

Fresh Hope for a Broken World: Gabriel Marcel's Phenomenology of Liberation

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Abstract: By the advent of the 21st century, the world is slowly succumbing (if not succumbed) to a certain 'broken-ness'. Man's identity and dignity is continually undermined as societies wage war against each other. This is all because we have failed to reflect on the presence of the other. These are the very same reflections made by French Existentialist, Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) during his 1949 Gifford Lectures. Hence the question remains: how do we hope in the midst of our broken world? This paper shall attempt to answer this question by going back once again to Marcel's reflections on the human experience of hope and how this aids us in liberating our world from its broken-ness. It focuses on an aspect of his phenomenology and metaphysics of hope wherein he implicitly relates hope to liberty. Here he explains that in hoping, a person sets his mind to the thought that everything is not lost even though there is no more way out. This attitude enables the person to be in the state of relaxation, or what Marcel would call, liberty. In the event of a hope-towards-liberation, man seeks the assurance of the Absolute Thou (God) for an authentic liberation. Which is why for Marcel, faith is never to be separated from hope. Since, it is through faith that a person quietly affirms his belief in the Absolute Thou. This hope, likewise, provides man with an avenue for a communion with God. It must not only be contained within oneself, rather, it must be extended from one's self to the other. This bond between the self and the other through the Absolute, is what Marcel calls, love. True liberation, in the end, is rooted in these three virtues of hope, faith, love and their end, God or the Absolute Thou.

Keywords: Broken World, God, Hope, Liberation, Phenomenology

"If there is a concept in my work dominating all others, it is without doubt that of **hope**, understood as a *mysterium*, a concept, as I have previously stated, that is enlivened as though from within through ardent anticipation."

Introduction: Reflections from a Broken World¹

By the advent of the 21st century, the world has entered the age of fast-paced technological progress. Man's capacity to reflect on things worth reflecting has been replaced by gadgets

that seem to alienate him from his very being. Moreover, this lack of reflection in everyday life is also what caused the rise of terrorist violence all over the world. Many states, particularly in

the Middle East, are collapsing into disorder. There is an impending possibility of an ecological catastrophe all because of man divorcing reflection from his everyday actions. Indeed, our world is broken. These are the very same reflections made by Christian existentialist philosopher, Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973).² When he delivered his lecture “A Broken World” during the first series of his Gifford Lectures in 1949³, he pointed out that “we live today in a world at war with itself, and this state of world-war is being pushed so far that it runs the risk of ending in something that could properly be described as world-suicide.”⁴ It is important to note here what he said about our world turning against itself. Our world is slowly succumbing (if not succumbed) to a passionless age – a completely “mechanistic age.” In the words of Marcel, a ‘heartless’ world. In his lecture he pointed out three factors that contributed to the world’s losing of its real unity and peace: (1) *Increased socialization of life* where man’s true identity is reduced to mere ‘identification cards/documents’; (2) *Extension of the powers of the State* where the government acts like an omniscient god; and the (3) *Loss of real unity due to lack of brotherhood, privacy, creativity and reflection*. These signs, according to Marcel, are certain evils which present a reality that needs to be transcended. These are sins which, at their very roots, are due to one’s failure to reflect on the presence of the ‘other’ by “taking one’s own self as the center”⁵. *How then do we hope in the midst of our world’s broken-ness - a broken-ness which holds us captives in our own world?* This paper will attempt to answer this question by going back to Marcel’s reflections on the human experience of hope and how it may aid us in liberating ourselves from this situation.

Gabriel Marcel’s Philosophy of Hope

A. Phenomenology of Hope

Although Gabriel Marcel wrote more than one treatise concerning hope, his essay “Sketch for a Phenomenology and Metaphysic of Hope”⁶ provides a detailed and concrete account on hope. First and foremost, we have to understand that the first part of his essay uses Phenomenology as the primary method of locating hope in the realm of everyday human experience. However, this kind of Phenomenology does not use any kind of *epoche*, *eidetic-transcendental reduction*⁷ rather, he utilizes a “reflection that is rooted in experience.”⁸ Basically, “Marcel strives here both to bring out the meaning and intention of the concrete act of hope, and also to meet the question of its validity, its truth value, its bearing on reality.”⁹

