



Hope and the Logic of Impossible Things

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Hope is a self-contradiction. If were it not, from a Pauline perspective it would be illogical. The impossible thing about Paul's hope (that is, impossible when it is not collapsed into optimism as it often is) is this: hope depends on the non-appearing of what is hoped for. Thus, hope has the same structure and the same weak, deconstructing force as the concept of the Messiah (the anointed one, the one who is to come), who, if she/he/they ever should appear would not be the Messiah, since the Messiah (I press hard on the concept) is the one who is *always yet* to come.¹ Moreover, hope contests itself as faith does; when knowledge completes faith as if faith were a kind of defective knowledge it is no longer faith: "for we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7)." And hope is unsatisfying like justice is unsatisfying, always out there ahead of us and never giving itself to us so that we can say justice has been done (see Gal 5:5).² My intention (notice that I did not write my

¹ For linkage of the idea of the Messiah with post-structuralist views of religion, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 117–143; Richard Kearney, "Derrida and Messianic Atheism," in Edward Baring and Peter Eli Gordon, *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 199–212.

² David E. Fredrickson, "The Justice of Faith," *Dialog* 52 (2013): 121–127.

For Paul, the basis of Christian faith is hope. But what kind of hope? Hope is such a misused word, capable of every definition from the banal to the sublime. To find the key to a Christian understanding of hope that leads to transcendent faith, it is necessary to look to Romans and to carefully delineate how Paul understands this concept.

hope, a word that I, like Paul, want to reserve for self-contradictory yearning for impossible things) in this essay is to call attention to the logic of impossibility in Romans 4–8.

EMOTIONAL CATASTROPHE

Ancient philosophers, however, would not have thought Paul's obsession to be strange, only misguided. From the ancient philosophic perspective, hope is not the solution but the problem. It increases human suffering rather than alleviating it. For this reason, philosophers often played self-discipline off against hope. For the Stoics especially—the dominant philosophic voice in the first century—self-control was the one and only path to happiness. To control oneself meant to detach oneself from money, reputation, spouse, children, and even one's body. To desire that the world might be different than it is, in other words to hope—this was the height of folly and an act of rebellion against an all-wise God who manages the universe with unquestionable skill. "Accept the role God has assigned you," a Stoic might have said, "since He has called you according to His good purpose. To do otherwise will only increase your misery."³ Such advice is the point of a rather obscure poem written about the time of Paul's letter to the Romans and (dubiously) ascribed to the Stoic philosopher Seneca:

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Hope the deceiver, Hope the sweet evil, Hope the sum of all evils,
solace for the wretched whithersoever their destinies drag them,
credulous being whom no misfortune can put to flight,
Hope stands by her duty in time of ultimate evil.
Hope forbids one to find peace within the everlasting gates of Death
and with the sword to cut short anxious cares.
Hope knows no defeat. Hope clings single-mindedly to the future.
Lying, she yet wishes to be trusted.
Extravagant, mad, most pleasing to shattered fortunes,
which she caresses, explaining that fate is constantly altered,
she alone holds the wretched in life, she alone bids them linger,
she alone never dies—nor does she appear then vanish.

³ Tr. Michael S. Armstrong, "Hope the Deceiver": *Pseudo-Seneca De Spe (Anth. Lat. 415 Riese)*, Spudasmata 70 (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1998), 49–51. For hope as the "common deceiver of all mankind," see Ruth R. Caston and Robert A. Kaster, *Hope, Joy, and Affection in the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 82.

Often most flattering to the good man, but always so to the wicked,
even those she has once deceived she nonetheless deceives again.
Unstable, erratic in motion [. . .],
reckless, and not one to suppose that anything is closed to her,
she promises all things, with the gods' well-known capriciousness;
she reminds mortals that nothing is immutable, that chance is
capricious.

