

# Hope

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Leonardo Polo

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Translated by:

Daniel B. van Schalkwijk  
Amsterdam University College &  
d.b.vanschalkwijk@auc.nl

Nathaniel W. Gadiano  
The Heights School (Maryland, USA)  
ngadiano@heights.edu

Roderrick Esclanda  
Leonardo Polo Institute of Philosophy  
resclanda@leonardopoloinstitute.org

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**ABSTRACT:** Hope is not only a virtue, but as the backbone of the existence of human beings in time. Its components are optimism, the awareness that future depends on human action, a certain amount of adventure or risk, joy and self-destining.

**KEYWORDS:** Freedom, optimism, future, destiny, gift.



## 1. DESCRIPTION OF HOPE

I am going to give a broad outline of the components of hope. In doing so, I intend to shed light on the axis that gives meaning and mettle to a human being's life. Hope is the backbone of the existence of human beings in time.

The first dimension of hope is optimism. There is no hope without optimism, that is, if one does not realize that there is a future to be attained that is better than the present. It also holds the other way around: the only legitimate optimism is the one that dwells in hope, because being content with the brokenness of a situation is characteristic only of timid and disillusioned people. To be an optimist without hoping is the same as limiting oneself to a flat, featureless plain. In the end, it is a foolish way of consoling oneself, as made clear by a British saying according to which the optimist maintains that we are in the best of all possible worlds; the pessimist is the one who believes this to be true.

The apparent paradox of this saying manifests an optimism that is not faithful to itself, that is, one that is foreign to hope. According to Leibniz's philosophy, this world is the best of all possible worlds. The Leibnizian position is a clear example of pessimistic optimism. The hope-filled optimist rejects the idea of being in the best of all possible worlds, because in that world, there is nothing to do; that is, it is not possible to improve it.<sup>1</sup>

True optimism, then, is not just any optimism, but rather optimism that is open to the future. This entails putting oneself to the test in the adventure of seeking a new stage of life that is superior to the present one. Those who live hope affirm that we are in a world that can be improved, and for this reason they do not remain settled in the present, but rather set out upon a path that leads to a goal. The best of all possible worlds is closed to human projects; it is a place for retirees, without history, without innovation. That is why I have said that hope is the basic framework of human existence in time: in order to move forward

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Leibniz is the first author to speak of progress, that is, of the existence of the monad as an unending unfolding of its attributes. This approach, however, nullifies the novelty implied by the future, since the attributes of the monad are pre-contained in its substance.

with meaning, it is necessary to envision some advantage that is within our reach, but not yet attained. This has to do with the word existing: *sistere extra*, to go out. To go out from what? From immobility, from the attempt to limit oneself to what seems to be enough, sufficient, and also to reject the interpretation of time as a mere passing.

As an ingredient of hope, optimism implies dissatisfaction, not being satisfied with what is given. For this reason, hope corresponds to a mode of lived temporality that is growth, which is completely different from the idea of time passing. Growing is the most intense way of making the best use of time, that is, of putting it at the service of life. It should be pointed out that man is capable of unrestricted growth, one that is superior to organic growth because it belongs to the order of the spirit. Such growth is inherent to the highest powers: intelligence and will. Hope-filled optimism is based on this type of growth, which, because it is unrestricted, is possible at all stages of human life.

The second element of hope is the conviction that the future depends on human action. Without this conviction, hope can be established only by interpreting that which is hoped for as an end that will arrive, that will be real, by virtue of a dynamic external to man's intervention. This hope, made false by its being devoid of human intervention, is characteristic of what is called utopia. The utopian man speaks like this: times are bad, and there is nothing we can change; however, without my intervention, without counting on me, the evils that afflict us will disappear and an optimal final situation will come about. It is clear that in this way Leibniz's pessimistic optimism is repeated but transposed: we are not in the best possible world, but we will be. Now, this future-centered improvement will occur automatically, mechanically, and in accordance with the inexorable events of extra-human forces.

Utopian hope is false not only because a utopia will never materialize, but also because even if it were to materialize, it would not be possible to recognize this future as one's own, since it would have come about as a consequence of dynamisms external to the contribution of human beings. A utopian thinker paints a picture of a better future that is external to human beings because it is due to a deterministic process that lacks freedom.

