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## BETWEEN HOPE AND DESPAIR The Experience of Eternity

*In spite of the cataclysms that marked the 20th century, numerous philosophers of the period, such as Gabriel Marcel, Paul Ricoeur, or Józef Tischner, emphasized the significance of hope. Pope John Paul II, in turn, went as far as to make the motif of 'hope' an essential element of his teaching. The attempts to reinstitute hope after the war show that it is among the most powerful dimensions of human nature and needs to be seen as a necessary condition for a human life, or even as a synonym for a human life: To live is to hope.*

### TIME AND ETERNITY Introductory Remarks

One of the most significant problems discussed in European philosophy over the years has been whether the essence of being is eternity or time. To put it simply, one can distinguish two dominant standpoints on the issue. According to the first one (of which Parmenides is the symbolic patron), the One Being is that which is eternal and immutable, and thus all changes belong to the world of illusion. According to the second one (of which Heraclitus is the symbolic patron), nothing in the world is stable, only change is real. Parmenides used to be considered right more often than Heraclitus, which is expressed not only in the various forms of Platonism, but also in the Christian understanding of God as the eternal and immutable being. The latter view is an expression of the distrust of time, which is conceived as degrading being. Existence in time is fragile, almost unreal, since—from the perspective of eternal immutability—to change is either to cease to be, or not to be at all. In a universe characterized by ever-present change, there is no room for absolute existence (which might be otherwise attributed to being, truth, or duty) and even enduring in existence turns out to be merely illusory. Thus time and eternity are mutually exclusive forms of existence. Since time involves not only change, but also destruction, it is perceived as evil, as illustrated by the Greek myth about Kronos, who begets his children only to devour them.<sup>1</sup> Thus, if being is tantamount to eternity and

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<sup>1</sup> I discussed the myth about Kronos in a separate article. See Ireneusz Ziemiński, “Logos czasu: Na marginesie greckiego podania o Kronosie,” *Sztuka i Filozofia*, nos. 22–23 (2003): 149–62.

immutability, time appears as an ontological horror and, as such, needs to be overcome.

In contemporary philosophy, the predominant standpoint in the controversy over the essence of being is that of temporality: being is considered as tantamount to time and change (this approach is particularly common for the philosophy and theology of process). Despite this general orientation, philosophers tend to seek a durable element capable of resisting the destructive power of the passage of time. Ironically, one of these durable forms is time itself: even though everything that exists in time must die, time itself does not cease to exist. This, however, would suggest that the primary mark of being is enduring in existence rather than mutability. Such a view is supported by the theory of substantialism, frequently recurring in the European philosophy since the times of Aristotle and claiming that there is an immutable entity (substance) at the base of all change. Thus, change and time appear to be ontically preceded by immutability and eternity. This, however, does not justify the claim that time is ontically inferior to eternity; rather, it points to the ultimate beginning of time which makes its existence possible and from which it derives its meaning. Therefore, according to substantialism, time and eternity do not need to be juxtaposed: they complement each other (or may even be seen as two sides of the same reality).

The controversy I have outlined is not merely over the nature of being as such, but it also concerns human nature and the meaning of life. The question we need to address is then whether a human being is merely a passing phenomenon, facing an ultimate and irreversible destruction in death, or whether there is an enduring and indestructible element in a human life. The key to the answer can be found in our daily experience of time.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME

While discussing the problem of the human experience of time, I shall disregard its physics related theories, as well as the issues they raise by understanding time as an indelible component of the human image of the world. Neither am I interested in the ontological argument over the reality of time, or its nature. Therefore I shall not delve into the issue of what or how time is: whether it is an objective aspect of reality (as Newton held) or simply a subjective form of intuition (as Kant understood it). Neither shall I consider the issue of whether time needs to be interpreted as an absolute and substantial structure which is the condition for the existence of objects (as is assumed in Newtonian physics), or rather as their secondary quality, resulting from the changeability of objects and from the relations obtaining between them (as held, for example,

by Aristotle or Leibniz). Last but not least, I shall not consider issues regarding the inner structure of time epitomized by the question of whether time is a monotonous, mathematical continuum of succeeding instants (which was the basis of Zeno's paradoxes), or whether time should be conceived in terms of real duration and lived consciousness (as Henri Bergson understood it). I disregard these questions because a human experience of time is subjective and largely independent of the ontic structure of time.

