

Hope in the Age of the Anthropocene

Brian Treanor

Preview

Today we are faced with all the traditional reasons to despair: poverty, loneliness, loss, tragedy, death, and the like. And, for many, this despair is exacerbated by either the modern disenchantment of the world, or a postmodern suspicion regarding grand narratives (especially those speculating about transcendence), or both. The news of the day sounds a relentless drumbeat of woe. As I write these words on a rainy morning in southern California—itself a depressing reminder of the apocalyptic drought my state is suffering, and the anthropogenic climate change that is likely to make such droughts more common and more severe—the headlines include: the ongoing brutality of the “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria; increasing tensions between Russia and the West, including frightening near-misses involving unregistered military aircraft; the stillsmoldering catastrophe of Ebola Zaire in West Africa (and parallel, though much less publicized, stories of MERS and H5N1, either of which, in a pandemic form, would give us all personal insight into the experience of medieval villagers facing the Black Death); epidemics of sexual assault and rape in both India and on North American college campuses; and stories about the widening economic inequality, and the possibility of another global economic downturn.

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We do not believe that everything will be fine.... Secretly, we all think we are doomed: even the politicians think this; even the environmentalists. Some of us deal with it by going shopping. Some deal with it by hoping it is true. Some give up in despair. Some work frantically to try and fend off the coming storm.¹

The Dark Mountain Manifesto

Modo liceat vivere, est spes (While there is life, there is hope).²

Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*

Introduction: Environmental Despair

Today we are faced with all the traditional reasons to despair: poverty, loneliness, loss, tragedy, death, and the like. And, for many, this despair is exacerbated by either the modern disenchantment of the world, or a postmodern suspicion regarding grand narratives (especially those speculating about transcendence), or both. The news of the day sounds a relentless drumbeat of woe. As I write these words on a rainy morning in southern California—itself a depressing reminder of the apocalyptic drought my state is suffering, and the anthropogenic climate change that is likely to make such droughts more common and more severe—the headlines include: the ongoing brutality of the “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria; increasing tensions between Russia and the West, including frightening near-misses involving unregistered military aircraft; the still-smoldering catastrophe of Ebola Zaire in West Africa (and parallel,

¹ “The Dark Mountain Project,” accessed 15 December 2014, <http://dark-mountain.net/about/the-dark-mountain-project/>.

² Terence, *The “Heauton Timorumenos” of Terence*, trans. E.S. Shuckburgh (Cambridge: Palmer 1869), 120-121.

though much less publicized, stories of MERS and H5N1, either of which, in a pandemic form, would give us all personal insight into the experience of medieval villagers facing the Black Death); epidemics of sexual assault and rape in both India and on North American college campuses; and stories about the widening economic inequality, and the possibility of another global economic downturn.

Dwelling too long on any one of these topics might induce despair in those inclined to melancholy. However, heaped on top of these headline issues—or perhaps dwelling in the background—environmentally aware people discern potential catastrophes the depth, breadth, and complexity of which are cause for despair even in those with generally more sanguine natures. As a result, environmental philosophers—as well as activists, scientists, and not a few economists—have tended toward extreme pessimism in their evaluation of the environmental realities at the dawn of the 21st century. And with good reason. The prospects for global climate change alone—given the *wholly* inadequate response by political and economic decision-makers—are enough to drive a well-informed person to drink.

True, every generation feels, to some degree, that it is living at the end of the world. One might argue that the sack of Rome by Brennus and the Senones in 387 BC,³ the Black Death of the 1300s, the Great War (which, to our disappointment, did not “end all wars”), the Shoah, the Cold War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis all felt like the coming of the Apocalypse to those affected. But climate change—the watermark, so to speak, of the age we have come to call the “Anthropocene”—is a threat of a fundamentally different order; it presents us with a challenge, and a despair, that is unique.⁴

First, unlike previous threats, climate change accelerates not when things go wrong, but when things go right. Unlike, say, the pollution of a river, which occurs when someone dumps effluent rather than disposing of it properly, climate change accelerates as part of a kind of “malign

³ This date may also be 390 BC, depending the source.

⁴ The Anthropocene is a term that gained popularity over the latter part of the twentieth century. It designates the geological time frame marked by the domination of human influence on the global environment. If the Anthropocene is characterized by the dominance of human influences on the planet and its systems, then surely climate change is the exemplary case, insofar as it has changed the terrestrial climate, as well as the temperature and pH of the ocean. There may now be no corner of the Earth untouched by humans. Bill McKibben, one of the earlier popular writers to draw attention to climate change, goes so far as to suggest that it marks the “end of nature.” See, Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989).

demographic transition.”⁵ When people become more affluent, they consume more; and because every single aspect of modern life is utterly dependent on the extravagant use of fossil fuel, more consumption leads to more climate change. When people consume, even frugally, when they commute to work, eat food, turn on the tap, read at night, and basically do anything else one does in modern life, they contribute to climate change.⁶ Climate change confronts us with a problem that is not the result of ill-will or ignorance. We know what we are doing, and we often don’t want to do it, but continue on our way.⁷

Second, unlike a war or even a plague, climate change is a slowly unfolding catastrophe. Like watching a child grow, it is often difficult to see the incremental changes; that is, until one is confronted with a sudden growth spurt or, in the case of climate change, a tipping point. In any case, it is enormously challenging to get people to radically change behaviour on the basis of incremental changes, the full effects of which will not be apparent for twenty, fifty, or a hundred years.

