

Hope and Despair: A Discussion on the Atheistic Existentialist, Evolutionary Biologistic and Intersubjective Accounts of Hope

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Abstract: What constitutes “genuine” hope? The kind of hope that helps us overcome the deepest despair? I begin my paper by citing the example of Etty Hillesum—a victim of the concentration camps during World War II. To my mind, during the last moments of her life, Hillesum exhibited a kind of hope that is profound and invincible. In this paper, I strive to understand the nature of Hillesum’s hope. How is such hope possible?

After some general remarks on hope and despair, I shall examine three different accounts of hope—what I shall call the “atheistic existentialist” (Sartre and Camus), the “evolutionary biologistic” (Dawkins and Dennett), and the “intersubjective” (Marcel) accounts of hope. These accounts are differentiated from each other by the worldviews they imply and how they understand the nature of hope. Following this investigation, I shall suggest that Marcel’s account sheds most light on our understanding of Etty Hillesum’s hope.

Introduction

The misery here [Westerbork transit camp] is quite terrible; and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then time and again, it soars straight from my heart—I can't help it, that's just the way it is, like some elementary force—the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage and every fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves.

Etty Hillesum¹

Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jew and a writer, was sent to the Westerbork transit camp in 1942 during World War II and was later deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where she died in 1943. Although there were millions of people who died in the concentration camps, Hillesum deserves special attention because of her profound account of her experiences. What was unusual about Hillesum was the degree of maturity, courage, calmness, and kindness that she exhibited in the last moments of her life. A close friend described Hillesum's departure to Auschwitz as follows: “Talking gaily, smiling, a kind word for everyone she met on the way, full of sparkling humor, perhaps just a touch of sadness, but every inch the Etty you all know so well.”² After she got on the train, Etty Hillesum was never to be seen again. It would not only be natural but also appropriate for anyone to feel despair, indignation, anger, and fear were he or she placed in a similar situation. But instead of giving in to despair and feeling indignant, like many others did,

¹ Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York, N.Y.: Holt, 1996), p. 294.

² *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

Hillesum was able to maintain a hopeful state of mind throughout her trial. It was this state of mind from which she drew her strength, calmness, and kindness.

To my mind, Hillesum's example manifests a kind of profound hope—a kind of hope that sustains us in times of extraordinary difficulty and dispels despair. What is the nature of this kind of profound hope? And by what framework are we able to understand it? I shall begin my investigation by observing some general characteristics of hope and despair, and then I shall propose a characterization scheme which might help us acquire a better understanding of different accounts of hope. In this paper, I shall discuss three different accounts of hope—what I shall call the “atheistic existentialist,” the “evolutionary biologicistic,” and the “intersubjective” accounts. I shall then discuss which of these accounts can best help us make sense of Etty Hillesum's hope. It is also to be noted at the outset that this paper shall not provide a general or comprehensive theory of hope.

I. Some General Remarks: Hope and Despair

Hope and despair cannot be understood apart from each other;³ hope, as Marcel observes, is situated within the framework of being in a trial.⁴ Only when one is in a trial or a difficult situation, can one either hope or despair. But how are we to understand hope and despair?

According to many philosophers, hope results from a combination of desires and beliefs. More specifically, *to hope for x is to desire x and believe that x is attainable.*⁵ And *to despair over x is to desire x but believe that x is unattainable.* From this framework, it follows that one's hope or despair, when “misguided”—due to one's having false beliefs or unreasonable desires—might not have direct bearing on reality. For example, a schizophrenic might believe that he or she is destined to be the conqueror of the world (a false belief), yet such a hope—a hope that is based on a false belief—is obviously unwarranted. Another example: Someone might despair over the fact that he or she is not admired by everyone he or she meets (his or her despair is due to his or her desiring something impossible). Such examples show that one's hope and despair can be “misguided” due to one's unreasonable desires or irrational beliefs.⁶ If one's hope (and despair) is to be “legitimate,” his or her desire has to be reasonable and his or her belief has to be (minimally) anchored in reality.⁷ Therefore, from this observation, we can distinguish “appropriate” hope/despair from “inappropriate” hope/despair. The “appropriate” kind of hope/despair is a result of one's having reasonable beliefs and desires, whereas the “inappropriate” kind of hope/despair results from one's having false beliefs or unreasonable desires.

Apart from being either appropriate or inappropriate, one's hope/despair can be either “trivial” or “profound.” The trivial kind of hope/despair results from our trivial and petty desires, and the satisfaction (or frustration) of these desires makes no significant difference to our lives (e.g., the desire to get the newest iPhone on its launch day). On the other hand, the profound kind of

³ For the idea that hope and despair are opposites, see, for example, Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to the Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd and Paul Seaton (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine's Press, 2010), p. 30; Adrienne M. Martin, *How We Hope: A Moral Psychology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 29; and J. P. Day, “Hope.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 6, number 2 (April 1969), p. 94.

⁴ See Marcel, *Homo Viator*, p. 24; subsequent citations abbreviated as *HV*.

⁵ See J.P. Day, “Hope,” p. 89; see Adrienne M. Martin, *How We Hope*, pp. 11-13.

⁶ Godfrey expresses a similar idea when he discusses the theme of hope; see Joseph J. Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope* (Boston, MA.: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 25.

⁷ In this paper, I shall not address the difficult issue of determining what it means for our beliefs to be “(minimally) anchored in reality.” It is sufficient for our purpose that we can see the difference in rationality between, for example, the belief that “there are other life forms in the universe” and the belief that “all our world leaders are human-alien hybrids.”

hope/despair has to do with our deepest desires, and the satisfaction (or frustration) of these desires brings significant changes in our lives. A man's profound despair, as Kierkegaard says, is "an expression of [his] total personality."⁸ In this paper, I am primarily interested in the kind of hope/despair that is "appropriate" and "profound."

II. A Categorization Scheme

For the sake of the argument, I shall propose a categorization scheme that enables us to better understand three different accounts of hope. According to this categorization scheme, all accounts of hope can be differentiated by (1) the worldviews they imply; (2) to whom the hope is directed; and (3) what is being hoped for.

Worldviews

Hope as a concept doesn't make much sense on its own. Just like many other concepts, such as right, duty, loyalty, filial piety, and goodness, the concept of hope derives its meaning from a network of interrelating concepts. The network of these interrelating concepts then forms (however loosely) a worldview. One's worldview determines how one interacts with the world. So, what kind of differing worldviews exist? It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive list of possible worldviews. Instead, I shall discuss three main types of worldview that are relevant for our discussion.

The Scientific Worldview

It is beyond dispute that we are now living in a scientific age. Science is looked upon as *the* source of knowledge and the dominant force that drives the progress of human beings. According to this worldview, very roughly put, the world is to be explained in physical and naturalistic terms.⁹ According to one version of this worldview, for instance, human consciousness is nothing more than the firing of neurons—or, as some like to put it, consciousness is "reducible" to matter or the firing of neurons. The belief in a soul—as something that is qualitatively different from matter—is simply a relic of the ancient and primitive way of thinking.¹⁰ This is what I shall call the "scientific" or "naturalistic" worldview.

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 2000), p. 79.

⁹ See, for example, Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 30-57.