An example of utopian thinking is Marxism. According to Marx, history has not ended because capitalism contains unresolved contradictions. The great defect of capitalism lies in the subjugation of work –the true creator of value– to the machine, which is dead work. This subjugation diminishes surplus value and, consequently, brings capitalism to a terminal crisis. Although the alienation of work is due to machines, society will nevertheless free itself from alienation not by doing away with machines (for that would be to go back to a time before capitalism), but rather when machines function by themselves. Then it will not be necessary to work; rather we will be able to dedicate ourselves to other activities.

Curiously, at its end, the automated economy frees man from work: this is the idea of the polyvalent man.<sup>2</sup> But his idea, aside from being ambiguous, is untenable, because Marx defines man as the animal capable of securing the objective conditions for his physical existence through work. This implies that activities other than production are a fantastical reflection: a superstructure devoid of real value. This is the Marxist sense of ideology. Therefore, if the objective conditions for the physical existence of human beings are secured through the automatic functioning of machines, then the multi-purpose human, having no need to work, cannot engage in activities imbued with human value, which Marx has disqualified with the notion of superstructure (Überbau).

In sum, utopia is a form of alienation, no matter how much those who hold utopian versions of hope maintain that this is the way to achieve de-alienation.

As an imperative, hope proposes an intrinsic future for man. The future is better under one condition: that the human being himself becomes better; otherwise, there is only room for utopia. Within utopia hide an anthropological reductionism: if man does nothing, he will remain unchanged in a magnificent world, like some of those guests from the Gospel parable, who were invited to the wedding feast, but were not wearing the proper attire. In the parable, the wedding feast is the optimal situation and the

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: A polyvalent man dominates work and is not dominated by it.

guests who want to enter without a wedding garment are those who have not changed, who have not improved. These are the guests that are cast out.

Here another dimension of hope appears: the man with hope, who is not devoted to utopia, knows that the future entails a task and that, without this task, the future will not come about. Additionally, it is necessary to determine what resources are available for carrying out this endeavor. The consideration of resources, therefore, is another dimension of hope, which constitutes an issue that needs to be carefully considered. The first step in addressing this issue is the following: at the moment, we do not have all the resources necessary to arrive at a better future. If we were to already have all the necessary resources, then what we could arrive at would not be a future at all, for it would lack novelty and would not be better. Strictly speaking, its coming about would be superfluous. There would not even be an obligation to propose it because, if everything is already in place, then what is best is the present situation. In the final analysis, resources are like cold hard cash, and if all of them are present, then the sensible thing to do is to enjoy them.

Consequently, the attainment of a future proper to hope requires a certain amount of adventure, of risk, since, as has just been stated, the possibility of a better future means that all of the necessary resources are not presently available. There is a Gospel parable that demonstrates this point as well. It is that of the man who had a great harvest and considered that it would be useless to continue working, that is, to sow again (the rationale for future sowing is what one hopes to harvest; therefore, the harvest is better than the sowing). Now, Scripture says that this man was a fool. From this parable, we can draw a twofold conclusion: hope cannot be surrendered, because the future, insofar as it depends on man, is better than the present; but the future is only possible, not certain, because the resources available now are not sufficient to guarantee success. When one sows, the harvest is not guaranteed.

The hypothesis that everything necessary for carrying out the task to be performed is available in advance is false. The resources that are at hand are always scarce with respect to hope, since to hope is to want to be more. To hope is to want to be more because right now one is little. With these observations, a first

step towards framing the question of the relationship between resources and hope has been taken.

It should be noted that the hope-filled task is impossible if one attempts to undertake it completely alone. The isolated man cannot reach a better future precisely because, by himself, he does not have all the necessary resources. Therefore, one cannot undertake an adventure of hope cannot if he does not count on the help of others. This help consists, above all, in cooperation. In other words, the hope-filled task cannot be undertaken if the future is not held in common, and this entails the common nature of the good that is sought. Working with hope, being open to new horizons, is a characteristic of human beings that develops in a social manner; that is, in accordance with hope's ability to gather people together. This value is of special interest for morality.

Human existence, insofar as it is articulated by hope, is constitutively epic. An epic is the narrative of a multiplicity of intense experiences through which human beings come to know themselves in depth. A magnificent example of a literary epic is the figure of Ulysses engaged in the task of returning to Ithaca. Another example of a more profound—and also real—epic existence is offered to us by the figure of Abraham.

