

The Unconditional in the Broken World

Gabriel Marcel on Hope and Revelation

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This article explores Gabriel Marcel's unique approach to God and revelation through his phenomenology of hope. Part 1 presents Marcel's phenomenological method of reflection and his approach to phenomena that stand at the threshold of revelation. Special attention is given to the notion of unconditionality. Part 2 shows how hope transcends the broken world and situates the hoping person in intersubjective relationships. Part 3 uncovers how the unconditionality of hope contributes to resolving a paradox of freedom and hope raised by Marcel in his 1963 article *Desire and Hope*. The concluding section traces how hope involves one in an implicit or explicit theistic position and points toward revelation.

1. Introduction

Gabriel Marcel's phenomenological account of hope introduces an unconditional element into a finite world broken by isolation and death. For Marcel, hope appeals to God as the Absolute Thou transcending the limitations and conditions of human existence. In order to hope, though, must one have religious faith in divine revelation or a personal experience of God? I propose answering this question by unpacking a related analysis in Marcel's 1963 essay *Desire and Hope*. Marcel asks whether we always remain free to hope, no matter the misery of our situation. He argues that this question can only be answered if one's freedom to hope is considered not as an abstract problem but as an intersubjective appeal. If hope is to remain open, it must be unconditional. Such unconditionality exceeds the resources of oneself and of other human persons, so the experience of hope implies a relation to God. I argue that Marcel holds that hope can always be chosen because anyone living within the situation of genuine hope can recognize in their attitude an appeal to something unconditional, whether anyone recognizes this as God or not.

This paper is divided into three major sections and a conclusion: First, I discuss Marcel's approach to God and revelation. Second, I introduce Marcel's philosophical method and examine hope as an attitude that can be taken toward the 'broken world.' Third, I resolve Marcel's paradox of hope and freedom in *Desire and Hope* in order to show how he sees God's role as unconditional as essential to the attitude of hope. I conclude with a reflection on hope as oriented toward revelation proper.

2. Marcel's Phenomenology and Revelation

Marcel's method is phenomenological and seems to be unique.¹ Marcel says his method consists in "working [...] up from life to thought and then down from thought to life again."² Often drawing on scenes from his own plays or from dramatic real-life situations, he reflects upon the given experience of human persons as being-in-a-situation.³ Against attempts to abstract essential and universalizable elements about human beings and their situations, Marcel's concrete philosophy returns to the involvement of an individual person and her complicated involvement in the questions she asks.⁴ Marcel's phenomenology unveils ontological structures by descriptive reflection upon experience.⁵

Marcel distinguishes between primary reflection and secondary reflection. Primary reflection begins with my being-in-a-situation but abstracts from it in order to find universal answers to abstract problems, as in scientific inquiry, while secondary reflection critically reexamines primary reflection by returning to the concrete situation.⁶ Whereas primary reflection divides experience into concepts, secondary reflection "reconquers" the original unity of experience.⁷ According to Brendan Sweetman, Marcel thinks that "there is a range of human experiences that is not totally accessible in the realm of primary reflection. This is because something essential to the nature of the experiences is lost in the transition from the level of being-in-a-situation to the level of primary reflection."⁸ God's presence to human persons and involvement in our actions and situations can only be discovered through secondary reflection.

Primary reflection excludes my personal involvement in the questions that arise for me in my situation. This is the essential difference between a problem and a mystery: a mystery is "a problem which encroaches upon its own data: I who inquire into the meaning and the possibility of this meeting, I cannot place myself outside it or before it; I am engaged in this encounter, I depend upon it."⁹ Mystery is neither mere obscurity nor principally a matter of religious faith but rather a reality in which one is necessarily personally involved, which makes no sense apart from one's participation in it as subject. Such personal involvement changes one's relation to the phenomena in question: one cannot in the end ask about phenomena such as evil, death, or love in the abstract without missing them entirely or for the most part; there is no suffering apart from the person who suffers. Consequently, if hope

¹ See Brian Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel, and the Contemporary Debate*, New York, NY 2006, 55.

² *Gabriel Marcel*, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, vol. I, transl. by G. S. Fraser, London 1950, 41. See also Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity* (see fn. 1), 54–56.

³ See Brendan Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent*, Amsterdam, 2008, 23–38. See also *Gabriel Marcel*, *Being and Having*, trans. by Katharine Farrer, Glasgow 1949, 11 f.

⁴ See Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity* (see fn. 1), 65–67. See also Marcel, *Mystery of Being* (see fn. 2), 214–216.

⁵ *Gabriel Marcel*, "Being and Nothingness," in: id.; *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, transl. by Emma Craufurd, Chicago 1951, 180. See also Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity* (see fn. 1), 166–184, here 55.

⁶ See Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel* (see fn. 3), 70.

⁷ Marcel, *Mystery of Being* (see fn. 2), 83.

⁸ Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel* (see fn. 3), 71.