¹⁰ For materialistic accounts of consciousness, see Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston, MA.: Little, Brown, 1991) and Paul Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2013, 3rd edition). We can acknowledge that materialist philosophers such as Dennett and Churchland are very insightful in their attempts to offer a materialistic explanation of consciousness by employing concepts from the latest neurological, biological, and physiological research. However, along with Nagel and Jackson, I am very suspicious that the subjective aspect of consciousness can be accounted for in purely naturalistic terms. It seems that materialist philosophers are primarily interested in explaining *how* the brain works but have so far failed to account for *qualia*—the subjective state of being conscious of something. In his landmark essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (in Ned Block, Owen Flanagan, and Guven Guzeldere [eds.], *The Nature of Consciousness* [Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1997], pp. 519-27), Thomas Nagel has convincingly shown us that even if we knew all there is to know about the physical constitution of a bat, we would still not know what it is like to be a bat. Similarly, Frank Jackson, in his "What Mary Didn't Know" (in Block, Flanagan, and Guzeldere [eds.], *The Nature of Consciousness*, pp. 567-70), argues that even if Mary had learned everything about the physical nature of the world, she still wouldn't know what it is like to experience red if she had never seen red before.

The Religious Worldview

In contrast to the scientific or naturalistic worldview, the religious worldview holds that reality is ultimately governed by a supernatural force or forces. The religious worldview can be further distinguished into two basic versions: (i) the polytheistic and (ii) the monotheistic. We are familiar with these two versions from our acquaintance with ancient Greek culture and the Judeo-Christian tradition. The ancient Greeks, just like many cultures in the world, believed in the existence of supernatural beings. According to the polytheistic belief system, these beings populate the earth and they sometimes interfere with human affairs. Human beings communicate with these supernatural beings through prayer, offerings, sacrifices, and even through psychics or mediums. These supernatural beings can be either benevolent or malevolent.¹¹ According to the monotheistic system, on the other hand, there exists a supreme God. He is not only omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and all good, He is also the Creator God—He created everything. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, God sometimes interferes with human affairs through miracles, divine revelations, and prophets, etc.

According to the religious worldview—whether it is polytheistic or monotheistic—there is a realm of existence that is beyond the physical. In other words, reality is not exhausted by physical explanations.

The Ethical Worldview

It is perhaps necessary to distinguish what I call the “ethical” worldview from the “religious” and the “naturalistic” worldviews. Unlike the religious worldview, the ethical worldview does not require a belief in gods or spirits; and unlike the naturalistic worldview, the ethical worldview does not believe that physical facts are all that exist. The ethical worldview holds that there is a moral principle or a principle of goodness that governs the universe, but the principle itself is impersonal, so that it is impossible for us to “interact” with it as we interact with another human being. It is due to this principle that we derive our sense of meaning and purpose and it is this principle that underwrites our value judgments.¹²

As an interesting aside, according to my categorization, the Buddhist worldview will situate somewhere between the religious and the ethical worldviews. Buddhists believe in the law of karma, which is not only a principle of cause and effect but also a moral principle. Buddhists believe that those who have accumulated good karmas through ethical behaviors will be born into a good family in their next lives, and those who have reached moral perfection will not be reborn again; they will attain the state of *Nirvana*—the state of ultimate bliss. However, unlike the proponents of the ethical worldview, Buddhists do believe in gods and spirits. To be sure, these gods and spirits are not the ones understood by the Greek or Christian traditions. Gods and spirits, according to Buddhism, just like humans, are subjected to the law of karma, to the cycle of life and death. Depending on the karmas that they have accumulated, the gods and spirits might reincarnate as gods, demigods, hungry spirits, humans, or animals in their next lives.¹³

Hope for Whom?

¹¹ In many Asian countries, it is still the tradition to make offerings to spirits, and burn incense and joss paper ritually.

¹² A clear expression of this worldview is found in Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

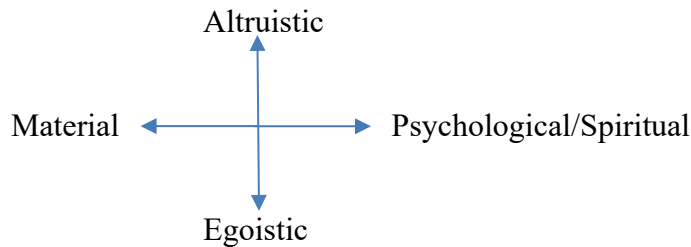
¹³ For the concept of “Six Paths” or “Six Realms of Existence”, see, for example, “Six Paths,” *Nichiren Buddhist Library*, <https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/dic/Content/S/208> (accessed February 23, 2021); “Six Realms of Desire,” *Learn Religions*, <https://www.learnreligions.com/the-realms-of-desire-449740> (accessed February 23, 2021).

When we hope, we always hope on behalf of *someone*—either ourselves or someone else. In most cases, we hope for what we desire. For example, “*I* hope that *I* will pass the exam tomorrow.” Hope, in this case, is directed to the fulfillment of my own desire. However, in some cases, our hope is not directed to the fulfillment of our own desires, but we hope on behalf of someone else, perhaps for this person’s well-being. For example, “I hope *Sam* will recover from his illness soon.” Additionally, we may sometimes hope for *us*—you and I are no longer considered to be distinct, but we now form one unit or one family. For example, “I hope *we* can overcome the tragic loss of our children *together*.”

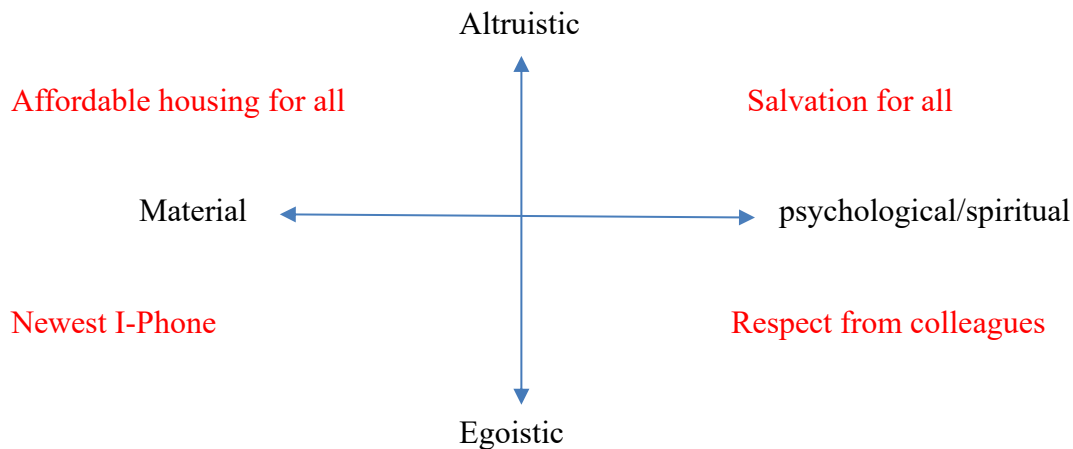
The question of “whom the hope is for” is important; we shall see later in this paper how this question has direct bearing on our overcoming despair.

What Is Being Hoped For?