Readers would probably find his essay unusual, since he does not begin with any technical definition of hope. Rather, he talks about how the experience of hope i.e. “*I hope*” like the rudimentary experience of faith i.e. “*I believe*” must be purified from any reason that is outside and that does not come from the innermost core of *my being*.¹⁰ In other words, it is not a **problem** but rather a **mystery**.¹¹ In the case of a trial (e.g. illness, exile or slavery etc.), *I hope* is intended towards a salvation or deliverance. It is important to note that Marcel sees trial as a “darkness”¹² and a “captivity.”¹³ Furthermore, being a captive involves oneself in being “alienated” e.g. sterile artist/writer, the invalid/sick. Nevertheless, Marcel admits that it is not limited to tragic situations such as these. It could be that of a mother that is waiting for the birth of her child or an adolescent waiting for his/her love. Hence, it is with no doubt that captivity is a general part of human existence. That is why “the less that life is experienced as a captivity, the less the soul will be capable of

seeing that veiled mysterious light”¹⁴ – the light at the very core of hope.

But then, Marcel poses a problem regarding hope – what is the object of our hope? He reminds us that through a *nisus* or effort, hope manages to go beyond the certain objects attached to it. That is why, it is important to emphasize the difference between “I hope” and “I hope that.”¹⁵ Hope, in a sense, does not claim to know anything hence, it is timid, humble and chaste. As mentioned earlier, hope is a mystery. Thus, it is very hard to describe it or define it rationally. But some realists would argue that hope would eventually be reduced to the “organic refusal to accept intolerable situation as final”¹⁶ e.g. hope of a sick man or hope of a prisoner. This point of view looks at hope as something measurable in the sense that the amount of an individual’s refusal is tantamount to the strength of his/her hope. But Marcel explains that hope’s strength is different from the body’s vitality. Even though the body is on the brink of collapsing, hope is able to live on. He adds that it is meaningless to establish any psychological or physical theory of hope since it is impossible for one to tell what the trial shall do to him/her.

Hope comes from our temptation to despair. Despair, as defined in the essay, means “capitulation before a certain *fatum* laid down by our judgment.”¹⁷ In other words, we give up to an inevitable situation up to the point of imagining or even anticipating our own destruction/death (e.g. a person suffering from an incurable sickness). It is as if telling ourselves, “there is no more way out for me but death.” Marcel took notice of two attitudes running in this kind of scenario: *to capitulate* and *to accept*. The distinction is simple: *to capitulate* means ceasing to be myself or “breaking down” before an inevitable situation whereas, *to accept* means keeping myself firm and intact; counters

any idea of destroying the self. Nevertheless, he warns us not to imitate the stoics¹⁸, otherwise we would end up strengthening ourselves without taking notice of the *thou*. Thus, hope cannot be resolved as a mere acceptance rather, it is “non-acceptance”. This may sound a little bit uncanny, but Marcel furthers his point by saying that hope is a “positive non-acceptance” since it is more relaxed or graceful than the stiff and powerless attitude of revolt. To clarify this point further, he declares that “if we introduce the element of patience into non-acceptance we at once come very much nearer to hope.”¹⁹ Patience, in essence, means realizing that we have our own individual rhythm or pace i.e. “to take one’s time.” To force ourselves from this natural rhythm would only lead us to despair. Likewise, if we try to impose our own rhythm on others, we would be despairing for them. In short, patience is “letting things be.”

B. Metaphysics of Hope

But then another question is raised, if we are to take hope as a certain wish for something and believe that it will come: is hope then a mere illusion? It was mentioned a while ago that there is a difference between “I hope” and “I hope that”. Hope must overcome this imagination by disallowing oneself to “imagine what I hope for.” Only then can it subdue the objection presented. It was also said earlier that, when I undergo a trial, my wishes are intended for liberation or salvation, no matter how I represent it. This problem is directly related to the previous argument. Is hope then a mere evasion? We have to bear in mind that in situations such as trials, we are confronted with two means: the *temptation to despair* and *liberation*.