⁹ *Gabriel Marcel*, "On the Ontological Mystery," in: id., *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. by Manya Harari, New York, NY 1991, 9–46, here 22.

belongs to the domain of mystery, one must inquire into hope as a real experience, as something that one lives through. One cannot begin from a place of absolute skepticism about the reality of hope and ask about its universalizable conditions of possibility. One's freedom to doubt the existence or efficacy of one's own hope as it is given to oneself is already an abstract step beyond the given, original experience.¹⁰

Marcel's approach to God draws upon this distinction between primary and secondary reflection. Proofs for the existence of God belong to primary reflection, for they reduce God to an object thought about in the third person. Secondary reflection approaches God as Absolute Thou, as a personal other to whom an appeal can be made, with whom one can have a relationship.¹¹ Sweetman observes that God, for Marcel, can only be affirmed as encountered in situations in which I am personally involved.¹² It is, for instance, in the situation of fidelity, of lasting commitment, that one must ask: "To whom am I committing myself, such that my pledge can be upheld unconditionally?" It cannot be oneself, for one is changeable in one's feelings and powers. It cannot necessarily be the person to whom one is pledging fidelity, for someone can be faithful to another person without that person's knowledge. Fidelity only makes sense as an appeal to a deeper, absolute reality that can uphold it. Sweetman writes: "Marcel presents the human experience of making and keeping promises as a way in which a person might come to believe in God."¹³ Such experiences do not necessarily seem religious or prompt belief, but, according to Sweetman, "in these cases God is still the ultimate ground of such experiences. That is to say, people who engage in such commitments are implicitly committed to a view of the world that is grounded in an ultimate reality."¹⁴ Hope, as we shall see, is an experience that, like fidelity, demands such an ultimate grounding.

Marcel's phenomenological philosophy presses against divine revelation. Seymour Cain writes: "From the beginning of his philosophical career, Marcel's main interest has been the interpretation of religious experience, that is, of the relation between man and ultimate reality."¹⁵ Raised without religion, Marcel reports that he always saw in Christianity "an extremely profound reality."¹⁶ He converted to Catholicism in 1929 at age of forty after a long period of indecision during which he believed that other people had genuine faith but was unwilling to make this faith his own. Both before and after his conversion, Marcel understands his philosophy as accessible to non-believers.¹⁷ He thinks faith can enrich philosophy, but he does not try to introduce Christian doctrines into his philosophical thought. Rather, he addresses phenomena that stand at the boundary of philosophy and theology, of reason and faith.

¹⁰ See Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery" (see fn. 9), 22 f.

¹¹ See id., *Metaphysical Journal*, trans. by Bernard Wall, Chicago, IL 1952, 262–264.

¹² See Brendan Sweetman, "Marcel on God and Religious Experience, and the Critique of Alston and Hick," in: *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80/3 (2006) 407–420, here 412.

¹³ Ibid., 412.

¹⁴ Ibid., 412.

¹⁵ Seymour Cain, *Gabriel Marcel*, South Bend, IN 1963, 87.

¹⁶ *Gabriel Marcel*, "Conversations Between Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel: Conversation 4," in: id., *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, transl. by Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick, Evanston, IL 1973, 237–243, here 238.

¹⁷ Ibid., 239.

Even when exploring typically theological themes such as hope, Marcel remains philosophical in his method. Although he believes religious faith opens one to further dimensions of reality and acts as a defense against reductive accounts of experience, he considers his analysis of hope phenomenological, that is, a reflective description of what is essential to the phenomenon itself as it is given to subjects undergoing it. Marcel describes himself as a “philosopher of the threshold, a philosopher who kept himself in rather uncomfortable fashion on a line midway between believers and nonbelievers.”¹⁸ He avoids imposing theological interpretations on phenomena and instead works to unveil the presence of the divine whenever he finds it essential to experience.

Marcel often introduces revelation as the extreme limit and culmination of philosophically available phenomena such as faith, hope, and love. To give a characteristic example: at the end of *Theism and Personal Relationships*, Marcel’s account of the dependence of genuine human relationships upon a personal, theistic metaphysics opens to reflection upon the *Mystical Body of Christ* as the extreme antithesis of atomistic views of the human person.¹⁹ A theistic attitude reveals how a loving relationship between human persons can be sustained by God as Absolute Thou, which already surpasses the limitations of abstract deism. The Christian faith, however, reveals that the reality theism illuminates finds its fullest expression in the personal, Trinitarian God. Revelation reveals what is at once wholly beyond and yet intimately fundamental to reality. Marcel says he is “convinced that Revelation cannot be considered as something which is brought, so to say, from the outside, as a fireball falling on our mental planet. There is, on the contrary, every reason to believe that Revelation is the crowning of an immense cosmic travail which at one and the same time calls it forth and implies it as its internal source.”²⁰ Revelation shines a greater light on that to which one is opened by the existential attitudes of faith, hope, and love.