These examples illustrate how epics possess an overarching structure: one's own resources are not enough. This structure defines the temporal being of the human being, whose existence can be narrated as a story because he has a past, whose meaning must be actualized, and an impulse toward an end, which calls him forth. For this reason, the counter-figure of history is narration without a future, which considers life as happening without any direction. A clear example of anti-history is Kafka's narrative, in which man is not helped by anyone and finds nothing, because he is submerged in an anguished bureaucratic process that continues to infinity.

Above all, an epic narration contains the task of a human subject. For this task to be hope-filled, it is necessary that it not follow the mere caprice of the subject. Rather, the task must have been entrusted, and the protagonist must understand it to be an assignment. This is where help, the original accompaniment, lies. One could ask the person who seeks to live in isolation: who asked you to butt in? Every task is assigned, first of all, by

belonging to history: it is the metaphor of passing on the torch. But, strictly speaking, the author of the assignment is the Creator. For this reason, the assignment must be understood as a mission that has been entrusted to someone. The ones that understand this fully are the saints.

Throughout the course of an epic's action, there appears an assisting element, that is, an accompanying aid, which is offered to the subject as she walks toward the future objective. At the same time, however, hope is always confronted by difficulties or obstacles: an adversary that puts it to the test. But this is not all. Another factor of hope lies in the fact that the beneficiary of the action cannot only be the subject who carries it out. In this sense, it can be said that the motivation of hope is always transcendent. A transcendent motivation is necessary because hope is incompatible with isolation. The better future, to which one aspires, cannot be for oneself alone; the benefit hoped for must reach others.

If any of the epic elements of hope disappear, human history becomes distorted and the ridiculous mutilation of hope into utopia takes place. In the Marxist utopia, the activity of the subject becomes trivial, because the polyvalent man is incompatible with projects that reach the social level. But the mutilation of the essential structure of hope can affect other elements. This gives rise to different modulations of nihilist individualism; the egoist curtails his hope and surrounds it with nothingness.

It is possible for a human subject to answer the following questions this way: Who entrusted you with the task of existing? No one. What help can you count on? Only my own resources. Who is your adversary? Everyone else. Who is the beneficiary? Only me. It should, however, be kept in mind that whoever puts his hope in a task that no one has entrusted to him, and with no other beneficiary or assistance than himself, is deceiving himself.

In the Christian understanding of life, the one who assigns the task is the one who is most interested in its success. He is the friend par excellence, to whom one can always go. For this reason, prayer occupies a central place in the life of the Christian. In prayer, one discovers that the helper is within himself, as the



most innovative, as the best and, ultimately, as what is least expected by superficial people.

There are two other human types incapable of living with hope: the doubters and the clueless. The doubter is the one who keeps a close eye on the resources at his disposal, forgetting that they can be increased, and gives too much weight to the difficulties. He allows himself to be deterred by pain and does not know how to seek help or cooperation. The clueless man, on the other hand, is the one who follows Foch's phrase: first jump, then look. Better yet, the clueless man is clueless with regard to everything except resentment. The hope-filled task is incompatible with resentment because resentment is the child of fear. If fear is introduced into hoping, then the latter is replaced by a sense of urgency or by excessive calculation.

Precisely because it is accompanied by risk, hope is a source of solidarity. Hope's power to call forth lies in the fact that he who hopes takes a risk and he who takes no risks does not hope. Hope calls forth two great forces of the spirit: friendship and antagonism; one positive and the other negative. But the first is more powerful. Since hope is a concern of a heart that—like the prow of a ship—opens up horizons, the one who hopes is always protected; and not because he takes cover, but rather on the contrary: because he exposes himself. The man who hopes neither conforms to the present situation nor takes refuge in a bunker. For this reason, he brings others along.

Taking risks is like gambling. If sociology develops by appealing to game theory, society must be defined as a positive-sum game. This is possible through hope as described above.

For this reason, hope-filled activity is a gamble that does not overwhelm. It is a joyful gamble that is worth taking chances on because everyone wins. The final element of hope, therefore, is joy. From this joy the universe's joy also derives. As St. Paul says, creatures are awaiting the manifestation of the glory of the children of God; meanwhile, they are subject to vanity (cf. Rm 8:19-20); or, in other words, they are bored.