There are an array of things for which we might hope; things for which we hope might be material in nature, related to our psychological needs, or include social justice concerns. But is there a way to categorize the things that we might hope for so that it would be easier for us to discuss them in relation to the theme of hope and despair? I suggest that the things we hope for can be categorized according to the following frame of reference:



The horizontal axis specifies whether the things we hope for are material or non-material in nature; the vertical axis specifies whether the things we hope for are egoistic or altruistic in nature. For example, if I hope that I can get the newest I-phone for myself, the object of my hope will be at the bottom left of this frame of reference; if I hope for my colleagues’ respect, the object of my hope will be located somewhere at the bottom right; if I hope for affordable housing for everyone, the object of this hope will be somewhere at the top left; if I hope that everyone will be saved and enter heaven, the object of this hope will be at the top right:



This frame of reference, albeit somewhat artificial, conveniently enables us to differentiate our objects of hope. Later in this paper, we shall see that the more material and egoistic the object of our hope, the more this hope will be susceptible to being frustrated; on the contrary, the more non-material and altruistic is the object of our hope, the less likely it will be frustrated. In other words, whether we are able to maintain our hope throughout our trial or despair largely depends on what is being hoped for.

With the above conceptual clarifications, we can see that different accounts of hope can be categorized according to (1) the worldviews they presuppose, (2) to whom the hope is directed, and (3) what is being hoped for. I shall now discuss three different accounts of hope, and then suggest which of these accounts can help us gain a better understanding of the nature of Etty Hillesum's hope.

III. Different Accounts of Hope

The Atheistic Existentialist Account of Hope: Sartre and Camus

The early twentieth century existentialist philosophers deserve a special chapter in the history of philosophy. They were the first thinkers to bring together and analyze in depth the themes of anguish, anxiety, alienation, freedom, and the meaning of existence in the modern world—a world characterized by an emphasis on scientific and technological development. Among the notable “atheistic existentialists” were Sartre and Camus. Although these two philosophers did not explicitly hold an articulated theory of hope, I shall attempt here to construct an account of hope based on their thoughts and to then examine whether the concept of hope can be coherently understood within such a framework.¹⁴

For Sartre and Camus, existence is “nauseating” or “absurd.”¹⁵ What this means is that since there is no God, life itself is without an objective meaning or purpose, values are groundless, there is no life after death, and there is no eternal punishment for the wicked, etc. This bleak picture of the world may make some of us question the “legitimacy” of our existence. Why then, do we not end this miserable existence by committing suicide? How can such a life still be worth living?

Although the picture of our existence painted by Sartre and Camus is quite dark, they nonetheless try to convince us that such an existence can be worth living. “Existentialism,” Sartre tells us, is what “makes human life possible,”¹⁶ for it leaves to man “a possibility of choice.”¹⁷ Camus similarly stresses the importance of “freedom of action” in an absurd universe,¹⁸ and that the “quantity of experiences” depends solely on us.¹⁹ For both of these thinkers, this life is all we have. Since there are neither objective values nor human nature, we are therefore free to invent our own values and create our own lives. Sartre elegantly summarizes this idea by stating that for human beings, “existence precedes essence.”²⁰

Thus, for existentialists such as Sartre and Camus, salvation from the miserable existence we find ourselves within does not come from the almighty God, but depends solely on us. It is up to us to make our own choices, “invent” our own values, and mold our own lifestyles. It is at this

¹⁴ Camus even argued against cultivating hope on the grounds that hope nourishes illusions; see Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York, NY: Vintage, 1991), pp. 8, 31-32, 37, 92.

¹⁵ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York, NY: New Direction, 1964); also Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York, NY: Citadel Press, 1987), p. 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ See Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 56-57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁰ Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, pp. 13.

point we can see how an account of hope might be constructed within such an atheistic existentialist framework.

Hope, as many have observed, implies a sustaining power that helps us get through difficult situations.²¹ But since the atheistic existentialists cannot rely on Divine Providence to help them, they can only rely on themselves to get through difficult situations—that is, believing in their own ability, choice, will, and freedom. In other words, if they don't want to be pessimistic and fall into despair, they have no one to rely on except themselves. It is from this perspective that we can see how an account of hope might be constructed.

It is significant that the doctrine of atheistic existentialism starts from *individual subjectivity*—that one is first aware of one's forlornness in the universe and one's freedom and choices.²² Although sometimes we might wonder whether atheistic existentialism can ever get beyond the confines of the Cartesian *cogito*, atheistic existentialists are confident that through our freedom of choice and will, we are able to transform what appears to be a meaningless and irrational life into one that is worth living. For Sartre, it is through our choices and actions that we create our own values and mold our own lives; for Camus, our lives gain dignity and worth by confronting the absurd universe with our indomitable will—that is, we “revolt” against the absurd without finding consolation in illusions and religions.²³ Now, insofar as hope is understood as a mentality that sustains us through difficult situations, we can certainly maintain that the theme of hope is present in Sartre's and Camus' philosophies. We might formulate the atheistic existentialist account of hope as follows: *To be hopeful is to be aware of one's freedom of choice and believe that through exercising this freedom of choice, one is capable of creating one's own values, thereby rendering one's life worthwhile in an otherwise absurd and meaningless universe.*²⁴

We can readily observe that in such an account of hope, hope is entirely grounded in individual subjectivity—our belief in our freedom of choice and our confidence in our own abilities generate hope. As long as we don't lose this belief and confidence, we have hope.

Now, let us examine in more detail the scope and limit of this atheistic existentialist account of hope. There are two questions we need to consider: (1) *Who* are the appropriate object(s) of hope? (2) *What* can we legitimately hope for on the atheistic existentialist premises? As to the first question, it appears that besides hoping for oneself (e.g., “I hope that I can/will...”), nothing in the atheistic existentialism prevents one from hoping on behalf of others (e.g., “I hope that *Sam* will/can...”). As to the second question, what we can legitimately hope for really depends on the extent of our freedom of choice and its influence. Given the fact that the atheistic existentialists start from individual subjectivity, and given their emphasis on one's freedom of choice, it follows that the extent of one's freedom of choice and its influence determine the extent of one's hope. For example, for the atheistic existentialists, it would be incomprehensible to utter: “I hope to be saved by Grace,” since “Grace”—understood as divine intervention—has no place in an atheistic worldview. Similarly, if I hoped that there will be an eclipse next week, and there is absolutely no scientific evidence indicating that this will happen, my hope would therefore be illegitimate. Just as with the previous example, “there will be an eclipse next week” is a state that lies beyond the influence of my choices and power.

²¹ See Martin, *How We Hope*, pp. 72-73; also Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Part One, translated by Ilse Lasch (Boston, MA.: Beacon Press, 2006), pp. 74-76.

²² See Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, pp. 9-10, 13-15.

²³ See Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 54-55.

²⁴ It is important for atheistic existentialists that if one is to live genuinely, one must be constantly aware of the “nauseating” or “absurd” character of the universe; it is “illegitimate” to try to explain away the irrationality and the purposelessness of the universe by appealing to philosophies or religions; see Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 32-41, 51-55.

However, there is a sense in which our hope might be legitimate according to the atheistic existentialist framework even if we don't have "direct" influence over something. For instance, after raising my son to become a loving family man, upon my death, I could legitimately hope that he would take good care of his son (my grandson) after my death. Since by raising my son to be a certain way, I could trust him that he would take good care of his family. But can I also hope that long after I am gone, my grandson would take good care of his son (my great grandson)? How about my great grandson? Can I legitimately hope that he would do the same as well? It seems that the legitimacy of our hope will diminish as the influence of our actions and choices dwindles.