Phenomena marked by unconditionality can lead philosophy to revelation. As we have seen, fidelity illustrates unconditionality. If one pledges oneself to someone, promising to stay with her through a time of severe illness or, in the case of marriage, over a whole lifetime, one makes an unconditional pledge. One is not pledging oneself on the condition that one’s feelings stay the same, that no difficulties arise, or that certain expectations are met. One commits to remain with the other, come what may. Self-deception is always possible, of course, but if fidelity is respected as a genuine phenomenon, one pledges to be faithful without reserve. If fidelity rested on one’s feelings or on some quality belonging to the other or to the situation, it would be conditional. Marcel says fidelity must appeal to something absolute and beyond both human persons involved in the pledge, to something that can uphold the pledge in a way no empirical person could. This appeal is, whether explicit or not, an appeal to God. Marcel maintains: “Unconditionality is the true sign of God’s presence.”²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., 240.

¹⁹ Id., “Theism and Personal Relationships,” in: *Cross Currents* 1/1 (1950) 35–42, here 42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24455899> [accessed at 10.04.2025].

²⁰ Ibid., 42.

²¹ Ibid., 40.

Marcel's philosophy, then, attends to God as revealed in experiences marked by unconditionality. God is somehow present to or grounds these experiences, which are shared by believers and non-believers alike. Hope belongs to this type of phenomena. While not yet belonging to revelation proper, that is, to God as revealed through faith, such experiences may be considered instances of revelatory experience, though the divine elements at work can always be overlooked. Marcel's phenomenology of hope is a phenomenology of a revelatory experience.

3. Hope in the Broken World

This section presents Marcel's account of hope against the background of the broken world. Hope, for Marcel, transcends the broken world by establishing the person in intersubjective relationships, which point to God as their ultimate guarantor. Hope is a fundamental attitude that can be taken in the broken world, and which transcends its limitations.

As a character in one of Marcel's plays asks: "Don't you feel that we are living [...] in a broken world?"²² Marcel says that "the condition of the prisoner can be taken as the symbolic expression of the human condition in general."²³ Humanity is fenced in by the ever-present threat of death, which operates the background against which all future possibilities are given. In the broken world, every person is condemned to death.²⁴ Within the confines of death, one does what one can, but everything is merely mortal, including oneself, one's loved ones, and one's values. No action is valuable in the last analysis except as related to the isolated ego and her limited horizon of possibilities. Hence, the world is a series of problems, and each person's task is self-preservation.²⁵ The world never ceases to be given to human beings as broken, but that brokenness can either be capitulated to in despair or transcended in hope.

The brokenness of the world is not a matter of historical contingency but rather the way the world is given.²⁶ The fact that the world is broken does not imply that it was once whole.²⁷ In the broken world, human persons are reduced to monads with specific functions to complete and repeat, and truth is reduced to techniques used to solve practical problems.²⁸ This results in a 'spiritual' imprisonment that isolates egos within a world of insurmountable problems. Despair sets in when one recognizes the broken world as the final horizon of reality.

In the attitude of despair, one's life and values seem doomed to destruction. "Our existence is so structured," observes Marcel, "that it can seem an imprisonment in a time cut off

²² Id., *Mystery of Being* (see fn. 1), 21.

²³ Id., "Desire and Hope," in: Nathaniel Lawrence; Daniel O'Connor (eds.), *Readings in Existential Phenomenology*, trans. by Nathaniel Lawrence, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1967, 277–285, here 281.

²⁴ Ibid., 284.

²⁵ See id., "On the Ontological Mystery" (see fn. 9), 9–13.

²⁶ See id., "Desire and Hope" (see fn. 23), 278.

²⁷ See id., *Mystery of Being* (see fn. 2), 34 f.

²⁸ Marcel's famous example is the railway worker whose life, internal and external, is divided into functions organized by a time table. See id., "On the Ontological Mystery" (see fn. 9), 11.

by the one certainty which cannot be doubted, the death-sentence which hangs over every one of us.”²⁹ Experience teaches one that everything tends toward destruction and ultimately fails. One despairs because one is struck by the fact that one’s “situation appears to be without an exit.”³⁰ To despair is to give up on holding oneself together, to see the disintegration of oneself and everything one loves as inevitable. A despairing person has spiritually capitulated to death, to the tragic situation, just as patients can capitulate to an illness when they find out it is terminal. Marcel says that “we could take the situation of the man who can no longer make ends meet. He has made all the calculations. He has taken account of all the accountable elements which experience provides him; and he recognizes that there is no way out.”³¹ Suicide is, as it were, the logical end of despair. In despair, the broken world is recognized as absolute, death is the last word, and one is ultimately alone, for the presence of others is vitiated by their mortality and one’s concern for one’s self-preservation.