At the time of extreme suffering, it is better to resign oneself to the divine will and just die. To hope that life might be otherwise than it is only pours salt in the wounds.⁴

I have put forward two understandings of hope that may have been current in the first century and a third that is peculiar to Paul (and nowadays to some post-structuralist philosophers): hope is (1) optimism flowing from a sunny disposition; we will spend no time documenting this in first-century literature; (2) a moral disease that intensifies the despair that comes when in a time of suffering one forgets that the only thing that can be controlled is one's attitude toward events; and (3) a yearning for things to be different than they are without the slightest idea of what that difference might be and how to bring the difference about, in other words, hope as a resounding *Yes* that comes forth *inexplicably* from despair to shake hands with a *Yes* that comes, might come, might never come from the outside, from the land of no-one-knows-where.⁵ So here is Paul's challenge when he wrote Romans 4–8: how to write his ideas about hope #3 without being mistaken as the naïve optimist of #1 (a risk every hoper runs) nor an incompetent thinker who, from the view of hope #2 that Paul's contemporary philosophers held, has painted himself into the corner by defending a palpably stupid idea: that hope #3 saves.

⁴ See Douglas Cairns, "Metaphors for Hope in Archaic and Classical Greek Poetry," in Caston and Kaster, *Hope, Joy, and Affection in the Classical World*, 13–44. For hope in the ancient novels, see Laurel Fulkerson, "'Torn between Hope and Despair': Narrative Foreshadowing and Suspense in the Greek Novel," in Caston and Kaster, *Hope, Joy, and Affection in the Classical World*, 75–91.

⁵ Not entirely peculiar to Paul, however. There is a remarkable similarity between Paul's thought and the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. One contemporary reader of Paul, the American philosopher John D. Caputo, has drawn attention to the compatibility of Paul's strange hope and the underlying logic of Derrida's contribution to the revitalization of religion known as *deconstruction*. What links hope and deconstruction is a yearning for the impossible that runs through both, a saying *Yes* to an unimaginable future, as John Caputo writes: "Hope means that a great 'perhaps' hovers over the world, that what holds sway over the world is not the Almighty but a might-be. But 'perhaps' does not signify an attitude of lassitude or indifference. 'Perhaps' is risky business, a resolute staying open to a future that is otherwise considered closed." (*Hoping Against Hope[hope]:[Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim]* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015], 198). Readers should not overlook the allusion to Romans 4:18 in the title of Caputo's powerful critique of religion's desire to establish itself on the certainties of revelation or metaphysics. And yet, it is also a book that dreams of a religion that takes its cues from hope, the strange hope of Abraham and Paul, a hope that is neither optimism nor the naïve salting of wounds. See also John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 3–23.

SAVED (REALLY?) BY HOPE

Nevertheless, Paul keeps on painting. Hope does indeed save. More precisely, it already has: “we were saved by hope” (Rom 8:24). Hope brings about a strangely timed salvation. Salvation happens the moment hope begins, and this must mean that salvation in Paul’s thinking was something quite unlike what most what Christians through the ages have thought: that is, salvation as the preservation of individual consciousness past the moment of dying, or a restoration of consciousness after extinction brought on by death. Yet, for Paul hope was a different sort of salvation, one located in the interiority of human emotion in an impossible combination of eager but blind welcoming (*ἀπεκδεχόμεθα*) with endurance (*δι’ ὑπομονῆς*). This combination is impossible because the active quality of expectant welcoming seems to cancel the passivity of *existing under waiting*, as the word *ὑπομονῆ* might be translated. So, self-contradictory and quite unphilosophic, but there it is: salvation, which Paul asserts begins the moment hope arrives, is the impossible coexistence of active expectation and enduring passivity. And yet Paul makes this impossible thing seem so commonsensical, so logical, so much so that if anyone were to answer “me” to his question “For who hopes for what is seen?” that person would seem to be the only one in the world illogical enough to oppose Paul’s logic of impossible things. One might reproduce Paul’s question in this way: “Who fails to see that the most uncertain thing in human experience, hope, which is by definition uncertain has replaced sight as the gold standard of certainty?” Any takers? So hoping *must* be logically dependent on the non-appearance of what is hoped for even if this reasoning results in an emotional impossibility: eager expectation blended with patient endurance.