Third, climate change is an example of a “commons problem,” in which responsibility is distributed.⁸ In a commons, individual virtue, such as lower carbon emissions, is utterly insignificant because all the other members of the commons are incentivized to cheat and free-ride. Even if we convince a few members of the commons to behave reasonably, others

⁵ “Benign demographic transition” is a phrase capturing the tendency for increasing affluence to lead to more environmentally beneficial behavior—lower birth rates, increased environmental awareness and concern, and so forth. My phrase, “*malign* demographic transition” captures the other side of the coin of development. As people become more affluent they consume more, and because consumption, especially modern consumption, is steeped in fossil fuel at every stage of production and transportation, the environmental effects of development have a very obvious dark side.

⁶ Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007), 5-45.

⁷ Although we have caused climate change, it came about as an unintended and largely unrecognized consequence of otherwise innocuous actions. The development of the coal-fired steam engine in 1712 allowed us, for the first time in history, to draw on seemingly unlimited solar power that had reached the Earth millions of years ago, now stored in the form of fossil fuels, rather than the much more limited solar power that had reached the Earth in the last year or so, growing the plants that fuel both human and animal muscle power. Harnessing that stored power was a revolution—one with unintended consequences. It was the massive release of this carbon into the atmosphere, largely unrecognized at the time, that began anthropogenic climate change. Because our entire way of life has adapted to cheap, dense and easily-portable forms of fossil fuel energy, basically everything we do contributes to climate change.

⁸ See, Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162, No. 3859 (13 Dec. 1968): 1243-1248.

will persist in their behavior, perpetuating climate change, which is noddied to a single individual, nation or culture. In a global commons such as the climatic system, we need to get everyone on board with a solution or there will be no solution.

Finally, climate change raises the specter of not only physical apocalypse, but also spiritual or existential crisis. It is not that we've destroyed the world in a fit of anger and hatred, as might have happened with a nuclear holocaust, but that we've neglected it, abandoned it, betrayed it in a slow-burning, short-sighted orgy of greed. We are destroying the world because we have turned our back to it, denying our earthy origins and our inextricable link to a healthy ecosystem (*humus*/earth, *humus*/human). One might argue that, even if we were to survive the next century by transitioning toward some synthetic and hyper-technological way of being, we would preserve our lives at the cost of our humanity. Something important would be lost in such a total embrace of the 'technological' over the 'natural'.⁹ Indeed, some argue that the latter effects have already been felt. Climate change has, by some accounts, initiated a break from nature, even the "end of nature."

* * *

I confess that I harbor a deeply pessimistic streak with respect to many things, but climate change takes the cake. When I look at the totality of our situation—our utter dependence on a carbon-intensive economy, the stranglehold that fossil fuel lobbies have on political systems, the ignorance and intransigence of a non-negligible portion of the population regarding this issue, widespread indolence and indifference, our general reluctance to make sacrifices,¹⁰ distributed responsibility leading to a lack of accountability, the slow speed of a catastrophe that cannot be easily captured in 'sound-bites' or thirty second 'news' stories, the fact that tipping points and other non-linear threshold events mean that late action could be as bad as no action at all, and so on—I see no good reason to wager that we will be able to avoid runaway climate change.¹¹ Never has

⁹ The nature/culture distinction is, of course, hotly debated among philosophers and other scholars. However, covering this important debate would distract us from the topic at hand.

¹⁰ For an illuminating take on this subject, see, Michael Maniates and John M. Mayer, eds., *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

¹¹ I often tell my students that (a) a responsible future would include pulling back from consumption of all sorts, reducing travel and the use of fossil fuels, localizing economies, and so forth. But, (b) given our inaction, indolence and selfishness, it is unlikely we will

our flirtation with doom been so clearly supported by science, so global in scope, and so clearly identifiable and understandable, while simultaneously seeming so inexorable, so completely inescapable. We are caught in an exceedingly complex, slowly unfolding, globally inclusive *tragedy*, in the sense Garrett Hardin uses that term: condemned, not by the gods, but by the “remorseless working” of the free market in an age of fossil fuel dependence.¹² The tragic chorus—in this case made up of environmental scientists and activists—warns us of our approaching doom, and yet we march on with the “inevitableness of destiny,” resigned to the “futility of escape.”¹³ Welcome to the Anthropocene. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we will die—and, perhaps, a good deal of the planet with us.

Nevertheless, I intend to argue that hope, properly understood, is the proper response to the angst of the Anthropocene. Although in previous work I have argued for simplicity and political engagement as keystone environmental virtues, hope is, in its own way, essential for the full realization of these, and other, dispositions.¹⁴ Hope is an essential virtue for our time.

The Nature of Hope

How, in the face of such calamities, so many reasons to wager that things will turn out poorly, can I suggest that hope is an appropriate response to our situation? In such circumstances, isn't hope a flight from reality? The last refuge of minds too weak to accept the world as it is: chaotic, threatening, and utterly indifferent to our desires? A rickety crutch for

manage to “power down.” Thus, there are (c) two possible futures for humanity: one looks like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and the other looks like *Star Trek*. But there is no real justification, other than a leap of faith, for thinking we will be living in a *Star Trek* world before climate change surges past any number of tipping points, which means there is some likelihood that we will be living in a radically impoverished environment (at least as viewed from the human perspective).

¹² There is also the intransigence of the laws of physics and chemistry, which do not compromise or negotiate.

¹³ The language is taken directly from Garrett Hardin's “The Tragedy of the Commons.”¹⁴ This paper is not focused on environmental virtue ethics, but on the foundations of hope that make it a potential virtue. For work on simplicity and other environmental virtues, see, Brian Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue: A Narrative Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014), especially chapter 4; Brian Treanor, “The Virtue of Simplicity: Reading Thoreau with Aristotle,” *The Concord Saunterer* 15 (2007): 65-90; Brian Treanor, “Environmentalism and Public Virtue,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23, No. 1 (2010): 9-28.

those who believe—not only without justification, but generally without even an *attempt* at justification—that “everything will be fine, we’ll figure something out”? Certainly some forms of “hope” are open to such criticism. But a philosophically robust notion of hope reveals it to be distinct from, and in some cases at odds with, other dispositions or attitudes with which it is commonly confused: irrational optimism, delusional wish-fulfillment, calculated cheerfulness or confidence, and so forth.