Hope is the opposite of despair and provides the only real solution to the condemnation of death and isolation. To do so, it transcends them. Marcel says that “the soul always turns towards a light which it does not perceive, a light yet to be born, in the hope of being delivered from its present darkness, the darkness of waiting [...]”.³² The darker the situation – that is, the more certain one is of death and the more one is tempted to despair because there seems to be no exit – the more confidently one can hope. I will explore hope from three angles: as creatively challenging conditions, as transcendent of the imprisonment of death, and, at its most essential, as intersubjective.

First, hope challenges the calculating mindset of the broken world. The human, reduced to a functionary in the broken world, limits reflection to past experience and abstract considerations drawn from materialism, psychology, religion, or metaphysics. Marcel distinguishes ‘hoping that’ and ‘hoping in’: when ‘hoping that,’ one has facts on the basis of which one can reasonably believe that a future outcome will occur. When one is ill, one can ‘hope that’ one will get better because of the doctor’s authority or the discovery of a new cure. One’s hope rests on probabilities and previous or imagined cases. These conditions, of course, can collapse such that it becomes irrational or illusory to ‘hope that’ a certain outcome will occur. ‘Hoping that’ is a calculation of odds.³³ ‘Hoping in,’ as we will see, is an appeal against all odds.

Optimism and pessimism fall into the trap of ‘hoping that.’ In the case of optimism, the weight of experience or an abstract system of answers yields “a firm conviction, or in certain cases just a vague feeling, that things tend to ‘turn out for the best.’”³⁴ The optimist depends upon primary reflection to judge a tragic situation as “*considered from a sufficient distance* to allow certain contradictions to become alternated or fused into a general harmony.”³⁵ Rather than transcending a tragic situation as genuine hope does, optimism either ignores

²⁹ Id., “Desire and Hope” (see fn. 23), 281.

³⁰ Ibid., 281.

³¹ Ibid., 282.

³² Id., “Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope,” in: *Homo Viator* (see fn. 5), 31.

³³ See *ibid.*, 65.

³⁴ Ibid., 33.

³⁵ Ibid., 34.

the tragedy or sublates it into a larger process that will “turn out all right,” as in a theodicy. Pessimism, the view that all will not be well, is simply the obverse of this. It too leans on the weight of experience or a rational system.³⁶ Genuine hope involves one in a creative process that transcends the tragic situation by transforming it.³⁷ It produces new possibilities and commits to values rather than outcomes.

The second mark of hope is its transcendence of death. This can, of course, be the literal death of a person or the end of a particular desire, but death is more essentially the fact that in the broken world everything is given as doomed to eventually fall apart, so there is no enduring meaning, value, or person, including oneself. On this point, however, Marcel sees himself as breaking with Heidegger by claiming that the correct posture toward death is not acceptance but negation, that is, the denial that death is an inescapable fact.³⁸ Hope is eschatological: it is only hope if it transcends death.³⁹ Transcendence does not mean escaping the human situation but rather seeing that the death does not limit all human possibilities; in other words, one is in the broken world, but the broken world does not have the last word.

The universe is not a process of functions and probabilities, as the broken world suggests. Even in the most tragic situations, the one who hopes can say that “it is impossible that reality in its inward depth should be hostile or so much as indifferent to what I assert is in itself good. It is quite useless to tell me of discouraging *cases* or *examples*: beyond all experience, all probability, all statistics, I assert that a given order shall be re-established, that reality *is* on my side in willing it to be so.”⁴⁰ Optimism, confronted by the problems of evil and suffering, steps back and says that, all in all, things are getting better. Hope, on the other hand, trusts that there is some principle, beyond one but with one, that wills to realize and uphold what is valuable and lovable in the world.

The third mark of hope is that it is intersubjective. Marcel conceives of hope as ‘hoping in.’ Hope can be an illusion if one is ‘hoping that’ one will escape a situation and seeks reliable reasons to justify one’s expectations. The hopeful person, on the other hand, holds to the fact that her liberty endures no matter the outcome. “The believer is he who will meet with no insurmountable obstacle on his way towards transcendence.”⁴¹ To ‘hope in’ is to give credit to someone or something such that one can continue to have patience even in a tragic situation. Marcel suggests that there could be a grace-inspired “absolute hope, inseparable from a faith which is likewise absolute, transcending all laying down of conditions”

³⁶ See id., “On the Ontological Mystery” (see fn. 9), 27 f.

³⁷ Marcel compares this hopeful transformation of a situation to that of prisoners of war who establish a community and cultivate value within their imprisonment. In this sense, hope alone “permits us in our ever precarious condition to free ourselves from this basic situation in which we seem to be enmeshed” (id., “Desire and Hope” [see fn. 23], 283).

³⁸ Id., “Value and Immortality,” in: *Homo Viator* (see fn. 5), 135–154, here 147 f.

³⁹ Jill Graper Hernandez also observes that Marcel distinguishes two “eschatologies.” Those who live in or capitulate to the broken world are facing death as an imminent destruction of themselves and all they love, whereas the one who hopes sees death as a “strengthening of being”; see *Jill Graper Hernandez*, *Gabriel Marcel’s Ethics of Hope: Evil, God, and Virtue*, New York 2011, 48. See also Marcel, “Desire and Hope” (see fn. 23), 283.