At this point, Marcel discloses the affinity between **hope** and **liberation**. Going back to our example of the man with an incurable sickness, temptation to despair exists when his

expectation that he will recover from a given time will not be met. But, if he is able to overcome this kind of attitude, that everything will not be lost even if his expected time was not met, then he acknowledges hope. He is far more “relaxed” from the constraints of time and his expectation. Thus, he is liberated. Furthermore, setting conditions/limits to hope would eventually lead to despair. A person who hopes is similar to a “believer” who does not limit but transcends every obstacle and secures its very “being”. Marcel would strictly affirm that absolute hope is inseparable from absolute faith.²⁰ Which is why, despair is a betrayal to the Absolute Thou.²¹

Does this mean that finite (worldly) hope must be renounced for a more stable absolute hope? Marcel offers us the example of a patriot who hopes for the liberation of his country. If the patriot resorts to despair, this would make him give his enemies a greater advantage. This is because of the very fact that the moment he despaired, he already renounced any idea of liberation or freedom of his country. On the other hand, if he hopes for the liberation of his country, and even though he would not be able to see this liberation, the fact that he hoped for it, he actually helped to prepare it. A “religious bond” on this matter is presented, “when I hope, I strengthen, when I despair, I weaken or let go of the certain bond which unites me to the matter in question.”²² This bond, even on a personal level, exists in myself as a “spiritual interconnection” – when love is being reciprocated i.e. communion. As fidelity is *creative*, so is hope. Hope does not conform to previous and established experience, rather it is an “experience-in-the-making.” With this in mind, we realize a certain relationship between hope and time. Hope penetrates through the obstacles of time since its creative power allows it to explore new “truths” other than the ones coming from established experience.²³

Touching once again the problem of hope as an illusion, Marcel provides us with the two meanings of human condition: “vital and spiritual order” and “nature.” These two need to work together since the latter falls short of the former. It is also important to note that human condition is full of risks. These risks must be acknowledged as a part of our human condition and the moment we avoid these risks²⁴ we are refusing hope. Hope is not a contract, that if we give off something we “expect” something in return. It makes no claim but humbly awaits on grace. The thought of a contractual “claim” would reduce “*hope in*” to a mere “expect from”.

Another attitude against hope criticized by Marcel, is that of Spinoza. This attitude looks at hope as a “subjective” inclination in achieving self-fulfillment, devoid of any metaphysical grounds. Looking at the subjective and the objective as two dichotomies, would take away the essential relation between hope and **love** or **communion**.²⁵

Finally, Marcel offers us with several conclusions. When facing a certain trial, “the temptation to shut in the self and time (repetition)”²⁶ exists. Nonetheless, it may be overcome through communion and hope. My “trial” becomes your trial and eventually mankind’s trial. This leads us into Marcel’s perfect formulation of hope: “**I hope in thee for us**”. The very essence of this declaration lies within the intersubjectivity of hope and its religious implication. The true act of hope is reflected by our relation with the *thou* which eventually becomes an *us*. Moreover, it is through the Absolute Thou or God that this “thou” and “us” is bonded or “cemented”. In other words, the Absolute Thou is at the very heart of this relationship. Even so, only those who are free from the bondage of Having can “*live in hope*” and true hope. Is hope then an

innate virtue or a “gift” from the graces of the Absolute? Does it depend on us or not? Marcel answers both affirmatively and negatively. It is a “gift” in the sense that it is “a ‘call’ to which I must respond”²⁷. It is offered, but then we could always deny it. Another question is raised: Can one hope with insufficient reason/grounds? This, he points out, is a mere question of probability – another quantification/calculation of hope. In a sense, he is trying to say that “reasons for hoping” is meaningless. What if we are already facing the matters of fact that provides us with reasons to stop hoping? In the case of the mother who still hopes for the return of his son, although he was confirmed dead, is brought about by “her loving thought which repudiates or transcends the facts”. And that her hoping is a “love, against all hope.”²⁸ Hope must transcend the egotistical desire. Like love, the lesser that it is egotistical, the more likely that presence will manifest.²⁹ It was clearly stated above that, hope turns away from established experience. But as Marcel suggests, Hope is a “return” and at the same time “something new”. As the paradox states, “as before, but differently and better than before.”³⁰ In short, a “renewal” or “transfiguration.” He ends the essay with a provisional definition of hope:

Hope is essentially the availability of a soul which has entered intimately enough into the experience of communion to accomplish in the teeth of will and knowledge the transcendent act the act establishing the vital regeneration of which this experience affords both the pledge and the first-fruits.³¹

Towards a Phenomenology of Liberation

In the previous section, we have seen how Marcel provided us with penetrating reflections on the human experience of hope. Returning to our insights about our broken world, we have posed the question: *How then do we hope in the*

midst of our world's broken-ness - a broken-ness which holds us captives in our own world?