There is, however, another sense in which it might be said that an atheistic existentialist can hope for something that is neither under his or her direct nor indirect influence. For example, an atheistic existentialist, who is neither a scientist nor a researcher in the medical field, might hope that a vaccine for a certain pandemic will be developed shortly. In this case, the basis of his or her hope is not the extent of his or her influence but his or her *trust* in other specialists. But "trust in others' abilities to bring about a certain state" and "trust in others' willingness to bring about a certain state" do not seem to be beliefs that are essential to the tenets of atheistic existentialism. An atheistic existentialist might believe that due to others' good will and expertise, a certain state will eventually come about, while another atheistic existentialist might believe the opposite.

In short, it would seem that within the atheistic existentialist framework, as long as our hope is grounded in individual subjectivity, what we hope for must not exceed the limit of the influence of our choices and actions (and the limits of the human race), otherwise our hope would be—as Camus states—nothing more than an illusion.²⁵

The Evolutionary Biologistic Account of Hope: Dawkins and Dennett

In recent years, a new brand of atheism has captured the public's attention. Similar to Sartre and Camus, thinkers such as Dawkins and Dennett reject the supernatural worldview in favor of the atheistic worldview; for them, it is from this atheistic framework that accounts of morality and value are to be derived. However, one of the chief distinctions between Dawkins' and Dennett's approach versus the existentialists' approach is the former's declared allegiance to Darwin's theory of evolution as well as the primacy that Dawkins and Dennett give to scientific thought.

Although it can be argued that the atheistic existentialists of the twentieth century were atheistic due to the advent of the scientific worldview, overall, they were indifferent to scientific knowledge and were suspicious of science's power to provide solutions to existential problems such as meaninglessness, forlornness, anxiety, and alienation.²⁶ The new atheists such as Dawkins and Dennett, on the other hand, are of a scientific bent of mind—they are not only well-versed in science, but they are also confident that science can tell us "why we are here" and "the purpose of human existence."²⁷

For the evolutionary biologistic thinkers such as Dawkins and Dennett, not only is creationism a relic of the past, but morality and human behaviors are to be explained entirely on evolutionary grounds. Regardless of many objections from philosophers and theologians, Dawkins insists that the belief in God *is* a scientific hypothesis,²⁸ and as such, since it cannot be verified

²⁵ As the previous paragraphs suggest, an atheistic existentialist's hope is most well-grounded when what he or she hopes for is directly under his or her control or influence. This hope diminishes as his or her control or influence over what he or she hopes for dwindles. For those atheistic existentialists who "choose" to trust the human race, the limits of their hope will also be the limits of the human race.

²⁶ See Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 3-4.

²⁷ See Richard Dawkins *Explains the Meaning of Life*, 0:57-1:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNgMu8z2Ryc> (accessed November 14, 2019).

²⁸ See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, MA.: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), pp. 48, 50, 71. However, for philosophers such as Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga, belief in God is not to be construed as a scientific

scientifically, it follows that there is no God.²⁹ The origin of the universe and of human beings can be adequately explained by science and the theory of evolution. For the evolutionary biologicistic thinkers, human beings evolved from the simpler organisms due to an unguided process of natural selection and were not created by some creative and supernatural being. For both Dawkins and Dennett, evidence abounds for the process of evolution, whereas the same cannot be said for creationism.³⁰

True to their own principles, Dawkins and Dennett attempt to ground morality and values on an evolutionary basis. We may recall that, according to the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection, survival and sexual reproduction are the main factors that drive the evolutionary process. Thus, the question inevitably arises: if that is the case, where do our altruistic impulses and overall moral behavior come from? Why do we sometimes show sympathy and compassion towards others? Why do we sometimes help others at the expense of our own welfare? According to Dawkins, our genes are programmed to be selfish and, in the course of evolution, they develop tactics that best ensure their own survival.³¹ But the process of evolution sometimes goes awry and genes can develop traits that are not conducive to their survival; our altruistic feelings and behaviors towards strangers or other species are nothing but the “misfirings” of the evolutionary process.³²

Despite this, Dawkins goes on to claim that an altruistic impulse or empathy is the cornerstone of our morality, and he contends that we “need to...expand the circle of those to whom we feel empathy.”³³ But this is puzzling. If Dawkins is to ground morality on evolutionary biology, and from that perspective our altruistic feelings and behaviors are *nothing but* “misfirings” of the evolutionary process, how is Dawkins in a position to claim that we need to expand our circle of empathy? In order to make that claim, Dawkins has to step out of the evolutionary perspective. In other words, his judgment that an altruistic impulse or empathy is to be cherished and cultivated cannot be validated within the confines of evolutionary biology.

How about hope? What can we say about hope within the evolutionary biologicistic framework? The idea of hope, as I have already mentioned, involves: (1) desiring something and (2) believing that it is attainable. But if one’s believing something attainable is to be legitimate and not groundless (contra wishful thinking), one must have the confidence of its becoming a reality. And

hypothesis. See Swinburne, “The Voluntariness of Faith,” in Paul Helm (ed.), *Faith & Reason* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1999), pp. 373-375; Plantinga, “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?” in Paul Helm (ed.), *Faith & Reason*, pp. 346-355.

²⁹ In chapter three of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins examines a number of the traditional arguments for the existence of God (e.g., Aquinas’ “Five Ways,” the Ontological Argument, the Argument from Design, Pascal’s Wager Argument). He rejects them for being either inconclusive, fallacious, or unscientific.

³⁰ See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 31, 79, 116, 118, 120; also Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York, NY: Viking, 2006), especially chapter three. It is also worth noting that both Dawkins and Dennett reject Stephen Jay Gould’s thesis of NOMA, according to which science and religion are two different and non-overlapping magisteria—science deals with facts, whereas religion deals with values, meanings, and purposes (see Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 54-61; Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 30). For Stephen Jay Gould’s thesis of NOMA, see his *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York, NY: Ballantine, 1999).

³¹ One of these tactics is to be good to one’s kin. Since one’s kin is statistically more likely to share the copies of the same genes as oneself, by being good to them, one increases the chances of one’s genes’ survival. Another tactic is called “reciprocal altruism”—being good to others is a best bet that others will be good to you as well. This is the relationship based on mutual needs. (See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 216-218.) There are other tactics, but these two—being good to one’s kin and reciprocal altruism—are essential.

³² Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 220-221.

³³ Richard Dawkins, *Sex, Death and the Meaning of Life*, Episode 1, 41:46-42:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLulcfyqrc0> (accessed November 14, 2019).

the basis of confidence is “trust”³⁴ (*HV*, 40). But for the evolutionary biologicistic thinkers, what can they legitimately trust? In other words, upon what should their hope be based?

A first noteworthy point is that just like the atheistic existentialists, the evolutionary biologicistic thinkers *cannot* base their hope on miracles or superpowers. So naturally, for them—just like for the atheistic existentialists—the first foundation upon which they can place their hope is their subjectivity.³⁵ Whatever is attainable by the exertion of one’s power, is that for which one can legitimately hope. The other source from which an evolutionary biologicistic thinker’s hope might originate is his or her trust in the power of science—and especially the process of evolution. Beyond these two sources, there do not seem to be other reliable sources from which the evolutionary biologicistic thinkers might derive their hope. Thus, the evolutionary biologicistic account of hope might be formulated as follows: *If one’s hope is to be legitimate on the evolutionary biologicistic premises, one’s hope must originate from a realistic assessment of what can be attained by one’s exertion and the power of science (especially the process of evolution).*

According to this account, *what* we can legitimately hope for must not exceed the limit of what can be attained by ourselves and the power of science. It would also seem that, according to the gene-centric model, if our hope is to fit this model, *who* we hope for must either be ourselves or someone who shares the same genes with us (e.g., one’s siblings and children), so that our hope is conducive to the survival and replication of our genes.³⁶

Marcel’s Account of Hope — “I Hope in Thee for Us”

Although Marcel himself does not articulate a systematic account of hope, it is still possible to formulate an account of hope based upon his ideas.