If hope is to be compelling, it must be something more than naïve optimism that things will work out in the manner we desire, because the most superficial reflection reveals that such a disposition is unwarranted. Such “hope” is often misplaced or frustrated: people don’t always recover from illness, injustices multiply, good people suffer, and evil goes unpunished. As Roger Scruton notes, “the belief that human beings can either foresee the future or control it to their own advantage ought not to have survived an attentive reading of the *Iliad*, still less the Old Testament.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, Scruton avers, in the very course of recommending a good dose of pessimism, “I don’t go along with Schopenhauer’s comprehensive gloom, or with the philosophy of renunciation that he derived from it. I have no doubt that St. Paul was right to recommend faith, hope, and love (*agape*) as the virtues that order life to the greater good.”¹⁶ I concur. Hope is, far from delusion or evasion, the virtuous, rational, and pragmatic response to a reality that seems to counsel, even demand, despair.

(a) Desire and Fear, Hope and Despair

To understand why hope is the proper response to our situation, we must begin by distinguishing hope, as I will be using the term, from various forms of desire, with which it is often confused, and by contrasting it with its antithesis, despair.¹⁷ Hope is distinct from desiring, wishing or

¹⁵ Roger Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism: And the Danger of False Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁷ My account of hope here is, quite clearly, deeply indebted to the work of Gabriel Marcel. See, for example, Gabriel Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Manya Harari (New York: Citadel Press, 1995); Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. 1 and 2 (London: The Harvill Press, 1950- 1951); Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1949); Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Co., 1964); Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, trans. Emma Crawford

expecting. While a person might say, for example, that she “hopes” there will be no thunderstorm or that her train will depart on time, these are in fact merely analogical and debased misuses of “hope,” just as when a person says that she “loves” ice cream she is not, presumably, using “love” in the more specific and proper sense of the term.

Hope and despair, unlike desire and fear, have a certain existential quality. By this I mean that hope and despair each assert something about existence itself—the meaningfulness or meaninglessness, the goodness or badness (or, perhaps worse, irrelevance and indifference) of being. This quality is clearest in the case of despair. When a person despairs, truly despairs, she loses faith in existence as such. Properly speaking, a person does not “despair” of the loss of her job, or her home, or even her life (though she may fear any of these). To despair is to come to the belief that, as W.H. Auden puts it in his *Twelve Songs*, “nothing now can ever come to any good.”¹⁸ This can come about as the result of a devastating individual loss—the death of one’s child, for example—but such an event is really just a trigger for a more comprehensive desolation. Despair is not the consequence of the loss of any one particular being or object in the world, but rather of the loss of one’s orientation in the world, the loss of one’s *sense* of the world.¹⁹ Despair leaves a person with nothing in which she can have faith, nothing to orient or give meaning to her existence, or indeed to existence itself; it is a loss of faith in reality as a whole, the assertion that, ultimately, nothing is valuable.²⁰

(New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962). However, my own account differs from Marcel’s in important respects, and so this should not be taken to be a strictly Marcelian description of hope.

¹⁸ W.H. Auden, *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage International, 1976), 141 .

¹⁹ “Sense” is here taken in the way it is used by Erazim Kohák, as a kind of foundational, global impression based on experience (and, later, reflection). “Philosophy can claim to be the *scientia generalis* because it seeks to see and articulate the sense of being as it presents itself primordially, prior to the imposition of any special perspective or purpose. See, Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 49.

²⁰ Despair is not focused on particular objects or events; it is a global attitude about the worth, meaning and goodness of being. Individual soldiers and civilians alike *feared* for their lives or their homes in WWI and WWII, but *despair* is not the result of a threat to, or even the loss of, individual lives. It was the blind insanity that unfolded in 1916 amidst the rolling hills north of the Somme that created a “lost generation.” And although Nietzsche’s madman announced the “death of God,” for many, the madness of the extermination camps at Chelmno, Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau most forcefully illustrated the absence of “God” in the twentieth century. Something more than the individual deaths and murders, or even the accumulated total, gave these events the

If despair is the denial of worth, hope is an affirmation that is a response to this denial; it is only in the context of the temptation to despair that we can respond with hope. As Gabriel Marcel notes, such is clearly the case in our world: “Despair is possible in any form, at any moment and to any degree, and this betrayal may seem to be counseled, if not forced upon us, by the very structure of the world we live in.”²¹ William James adds that the “whole army of suicides” stands as a mute testament to the claim that life is not worth living.²² But it is *precisely* the omnipresent possibility of despair that can become, as it “was for Nietzsche [and others] . . . the springboard to the loftiest affirmation.”²³ Where despair denies that anything is ultimately worthy, hope wagers—hermeneutically, not calculatively—that reality is worthwhile, worthy of my complete engagement (if not, as we will see, my complete endorsement).

Hope, then, rests on a faith,²⁴ a faith that, despite the apparent lack of worth, the untrustworthiness, the underlying tragedy of reality, there are nevertheless compelling reasons to affirm and endorse it: beauty, goodness, wonder, joy, vitality. The form of hope I am describing does not deny suffering, loss, and tragedy, which seem, as far as human experience can attest, utterly inescapable. And while some forms of hope may turn on a salvific doctrine of one sort or another, hope does not require that specific type of faith; it is not, or need not be, a calculation based on some transcendent trick of accounting in which goodness will outweigh, pound for pound, evil, justifying the horror and tragedy. Hope is possible even in the face of the finality of death, even in the face, on a cosmic scale, of heat-death of the universe itself under the influence of the second law of thermodynamics.