First, it must be realized that our situation as a ‘broken world’ is a form of captivity – where we, as human beings, are alienated or deprived of a certain kind of liberty. We are captives in a sense that we are trapped inside a system of a mechanized world – “a bureaucracy of life” as Marcel puts it. This is clearly manifested, as we have mentioned at the introduction, in man’s true identity being reduced to mere “documents”. Likewise, the State acts like an all-seeing eye – an “omniscient god” where the State looks at his fellow men as a potential threat to its power. Clearly, at the very root of these problems, is man’s failure to reflect that beyond these documents lies a valuable truth – the truth of man’s being. And, it is precisely this indifference towards the value of this truth that fragments our world.

This, however, may be counter-balanced by a sincere act of hope. A hope that rejects the despair laid down by our submission to these “document identities” and “god-acting State”. As stated in the preceding part of this paper, hope is always directed towards a certain kind of liberation or salvation. Liberation, in this sense, is the feeling of relaxation and creativity amidst the grappling thoughts of giving up on our current situation. Hence, one’s battle-cry would be: “we can do something.” And by pronouncing these words, one does not simply hope anymore, but also “believes in” the transcendence of any possible calculation of victory or loss. This person-in-hope likewise quietly and humbly believes in the power of the Absolute Thou – the one capable of granting true liberation. This affirmation of belief in the Absolute Thou, according to Marcel, is faith.³²

Hope, then again, is not an egotistical enterprise. It is always tied to intersubjectivity,

as Marcel puts it. “[T]his means that hope is always centered on a *we*, on a living relationship...One of the most meaningful examples that can be given in this context is that of hope in the Liberation such as we have lived it in the dark times.”³³ This only goes to show that as hope is intersubjective, so is liberation. Hope in liberation, therefore, calls for an active participation in a concrete community. As Vincent Miceli remarks, “Hope, then, cannot be self-centered...I hope for the return of someone long absent, for the defeat of the enemy, for peace for all, for the guarantee to all peoples of their liberties.”³⁴ In short, hoping in liberation is nothing without the essential virtue of love. This love, calls us to be **available** (*disponibilité*) to others’ needs, especially in their times of trials and darkness. This bond created by loving and remaining with the other likewise creates a communion with the Absolute Thou.

Some Final Remarks

To sum up everything, it was shown at the beginning of this essay that our world today is a ‘broken world’ due to certain elements pointed out by Gabriel Marcel during his Gifford lecture, leaving us with the question: *How then do we hope in the midst of our world’s broken-ness - a broken-ness which holds us captives in our own world?* By going back to Marcel’s “Sketch for a Phenomenology and Metaphysic of Hope”, we were able to trace three important virtues highlighted by Marcel himself which is quintessential in liberating ourselves from our broken world – hope, faith and love. Hope is what enables us to reflect that everything is not lost in the face of our current situation. This hope must, likewise, be coupled with faith that we can do something through the Absolute Thou, who is at the same time the final guarantor of our liberation. Finally, these two are summed up by love. Love enables us to enter into a genuine communion with the

Absolute Thou by making ourselves available to others’ hope for liberation. Hence, “hope is emptied of its meaning and its virtue if it is not the affirmation of a *we*, of an all-of-us-together – but this oneness of spirit can of course be founded only upon an appeal to the One.”³⁵ True liberation, therefore, is rooted in these three virtues of hope, faith, love and their end, God or the Absolute Thou.

¹ This paper was presented in one of the parallel sessions during the joint conference of the Philosophical Association of the Philippines, Inc. and *Pagarubangan* held at the Lyceum of Aparri, Cagayan, last February 25-27, 2016. The theme of the conference was “Questions on God”.

² Gabriel Marcel, *Philosophical Fragments 1909-1914 and The Philosopher and Peace*, trans. by Viola Herms Drath, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1965) p. 19. [emphasis mine]

³ These lectures were compiled and published as *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery* (First Series-1949) and *The Mystery of Being: Faith and Reality* (Second Series-1950).

⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, trans. by G.S. Fraser (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1960) p. 28.

⁵ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Faith and Reality*, trans. by Rene Hague (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1951) p. 181.

⁶ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), 29-67.