First, from Marcel’s writings on hope, it is apparent that the worldview in which hope is situated is entirely different from the one presented by Sartre, Camus, Dawkins, and Dennett. It is a worldview rooted in the tradition of a personal God. For Marcel, there is a “spiritual” or “transcendent” aspect to existence—that is to say, there is an aspect or order of reality that defies scientific explanations and cannot be accessed by scientific methods. Throughout his writings, Marcel refers to this aspect of reality as “God,” “Absolute Thou,” or “Being.” For Marcel, it is our relationship with this aspect of reality that is of utmost importance, and the nature of hope can only be properly grasped in light of it.³⁷

It is important for Marcel that not only is there a spiritual or transcendent order of reality, but that it is possible for us to enter into some kind of “communion” with this reality. Marcel is insistent that by entering into communion with “Being” or “Absolute Thou,” our life will be “consecrated” and gain rejuvenating power; thus, we will live a “fuller” life than before (see *HV*, 4, 61, 89-90, 112, 127).

So what does Marcel have to say concerning hope within such a worldview? While remarks about hope are scattered throughout Marcel’s writings, he often relates hope to other themes such as suicide, despair, death, the modern way of life, science and technology, vocation, fidelity, and many more. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine how hope is related to each of these themes. What I shall do, is to begin my examination with a formulation of hope offered by Marcel.

³⁴ See also Joseph Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, pp. 172-190.

³⁵ Dawkins tells us that meaning is subjective, something that we need to carve out for ourselves. See Dawkins, *Sex, Death and the Meaning of Life*, episode 3, 31:35-31:45, 35:37-35:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYXDht09KXs&index=204&list=WL> (accessed November 14, 2019).

³⁶ Of course, this doesn’t alter the fact that sometimes, out of good-will, we might hope on behalf of someone who is entirely unrelated to us. But from the gene-centric perspective, such hope is a “misfiring” of the evolutionary process.

³⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katherine Farrer (La Vergne, TN.: Marcel Press, 2007), p. 79.

This brief formulation will then serve as an Ariadne's thread that will lead to a better understanding of the notion in Marcel's work.

In *Homo Viator*, Marcel provides his readers with a formulation (or an expression) of hope: "I hope in thee for us" (*HV*, 54). A number of key ideas can be gathered from this short formulation or expression. First, while acknowledging that there are various grades of hope,³⁸ Marcel writes that "genuine" hope requires *trust*—absolute trust in Being or an Absolute Thou. We have already seen that, for Marcel, the world is neither naturalistic nor reductionistic; rather, it possesses a spiritual or transcendent character. Furthermore, the spiritual or transcendent character of the world allows us to hope that reality is grounded in care; as such, it is also a human ally,³⁹ and by placing our trust in such a world, we are confident that the future will be better than the present, even if the odds seem to be against us. "As before, but differently and better than before" expresses the true character of hope (*HV*, 61, 280). A despairing man, on the other hand, anticipates the repetition of his own sufferings without any possibilities of salvation—he is a man without trust in Being (*HV*, 36).

Those who resist the Marcelian account, such as the individual who despairs, could respond to Marcel by pointing out the fact that there are countless circumstances in which it appears that to hope against all odds is to act irrationally. For example, despite all available evidence, a soldier's mother might insist that her son is still alive and will return from the battlefield. In cases such as these, wouldn't it be more appropriate to say that the mother's hope is nothing more than wishful thinking? That her trust is unfounded?

A clarification concerning Marcel's understanding of hope is needed at this point. For Marcel, the "genuine" kind of hope is based neither on established experience nor does it spring from calculating reason (*HV*, 45-46, 58-59). Even should past experiences not lend support to a particular hope of ours, even should our calculating reason tell us that the odds are against us, our hope still remains untainted. For Marcel, hope is not the result of the calculating process, nor can it be "validated" or "invalidated" by past experiences. For Marcel, this is the wrong approach to understand the nature of hope. In Marcel's own words, "hope and the calculating faculty of reason are essentially distinct and everything will be lost if we try to combine them" (*HV*, 59).

However, this does not mean that we should disregard facts or existing evidence when we hope. Marcel explicitly states that he is not against "authentic empiricism" (*HV*, 46). What this means is that, to return to our example, if the son's death has been verified by the recovery of his dead body, it would then be irrational for the mother to insist that her son is still alive and will return (*HV*, 59). Such a hope will be against the "authentic empiricism" that Marcel speaks about.

Despite this, there is a sense in which we might say that the mother's hope can be "legitimate". If restricted to the temporal plane of existence, the mother's hope would seem to be nonsensical, but not if her hope is oriented to another plane of existence—a plane of existence that emerges from her love of her son and the "I hope in thee for us" in which such a hope might be fulfilled.

Next, crucial in the "I hope in thee for us" are the two ideas that seem to imply one another: first, the subject in "I hope..." cannot be an egoistic subject that is closed, self-centered, and obsessed with satisfying his or her own desires; instead, it has to be an open, loving, and altruistic subject. Someone who is obsessed with his or her own wealth, ambition, and reputation cannot have genuine hope.⁴⁰ Similarly, someone who is closed within and refuses to open himself or

³⁸ Some forms of hope are either trivial, selfish, or superstitious, as in: "I hope that James will arrive in time for lunch tomorrow," and "I hope that by praying to God, I will win the lottery"; see Marcel, *Homo Viator*, p. 23; *Being and Having*, p. 91.

³⁹ See Albert B. Randall, *The Mystery of Hope in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p. 6.

⁴⁰ Marcel is insistent that "hope and ambition...are not of the same spiritual dimension" (*HV*, 4).

herself up to others is incapable of genuine hope.⁴¹ In Marcel's terminology, in order to be able to hope in its genuine sense, the subject must be "available" to others.⁴² Second, what the loving and altruistic subject hopes for is not the well-being of himself or herself alone; rather, he or she hopes for the well-being of "us"—he or she hopes on behalf of "us."

This brings us to the idea of "intersubjectivity" in Marcel's thought. For Marcel, the idea of an individualistic, monadistic, and self-contained self is an illusion that must be dispelled.⁴³ Marcel argues that the intrinsic structure of subjectivity is already "intersubjective"—meaning that the nature of the self is such that it is opened towards others—and it is by reaching out to others that the self reaches its highest fulfillment.⁴⁴ Therefore, when one properly grasps that the self is in fact intersubjective in nature, it will be appropriate for him or her to hope for the well-being of all of us.⁴⁵

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that, for Marcel, what we can properly hope for "all of us" is not something materialistic but spiritual. To be more specific, what we can properly hope for is salvation for all of us. As Marcel affirms, "All hope is hope of salvation."⁴⁶ But salvation from what? The general condition of human beings, states Marcel, is that of captivity—we are the prisoners of our own egoism and selfish desires. It is our egoistic self that prevents us from "rising to a fullness in life" (*HV*, 53). Salvation, therefore, is salvation from the condition of captivity to which everyone is subject. To be more specific, salvation, when understood properly, is not only to be freed of one's avarice for money, social position, and power, it is also to be freed of one's

⁴¹ As an example of someone who is enclosed within him/herself, Marcel tells us of a shy and reserved young man at a party who is overly self-conscious of what others think of him; as a result, he becomes nervous and tensed up. For Marcel, such a person is "unavailable" to others, for he is too egocentric; see Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. I, trans. G. S. Fraser (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine Press, 2001), pp. 176-117.