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AGAINST HOPE ON THE BASIS OF HOPE

There is more to say about hope in Romans 8, and I will do so in the conclusion, but we need to swing back to Abraham in Romans 4. There, hope’s insistence on impossible things gets a start in the rhetoric of the letter, but as we will see at the conclusion of this essay, hope (#3!) seems to have been structured into creation from the beginning.

As it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and

calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope [παρ' ἐλπίδα ἐπ' ἐλπίδι], he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” (Rom 4:17–18)

The Christian tradition has explained away the self-contradiction of “hoping against hope.”

It has proposed two distinct hopes: one based on human possibilities, which Paul teaches us through the example of Abraham to leave behind by pursuing another hope based on the infinite possibilities open to God and those who are favored by God.⁶ And yet, what if there was only one hope worthy of the name, whose nature is always to contest itself, always to criticize itself for resting too readily in the humanly possible or even in the divinely possible? What if Paul's Abraham (who of course is an image of Paul, and as I will suggest below, of all creation and even of God) heard hope say, “only the impossible will do”?

IMPOSSIBLE SELVES

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom [also] we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Rom 5:1–5)

Scholars have noticed a shifting of gears between 5:1 and 5:2. Justification and the peace it brings (5:1) is supplanted (“through whom *also*”; note the NRSV fails to translate καὶ) by access to grace and a right to boast in the hope of the glory of God (καυχώμεθα ἐπ' ἐλπίδι τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ). Now, δόξα in this verse is generally assumed to have a visual connotation to something like *glory* or *splendor*. Nevertheless, the first meaning of *doxa* in the lexicon of Liddell-Scott-Jones is *expectation*.⁷ In this sense, δόξα pertains to time; δόξα orients itself to an open and unimaginable future, just as hope does (recall: “hope that *is seen* is not hope”). In fact, according to Liddell-Scott-Jones another of the possible definitions of δόξα is *hope*. Furthermore, like hope δόξα is a *yes-saying* to that which is always yet to come.⁸ That is why there is a trace of hospitality to the stranger in

⁶ Severianus, *Fragmenta in Epistolam ad Romanos* 218.1–2. Removed from its Pauline context, the phrase retained its established sense; see Theodorus Studites, *Epistulae* 411.2–4.

⁷ Liddell-Scott-Jones, 444. Cf. Anonymous Lexicographus, *Συναγωγή λέξεων χρησίμων* A 830.1.

⁸ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 63–66.

δόξα, as the etymological relation of δόξα to δέχομαι indicates. The latter means *I receive* or *I welcome*. Now, where does all of this linguistic data take us? Directly to a much revised translation of καυχώμεθα ἐπ’ ἐλπίδι τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ: “we boast on the basis of the hope of God’s hope (of God’s yes-saying, welcoming, and expectant spirit).”

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God’s hope? To think that God imitates Abraham’s hoping against hope, the patriarch’s wonderment, uncertainty, and risky yes-saying to an unknowable future, flies in the face of the normal Christian way of thinking. Yet, the scandal generated by the very idea of God’s hope is a measure of the influence of ancient Greek philosophic understanding of divinity (or Father, nature, Zeus, fate—all the terms and titles pointed in the same direction) on Christian theology. What if one of the aims of Paul’s Letter to the Romans was to contest the God of metaphysics? Would it not then be supremely ironic if interpretation of Romans in the twenty-first century, when serious alternatives to the God of metaphysics do exist and yet do not abandon Christianity (only its theism), nevertheless insists on the God of Aristotle or Epictetus as the referent of Paul’s word *theos*?⁹

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Paul attacks the God of philosophy, the chief antagonist to hope. He goes for philosophy’s jugular veins, the twin ideals of self-formation and self-perfection. Since Paul did not derive his confidence from imitating the philosophers’ God, whose own self-control and self-sufficiency, because of which God has need of hope, is the model for living in the household of God (i.e., the universe), he was free to compose a parody of their treatment of suffering. Granted, Rom 5:3–4 starts as if Paul were conventionally reiterating the philosophic *topos* that suffering teaches virtue, the modern version of which is “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Any philosopher in antiquity would have approved every word of 5:3–4; every word, that is, except the last one, *hope*: “And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope [ἐλπίδα].” Imagine the author of *De Spe* reading these words quite happily through *produces*, but suddenly, when confronted with *hope*, his voice would have stumbled and stopped. Why? For the

⁹ For example, John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

philosopher, hope *increases* suffering. To cap off a description of moral development as Paul did with *hope*? Ridiculous. Paul should be ashamed for promoting such a ruinous emotion.