⁷ Edmund Husserl, the founder of Phenomenology, used these three methods (epoché, eidetic and transcendental reduction) in his phenomenological method.

⁸ This reflection is further subdivided into two levels: **Primary** and **Secondary**. The former “tends to dissolve the unity of experience...” while, the latter “is recuperative; it reconquers that unity.” Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, p. 102-103.

⁹ Seymour Cain, *Seymour Cain, Gabriel Marcel’s Theory of Religious Experience*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 112.

¹⁰ In his book *Être et Avoir*, Marcel dichotomizes *being* (être) from *having* (avoir). In simple terms, the latter means “to have for one’s self, to keep for one’s self, to hide...[it] seems to have a tendency to destroy and lose itself in the very thing it began by possessing.” The former, on the other hand, refers to something that comes from the very **depths of myself** i.e. something

that which I do not merely possess but is **integral to me**. Cf. Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katharine Farrer (London: Dacre Press, 1949), 160 [emphasis mine].

¹¹ Here we have to take note of Marcel's distinction of *problem* and *mystery*. "A *problem* is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege and reduce. But a *mystery* is something in which I am myself involved...A genuine *problem* is subject to an appropriate technique...whereas a *mystery*...transcends every conceivable technique." *Ibid.*, 117; emphasis mine. In his phenomenological method, a problem is located within the Primary Reflection whereas the mystery is in the Secondary Reflection.

¹² "It is, indeed, true that throughout a trial of the kind I have in mind, I find I am deprived for an indefinite period of a certain light for which I long." Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 30.

¹³ Captivity, as Marcel defines it, is "a compulsory mode of existence involving restrictions of every kind touching my personal actions." *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵ The distinction between the two shall be tackled under the section of this paper "Metaphysics of Hope."

¹⁶ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ "Stoicism counsels an acceptance of the inevitable that entails the determination to remain myself and thus transcend the decree of fate. This, says Marcel, is a self-enclosed, unradiating virtue, which strengthens the inner self, without regard for the neighbor, perhaps the highest form of egotism." Cain, *Gabriel Marcel's Theory of Religious Experience*, 112.

¹⁹ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 39.

²⁰ Marcel emphasizes that the source of this "absolute hope" is from the Absolute Thou or God. "It appears as a response of the creature to the infinite Being to whom it is conscious of owing everything that is has and upon whom it cannot impose any condition whatsoever." *Ibid.*, 47.

²¹ "What is the meaning of despair if not a declaration that God has withdrawn himself from me?" *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 48.

²³ Established experience, according to Marcel, looks at time as if it does not bring anything new. E.g. elders

telling the younger generation "indisputable truths". Marcel contends that the elder's experience before is different from the youth's experience in the present moment. The elders imposing their "truths" to the younger ones would create a "generation gap". In addition, this established experience is much more prone to despair since it looks at time as a closed system.

²⁴ Avoiding risks is similar to avoiding disappointment.

²⁵ "In creation, love is embodied in the created thing...hope is a vital aspect of the creative process...This is not a matter of self-amusement but of communion with others; and we see that whereas despair and solitude go together, hope is always bound up with communion, with love." Cain, *Gabriel Marcel's Theory of Religious Experience*, 116.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 65.

²⁹ "This *presence* is incarnated in the 'us' for whom 'I hope in Thee', that is to say in a communion of which I proclaim the indestructibility." *Ibid.*, 66; emphasis mine.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Absolute fidelity is based "on a certain appeal delivered from the depths of my own insufficiency *ad summam altitudinem*." To be able to fill in this insufficiency, Marcel proposes a commitment to this being whom he calls the "absolute recourse." This commitment presupposes a "radical humility", meaning we have to admit that we cannot always rely on ourselves – that we have to seek another "recourse". In this case, he identifies this "absolute recourse" with God. This **absolute fidelity** in the "absolute recourse" or God is what Marcel calls, **faith**. Cf. Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. by Robert Rosthal (New York: First Noonday Printing Press, 1964), 167-168.

³³ Gabriel Marcel, "Structure of Hope," in *Communio* 23, trans. by David-Louis Schindler, Jr. (Fall 1996), 607-608.

³⁴ Vincent P. Miceli, S.J., *Ascent to Being: Gabriel Marcel's Philosophy of Communion* (Belgium, Desclée Company, 1965), 128-129.

³⁵ Marcel, "Structure of Hope," 611.

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