As hope and desire have different objects, so do they have different responses. Fear and desire are not blanket positions regarding reality as such; they are expectant states that focus on the anticipation of some determinate object or event. To desire is “to desire that X” and to fear is “to fear that X.” I *desire* that I will be offered the job. I *fear* that the biopsy will come back malignant. Because they are focused on determinate outcomes, fear and desire generally operate in the sphere of

power to induce despair.

²¹ Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” 26.

²² William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁴ See, Brian Treanor, “Blessed are Those Who Have Not Seen and Yet Believe,” *Analecta Hermeneutica* 2 (2010): 1-17. In this case, the “faith” in question is the affirmation—a hermeneutical wager—of the goodness of being, and the willingness to act on the basis of that belief.

what Marcel calls the problematic. Desiring X and not yet having it raises the problem of how to go about securing it. Fearing X and trying to avoid it raises the problem of how to go about avoiding it. As problematic, desire is tied to what Marcel calls *technics*.²⁵ In the case of problems, the identity of the person seeking a solution is not at issue; it makes no difference who is asking the question—or desiring the outcome, or fearing the consequence—because all the relevant facts are external to the questioner. The identity of the questioner can be changed without altering the problem itself; and the solution to a problem is, inevitably, a technique that can become common property and used by radically different individuals. “When I am dealing with a problem, I am trying to discover a solution that can become common property, that consequently can, at least in theory, be rediscovered by anybody at all.”²⁶ If a person desires to lose weight, she will employ a technique that is more or less indifferent to her individuality. Even if some diet regimes work better for certain people over others, any diet one adopts is employed by many other people seeking the same solution to the same problem. So desire seeks some relatively specific object or outcome, which is achieved through the application of some specific technique, a technique that is, in principle, of use to anyone else desiring the same object or outcome.

Hope, however, is of a fundamentally different order: not problematic, but mysterious; not tied to technics, but to a specific sort of hermeneutic wager about being and, therefore, to one’s way of being-in-the-world. Mysteries, unlike problems, cannot be solved with techniques, because mysteries—of which love and being are perhaps the archetypal examples—are issues in which the being of the “questioner” is at stake.

A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity.²⁷

If my being—my unique particularity, my *haecceitas*—is at stake in any mystery, it goes without saying that the response to that mystery cannot be something technical, which is, by its very nature, something indifferent to the being of the person using the technique. My being is not at stake in the changing of a flat tire, which is a problem (an inoperable car) that can be solved with a technique (engage the emergency break,

²⁵ Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” 30.

²⁶ Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. 1, 213.

²⁷ Marcel, *Being and Having*, 117.

jack up the car, remove the flat, and so forth) that is basically the same for any person with the same problem. But when asking whether or not I love someone, or whether or not my life is worth living, I cannot use a generic technique or universal formula to arrive at a satisfactory answer.

In fact, mysteries are not, properly speaking, the sort of things one “solves” at all, whether or not the proposed solution is technical. Mysteries do not present us with a gap in our knowledge, or an obstacle to our desires, in the same way that a problem does: “the mysterious is not the unknowable, the unknowable is only the limiting case of the problematic.”²⁸ Problems are solvable, at least theoretically. For example, the feasibility of economically viable, production-scale fusion reactors is a problem with a theoretically technical solution, whether or not a technical solution is ever developed. In contrast, the question of love or of the goodness of being is not something I successfully solve once and for all, after which I can turn my attention to other problems. No. A mystery like love is something one must live, day-by-day, in a series of creative acts that help to make the reality of love.²⁹

Thus, the essence of hoping is not “to hope that X,” but rather simply “to hope.” That is to say, while hope does not affirm or embrace the current state of affairs—confusion, doubt, depression, infirmity, or, in terms of the Anthropocene, climate change—as final, it does not imagine or anticipate some specific change in circumstances that would result in salvation.³⁰ The hopeful person does, after a fashion, hope for deliverance, but she is not fixated on the specific form that this deliverance will take. And indeed, at its limit, as an affirmation of the goodness of being as such, hope does not require such deliverance. But in any case, the more hope transcends any anticipation of the specific form of deliverance, the less it is open to the obvious objection that in many, perhaps most, cases the hoped-for deliverance simply does not take place. If I desire that climate change will be solved by some particular technique (e.g., economically viable fusion reactors) or state of affairs (e.g., a global awakening to the seriousness of the problem, and a parallel appreciation for the benefits of simpler living, local economies, reduced population, and the like), it is highly likely that my desire will be frustrated. However, if I simply maintain myself in hope, without fixation on any preconceived solution or

²⁸ Ibid., 118.

²⁹ Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” 34ff. See also, Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*; James, 25, 96-97.

³⁰ Salvation, for the time being, is taken in its broadest sense as deliverance from an unwanted situation or state of affairs.

object, then no specific event or absence of an event will have the power to destroy that hope.

Given this account, it would be reasonable to conclude that, in fact, hope is *not* the proper response to the Anthropocene. Climate change is, on most accounts, the final and most terrifying horseman of the Anthropocene. However, insofar as climate change is a determinate *problem*, and is susceptible to technical solutions—whether those technical solutions involve technology (e.g., clean energy, CCS technology, etc.) or techniques (e.g., simplicity, vegetarianism, local economies, etc.)—it is the focus of a *desire* or set of desires rather than hope per se. Fair enough. However, precisely because climate change accelerates, magnifies, and extends the Anthropocene, it also calls into question accounts of the order and meaningfulness of the world. It is, as I noted above, both a physical threat and an existential/spiritual threat: the age of the Anthropocene is heralded by alarm at the “end of nature,” or the “disenchantment of the world,”³¹ or our loss of our sense of creatureliness.³² And these narratives court despair as surely as the “death of God.” Therefore, the novel and terrifying problem of climate change leads us inexorably to the mystery of the Anthropocene.