By limiting the scope of the inquiry to the anthropological dimension, I shall omit a majority of issues related to the culturally determined perception of time in particular historical epochs, civilizations,<sup>2</sup> and areas of social life.<sup>3</sup> I believe that, regardless of such determinants, human beings understand time in a specific way linked to their (species determined) physiological, bodily structure and their specific experiences, as well as to the specific course of the life of each of them. What I mean, however, is not the universally acknowledged fact that time is perceived as subjective due to the changing intensity of various experiences, acutely manifested in the fact that we tend to consider negative circumstances as long-lasting (a few minutes long toothache, for instance, might seem an eternity), and find pleasant moments passing too fast (a walk in the company of a loved person might seem very short, while in fact it has taken a few hours). Instead, my objective is to demonstrate the aspects of the human experience which point to our existence in both time and eternity.<sup>4</sup>

Without undermining the importance of space as the 'place' filled with our lives and the activities we pursue, it is important to note that it is its temporality that constitutes the fundamental mode of any human experience; thus, it is justified to say that we not only exist, but that we also exist in time. Therefore, one may agree with Edmund Husserl that our primary awareness is that of time, and our awareness of space is only secondary.<sup>5</sup> The primacy of time-consciousness is evident also on the level of our fundamental existential aspirations, which has been succinctly grasped by Abraham Joshua Heschel in his observation that humans must first and foremost master time and only secondarily do so about space.<sup>6</sup> But how to master time? It seems only obvious

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<sup>2</sup> Interesting remarks on this issue can be found in Frederick Charles Copleston's book *Philosophies and Cultures*. See Frederic Charles C o p l e s t o n, *Philosophies and Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Obviously, a monk in a monastery experiences time differently than a stockbroker.

<sup>4</sup> For an explanation of the metaphysical meaning of ordinary human time, see Jean G u i t t o n, *Justification du temps* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966).

<sup>5</sup> According to Husserl, consciousness constitutes itself as internal time-consciousness. See Edmund H u s s e r l, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, trans. James Churchill (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> See Abraham Joshua H e s c h e l, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux and The Noonday Press, 1998), 3–7.

that the limits of time are more difficult to escape than those of space. Time not only affects us externally, but also determines the internal structure of our lives, and thus it is not at our disposal. Contrary to appearances, it is not us having power over time, but time having power over us. Leszek Kołakowski once said that a human life is like a house with four cornerstones provided by reason, God, love, and death, all of them bound together by time and simultaneously serving as ways to master time and its destructive power.<sup>7</sup>

Our experience of time is ambiguous. On the one hand, time is given us as a natural form of existence, but on the other, it is a power which destroys us.<sup>8</sup> The dubious nature of time results in its two opposite understandings: as a continuity and durability, or as fading and destruction. In everyday life we tend to perceive time in terms of fading, or we even see an irresistible momentum in it. This particular aspect was stressed by St. Augustine, who argued that time cannot be considered as ‘being’; rather, it should be conceived as ‘nothingness,’ since the past no longer exists and will never recur (the course of events is final and unidirectional), the future does not exist yet, and there is no certainty that it will ever happen (neither the past nor the present time imply the existence of any antecedent moment), while the present time, delineating the border between the past and the future is devoid of duration and impossible to grasp by the intellect. The above description points to the fact that, by existing in time, a human being does not partake of enduring (or true) being: only eternity is truly real. Although our lives could be considered as following the path which ends with eternity, they cannot be deemed real as long as this destination has not been reached. A similar description of time, much as it is set in a different philosophical context, can be found in the work of Hegel, who claimed that temporal existence disappears in the act by which it is. Thus, it is their existence in time that decides about the fundamental finiteness of things, which, therefore, can hardly be called entirely real.<sup>9</sup>

The negative experience of time, rooted in the contrast between our existence, which fades as time passes, and the eternity and durability of the abso-

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<sup>7</sup> See Leszek Kołakowski, *Kompletna i krótka metafizyka: Innej nie będzie. Innej nie będzie*, in Leszek Kołakowski, *Czy Pan Bóg jest szczęśliwy i inne pytania*, ed. Zbigniew Mentzel (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2009), 297. At first glance, it might seem that death is not a triumph over time; rather, it provides most clear evidence of the power time has over us. However, death can mean either an eternity of non-existence or a transition to a different form of being and in both cases it signifies a triumph over time.

