

BOOK REVIEW

Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (Charlottesville, WV: University of West Virginia, 2015), 160pp.

Hope without Optimism is a brief but rich work, of a piece with Terry Eagleton's recent books tackling existential and spiritual subjects: *The Meaning of Life* (2007), *On Evil* (2010), and *Culture and the Death of God* (2014). Based on the Page-Barbour lectures at the University of Virginia delivered by Professor Eagleton in 2014, the book often reads like a long catalogue of opinions and quotes about hope from noteworthy philosophers, poets, novelists, and theologians—not least among them, Gabriel Marcel. The book's four sections are best approached as individual essays which when set alongside their neighbors cover most of the ground that must be covered in any careful examination of the concept of hope.

The book's first section, "The Banality of Optimism," aims to distinguish optimism from hope. Optimism, for Eagleton, appears to be something between a decision and a feeling. Optimism is "more a matter of belief than of hope," a "primordial stance toward the world, like cynicism or cruelty" (p.1), a mere "quirk of temperament" (p.2). Eagleton cites Marcel (in *Homo Viator*) as doubting the possibility of a "deep" optimism. Optimism is a stance which cannot be "empirically disproved," and is thus a form of "fatalism." In this, it is just like pessimism. In contrast, hope consists of a deep conviction about reality. Authentic hope "needs to be underpinned by reasons" and "must be fallible" (p.3).

Eagleton goes on to disentangle hope from the most seductive form of optimism, the idea of "not progress but Progress." "Progress" is the doctrine that the plight of the human race improves automatically with the march of history, a view he attributes to Kant, among others. Eagleton thinks that optimists tend to believe in progress, and are not without reason to do so, for "that there has indeed been progress in the history of humanity can scarcely be doubted" (p.7). Moreover, this progress has come in great part thanks to the expansion of productive forces under capitalism. What Eagleton objects to is the failure to acknowledge the "transitional human misery" involved in progress: those left behind, "ruthless acquisitiveness," colonialism, consumerism, and so forth. Instead, Karl Marx (and Marxists like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno) holds a tragic, realistic view of progress, wherein "the very forces that make for freedom and affluence also lay waste to human powers" (p.16). Judaism and Christianity, in turn, are both a "creed that breaks the [alleged, but fake] link" between progress and hope by revealing that hope is about redemption, not material accumulation.

What hope actually consists of is discussed in the second section, "What is Hope?" The chapter contains meditations on the relationship between hope and despair, hope and knowledge, and performative rather than optative hope. While many thinkers are cited, Eagleton's greatest influence in this chapter appears to be Thomas Aquinas and Christian thinkers in general. He begins with Aquinas's idea that hope is a virtue, which Eagleton takes to mean that "hope is a disposition rather than an experience" (p.57). He develops this idea into a view of hope as a species of desire oriented toward the future. Hope is like desire in that it is oriented toward a good, though the type of good differs in each case: "desire is often for a specific object ... hope's

goal is generally a state of affairs.” (p.47) This future state of affairs must be realistically possible, for “impossibility cancels hope but not desire” (p.49). “One can always desire, but one cannot always hope” (p.48), because one may desire something imaginary, but one cannot delude one’s self into hoping for that which cannot come to pass.

The idea that hope must always lie in the possible forces Eagleton to contend with the view, represented by Marcel and others, that hope somehow survives any and all disappointment—indeed, that one must not give up on hope even in the face of complete disappointment. Eagleton refers to this type of hope as “fundamental hope” or “metahope” (Marcel calls it “ontological hope”). Eagleton considers whether such hope is merely ideology, though he also links it to “a nameless conviction that life is ultimately worth living” (p.74).

Eagleton dedicates an entire chapter to the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, Marxist theorist and “*the philosopher of hope.*” Bloch deserves this title because for him “the whole of material reality ... is pervaded by an inherent purposiveness or tendency to perfection” (p.98). For Bloch, hope is somehow embedded in matter: the evolution of the cosmos and the revolutionary advancement of humanity in history are both considered part of the same process. His work largely consists of empirical investigations searching for evidence of the advancement of hope in history. Yet Eagleton finds so little that’s valuable in Bloch’s thought that one wonders why he dedicates so much time to it. Perhaps it is because Bloch “is the kind of Marxist with whom critics of Marxism may feel at home” (p.93) and therefore his thought could facilitate a dialogue between worldviews—though given this opinion, one wishes Eagleton had spent more time examining Bloch’s fascinating dialogue with his Christian theological companions, Jürgen Moltmann and Joseph Ratzinger.