⁴² The idea of "availability" is important in Marcel's philosophy of hope. "To be available" is to open oneself up to others, to reach out to others; more importantly, it is also to open oneself up to the eternal, to let oneself be permeated by the transcendent; see Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Many Harari (New York, N.Y.: Philosophical Library, 1949), pp. 25-26, 28.; *Homo Viator*, p.4; *Being and Having*, pp. 76, 79.

⁴³ See Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. I, p. 139; Marcel, *Being and Having*, p. 200; Marcel, *A Gabriel Marcel Reader*, ed. Brendan Sweetman (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine Press, 2011), p. 129.

⁴⁴ See Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. I, pp. 182-183; Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. II, trans. G.S. Fraser (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), pp. 8, 33, 119.

⁴⁵ I am grateful to an editor for pointing out that the formulation "I hope in thee for us" does not necessarily imply a universal love of all humans. However, when we consider what Marcel says about intersubjectivity, salvation, suffering, responsibility, etc.—that is, when we consider the general direction of Marcel's thought—I think it is appropriate to interpret Marcel's hope (at least in its most "genuine" sense) in terms of a universal love of all humans. Consider the following quotes from Marcel: "This part of me can still have a fellow-feeling for groping souls, travelers and seekers... For I believe that no man, however enlightened and holy he is, can ever really arrive until the others, *all* the others, have started out to follow him"; see Marcel, *Being and Having*, pp. 199-200; "[T]he fundamental idea of intersubjectivity [is] that we are not alone, that whatever we do we are responsible for what happens to others"; see Marcel, *A Gabriel Marcel Reader*, p. 129; "[I]n the world that we know...human beings can be linked to each other by a real bond only because, in another dimension, they are linked to something which transcends them and comprehends them in itself"; see Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G. S. Fraser (South Bend, ID.: St. Augustine's Press, 2008), p. 194; "[F]rom the moment when we open ourselves to these infiltrations of the invisible, we cease to be the unskilled and yet pretentious soloists we perhaps were at the start, and gradually become members, wide-eyed and brotherly, of an orchestra in which those whom we so inaptly call the dead are quite certainly much closer to Him of whom we should not perhaps say that He conducts the symphony, but that He *is* the symphony in its profound and intelligible unity; a unity in which we can hope to be included only by degrees, through individual trials, the sum total of which, though it cannot be foreseen by each of us, is inseparable from his own vocation"; see Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. II, p. 187.

⁴⁶ Marcel, *Being and Having*, p. 75.

prejudices and biased or misguided opinions. In Marcel's terminology, it is to be freed from "Having."⁴⁷

More importantly, for Marcel, there is a transcendent aspect to his idea of hope and salvation. Death, Marcel states, is the structural condition of despair, meaning that the fact of death constantly invites us to despair.⁴⁸ Hope of salvation, however, will deliver us from the finality of death.⁴⁹ This is possible because hope is the "affirmation of eternity and eternal goods";⁵⁰ it reaffirms our "divine filiation" (*HV*, 153). The finality of death can be denied because "true hoppers" participate in the mystery of the transcendent. As Randall nicely summarizes:

In Marcel's ontology of being and existence, hope becomes an entrance into being and Infinite Being and becoming available, a continual new beginning freed of the determinism of the past, a response to the call of being and Infinite Being, and a sharing of fellow-feeling grounded in Infinite Being. In short, hope is both an *entrée* into and a *réponse* to being and Infinite Being.⁵¹

Thus, for Marcel, hope not only delivers us from our egoistic self, along with its petty desires, it also delivers us from the finality of death by orienting us toward participation in the Infinite Being. Such is the true character of hope.

One last point worth noting is that since hope involves absolute trust in the Infinite Being, this means that the "contractual interpretation" of hope is mistaken. The contractual interpretation of hope understands hope on the basis of our having made a contract with the Infinite, and therefore, we are entitled to demand what we hope for be given to us. But as Marcel remarks, "A philosophy which revolves round the contractual idea is likely to misunderstand the value of the relationship" (*HV*, 49). If we interpret hope on the basis of having made a contract with the reality, we will inevitably expect that what we hope for will be given to us. Thus when we fail to get what we expected, we will be left feeling disappointed. One might note that such a disappointment is an ever-present threat to the atheistic existentialists and the evolutionary biologicistic thinkers, since their accounts of hope—as presented in this paper—are incapable of accommodating such an absolute trust. Moreover, a similar orientation with regard to understanding hope from one's own power and scope of action (one's own subjectivity) can also be discerned.

But if we reject the contractual interpretation of hope and grasp the true character of hope—absolute trust in the Infinite Being—we will be immune to despair. Absolute trust, coupled with a lack of self-obsession, will prevent us from laying down conditions.⁵² When we lay down conditions in our hope, we represent certain images to ourselves and expect them to come to pass. For instance, someone whose hope is contractual and conditional might hope for a certain state of being to come about. And when this state of being fails to come about, the person will be plunged into disappointment and despair. In contrast, if we have absolute trust and our hope is unconditional, we will not lay down conditions or set limits to the fulfillment of hope. Thus, we transcend all possible disappointments (*HV*, 40-41, 49-50).

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 55-56, 60, 87, 188.

⁴⁸ See Marcel, *Being and Having*, pp. 110, 138-139; Marcel, *Homo Viator*, pp. 52, 285-286.

⁴⁹ See Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. II, p. 180.

⁵⁰ Marcel, *Being and Having*, p. 75

⁵¹ Albert Randall, *The Mystery of Hope in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, p. 345.

⁵² Speaking of "absolute hope"—the kind of hope that cannot be disappointed—Marcel writes that "the inner disposition of one who, setting no condition or limit and abandoning himself in absolute confidence, would thus transcend all possible disappointment and would experience a security of his being, or in his being, which is contrary to the radical insecurity of having" (*HV*, 41). In his account of hope, Godfrey also stresses the indispensability of trust; see Joseph Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, pp. 172-190.

But does an inconsistency in Marcel's thoughts arise at this point? If hope implies absolute trust in the Infinite Being, and this entails a refusal to lay down conditions or represent certain images to ourselves and expecting them to come about, how is it still possible for us to remain hopeful? Isn't it the case that when we hope, we always hope for "something"—and this will always involve some kind of representation? Otherwise, how is it possible to hope without knowing that for which we are hoping?

Upon further scrutiny, we will see that such an inconsistency is merely apparent. At this point, it is important to differentiate between (1) hope that does not involve any representations and (2) hope that involves certain representations. We have already seen that the latter will eventually leave us disappointed, since not all our representations will come to pass. The question is: How is the former possible?

Let us consider a common example. A trusting child, for instance, will believe that whatever his or her parents may do, it will be in the child's own best interest, and that they will never do anything to harm him or her, although the child might have no idea about what decisions or choices that his or her parents might make for him or her. Because of the child's trust in his or her parents, although he or she might not know what is in store for him or her, he or she is nonetheless hopeful that his or her future will turn out well.