⁴⁰ Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery” (see fn. 9), 28.

⁴¹ Id., “Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope” (see fn. 32), 46.

that rests on God as absolute and unchanging. That said, he also recognizes that this is a practically difficult attitude for human persons to maintain.⁴²

Marcel maintains that “I hope in thee for us” is the “most adequate elaborate expression of the act which the verb ‘to hope’ suggests.”⁴³ Genuine hope is ‘hoping in’ someone with whom I am no longer subject to death. Upon recognizing my ‘own insufficiency’ to overcome destruction, I can either despair or I can appeal to God as Absolute Thou to uphold me. Marcel writes: “It cannot be a matter of counting on oneself, on one’s own resources [...] but in the act in which I commit myself, I at the same time extend an infinite credit to Him in whom I did so; Hope means nothing more than this.”⁴⁴ To hope is to give oneself over to the Absolute Thou as the source behind creatively upholding what is valuable and overcoming the threat of death. To despair is to betray the Absolute Thou and to fall back on one’s own resources, to see oneself as an isolated individual who ultimately will not survive a particular tragic situation or the broken world as a whole.⁴⁵

To transcend the broken world in hope, one does not overlook the weight of calculations and tragic conditions but rather establishes oneself as a subject participating in an intersubjective relationship with others and the Absolute Thou. Calculations and tragic conditions cease to be the given limit of one’s future.⁴⁶ Hope appeals to a ground that opens up creative possibilities for enduring. Of course, Marcel thinks the possibility of despair remains; for the broken world is never fully left behind in this life.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the choice to remain faithful is open: as Cain puts it: “Absolute fidelity to a being transcends and conquers death. ‘To love a being is to say, thou wilt never die’ [...]. Anything else is betrayal – it is to give up one’s beloved to death and take silence and invisibility for annihilation.”⁴⁸

4. The Freedom to Hope

Turning to *Desire and Hope*, we find that for Marcel hope and freedom are intertwined. With the threat of despair in mind, Marcel writes: “But my death is powerless against me except by the collusion of a freedom which betrays itself to give death that reality or appearance of reality whose fascinating power has already been verified.”⁴⁹ There is certainly a choice involved in despairing and hoping, but in the face of despair, does one always remain free to choose hope? Tragic situations seem to rob one of the option of hope by

⁴² Ibid., 47.

⁴³ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁴ Id., “Creative Fidelity,” in: id., *Creative Fidelity*, trans. by Robert Rosthall, New York, NY 2002, 147–174, here 167.

⁴⁵ Id., “Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysics of Hope” (see fn. 32), 61.

⁴⁶ The phenomenological notion of ‘horizon’ would be applicable here, though its attachment to the philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger invites confusion. Marcel does refer to a background “in which reflection alone is able to discern, somewhat imperfectly perhaps, what belongs to the past or the future or what is only a horizon of floating possibilities” (ibid., 42).

⁴⁷ See id., “On the Ontological Mystery” (see fn. 9), 28.

⁴⁸ *Cain*, Gabriel Marcel (see fn. 15), 86.

⁴⁹ Marcel, “Desire and Hope” (see fn. 23), 284.

taking away anything on which it could rest. If hope were not understood as unconditional appeal, then the option of hope would be closed.

To set up his answer, Marcel distinguishes desire and hope, effectively reformulating his distinction between 'hoping that' and 'hoping in.' Marcel defines desire as "a state of tension between a certain actual situation, which may very well not be completely clear to the subjective consciousness, and the idea of an imagined satisfaction, which must also be obtainable."⁵⁰ Desire and hope are falsely equivocated when one says "I hope that *x*," such that *x* is a possibly attainable future good either for oneself or for another.⁵¹ A sick patient, for example, may *desire* to be cured but incorrectly says that she *hopes* to be cured. If the desired effect cannot be had or appears to the subject as impossible to attain, it is merely a wish ("I wish I had a million dollars"). A wish can become a desire if the possibility of acquiring the originally wished for object is opened to the subject. Desire is satisfied when one comes to have the thing one previously lacked. It 'hopes that' a specific outcome will occur, on the basis of certain expected conditions and one's own strength.

Marcel presents hope as active waiting. Desire is impatient, whereas hope is patient. Desire declares that there is no time, that that which is desired should be here *now*. The person who hopes, on the other hand, is able to wait. Waiting, which falls in a range from inert to active, involves a restraint of impatience because of "a confidence in the fact that a certain event will occur."⁵² Hope as active waiting holds open the possibility that *x* will occur precisely because of one's confidence in another, and one may even prepare oneself in anticipation of the arrival of that which is hoped for. Hope is a 'hope in' someone else.