<sup>8</sup> See *ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> See Bernard Bourgeois, “Time and Eternity,” *The Philosophical Forum* 31, nos. 3–4 (2000): 380–5. According to Hegel, the essence of time is that it emerges from nothingness and, having come to existence, immediately fades into nothingness; therefore, one could say that time both is and is not. To be precise, things do not emerge or die in time, time itself being both emergence and death.

lute, is, however, not the only possible approach to time. Once we disregard the initial negativity of transience and focus on the subjective experience of the successive moments of life, also positive aspects of the passing of time will come to the fore. While time helps us forget pain and makes the old wounds heal, some experiences—both negative and positive—are so intense that the passing of time will never erase them. They are enduring to the point that we keep reliving them as if they had just happened. In such cases, we observe that time is not related merely to fading, but also to a continuous endurance of one state: a specific event or experience appears continuously present, making a stamp on the person's entire life. Such occurrences point to the existence of a significant dimension of the self which persists while simultaneously fading away. Simultaneously with temporality, we experience eternity.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF ETERNITY

There are two major ways of approaching eternity: we can conceive of it either as infinite time or as timelessness, that is as an 'eternal now' in which the passage of time does not exist. Both descriptions can be referred both to earthly life and to the potential existence after death, and therefore we can speak of four meanings of eternity, related to, respectively, (1) a temporally infinite earthly life, (2) a temporally infinite life after death, (3) a timeless earthly life, and (4) a timeless life after death.

A temporally infinite earthly life can be an object of our experience insofar as our consciousness, at any moment, remains open to the future. Since we do not experience any conscious moment as the final one, our lives appear potentially infinite at least in the subjective sense. However, were such an eventuality to become fact, death would have to be eliminated, which—at least at the current stage of the advancement of medical science—is out of the question. Thus, in our considerations, we may disregard the concept of eternity as a temporally infinite earthly life.

A temporally infinite existence after death, in turn, poses a problem not only because we lack conclusive (or at least uncontroversial or generally accepted) arguments for it, but also due to the fact that it would exclude the possibility of ever reaching the fullness of life and would be tantamount to endless and aimless being.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, from the perspective of earthly exist-

<sup>10</sup> See Bernard Williams, *The Macropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality*, in: Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82–100. One could interpret the model proposed by Kant in a similar way; although he believed that life after death is an essential condition for accomplishing the highest good (conceived as the effect of the fulfillment of our moral duties which makes us deserve happiness),

ence, it is rather difficult to grasp in what an endlessly enduring existence after death might actually consist. Therefore, in the present considerations, we shall disregard also this way of approaching eternity.

The third option, that of eternity conceived in terms of a timeless earthly life, would imply that, in our lives, we actually experience certain moments without a simultaneous experience of the passage of time. Owing to such moments, we partake of eternity even before we die. On the other hand, eternity understood as a timeless life after death would imply a self-contained existence, resembling that of God.<sup>11</sup> The only basis for envisioning such a condition is the experience of moments marked by timelessness already in earthly life.

It is clear then that the only sufficiently justified eternity, as well as the only available one in our earthly experience, is that related to a timeless earthly life. Thus we must not conceive of eternal life as the negation of time; rather, we need to see in it a particular form of existence manifested in time and through time,<sup>12</sup> and consisting in a subjective experience of the absence of a passage of time, which marks such realities as love, boredom, or pain we tend to perceive as enduring. Strictly speaking, though, one can hardly associate them with an experience of 'eternal presence,' since they presuppose the knowledge that they may be terminated. Therefore, they do not fully partake of eternity; rather, we may see in them the 'crumbs of eternity' experienced in time. Yet, while being experienced, they appear permanent and unchangeable to the extent that the subject finds it impossible even to envision that they might ever end; it is precisely at such moments that a human being experiences eternity, and much as temporary or subjective such an experience is, it is nevertheless real.

It is also possible to experience time itself as eternity, and it would imply not only a deep intensity of certain experiences (in the sense of the content

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one might nevertheless wonder whether such a goal can ever be reached. If so, life after death would amount to an endless pursuit of the final goal (the synthesis of duty and happiness) which is never ultimately accomplished.