(b) Hope in the Anthropocene

Hope, as we’ve seen, is expressed in an affirmation about value of being, an affirmation that bears on my own being and my relationship to the larger whole. As Marcel writes: “Hope consists in asserting that there is at the heart of being, beyond all data, beyond all inventories and all calculations, a mysterious principle which is in connivance with me.”³³ Parsing this sentence will help us to circumscribe the nature of authentic hope. Let’s take note of three things: hope involves an “assertion” that is not based on “calculation,” but instead on a belief about the “mysterious” relationship between reality and myself.

First, that hope consists in an assertion indicates that it is both a way of viewing things and a way of acting. To hope is not merely to believe certain things about being but to assert, to make active claims about being based on that belief. Therefore, to hope is to adopt a certain

³¹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 270.

³² Brian Treanor, “Introduction: The Human Place in the Natural World,” in *Being-in-Creation: Human Responsibility in an Endangered World*, eds. Brian Treanor, et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 1-22.

³³ Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” 28. Gabriel Marcel, *Position et approches concrètes du mystère ontologique* (Paris: Vrin, 1949), 68.

way of being-in-the-world; it is an active, not passive, disposition. Marcel makes this clear when he notes that the affirmation of being is “an affirmation which I *am* rather than an affirmation which I *utter*.”³⁴ Such activity is, no doubt, based on belief; but hope is more than mere belief, which is why, in a previous paper, I took care to indicate the relationship between hope and faith. Faith is distinguished by, among other things, my willingness to act on the basis of my faith.³⁵

Philosophy has, to a large degree, ignored the problem of faith. Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically *possible*; and as *the test of belief is willingness to act*, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not known to us in advance.³⁶ This criterion seems to apply well in the case hope in the face of environmental crises like climate change. We do not know whether or not, and we do not know how, we will weather climate change. Therefore, if we are to be hopeful in the Anthropocene, hope cannot have anything to do with certainty; it can be, and often is, plagued by doubt, uncertainty, apprehension, reservations, and the temptation to despair. Nevertheless, in the face of this uncertainty, the hopeful person exhibits a willingness to *act as if her hope is well-founded*, as if we will, somehow, in some way which is completely unforeseeable,³⁷ be delivered from absolute ruin and despair.³⁸

³⁴ Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” 18.

³⁵ On the nature of faith, its commitment to action and similar subjects, see, Treanor, “Blessed are Those Who Have Not Seen and Yet Believe.” Here again we find a distinction between the sphere of hope and despair, and that of desire and fear. The assertion contained in hope reveals a kinship with willing rather than desiring. I can perfectly well desire X without ever acting to secure X, something abundantly clear in the myriad daydreams and fantasies on which we never act. Paradoxically, however, while hope is indeterminate—and therefore cannot precisely describe the end for which it hopes—it is nevertheless inextricably caught up with a willingness and commitment to action on the basis of that hoping.

³⁶ James, 90.

³⁷ This echoes, at least in some ways, the work of Jacques Derrida as interpreted by John D. Caputo. See, John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997). See also, Caputo’s own philosophical and theological work: John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theological Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006); John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

³⁸ The person who focuses on the *problem* of climate change will certainly be tempted to despair. First, it appears that there is at least a possibility that this problem will not be solved, or at least not in the way many of us hope to solve it. It may be that, in a commons, we find ourselves unable to come up with techniques—philosophical,

political, or economic—powerful enough to sufficiently alter our behavior, or quick enough to alter it in the time necessary. It may also be that, despite the best efforts of engineers and entrepreneurs, there will be no technological miracle developed to save us from ourselves. Second, whether or not we solve the problem of climate change, the Anthropocene itself is already upon us. Focusing on the problem of climate change confronts one with the Anthropocene: the end of nature, the disenchantment of the world and the loss of creaturely identity. Caught up in the desire to attend to this most pressing of *problems*, we find ourselves drawn into a more serious *mystery*.

But what if we begin, not with our fears and desires about the problem of climate change, but rather with our *hope* in the world, with the mysteries of carnal and earthly beauty, life, vitality, wonder? The calculative person determines that there is a negligible chance of her individual efforts stemming climate change and, moreover, a negligible chance of the combined efforts of many people doing so. The response? Alltoo often to throw in the towel: despair, which may take the form of resignation or, just aslikely, an enthusiastic embrace of the hedonism of consumer culture. In contrast, a personwho begins with the mystery of being and faith in the fundamental goodness of being willbe armed against despair. However anthropogenic climate change unfolds, it does so inthe context of a more fundamental meaningfulness. And because hope is of necessity active, she will also put her shoulder to the wheel and make an effort to contribute to the goodness of the world, despite the utter inefficacy of individual action, the long odds of successful climate mitigation and the daunting challenge of adaptation. I participate in the salvation of the world; I do so with others and, in hope, with being itself. I am not the solution (the definitive answer, or the “way out”), but I am part of the solution (the formula, the mix, the things that matter).