Once again, despair is presented as the opposite of hope. Despair is "above all the experience of closing or [...] the experience of *time plugged up*."⁵³ When one accepts that delivery from a tragic situation is ultimately impossible, despair sets in. Marcel notes that some soldiers waiting for deliverance from wartime imprisonment fell into an inactive waiting that teetered toward despair or fueled desperate escape attempts:

"But there were others who knew the active waiting I was speaking of, and the most important thing to say of them is that because they were inhabited by Hope they remained open to one another; a real communion was established among them, which of course was not reserved for believers only – I take the word here in its confessional meaning – although the believers must have constituted frequently, and perhaps in the majority of cases, the center around which the cultural life of the camps [...] was organized."⁵⁴

The difference between hope as active waiting and the temptation to despair is communion. A genuine bond of love in captivity gives one the confidence that those one loves will eventually be free, even if one will not live to see it. All that is required, for Marcel, is what he calls a "spiritual economy within which my existence can preserve [...] can *regain*, a meaning and a value."⁵⁵ Hope as active waiting is sustained by the love between persons in

⁵⁰ Ibid., 279.

⁵¹ See *ibid.*, 279.

⁵² Ibid., 280.

⁵³ Ibid., 281.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 282.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 283.

particular tragic situations, but it reaches its fulness in its religious form as salvation from the broken world.

Against the objection that all of this hope and trust in another is nothing but a diversion from the tragic situation and the condemnation of death, Marcel puts in question the assumption that death is absolute. That death has the last word only appears as certain when one asserts the primacy of the ego, that is, when one's isolated existence and one's concerns (things as related to oneself) are the only things one desires to keep alive. There is no reason strong enough to ensure that oneself and one's concerns will ultimately survive, and experience shows that everything dies. The possibility of hope opens up only in "openness to the other, this disengagement with regard to oneself which permits escaping from the obessional yoke of mortality."⁵⁶ In other words, intersubjectivity is the plane of hope because it allows one to be concerned not with one's own death but with the mutual value affirmed in the reciprocal relation of the "we."⁵⁷

We arrive again at our question: "Does it depend on me to hope or not to hope? At a point where everything seems to urge me to despair?"⁵⁸ In answering, Marcel puts himself on the intersubjective plane, reframing the situation as a neighbor specifically addressing the question to himself as subject.

"Assume that he [the despairing neighbor] asks the question: 'Do you pretend that it is in my power to hope, although all the exits seem to me closed?' Doubtless I will reply: 'The simple fact that you ask me the question already constitutes a sort of first breach in your prison. In reality it is not simply a question you ask me; it is an appeal you address to me, and to which I can only respond by urging you not only to depend on me but also not to give up, not to let go, and, if only very humbly and feebly, to act as if this Hope lived in you; and that means before anything else to turn toward another – I will say, whoever he is – and thus to escape from that obsession which is destroying you.'⁵⁹

He ceases to treat the despairing man as an object with a problem; he opens the opportunity for the man to reintegrate himself in communion with other human persons. If hope depends on intersubjective love, then one is free to hope insofar as one exists on the plane of intersubjectivity, that is, insofar as one exists in a loving relation and establishes a spiritual economy with at least one other person.

The question remains, however: why does Marcel think that intersubjectivity resolves the tension between freedom and hope? This problem of freedom and hope also arises in Marcel's *Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope*, written one year earlier in 1962. There, Marcel argues that the question of one's freedom to hope cannot be answered with a simple yes or no because it is incorrectly framed. Asking "Is one free to hope when one does not have sufficient reasons to do so?" belongs to primary reflection. It treats hope as a universalizable object, rather than as an attitude and act taken up by concrete persons in their situations. It asks the hopeful person to prove that her hope has sufficient basis such that anyone could have hope as she does. From this objective standpoint, Marcel says that

⁵⁶ Ibid., 284.

⁵⁷ Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel* (see fn. 3), 71.

⁵⁸ Marcel, "Desire and Hope" (see fn. 23), 285.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 285.

it is “absurd to claim that it can be legitimate to hope without sufficient reasons for hope. But [...] the meaning of the word hope has been completely distorted.”⁶⁰ Hope does not operate on the plane of ‘reasons’ because it would then be reduced to either an irrational confidence or a reasonably held desire.

The real issue here is not whether one has sufficient conditions to hope. It is instead whether one understands hope as based on one’s conditions or as more fundamental than one’s conditions. In the latter case, one must appeal to the reality of something that must always exceed the limitations of finite conditions. The real question, then, is whether one has something transcendent upon which to rely. According to Marcel, I must recognize that hope does not depend upon me “because it does not depend upon me to be or not to be such as I am.”⁶¹ I, in fact, am not the reason that I exist or have free will. The deepest possibilities of my being seem to be given to me, regardless of what I want to assign as their source. My freedom, my existence, and my capacity for hope are all gifts, and gift, for Marcel, “is a call to which we have to make a response.”⁶²