<sup>11</sup> This is how eternity has been understood by numerous philosophers and Christian theologians.

<sup>12</sup> See Jacques Durandeaux, *L'Éternité dans la vie quotidienne: Essai sur les sources et la structure du concept d'éternité* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1964), 170, 225–7. See also Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of Immortality* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1922), 135. One might certainly point to alternative models of timelessness, for instance, to that which identifies it with a total absence of time (even of the present time). In the present considerations, however, I disregard this option, since what I am interested in above all is the experience of eternity in time, while an absolutely timeless existence, devoid not only of the past and the future, but also of the present time, would not pertain to time in any way. Therefore, an eternal timeless existence in the sense of an absence of time would denote a form of eternity radically different from what we can experience in everyday life; it is not excluded, though, that the latter possibility relates to the essence of the life we might experience after death. It would then denote a radically new form of being impossible to grasp mentally from the vantage point of earthly existence.

filling up time), but also a durability of time as such (i.e., present, as well as continuous existence of the past and of the future). In both cases, the experience of eternity involves a subjective sense of an unchangeable duration devoid of any awareness of the passage of time. The experience in question may be either positive and involve pleasure, or negative, when it embraces suffering; it may also be rather neutral, almost bordering indifference, but it always consists in the subject's attention being focused on the present, which makes it possible for the consciousness not to realize the passage of time. The most important sources of this particular sense of eternity are memories, aesthetic and religious experiences, love, happiness and ecstasy, hope, fear, pain, suffering, despair, unremovable guilt, and boredom.<sup>13</sup> Below, I shall consider experiences related to hope as broadly understood (i.e., involving the expectation of something good), as well as fear that the good in question will not be accomplished, or that, once accomplished, it will be lost. Should the latter turn out to be the case, we experience anguish or even fall into despair.

### HOPE

As confirmed by empirical data, hope is counted among the most important values. Władysław Tatarkiewicz, a 20th century Polish philosopher, refers to a survey done among German youth which showed that they considered 'hope' as the most beautiful word.<sup>14</sup> Although Tatarkiewicz does not provide the exact year of the study in question, it was apparently conducted soon after the Second World War, which proves that human beings crave hope even in the most tragic circumstances. In spite of the cataclysms that marked the 20th century, numerous philosophers of the period, such as Gabriel Marcel, Paul Ricoeur, or Józef Tischner, emphasized the significance of hope. Pope John Paul II, in turn, went as far as to make the motif of 'hope' an essential element of his teaching. The attempts to reinstitute hope after the war show that it is among the most powerful dimensions of human nature and needs to be seen as a necessary condition for a human life, or even as a synonym for a human life: To live is to hope.

In the present considerations, we shall disregard various attempts to define hope; rather, we shall focus on a description of the experience of hope in daily life. Hope certainly involves a subject who cherishes it, as well as its object,

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of the 'crumbs of eternity' offered us in earthly existence, see Ireneusz Ziemiński, *Życie wieczne: Przyczynek do eschatologii filozoficznej* (Poznań and Kraków: Dominikańskie Studium Filozofii i Teologii, Wydawnictwo Polskiej Prowincji Dominikanów W Drodze and Kolegium Filozoficzno-Teologiczne Polskiej Prowincji Dominikanów, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> See Władysław T a t a r k i e w i c z, *O szczęściu* (Warszawa: PWN, 1985), 249n6.

and it consists in trust in that a certain good will endure or some evil will be removed. Hope by no means refers to specific situations only: it may equally be a stable attitude in life which makes it possible for a human being to overcome adversities and handle difficult situations. However, hope must not be mistaken for naïve optimism, blindness to evil, or an escape from an unbearable situation into dreams of a better tomorrow. What hope embraces is rather readiness for the new and the unexpected, although it lacks certainty that what we desire will actually come true. Therefore, hope must not be interpreted as anticipation of something already settled or determined; rather, hope expresses trust that there is always a possibility that we will go on living. Hope is open to the future, including the future after death.