Here, whether or not we embrace his faith, we might embrace the sentiment in a prayer made famous by Archbishop Oscar Romero:

It helps, now and then, to step back
and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it
is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of
the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete,
which is another way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church's mission. No
set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about:
We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

Second, the faith or belief that is at the root of hope is not a matter of calculation. With respect to the threats of the Anthropocene, the chances for a favorable outcome are—at least according to many oddsmakers—not good at all. This is perhaps one reason that so many people focus on the *desire* for short-term profit, security or comfort: to ward off the looming *despair* regarding where those short-term concerns are leading us in the long term. When we widen our field of concern beyond the specific problems of the Anthropocene, the impossibility of calculation becomes even more obvious. *Pace* utilitarians, when it comes to the questions of whether or not being is good, or existence is meaningful, or life is worth living, we find: (a) that we are incapable of collecting, much less taking into account in a single calculation, the infinitely variegated data points that might bear on the question; (b) that, even if we could enumerate all such relevant data, we would find—precisely because of the infinite variety—that we are confronted with incommensurable phenomena that cannot be measured in terms of some universal unit for purposes of comparison and calculation; and, (c), that much of what matters when it comes to questions like the goodness of being or the value of life is entirely beyond the reach of facts and data, which certainly bear on, but do not exhaust, the relevant factors in answering such questions.

Finally, Marcel suggests that hope includes a feeling that reality is, in some way, in “connivance” (*connivance*) with me.³⁹ This is an unfortunate choice of words, insofar as connivance carries the implication of collusion in wrongdoing. True, connivance also carries the suggestion of intimacy, as the etymology suggests a conspiratorial wink as one looks

We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an
opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders,
ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.

³⁹ Gabriel Marcel, *Position et approches concrètes du mystère ontologique* (Paris: Vrin, 1949), 68.

the other way; but hope embodies the togetherness of the “con-,” while eschewing the implicit ignobility of the “-nivance,” the *nictare* (wink). Let us therefore amend Marcel’s statement to assert that hope finds in reality a mystery by which I am called, among other things, to *collaborate*.⁴⁰ That hope demands my collaboration suggests that however hope works itself out, it will require my active participation. That is to say, “acting as if hope in the future is justified” cannot mean acting as if everything *will* turn out well and so going about my business as if things will turn out well, like a spoiled student failing his university studies because he knows his father will make him Vice President of Operations in the family business when he graduates. No. Such passive anticipation is expectation or wishfulness, not hope. The hopeful person does not patiently await salvation from some external source, but becomes actively involved in her salvation and, in the case of the Anthropocene, the salvation of the world.

⁴⁰ More on this below, but note that the gesture toward a “mysterious principle in connivance with me” does not demand belief in a personal god; it can just as well be the recognition of meaningful being of which I am a part. Although both Marcel and Kohák argue for a personalist account of being, the latter especially is quite careful to articulate his account in a way that is not tied to any specific, determinate faith tradition.

So, with respect to hope, a belief gives rise to an assertion; and that assertion is a testimony that I am willing to act on the basis of this belief.⁴¹ But can we justify such hope?

The ‘Compensation’ of Hope

I’ve suggested that the *desire* for solutions to the problematic aspects of the Anthropocene—for example, a technical solution to climate change—should rest upon a *hope* grounded in the mystery of being: that being is meaningful and good, and that I have a role to play in that story.

One might object that a person could desire a solution for anthropogenic climate change out of pure self-interest without hope in the goodness of being. For some potential climate activists this is no doubt true; the fear of suffering or death in a meaningless and indifferent cosmos might induce one to seek a solution to the problems of the Anthropocene. But that motivation seems unlikely, at least for most of those reading these words. First, as I’ve argued, the odds are that our efforts will not avoid significant climate disturbances and related effects; and, second, the fact is that readers of this article are likely to be among the lucky minority who will be more resilient to the initial effects of climate change.⁴² So a person

⁴¹ Of course, neither one’s faith in reality, nor one’s action on behalf of that faith can assure a positive outcome. Just as hope is only possible in the face of the possibility of, and temptation to, despair, so faith is only possible in situations where it (the leap of faith) can prove unfounded—one cannot have “faith” in a certainty. Therefore, while hope consists of a faith strong enough to be backed up by affirmation and action, hope it must remain deeply humble: “speaking metaphysically, the only genuine hope is hope in what does not depend on ourselves, hope springing from humility and not from pride.” See, Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” 32. Facing the temptation to despair, one must recognize one’s own insufficiency. I cannot “save the world” from anthropogenic climate change and, even if I could, I cannot redeem being from the multitudinous other horrors, tragedies and losses that daily take place. Although hope calls me to work on behalf of the good, it does not, cannot, require that I accomplish it. This is one reason Marcel insists that authentic hope is always choral. See, Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 143. Of course, the main reason that Marcel insists on the choral nature of hope is tied to his personalist metaphysics. See also, Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*.

⁴² Near the middle of my life, by dint of hard work and luck (largely the latter), I enjoy a middle class lifestyle in the United States. I suspect that a number of people in my circumstances make something like the following calculation, consciously or unconsciously: “The odds are that I am unlikely to suffer substantially from climate change. I have, perhaps, thirty or thirty-five years left to live, and both the slowness of climate change and my relative affluence will shield me from the worst impacts of climate change. Indeed, they are likely to offer some protection even to my children. We

might think—indeed, many do think—that climate change is far enough off, and slowly developing enough, that her relative affluence will serve as protection, whatever might happen in a hundred years. And if neither a calculated belief in likelihood of successfully avoiding the problems of the Anthropocene nor a personal fear of imminent suffering is an adequate foundation to motivate action, we must look elsewhere for a grounding principle.

It is hope, grounded in a faith in the goodness of being, that can ultimately motivate and sustain the desire to address the specific problems of the Anthropocene. Mitigating and adapting to climate change must *mean something* for us to invest ourselves; and in a world without hope nothing means anything—things can be causes, or effects, or dangers, or benefits, but not *meaning-laden*.