The freedom to hope, the ability to find possibilities for upholding the good despite bad conditions, depends on something that is itself not limited by these or any bad conditions. Marcel calls hope “essentially the availability of a soul which has entered intimately enough into the experience of a communion to accomplish in the teeth of will and knowledge the transcendent act.”⁶³ For Marcel, hope rests on a genuine love in which one opens oneself to another. Love involves an availability (*disponibilité*) to the other.⁶⁴ In love as “the mutual openness and mutual constitution of one another,” the ego is reconstituted as a person. Genuine love opens one to the other person as a whole, and it open one to oneself as a whole. When one enters into a loving relationship, the isolated ‘I’ transforms into a ‘we’.⁶⁵

If one approaches hope from the standpoint of the ‘I’, of the ego operating apart from a loving relationship, then one relies on oneself and one’s resources, transforming even other persons into resources or means toward realizing some desire. If the other person should fail, nothing stands between the ‘I’ and despair. This reduction of the other to a means is a closing of availability to the other, a rejection of love.

What happens if one approaches hope from the standpoint of the ‘we’? Pax observes that the religious question, the question of the Absolute Thou, arises in light of the ‘we’. For there to be a genuine ‘we’, both persons must be available to each other unconditionally. The act of love itself, however, is no guarantee of itself as unconditional, since persons do in fact fail to love each other. What keeps the availability that constitutes a loving communion from closing? According to Pax:

⁶⁰ Id., “Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope” (see fn. 32), 65.

⁶¹ Ibid., 62.

⁶² Ibid., 63.

⁶³ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 50. On the notion of availability (*disponibilité*), see Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity* (see fn. 1), 72–75.

⁶⁵ Marcel does take note of the more difficult situation in which there is no other person. One can, for Marcel, hope for oneself but only in terms of a piety toward oneself, in which one recognizes oneself as loved and loving. The desire for self-preservation is never a ground for hope. See Marcel, “Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope” (see fn. 32), 61.

“There is, however, an absolute or unconditional dimension possible in personal relations inasmuch as once I have committed myself to another, no obstacle including even the rejection by the one to whom my commitment has been made, can break the bond of my care and concern unless I choose to be unfaithful.”⁶⁶

While loving communions do in fact collapse, Pax says that Marcel introduces the Absolute Thou in order to account for those that do not: “It is in such actions that Marcel claims we must either appeal to thou my Ultimate Recourse or leave the experiences ultimately unexplained.”⁶⁷ If the ‘we’ is conditional, then the two egos remain closed to each other; such a condition would not offer hope to the despairing man in Marcel’s example. Without an appeal to something transcending any conditions, the loving communion cannot be upheld, and hope lacks a ground.⁶⁸

To avoid collapsing into desire, hope can be based neither upon oneself nor upon the other person who always might fail me and whom I run the risk of reducing to a condition. In what sense, then, is hope possible? If one is in fact hoping, one can recognize that one’s hope cannot be based on oneself or any finite condition, including other human persons; otherwise, one would fall back into the pattern of desire and calculation. Whatever it is one relies upon, it must exceed all conditions and expectations. It must be unconditional.

Marcel argues that the unconditional to which one appeals in hope is the personal, Absolute Thou rather than an abstract principle or object. Marcel describes the Absolute Thou as analogous to the empirical Thou. I can address as a Thou “only what or whom I look on as being able to answer me, if only through an understanding silence.”⁶⁹ One can approach another person as an object from whom something can be obtained, but one also can discover ‘a certain community of interest and experience’ with the other. In light of the ‘felt unity’ of such a situation, the other person can be treated not as an object but as a Thou, as someone who can be addressed and who can answer.

When in hope one appeals to something transcendent of conditions, this means something different than trying to find a more secure objective footing for one’s odds of survival. If that is all hope were, then the ‘unconditional’ would in fact be treated as a resource one has tapped into in order to better one’s chances and rally one’s strength. The unconditional would be at best a cosmic doctor reasonably expected to help one realize certain desires. Hope emerges instead out of an intersubjective appeal that that which I love should continue to be loved and upheld. To whom is this appeal made? To one who can be addressed and can answer, and who can do so unconditionally. While Marcel maintains that the Absolute Thou cannot be explicitly asserted without a grace-inspired act of faith in which “I acknowledge myself as a creature of God,”⁷⁰ it is nevertheless the case that the experience of hope is upon secondary reflection nonsensical without an Absolute Thou upon whom one can unconditionally depend.