According to Gabriel Marcel, hope is invariably eschatological in its nature, its scope never limited to our earthly existence and always going beyond death, towards the fullness of life.<sup>15</sup> Polish poet Jan Twardowski called hope a time without goodbyes,<sup>16</sup> while German philosopher Paul-Louis Landsberg believed that hope is capable of defeating death.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Josef Pieper argued that hope means trust in the possibility of attaining life in God, the proper object of hope being salvation.<sup>18</sup> To a Christian, it is Jesus Christ who is the fulfilment of hope, which becomes clear in death: while from the vantage point of earthly existence, death signifies the final defeat, from the perspective of faith, it is the moment of greatest hope. It means that the full meaning of hope is revealed in situations when a human being, pushed into nothingness, loses everything. Paradoxically then, death brings the culmination of hope, as shown by Jan Twardowski in his poem *Na ręce* [In My Hands].<sup>19</sup> This certainly does not mean that death is good or that it is the ultimate goal of life. Conversely, it is the moment of greatest hope possible, because, helpless in the face of fate, in death, we reach the absolute end. In death, nothing awaits us any more; in death, we lose everything, and we lose it forever. However, while posing a dire threat to our existence, death is simultaneously the moment of absolute hope for salvation from evil, including the evil of death itself.

<sup>15</sup> See Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katharine Farrer (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), 77–9, 93–4. See also Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, trans. George Sutherland Fraser (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1950), 216–9.

<sup>16</sup> See Jan Twardowski, “Ostatnia” [The Last One] in Jan Twardowski, *Nadzieja, miłość, spisane pacierze: Wiersze wybrane* (Białystok: Dom Wydawniczy Benkowski, 2007), 118.

<sup>17</sup> See Paul-Louis Landsberg, *Essai sur l'expérience de la mort et Le problème moral du suicide* (Paris: Éditions Points, 1993). See also Paul-Louis Landsberg, *O sprawach ostatecznych*, transl. by Barbara Kazimierzczuk (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, 1967), 35–7.

<sup>18</sup> See Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, and Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 106–8, 111–4.

<sup>19</sup> See Jan Twardowski, “Na ręce,” in Twardowski, *Nadzieja, miłość, spisane pacierze*, 86.



Hope is not only open to the future, but also embodies it by turning some future good into a present one: our trust in receiving a good annihilates the temporal distance which separates us from it.<sup>20</sup> One might go as far as to say that hope in a way materializes what only the future holds for us. And this does not hold true about earthly goods exclusively, but also about life after death, since eschatological hope makes it possible for us to experience its presence already now. This is something already St. Paul emphasized by saying that “in hope we were saved” (Rom 8:24). Gabriel Marcel held, in turn, that hope makes a human being capable of overcoming the passage of time, thus confirming his or her eternal existence.<sup>21</sup>

However, there are certainly numerous individuals who do not cherish eschatological hope; indeed, some of them would rather avoid life after death at all costs. One might say, though, that what they hope for is death which will put an ultimate end to their earthly agony. Likewise, a person committing suicide, unable to cope with utter despair, has at least a glimmer of hope that their fate will change once death puts an end to the suffering. There is no doubt that those who continue their lives by taking up new projects on a daily basis are hopeful, since a human being absolutely devoid of hope would not be able to act at all. If absolute despair, a total absence of hope (whether for life or for death), is possible, a human being who has experienced it has simultaneously experienced the eternity of hell.

Certainly not all hope is rational. Not infrequently do we hope in spite of what surrounds us. One might even go as far as to claim that hope, by making it impossible to see life as it really is, engenders dangerous illusions. On the other hand, though, this is precisely the reason why hope makes it possible for us to handle even most difficult situations in which we would otherwise tend to experience life as an endless agony and, as such, having no meaning at all. The fact that at times we can break in the face of a minor failure, while on other occasions even a major tragedy exerts no power over us, can be explained by pointing to the difference between the nature of hope for accomplishing a specific good (or, for avoiding a specific evil) and that of hope as a permanent attitude adopted in life, the latter justifying the acceptance of even enduring agony. Hope for a specific good not infrequently ends up in disappointment, yet it does not destroy the attitude of trust in the world as such, regardless of the many disappointments and failures one might have experienced. Both types, though, coincide in eschatological hope, which is, on the one hand, hope for a specific good (i.e., life after death) and, on the other, a stable attitude

<sup>20</sup> See G u i t t o n, *Justification du temps*, 21–8.

