

PHILOSOPHICAL NOTES

Reflections upon Michael Healy's essay, "Hope and Despair in Marcel"

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In Michael Healy's essay, "Hope and Despair in Marcel," the leading terms are contrasted on traditional Marcelian grounds. Hope emerges from intersubjective communion, whereas despair follows self-absorption or "what Marcel calls 'egolatry,' i.e., being clogged up with oneself" (3). Communion is aligned with a spirit of openness, whereas self-absorption manifests an attitude of closure. Hope arises from one's openness to the good, especially the good as incarnated in intersubjective communion. In turn, despair speaks to one's closure, not only to the good of communion, but to the good as it exists apart from the interests of the singular self. The exploration of these two attitudes, along with the experiences that give rise to them, could be said to define Marcelian philosophy. Healy's essay does well to return *Marcel Studies* to the themes of openness/closure and communion/egolatry. It is worth noting that another essay from this volume, Alexander Montes' "Gabriel Marcel and Dietrich von Hildebrand on Freedom," is also focused upon these themes.

With this as a background, Healy's essay adopts a position wherein hope and despair become a choice of perspective or orientation. Despair, as a choice of perspective, specifically an egotistic perspective, is suggested in Healy's comment that:

[H]ope, like love, can be rejected. This becomes sin when it involves a rebellion against trust, when one chooses despair over oneself, evolving into despair over God Himself (saying to oneself, 'even God cannot or will not help me'—in the way that I demand).

The language of choice also appears in Healy's observation that "hope is not just an inclination or a tendency, but a decision and a virtue." I either choose to predicate reality upon myself and fall into despair or I choose to participate in a reality greater than myself and am buoyed by hope.

Rendering hope and despair as a choice raises many questions. For the sake of this commentary, I would like to begin with the following query. Speaking to a broader concern from critics of existential philosophy, does Marcel inappropriately elevate human choice? Does

Marcel elevate human choice to the point that hope is divorced from grace? Can one, simply via an act of will, become hopeful? Do those who despair choose that state?

In response, Healy frames hope as a choice to trust, specifically, to trust in another. The move decenters or, in a certain sense, de-selves the choice. In contrast to optimism and pessimism, which according to Healy/Marcel “are more psychological tendencies based in oneself—some see the glass half-empty, some see it half-full,” Healy notes that “genuine [Marcelian] hope opens onto a transcendent source—someone who can help—in whom we hope in light of his power and his goodness.” A psychological tendency to interpret reality in accord with my preconceptions—this is simply the way I see things—does not capture the kind of choice exhibited in hope and despair.

The choice associated with hope versus despair does not assume the primacy of the self, but asks about the ultimate ground of one’s reality. Grounded upon oneself or one’s vision of reality or upon one’s strength, one despairs. Whereas in giving myself to another and releasing myself to a reality grounded upon communion, one hopes. Healy is explicit: “Hope essentially involves love and trust, not so with despair. Indeed, it is the person hoped in who is at the core of the former, whereas in despair it is my wishes which are at the center” (2). If one fears that the association of hope with choice will turn the individual back upon his/her strength of will and/or one’s vision of reality, it is precisely such a choice that would annul hope. It is only by relinquishing a reality centered upon myself that one hopes.

Rather than choice in some sense deifying the individual (a deification which has been associated with certain lines of existentialist thought—early Sartre and the ability of consciousness to create value serves as the most prominent example), Marcelian choice occurs in response to already existent values and forms of good. In Brendan Sweetman’s contribution to this volume, “Marcel on Philosophy and Evil,” he associates Marcel with Heidegger, Buber, and Merleau-Ponty in ontologically prioritizing the existential question as the source of philosophic inquiry. In this commentary, such thinkers could be grouped according to those who see choice as a response to our given reality. Understood as a response, the good precedes one’s choice as to what constitutes the good and, more precisely, what is good for oneself. Healy notes that Marcel:

[S]ees the experiential beginnings of hope in the most deeply valid attitudes we affirm in responding to true values (objective goods built into being) and especially in the truth of the call to love—and to commitment, faithfulness, and communion with other persons.

Prior to one’s self-definition of the good, there is choice as to whether one participates in already existent forms of good, the “true values (objective goods built into being)” to which Healey referred. To decline these offers, which would be to refuse one’s participation in the deepest and most fulfilling forms of intersubjective reality, is precisely why an individual’s self-definition of the good is a derivative or secondary choice. I define the good as needing to meet my self-definition only because I have rejected the good as it has been offered. Healy captures the insight: “hope overcomes, though not by one’s own strength. This...allows the man of hope to discover and to hold onto his true self, to take a position—trusting in Him Who deserves it”. The choice that allows for Marcelian hope involves one’s acceptance of a gift – the gift of intersubjective communion. Such a choice simultaneously rejects the kind of choice that would elevate or deify or center reality upon the self.