RUINOUS, LIKE LOVE

Yet Paul is confident that hope (but it must be hope #3) *does* not put the one who hopes to shame. Why? (In what follows, the present tense of *does* will turn out to be crucial). It is worth pointing out that the NRSV missed the opportunity of helping English readers fully understand that Rom 5:5 acknowledges the *risk* of pinning your life to hope: “and hope does not disappoint [καταισχύνει] us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” God’s love intervenes, but how is it that God’s *love* keeps us from disappointment? First of all, *disappoint* does not communicate the risk one takes with hope. The Greek term καταισχύνειν means *to put to shame* and implies the possibility of ridicule if what is hoped for fails to appear. But hope #3, as we have seen, paradoxically requires that what is hoped for *not* appear: “But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (8:25). Well then, it seems that if hope is what Paul says it is in 8:25, an always unsatisfied desire, an impossible combination of action and passivity, then shame will have always already overtaken the one who hopes. Hope has already borne the shame of not having what it hopes for. And this is why hope is so much like love. Love and hope share the trait of always already not having the object of desire, and both would be extinguished if they ever possessed what they love/hope for.

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That is why, I think, Paul connects hope to “God’s love [that] has been poured [ἐκκέχυται] into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” Here he alludes to a famous trope in ancient erotic literature concerning the liquefaction of the lover’s innards. Love is traumatic. Those who love find the organs between their collar bone and diaphragm first heated, then melted, and then flowing out. This pouring out, which is called *longing* (πόθος) in ancient literature, is neither voluntary nor involuntary, or perhaps it is an amalgam of both. In any case, this love, the kind that melts innards, differs little from hope, since both are driven by a desire that finds itself never satisfied. Love desires the beloved, though this love contradicts itself: once *possessed* the beloved is no longer desired, no longer beloved; similarly, hope desires things to be other than they are in ways impossible to say (cf. 8:26); if they could be expressed, hope would vanish.

CONCLUSION: FROM THE BEGINNING THE CREATION IS WITHOUT WHY SO THAT THERE MIGHT BE ROOM FOR HOPE¹⁰

Paul makes some provocative claims in the following passage. Granted, *Paul* might be a code word for *me*, and I am the one making two provocative claims. Either way, however, something very interesting is getting itself said:

For the creation waits with eager longing [ἡ γὰρ ἀποκαραδοκία τῆς κτίσεως] for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility [τῇ γὰρ ματαιότητι ἣ κτίσις ὑπετάγη], not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it [διὰ τὸν ὑποτάξαντα], in hope [ἐφ' ἐλπίδι] that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory [τῆς δόξης] of the children of God. (Rom 8:19–21)

This passage is even more interesting in Greek. For example, the word ἀποκαραδοκία that stands behind “eager longing” (a very good translation by the way) also meant *despair* (ἀνελπιστία), although rarely did early commentators admit the contradictory meanings.¹¹ Yet this is the very self-contradiction that goes to the heart of hope, its emotional and logical impossibility. Next, it appears that Paul is claiming that God structured or ordered *purposelessness* (a little less pejorative than *futility*) into creation. Why would God do such a thing? To make hope possible. Hope starves in a total system of means to ends, in an infinite series of explanations that tell the why of everything that exists and illumine pathways to desired objects. And, lastly, if one pays *very* close attention to the Greek behind “by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope” and removes that gratuitous comma one might be convinced that God wove the space-making of purposelessness into creation so that *God* too might have hope. #3 that is. ⊕

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¹⁰ Meister Eckhart’s love for the purposelessness of the rose has captured Caputo’s imagination. Sic passim *Hoping against Hope* and the rest of Caputo’s writings.

¹¹ Suda, *Lexicon* A 3335.3. Exceptional in this regard is the comment of Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Fragmenta in epistulam ad Romanos* 137.9.