Hope is ultimately grounded on what Marcel calls our “ontological exigence,” an aspiration to participate in being and a recognition that being is “necessary,” that is, meaningful:

Being is—or should be—necessary. It is impossible that everything should be reduced to a play of successive appearances which are inconsistent with each other... or, in the words of Shakespeare, to “a tale told by an idiot [full of sound and fury, *signifying nothing*].” I aspire to participate in this being, in this reality—and perhaps this aspiration is already a degree of participation, however rudimentary.⁴³

Ontological exigence is the need, the demand, for some sort of meaning and coherence in the cosmos; it is something like the combination of wonder (*thaumazein*) with an attendant aspiration to understand, if not the

have resources, substantial savings, and education; we can afford to move to areas that are relatively more resilient to climate damage, and will likely be successful in a changing economy. True, I will suffer from economic volatility and global political instability, but that is likely to be nothing I can't ride out successfully for another three decades. With unchecked climate change, my children may face more substantial threats, including food instability, the spread of some infectious diseases, even more economic stress, and so on. But, again, their education, health, and affluence are likely to make them much more resistant, much more successful adapters, than many other people. And, if and when things get that bad, surely climate adaptation and mitigation will be top priorities around the world.” Whether or not the reader agrees with this logic—I don't—it is undoubtedly an aspect of the thinking in most affluent nations. We are the first class passengers on the Titanic, willing to set sail with insufficient lifeboats because, while there may be problems for all those folks in steerage, we're pretty sure there will be a seat for us in the lifeboat.

⁴³ Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” 14 [emphasis added].

entire cosmos, then at least something of one's own place in it.⁴⁴ For Marcel, this need is not a "wish" for being or for coherence, which would be nothing more than a "psychological state, mood, or attitude a person *has*; it is rather a movement of the human spirit that is inseparable from being human."⁴⁵

Erazim Kohák argues that, in our lived experience, the meaningfulness and goodness of being is "so utterly basic... [that it is] never absent from all the many configurations of life's rhythm,"⁴⁶ even the experiences of suffering and pain.⁴⁷ As poet Gary Snyder puts it:

I have a friend who feels sometimes that the world is hostile to human life—he says it chills us and kills us. But how could we be were it not for this planet that provided our very shape? Two conditions—gravity and a livable temperature range between freezing and boiling—have given us fluids and flesh. The trees we climb and the ground we walk on have given us five fingers and toes. The "place" (from the root *plat*, broad, spreading, flat) gave us far-seeing eyes, the streams and breezes gave us versatile tongues and whorly ears. The land gave us a stride, and the lake a dive. The amazement gave us our kind of mind. We should be thankful for that, and take nature's stricter lessons with some grace.⁴⁸

The "problem of evil," which so many people see as a reason to deny the goodness of being, is, at root, really the "mystery of the good." The problem of evil is the problem of why there are pockets or instances of evil in a world that is so obviously, undeniably, primordially good, a

⁴⁴ Marcel concedes that it may be the case that ontological exigence is never fully satisfied, and cannot be fully satisfied. See, Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, 50. ⁴⁵ Sam Keen, "The Development of the Idea of Being" in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, eds. Paul Arthur Schilpp and Lewis Edwin Hahn (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1984), 105. See also, Brian Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel, and the Contemporary Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 182. Kohák says "the presence of God" is utterly basic; however, in the context of the entire argument, it is clear that God is personal being and that personal being is the meaningfulness of being, the goodness of being. This is not to diminish Kohák's own experience of this goodness as God, but to emphasize that his description can be valid for those who do not share his experience of God. See, for example, Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 194.

⁴⁷ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 40ff.

⁴⁸ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1990), 31.

world in which we fit, in which we have a place, even if we cannot fully understand it. We have a *natural* affinity for the meaningfulness and goodness of being, which is manifest in experiences such as wonder;⁴⁹ and while such an affinity can be smothered, neglected, or denied, it can never truly be silenced.⁵⁰

But if goodness “compensates” us for evil, it is not in some quasi-economic sense (*compensare*, from the Latin to “weigh together”), in which the scales, on a long enough time horizon, come down in favor of the good—as in Martin Luther King’s claim that “the aim of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”⁵¹ Nor is goodness a justification (*justificare*, “to do justice to”) or vindication (*vindicare*, “to avenge”) that “conquers” evil by defeating it and doing away with it. Hope does not require theodicy. We don’t need to wait for God to put his thumb on the scales of reckoning. In fact, the goodness of the universe and the horror of the universe cannot be weighed on the same scale, as if they were commensurable and able to be measured by some third, neutral unit.

The compensation of the good is, rather, a “weighing together” in terms of considering together, recognizing the wonder of existence as well as the wreckage and carnage. Poet Jack Gilbert captures this marvelously in his poem, “A Brief for the Defense,” which, after cataloguing “sorrow everywhere, slaughter everywhere,” “the suffering [we] have known, and the awfulness of [our] future,” tell us that “we must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world.” He concludes:

We stand at the prow again of a small ship
anchored late at night in the tiny port
looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront is
three shuttered cafes and one naked light burning.
To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat
comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth
all the years of sorrow that are to come.⁵²

The world is not “worth” it because the sound of the oars in the silence outnumber or outweigh, genocide, sectarian religious violence, systematic rape, economic injustice, and the rest of the litany of human woe, to say

⁴⁹ Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” 13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Sermon at Temple Israel of Hollywood,” delivered 26 February 1965.