To cite another example, Plenty Coups, a tribal leader in the late 19th and early 20th century North America, aligned his people with the Europeans in a war against other tribes. He chose to side with the Europeans because he wanted his people and culture to survive. He and his people submitted to the Europeans, relinquished their hunter-warrior lifestyle, and voluntarily moved onto reservations. It was said that in his earlier years, Plenty Coups had a vision of the white men's eventual domination of the country and a voice told him to be like a Chickadee—whose virtue is to "listen and learn from the successes and failures of others."⁵³ Because of his willingness to abandon the old lifestyle and adopt the new and "unknown" lifestyle, his tribe flourished, whereas other tribes were annihilated. Plenty Coups did not know what would happen to his tribe if he submitted to the Europeans; nonetheless, because of his vision, he was confident that whatever may happen, it would be for the benefit of his people. This is a fine example of hoping without any representations or laying down any conditions.

IV. The Best Account to Elucidate Etty Hillesum's Hope?

We have sketched three different accounts of hope: 1) the atheistic existentialist account, 2) the evolutionary biologicistic account, and 3) Marcel's account. Each account is distinguished from the others by the worldview it implies, its depiction of the nature of hope, and what it understands to be the appropriate object of hope. Now, the question is: Which account is the best account to elucidate Etty Hillesum's hope? At the beginning of this essay, we have seen that despite the dire situation she found herself in, Hillesum was able to not only remain calm and courageous but also hopeful of the future. But again, how was her hope possible? How are we able to understand the nature of her hope?

From Hillesum's story, we can gather some essential features of her hope.

Remarkable Sustaining Power and Immunity to Frustrations

⁵³ Adrienne Martin, *How We Hope*, pp. 98-100.

Hope entails a sustaining power in times of difficulties and hardships.⁵⁴ The greater the sustaining power, the greater is one's hope.⁵⁵ The sustaining power of Hillesum's hope, as we can see from her story, was remarkable. It prevented Hillesum from breaking down in the face of her impending death. This is the kind of "profound hope" that arises from "profound despair." Which of the accounts of hope can enable our hope to have this high degree of sustaining power?

Let us begin by examining the atheistic existentialist account of hope as represented by Sartre and Camus. Since, for the atheistic existentialists, the world is absurd and apathetic, the basis of the sustaining power of hope cannot be grounded in our *trust* in such a world; rather, the sustaining power of hope can only depend on oneself. In other words, it is *the strength of our will* that determines whether we break or don't break down in our trials. Logically speaking, it would seem that there is nothing preventing an atheistic existentialist's hope from having such a high degree of sustaining power. How much one can endure will be entirely determined by the strength of one's will.⁵⁶

How about the evolutionary biologicistic account? Is there anything in the repertoire of this domain that might give us the kind of hope that sustains us through the direst situations? One of the fundamental principles of (Dawkins' version of) evolutionary biology is the selfishness of genes—that is, our genes will do all they can to replicate and preserve themselves (incoherent though this view may be on its face). From this perspective, we might say that by believing that one's genes will replicate themselves into the foreseeable future, one might be able to dispel the fear of one's impending death. In a sense, one is immortal through the replication and preservation of one's genes.⁵⁷

Still, there are two problems with regard to this approach. First, it might not be very comforting to some people that it is their genes that are replicated and live on forever, since they as *individuals* still do not survive the demise of their physical bodies. Second, for those who fail to reproduce or who are left without close relatives, they cannot rely on this idea to give them strength to sustain themselves through difficult situations.

Etty Hillesum did not have any children and many of her relatives (including her parents and brothers) were put into the concentration camps where they eventually perished, and yet, her hope was so great that she fearlessly and calmly confronted her own impending death. Despite whatever merits the evolutionary biologicistic account might have, it is highly unlikely that Hillesum drew her strength from it. We have to look elsewhere.⁵⁸

When we turn to Marcel's account of hope, we will see that this account allows us to acquire the hope with the greatest sustaining power. First, Marcel's account of hope requires absolute trust in the world or the transcendent. What this trust implies is that whatever may happen, in the end, things will turn out for the better. This is the kind of trust that is unconditional, that lays down no conditions. And since no conditions are laid down, this kind of hope will be immune to frustrations; it will be invincible. Second, Marcel's account stresses the idea of our "divine filiation" with the

⁵⁴ See Adrienne Martin, *How We Hope*, pp. 72-73.

⁵⁵ Recalling his experience at the concentration camps, Viktor Frankl, a prominent psychiatrist and a survivor of the Holocaust, observed that those who had lost hope or faith were more likely to perish in the camps; see Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, pp. 74-76.

⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that, for Marcel, if one has a strong will but no trust in the Absolute Being—or in his words, revolt without transcendence—one cannot prevent oneself from eventually falling into despair (*HV*, 277).

⁵⁷ See Dawkins, *Sex, Death, and the Meaning of Life*, episode 2, 46:00-46:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toj7aAtEaPc&t=15s&list=WL&index=202> (accessed November 14, 2019).

⁵⁸ Furthermore, from her diaries and letters, it is apparent that the theory of evolution and genetics were not Etty Hillesum's concern; she simply didn't discuss these topics. It is, therefore, even more unlikely that she would ground her hope in the belief of the replication of her own genes.

Infinite Being. As such, death is transcended because of our participation in the mystery of the transcendent.

Hopeful of a Better Future

The second essential element in Hillesum's hope (which is closely related to the first one) is her confidence in the advent of a better future. Despite the horrors and atrocities surrounding Hillesum, she was nonetheless confident that a better future—a world built upon goodness and love—would eventually come to pass. It would seem that neither the atheistic existentialists nor the evolutionary biologicistic thinkers have the resources to remain optimistic and confident of a better future amidst present horrors. For the atheistic existentialists, since the world is presented as absurd and hostile, and our subjectivity and freedom of choice are all that matters, it is difficult to see how such an account allows one to be optimistic and confident of a better future, especially after one's demise (since after one's demise, one is no longer able to exercise one's freedom of choice to affect the world). For the evolutionary biologicistic thinkers, the prospect is not any better. The process of natural selection is a blind process, it doesn't necessarily lead to a better, more moral world; in fact, the process has nothing to do with the moral character of the world. It would be irrational to expect that natural selection would necessarily lead to a better, more moral world.⁵⁹

Marcel's account, however, is a different story. Marcel explicitly claims that because of our trust in a caring and loving Infinite Being, we can be confident that the future will be better than the present: "As before, but differently and better than before"⁶⁰ (*HV*, 61, 280).

Self-Transcendence and Hope for All of Humanity

When we read Hillesum's story, it is clear that near the end of her life, she had developed a kind of sympathy for humanity as a whole. She was neither obsessed with satisfying her own selfish desires nor worried about her own survival. Instead, she had become sympathetic to all of humanity and her sympathy for all was the source from which her hope sprang. Her hope was not about her personal survival and well-being but about a better future for all of humanity. To put it differently, I shall state that there is a trait of "self-transcendence" to her hope. When I use "self-transcendence" in this context, I am using it loosely to refer to a kind of personality trait that involves the expansion of one's circle of concern; one "reaches out" beyond oneself and to others.⁶¹ We can now reformulate the question underlying this section of the essay: Which of the aforementioned accounts can best accommodate the "self-transcendence" character of hope?