If such a response accurately captures the de-centering/de-selving that occurs in Marcelian philosophy, the question of choice now arises in a different manner. When it comes to the kind of choice that allows for hope/despair, is it not so much a matter of an orientation toward others—one of “ongoing reciprocal communion”—versus a fixation upon oneself, but a matter of the manner in which one turns to oneself? Could one turn to oneself as a source of intrinsic and inexhaustible value (a value which, like love/communion, gestures toward something more)? Or does the turn to oneself necessarily result in a descent into despair? Is the dichotomy of communion versus the turn to oneself adequate to capture the possible source of hope versus despair?

Healy seems to confirm the existence and adequacy of such a dichotomy. He writes that “hope always has a communal aspect; it is not just for oneself but for others, especially those whom we are called to unite with in love.” The question at present is whether hope “always has” or, better put, always has to have “a communal aspect”?

The background motivation for this question is the thought of the Spanish existentialist Miguel de Unamuno. Forgoing much complexity to highlight an essential tenet of his philosophy, Unamuno’s existential springboard to the beyond is a sense of the self as a precious, intimate, and inexhaustible value. In contrast, Marcel’s springboard is love and communion. In his essay “Theism and Personal Relationships,” Marcel brings this distinction to the fore: “As a rule, nothing is easier at a certain time of life than to accept death for oneself if one considers it a dreamless sleep without awakening; what cannot be accepted is the death of the beloved, more deeply still the death of love itself.” In even more explicit terms, Marcel writes of a debate between himself and Leon Brunschvicg. Brunschvicg, Marcel recounts:

asserted that the Death of Gabriel Marcel seemed to preoccupy Gabriel Marcel much more than the Death of Leon Brunschvicg preoccupied Leon Brunschvicg; I answered him that he framed the question very poorly and that the only thing worthy of preoccupying either one or the other of us was the Death of the being whom we loved.¹

With such passages in mind, I wonder whether Marcel and, by extension, Healy are wrong if they conclude that the orientation toward the self, versus the beloved, in and of itself serves as the basis for hope versus despair. Are they wrong, if they claim that a turn toward the self is necessarily connected to despair?

I claim that there is a worthwhile critique or, at the least, further questions that can be brought against Marcel on these grounds. If his basic philosophical position is that hope must begin with or in some other way require an existential experience of communion, then he is open to the charge of privileging the communal dimension of existence to the point of failing to recognize the inherent value of the singular self. One can even wonder whether the value of the singular self is voided in Marcel’s philosophy: “*the only thing worthy of preoccupying either one or the other of us was the Death of the being whom we loved*” and “*nothing is easier at a certain time of life than to accept death for oneself.*” As an Unamunian challenge, one could rephrase Marcel’s position: “the only thing worthy of preoccupying” us is the destruction of inherent sources of value.

In this view, Marcel’s definition of the good in terms of communion is subject to a similar critique as that raised against a self-absorbed view of the good. The critique is that the good is

¹ Gabriel Marcel, *Thou Shalt not Die* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine’s Press, 2009), p.64.

inadmissibly limited. As a self-definition of the good limits the good to the interests of the ego, the communal-definition of the good limits the good to the self in its relationship with but not in its distinction from others. In both approaches, sources of good are excluded.

While still privileging the good of communion, Healy offers the opening for such a critique. He writes that:

The deepest and most far-reaching value response...is the response to the highest value we perceive in this world, which is—according to Marcel—the value of the incarnate human person, and especially in our experience, the value of the most beloved human person.

If the value of the “incarnate human person” becomes the source of hope, then hope need not be restricted to the framework of communion. Healy does not pursue the matter further, nor is it the purpose of his essay to do so. However, the invocation of “the incarnate human person” as a source of hope raises the question of whether and to what degree – apart from its relationship to others – the individual person could be that source.

There is a case to be made that intersubjective communion offers the most promising foundation for hope—a case that could be bolstered by the contrast between Marcel’s hopeful philosophy and the sense of tragedy which permeates Unamuno’s desperate hope for the afterlife. One could also argue that hope, even if it emerges from a sacred value found in human individuality, still points toward communion insofar as it requires trust in a God that would recognize and support the eternal value of such individuality. In furtherance of such avenues of thought and certainly others, the *potential* Marcelian restriction of hope to incarnate human communion requires further attention. Healy’s claim that “the value of the incarnate human person” forms the basis of Marcelian hope offers a path to question whether Marcel actually restricts hope to the experience of the beloved and the communion that follows and, if he does, whether he is too ready to discount or ignore the good as constituted by the singular self. In specific reference to Healy’s essay, one can ask whether a dichotomy of openness/closure and communion/self-absorption too readily restricts openness to communion and too quickly discounts the value of human individuality. More generally, the question for Marcel and Marcel scholars is whether his philosophy might be profitably expanded to include a richer or more extensive understanding of the good.