⁵² Jack Gilbert, *Refusing Heaven: Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 3.

nothing of what we've done to the more-than-human world. The world is worth it because, despite these things, *goodness remains, and we can witness it*. We can hope without cheating the hardness of reality, death, and the second law of thermodynamics. The goodness of being and the meaningfulness of existence do not rest, fundamentally, on the victory of the good over the horror or indifference of the cosmos in the order of time; hope is, rather, about the victory of the good—beauty, love, life, goodness—in the what Kohák calls the “order of eternity,” that is in the order of value, of meaning, which can become manifest in any moment and to which humans are particular, perhaps unique, witness.⁵³ Hope does not deny the absolute *reality* of death and dissolution; it denies their absolute *significance*.

When we lose touch with this primordial exigence, we are in danger of slipping into despair. For if being itself is meaningless, despair becomes a powerful, perhaps insurmountable, lure. Those who do not fall into outright despair often resist by shielding themselves, poorly, with a life of mere functionality and *technics*.⁵⁴ Marcel's compatriot Antoine de St. Exupéry captures this well in an account of a pre-dawn ride in an omnibus full of French bureaucrats as they headed toward the then quite dangerous flight to Africa:

Old bureaucrat, my comrade.... You, like a termite, built your peace by blocking up with cement every chink and cranny through which the light might pierce. You rolled yourself up into a ball in your genteel security, in routine, in the stifling conventions of provincial life, raising a modest rampart against the winds and the tides and the stars. You have chosen not to be perturbed by great problems, having trouble enough to forget your fate as a man. You are not a dweller on an errant planet and do not ask yourself questions to which there are no answers.⁵⁵

When it comes to the meaningfulness of being we either (1) hide from the issue by refusing to ask the big questions, burying ourselves in routine, in work, in “getting ahead” (or just getting by), or we (2) ask the big questions, confront the mystery, and conclude either (a) being is

⁵³ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 82-85, 95-103, etc.

⁵⁴ Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” 9-13.

⁵⁵ Antoine de St. Exupéry, *Wind, Sand, and Stars*, trans. Lewis Galantière (New York: Harvest Books, 1967), 11.

meaningful or (b) it is not. If being and existence are not meaningful, then there is not much to do about it other than plug away at whatever will pass the time. But if being is meaningful, then we have a part to play.

Conclusion

As I've noted, I think there are both good reasons to fear the Anthropocene (due to the looming threats of resource wars, climate refugees, agricultural stresses, increased ranges for many diseases, coral bleaching, ocean acidification, and so forth) and good reasons to despair in the Anthropocene (because of what it says about our ability to live well as the kinds of creatures we are); and I am, perhaps, more inclined than others to see, and to dwell on, those reasons. Nevertheless, I also think that there is reason to hope, and that based on that hope there is reason to attempt to mitigate the negative impacts of the Anthropocene and to adapt to the changes we've already wrought.

Choosing hope in these circumstances is reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur's account of "second naiveté." When a deeply held belief is, as most beliefs ultimately are, subjected to doubt, there are basically three possibilities: skepticism, new belief, or a return to the old belief. In the first case, the person plunges into doubt and stays there, remaining, as much as possible, skeptical and uncommitted. In the second case, the person abandons her old belief in favor of a new belief, as when a theist, subjected to some dark night of the soul, becomes an atheist.⁵⁶ In the last case however, the person returns to her original faith. But having passed through the crucible of doubt, it is impossible to return to the same belief in the same way; and so this "return" is what Ricoeur calls *second* naiveté. For example, a child with a childlike belief in an anthropomorphic God who scrupulously rewards good behavior and punishes bad behavior might well lose that faith in the face of inexplicable tragedy—say, the death of a parent—only to regain at a later point a transformed, adult faith. Likewise, the dewy-eyed romance of one's youth might be challenged by any number of misfortunes—disease, infidelity, or merely the banal routine of paying the mortgage and washing the clothes—only to emerge as a different, more mature love of the same person.

Hope in the Anthropocene seems to me to have a similar form. The innocent faith in progress—the belief that each year will be better than the last and that each generation will enjoy successively greater benefits as we

⁵⁶ Although here, as in all cases of second naiveté, effects of the first belief persist. Ruptures with our past can be more or less radical, but they are never absolute.

march inexorably, if asymptotically, toward some eschatological promised land—seems impossible to maintain for anyone who is paying attention. Some things certainly have improved in some places; but such progress is neither even nor without other costs, which are all too often misunderstood or ignored. But once a person comes to doubt the future and the direction in which we seem hell-bent on heading—the cornucopian narrative of limitless growth and progress, the goal of independence from the natural world (as if that were possible), the desire to emancipate ourselves from the rhythms and cycles of nature, from our carnal bodies, from finitude and dependence themselves—there is no going back to the first naiveté of utopian belief in inexorable progress and, for many people, despair looms as the likely response, whether it manifests itself at the bottom of a bottle or buried under shiny new consumables and credit card debt.

But there is another option: a return to hope—not the innocent hope of first naiveté, but the transformed, chastened, more prudent, more mature, and perhaps somewhat tragic hope of a second naiveté. Such a hope is rooted not in our omnipotent ability to shape reality in order to match and satisfy our desires, nor in the thaumaturgy of salvation by some omnipotent *deus ex machina*, but rather in a sense of the deep and abiding goodness of being, and a faith in meaning that we can appreciate but never fully understand.

This second hope is neither Pollyannaish about environmental realities, nor a laconic resignation to our fate; it is not a passive expectation for deliverance, whether technological or theological. It requires our active participation in both the enjoyment of the world and the maintenance and promotion of its goodness. E.B. White once quipped, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world,”⁵⁷ which perfectly captures the experience of hope in the age of the Anthropocene. Unfortunately, White also noted that these competing desires make it “hard to plan the day.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Israel Shenker, “E.B. White: Notes and Comments by Author,” *The New York Times*, 11 July 1969.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*