⁶⁶ Clyde Pax, “Marcel’s Way of Creative Fidelity,” in: *Philosophy Today* (Celina) 19/1 (1975) 12–21, here 18, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday197519121>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁸ See Marcel, “Theism and Personal Relationships” (see fn. 19), 38 f.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

5. Conclusion: From Hope to Revelation

In conclusion, must we say that one is free to hope only if one believes in God? The answer depends on what one means by belief. For Marcel, hope is genuine “if God exists for me.” Marcel describes this belief in God as a “root condition.” Hope is tied up with belief in God, but belief in the sense of Marcel’s fidelity rather than “opinion grounded on feeling” or a “subjective act of consciousness.”⁷¹ To believe is to bear witness to that to which one has pledged oneself. Marcel compares belief to following a light which one has glimpsed, even after one has ceased to see it.⁷² He does not mean that belief rests on a moment in which one has seen God physically. What belief bears witness to is the sort of thing that Marcel’s phenomenological study of hope points to: there must be something like an Absolute Thou in order for certain types of experiences to make sense, even if one cannot fully explain the nature of this Absolute Thou or produce the sort of objective evidence primary reflection would here demand.

The act of hope is based on this belief, implicit or explicit, that there is at the core of reality a principle that is on our side. Marcel writes: “Hope consists in asserting that there is at the heart of being, beyond all data, beyond all inventories and all calculations, a mysterious principle which is in connivance with me, which cannot but will that which I will, if what I will deserves to be willed and is, in fact, willed by the whole of my being.”⁷³ Even if an atheist denies God’s existence, she may still, if only implicitly, adopt this fundamental attitude toward reality. Refusing to see all life and values as doomed to death affirms something transcendent to one’s present and foreseeable conditions.

The implicit metaphysical position here is theistic. Marcel thinks of theism not as a doctrine of an objectively proven God of the philosophers but rather as a faithful and hopeful affirmation of an Absolute Thou at the heart of experience and reality. God’s presence is appealed to, not argued into reality. Hope does not consist in saying: “Metaphysically speaking, there is a positive principle at the heart of reality, so I will survive.” If it were such a proof, hope would be merely a case of ‘hoping that’ *x* will occur because the metaphysical conditions favor it. Instead, Marcel thinks of hope as “a certain appeal delivered for the depths of my own insufficiency *ad summam altitudinem* [...]. This appeal presupposes a radical humility in the subject.”⁷⁴ One is not free to hope because of a bit of abstract knowledge of reality one has happened upon but rather because one has realized that the source of one’s own freedom, possibilities, and relationships transcends one’s knowledge and conditions.

In this sense, the theist and the atheist, despite their professed views, would arrive at the same conclusion by following secondary reflection on their own experiences of hope. The believer cannot claim to have something of which the unbeliever “has been deprived”, for Marcel.⁷⁵ The structure ‘I hope in Thee for us’ and the possibility of affirming the Absolute

⁷¹ Ibid., 39.

⁷² See *ibid.*, 39.

⁷³ Id., “On the Ontological Mystery” (see fn. 9), 28.

⁷⁴ Id., “Creative Fidelity” (see fn. 44), 167.

⁷⁵ See *id.*, “Dangerous Situation of Ethical Values,” in: *Homo Viator* (see fn. 5), 155–165, here 160.

Thou is available to anyone who reflects on hope as it is given in subjective and intersubjective experience. That said, Jeffrey Bloechl correctly notes: "Whether or not this might give way to a positive experience of some source or principle for all things is, of course, a matter of the drama of individual existence. Even in his most Catholic moments, Marcel recognizes that nothing guarantees the awakening that belongs properly to faith."⁷⁶ Reflection upon hope is not a shortcut to religious faith, but it opens one's horizons to interpersonal relationships transcending the immanence of the broken world.

If one does not count on one's own powers, then one is always free to hope. Hope is not a question of what one can do alone, but ultimately an appeal to an Absolute Thou upon whom one can depend unconditionally. Hope implicitly acknowledges that even one's own existence, strength, and freedom are gifts. The experienced attitude of hope points to revelation by revealing, however incompletely, the unconditional that ever transcends the broken world.

Dieser Artikel untersucht Gabriel Marcells Zugang zur Gottesfrage und zur Offenbarungsthematik im Horizont seiner Phänomenologie der Hoffnung. In Teil 1 werden Marcells phänomenologische Methode der Reflexion und sein Zugang zu Phänomenen, die an der Schwelle zur Offenbarung stehen, vorgestellt. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit wird dem Begriff der Unbedingtheit gewidmet. Teil 2 zeigt, wie die Hoffnung die zerbrochene Welt transzendiert und die hoffende Person in intersubjektiven Beziehungen verortet. Teil 3 weist nach, wie die Unbedingtheit der Hoffnung dazu beiträgt, ein Paradoxon von Freiheit und Hoffnung aufzulösen, das Marcel in seinem 1963 erschienenen Artikel zum Thema Begehren und Hoffen aufgeworfen hatte. Der abschließende Teil widmet sich der Frage, wie das Moment der Hoffnung den Einzelnen in eine implizite oder explizite theistische Position einbindet und auf die Offenbarung verwiesen sein lässt.

⁷⁶ Jeffrey Bloechl, "Plurality and Transcendence: Levinas With and After Marcel," in: *Levinas Studies* 5 (2010) 83–98, here 90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26942890> [accessed at 10.06.2025].