## 2. HOPE'S LOVE

What does Christianity add to man's hope; that is, what is hope in the realm of personal love? This question can also be expressed as follows: what is my life's task? A task is an expansion of freedom. For the Greeks, freedom is dominion over voluntary acts insofar as they bear a relation to an end. But there must be a greater freedom in the hope-filled task embedded in loving bestowal, that is, in the expansion of intimacy. Love is not possible without personal freedom.

For the Christian, hoping does not mean waiting. Hope is not only about what is to come. Kant's question, "what am I authorized to hope for?" does not presuppose a journey to a terminus whose coming about and content has to be ascertained. If having is continued in the form of gifting, then there is a notion that is superior to that of the goal which I call *destining*.<sup>3</sup> The question concerning destining entails that man's activity springs forth in giving from the person. Destining should not be confused with destiny. To say it in some way, when taking stock of his life from his personal being, man finds that a final fulfilment of his capacity for desiring is not enough for him, but rather that he needs to seek the fulfilment of his capacity for offering.

I will try to express this difficult question in a more graphic manner. It is not primarily a question of attaining new horizons, but rather of giving. Who will accept? The capacity to give must also resonate at a personal level; otherwise, it is absurd. Who responds to the hope-filled initiative? The key issue is correspondence. Thomas Aquinas states this clearly: strictly speaking, without correspondence, love does not exist. On this point there is no room for the one-sidedness of desire. Without correspondence, the superiority of the person's giving love would make no sense. Hope aspires to loving reciprocity and aims to

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<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: Polo considers that in classical Greek philosophy "having" was the highest form of human activity, which was conceived of as going beyond material possessions; one can for example be said to "have ideas". In Christian thought, however, it is understood that giving is a higher form of human activity than having. In this paragraph and those that follow, Polo explains that this priority also entails a shift in teleology. "Obtaining a goal" is no longer the most important, but rather "destining" oneself towards a loving personal relationship.

foster it above human fancies. Hope comes from love and seeks to correspond.

Hope's love seeks acceptance and response; that is, the one who is alike. Here likeness does not mean a copy or reiteration, but rather an otherness of initiatives in reply that brings the two together and places them on the same level. For this reason, one of the central categories of Christian sociology is the notion of neighbor. This notion means that if one is capable of loving, the other must not be inferior through lack of this capacity. Equality among human beings is not only according to the species, but rather is focused on their personal dignity, and it is a requirement of the Christian life to respect and promote the dignity of others. If others are not equal to me, what does giving mean? To whom does one give? A neighbor is not a mere receiver of one's giving. For, above all, giving seeks to promote the dignity of the other. This intention regulates the content of the gift.

Hope is a doubly directed requirement, beyond adaptation or equilibrium. Hope is not homeostatic, since it seeks the dignity of all men and promotes it. From it arises an imperative that, modifying a Kantian phrase, can be expressed as follows: do not be satisfied with the means. This non-conformism brings with it dissatisfaction; it is the refusal to stop, to say "that's enough".

Dissatisfaction is equivalent to not getting tired of giving. It is not a negative attitude, although it brings with it a letting go. This letting go is described in many cases (in others, it implies a renunciation) as sharing and helping to grow. What is usually called interpersonal communication requires the correlative flexibility between what is mine and what is yours, which is proper to the virtue of friendship. For this reason, hope neither claims the authority of the bestowal nor demands its recognition. It renounces the attention of others precisely because it does not renounce giving and because dissatisfaction is equivalent to not tiring of giving.

A capacity to love subjected to a situation of solitude is a tragedy. If others are not dignifiable, then loving hope lacks meaning; it is, so to say, a burden that cannot be unloaded if one is left alone, it is a capacity nullified at its terminus. But the Christian cannot remain alone, as "one" who lacks a neighbor. Who is my neighbor? Implicit in the question that gives rise to the parable of

the Good Samaritan is a whole orientation of existence. A neighbor needs to be searched for. The neighbor must be found. For this reason, this question has repercussions for whoever formulates it. To seek out one's neighbor means being disposed to continue as a neighbor. Strictly speaking, the neighbor of the Gospel parable is the Samaritan. Seeking one's neighbor is equivalent to replacing one's own concerns, to changing life's routine because of the irruption of the person into it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The observations contained in this article are situated within a larger investigation entitled *Transcendental Anthropology*.