Prima facie, it would appear that there is nothing to prevent atheistic existentialists from becoming "self-transcendent"—that is, deeming the other's welfare as more important than one's own. But if we probe a little deeper, we notice an inconsistency. Given the importance that atheistic existentialists place on the idea of subjectivity, the freedom of choice and possibility of revolt, it is difficult to conceive how such a framework can consistently accommodate the idea of self-transcendence. The gist of the matter is that the philosophy of atheistic existentialism is premised on subjectivity/individuality and freedom of choice, but the whole idea of self-transcendence is to

⁵⁹ However, a concession might be made to the evolutionary biologicistic thinkers by conceding that *if* morality ensures the flourishing of a species, it might be possible that the process of natural selection will eventually lead to a more moral world, even though the moral order would be justified primarily on instrumental grounds in such a case.

⁶⁰ It should also be noted that Marcel's hope doesn't seem to require that this better future be realized in this temporal world. I am grateful to an editor for pointing this out.

⁶¹ The idea of self-transcendence plays an important role in Viktor Frankl's logotherapy. Frankl writes that "[t]he essentially self-transcendent quality of human existence renders man *a being reaching out beyond himself*," and "[s]elf-transcendence is the essence of existence. Being human is directed to something other than itself"; Frankl, *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy* (New York, N.Y.: Meridian, 1988 (Expanded Edition)), pp. 8, 50.

“renounce” one’s attachment to one’s self. It is by becoming less attached to your “self” that you are able to genuinely care for others. Certainly, one could argue that, because it is still *you* who *choose* to become less attached to *your self*, the idea of self-transcendence can still be preserved within the atheistic existentialist framework. Nonetheless, the whole atheistic existentialist philosophy is directed at *strengthening one’s subjectivity and individuality* (hence the emphasis on freedom of choice and revolt), and this does not naturally support or foster self-transcendence.

When we turn to the evolutionary biologicistic framework, we see an account that is even less capable of accommodating the idea of self-transcendence. We have already seen that from the evolutionary perspective, our altruistic instinct is to be explained away by stating that either it is ultimately conducive to our own genes’ replication and survival (reciprocal altruism), or that it is a “misfiring” in the process of evolution. First, the idea of grounding one’s altruistic impulses and behaviors on the replication and continual survival of one’s genes is simply not true for people like Etty Hillesum. The compassion that she displayed at the camps had nothing to do with her personal survival (since it was obvious to her that whatever her attitude was towards others, her fate had been sealed). Additionally, she bore no child to carry on her genes. Second, the fact that we admire and respect those compassionate souls who devote themselves to helping strangers and other species seems to indicate that it is misguided to explain away their altruistic instincts and selfless behaviors as the “misfiring” of the evolutionary process. Why would we applaud and not lament their altruism if we did not regard what they do as something noble and worthy, rather than simply constituting a mistake or fluke of nature?

Ingrained in Marcel’s philosophy is the idea of intersubjectivity. For Marcel, we are not isolated monadistic individuals; instead, our true nature is *intersubjective*—we are interconnected with others and our well-being is intimately connected to theirs. As such, it is natural that we ought to extend our sympathy to encompass others.

A Sense of Serenity and Joy

Hillesum’s hope was not only steadfast and all-encompassing, it also provided her a sense of serenity and joy:

I would like to fold my hands and say, ‘Friends, I am happy and grateful, and I find life very beautiful and meaningful. Yes, even as I stand here by the body of my dead companion, one who died much too soon, and just when I may be deported to some unknown destination...’.⁶²

Remarks such as these clearly indicate that despite the surrounding atrocities and her impending doom, Hillesum was nevertheless serene and joyful, and she even found her life “beautiful and meaningful.” It is also clear from her diary that her serenity and joy swelled up from *within*—that is, from her inner experience of God.⁶³

We can once again ask: Which account of hope enables the “hoper” to not only possess the strength to withstand his or her trial but also be joyful and grateful at the same time?

Although it is true that, logically speaking, there is nothing in the philosophy of atheistic existentialism to prevent one from being serene and joyful, one cannot fail to notice that the overall tone of this philosophy is one of “tragic heroism.” Sisyphus, the tragic hero in the myth, epitomizes the “absurd man” for Camus. The tragic aspect of the story lies in the fact that Sisyphus realizes that there are no means for him to escape his fate of constantly rolling a boulder up the hill just to

⁶² Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 203.

⁶³ “There are moments when I can see right through life and the human heart, when I understand more and more and become calmer and calmer and am filled with a faith in God that has grown so quickly inside me that it frightened me at first but has now become inseparable from me.” See Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 171.

see the boulder roll back down the hill, waiting for him to push it up the hill all over again; the heroic aspect of the story lies in Sisyphus's acceptance of his own fate and his determination not to be crushed by it.⁶⁴

One would conjecture that the primary mental states of such a tragic hero would be perplexity (one's failure to understand why the world is the way it is) and indignation (one's feeling of unfairness about one's life). However, Camus goes a step further and claims that the tragic hero must also be "happy."⁶⁵ But how is it possible for a tragic hero to be happy about his miserable and inescapable fate? And what does his happiness or joy consist in?

For Camus, the tragic hero's happiness and joy consist in his revolt against an absurd and hostile world. It is the joy of embracing the absurd, and the joy of feeling the strength of one's ego in confronting and rebelling against a hostile world; it is a single man's joy for himself.⁶⁶ However, it is apparent that the happiness of the tragic hero is remarkably different from that of Etty Hillesum. Hillesum's sense of serenity and joy arises from her sympathy for all and her unshakable conviction of a better future for all of us; it is the joy for all.

Given the emphasis that the evolutionary biologists place on the replication and survival of genes, it is only natural to assume that, for them, this would be where we derive our greatest joy and happiness. This position can certainly be validated by our everyday experience. For instance, for many of those who have had children, watching their offspring do well in life constitutes a major part of their happiness. Although one cannot deny the joy of having offspring and the happiness of seeing them do well in life, this is obviously not what constituted Etty Hillesum's joy and serenity. As we have already seen, Etty Hillesum died before she could have any children.

Marcel's account is best suited to explicate this aspect of Etty Hillesum's hope. Inherent in Marcel's philosophy of intersubjectivity is the idea of "collective joy." For Marcel, it is not possible to live a fulfilled and joyous life just by focusing on one's selfish ego; instead, joy is "fundamentally bound up with a consciousness of being *all together*."⁶⁷ Genuine joy, suggests Marcel, is analogous to the joy we feel when we take part in an orchestra or a choir. Just by extending one's sympathy to others and being connected to others, one can begin to feel joyous and happy. Furthermore, it is to be noted that for both Marcel and Hillesum, when we open ourselves to others, we also allow ourselves to be *penetrated* or *infiltrated* by the transcendent.⁶⁸ And however paradoxical it may sound, the transcendent is at the same time immanent. Quoting another French philosopher, Gustave Thibon, Marcel writes that "God does not float on your horizon, he sleeps in your substance" (HV, 22).

It is now clear that of the three different accounts of hope, Marcel's intersubjective account sheds most light on the nature of Hillesum's hope. In fact, it might not be too far from the truth to state that despite different wordings, Hillesum and Marcel have similar ideas about what constitute the "genuine" hope.

⁶⁴ See Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 119-123.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.123.

⁶⁶ See Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 123.

⁶⁷ Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. II, p. 119.

⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 187.