Eagleton’s final chapter, “Hope against Hope,” explores the quasi-paradox that hoping often requires accepting both the (apparent) hopelessness of a situation and the fact that hope is somehow tied to a future that cannot be imagined by the one who is hoping. He gives as an example the moving story of Plenty Coups, the last chief of the American Crow tribe, who saw the end of his tribe’s way of life in the face of war and colonial encroachment. Plenty Coups found reason to hope in a dream in which a voice enjoined him “to accept the ruin of his tribe’s way of life, in the trust that only in this way could his people struggle through to a good end” (p.112). Plenty Coup’s tribe lost its land and culture, but ultimately found a modicum of peace in a reservation, and eventually obtained some of their stolen land back from the U.S. government.

Inspired by this story, Eagleton explores the idea that “authentic ... hope is whatever can be salvaged, stripped of guarantees, from a general dissolution” (p.114). This salvage can be a literal thing—a parcel of land. It might also be contained in language: “As long as calamity can be given a voice, it ceases to be the final word” (p.122). Or—and here Eagleton flirts with theology—the salvage might be that which divine grace is able to save when it enters the human story, a heavenly aid which makes possible the perfection of nature, the “self-transcendence” of humanity, and “transfiguration” of history (p.126). The upshot of this chapter is that hope is not simply a teleological affair and not only a question of one’s fate but the relationship one establishes to it. Hope makes possible a way of existing which reclaims and safeguards certain values when they are present, and pursues them when they are absent.

Eagleton could find support for his notion of non-teleological hope in Marcel, but instead he is mostly critical of Marcel’s thought. In all, Eagleton spends about a dozen pages on Marcel, mostly on the “Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope” in *Homo Viator*. Eagleton writes that, in arguing that “absolute” hope does not calculate nor fixate on particular objects, Marcel gives us a theory that is essentially ideological and is “the privileged view of

those who have no need of any very palpable form of redemption ... ” (64). Even though Marcel does give one very concrete example of a hope—the end of the German occupation—Eagleton argues that this is “the equivalent in the realm of hope of fideism in the domain of faith” (p.64), wishful thinking without rational foundations, precisely because Marcel holds that we should hold on to this hope in spite of the current improbability that it will happen. Not only that, but Marcel’s notion of hope also lacks *experiential* foundations, for it is “not based on experience, indeed takes no account of it, and rises from the ruins of all specific aspirations” (p.63). Nevertheless, Eagleton does agree with the validity of what Marcel calls “fundamental rather than absolute” hope, which is both indeterminate and not ideological, and constitutes a “nonpurposive openness to the future.”

But perhaps a more fruitful way to interpret Marcel’s account of hope would be to look at it as describing one unique type of experience, rather than a conviction or ideology that is either “absolute” or “fundamental.” Hope would then be an experience not founded on particular hopes (i.e., “I hope that”) but rather a particular mode of hoping-in-general (i.e., “I hope”). It is suggestive that, unlike English, the French language has two words for hope, the more mundane *espoir* and the philosophical *espérance*, the latter being the “special experience” that is the stated object of Marcel’s study. This “special experience” involves a sense of “relaxation” and “patience,” according to Marcel in *Homo Viator*, “being” rather than “having,” and is ultimately founded in one’s relationship with “the infinite Being to whom [one] is conscious of owing everything that it has and upon whom it cannot impose any condition whatsoever ...” (*Homo Viator* {Harper 1962}, p.47). Marcel does not offer a formal proof for this infinite Being’s existence, but rather argues that an accurate account of hope’s structure includes a relationship with such a being, and this is a kind of indirect argument for the existence of such a Being.

Cast in this way, it seems that Marcel’s existential description of the “special experience” of hope would dovetail with Eagleton’s own notion of a non-teleological hope against hope. It is a stance toward the world and time which values the present moment as much as the future, a hope for both the improvement of the human lot but and for the redemption of its past. And let’s not forget that the liberation of France from Nazi occupation really did happen.

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