<sup>21</sup> See Gabriel M a r c e l, *Homo Viator: Introduction to the Metaphysics of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd and Paul Seaton (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2010), 24–5.

a person shows while handling most difficult moments in his or her life. Should eschatological hope turn out merely an illusion, we shall not experience life after death, but neither shall we experience disappointment: having ceased to exist, we shall not be in the position to realize that it was actually an illusion we entertained as hope. Thus anyone who preserves a hope for life after death, and does so till the end of their lives, will not experience their death as the ultimate end of life, and so, as long as such a person is alive, he or she enjoys eternal life.

One might argue, though, that hope—in particular eschatological hope—is actually tantamount to pride, which consists not only in a greed for life, but also in the belief that salvation can be taken for granted. The reason is that eschatological hope is not experienced as a risk or an uncertainty, rather, it is identified by the hoping subject with his or her actual possession of the ‘goods’ hope is merely to portend. Since no certitude is possible as far as the future, in particular the potential future awaiting human beings after death, is concerned, a person who believes he or she has already been saved not only entertains an illusion, but also manifests pride.

Contrary to the just described interpretation, it is important to note that no one actually experiences hope as reassurance that the desired goods will be ultimately granted; instead, the role of hope is to create useful illusions which help human beings live on. Thus the suggestion that hope for salvation is tantamount to pride is utterly senseless: what hope for salvation expresses is rather faith in the existence and goodness of God, combined with an unshakeable trust that God will never leave us. Of all these, we cannot be certain, though, since certainty is a mark of expectation rather than of hope.

## EXPECTATION

Expectation is an axiologically and emotionally neutral state, devoid of hope as much as of fear, and relating to a predetermined future. Expectation is accompanied by the certainty that a particular good, or a particular evil, will affect us as soon as the temporal distance that separates us from it disappears. A good example of a person cherishing an expectation is that of a writer who has just been awarded the Nobel Prize: the prize might not have been handed to him yet, but the decision that he will receive it has already been taken, so the writer is expecting the prize.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The writer might certainly die before receiving the award or the circumstances might preclude the ceremony, still, once we disregard arguments of this kind, at least some future facts can be already taken for granted.

Thus expectation is not an ‘empty’ experience of time, but it is focused on a specific fact which is certain to occur. In expectation, there is no room for surprise, or for novelty, since the contents of expectation have already been set. Expectation does not open up the human being to a new future, because, paradoxically, one can expect only what is already known, more than that: what is already certain.<sup>23</sup> In daily life, expectation is based on the repetitiveness of things: we expect things that usually happen and we expect things which we have repeatedly experienced to continue. We expect certain situations or specific events to take place and we consider them as daily routines, as things that will definitely happen and will do so precisely the way everything we have expected so far happened. However, expectation is by no means a result of routine or a matter of habit; rather, it manifests our sense of the reality which makes us expect the predetermined to come (and consider all other things as uncertain). It is here that the main difference between expectation and hope lies: hoping involves no certainty, while expectation embraces things already set to happen and relates to them as if they have happened already.<sup>24</sup> One can expect life after death, as confirmed by the Apostles’ Creed; yet should one believe in resurrection, one will not only hope for it, but be certain resurrection will be the case.

If the above description is apt, the element of the future is even more deeply present when we expect things than when we hope for them. In the case of expectation, future things are present already now as ones to come. Expectation is then analogous to memory: while it is thanks to memory that things gone by become present, expectation does so about future things. Thus both memory and expectation make it possible for us to experience time that does not pass.

And yet this optimistic thesis may be put into question once we argue that what we expect does not exist yet, since it belongs to the future which is only to come. Thus the expectation of a thing is not tantamount to the actual possession of it. Rather, it should be seen in terms of lacking this thing continuously and, since the future is unpredictable, the fact we expect to take place may actually never happen. This argument turns out paramount once we consider the case of life after death.

A counterargument, though, points out that, in the case of inevitable events, we may say that they are present already now and the fact that they actually have not taken place yet is insignificant. For instance, if a marathon runner is a kilometer ahead of the other competitors and a hundred meters away from the finish line, we may safely assume that no one is going to overtake them and we consider them the winner. Likewise, we consider the promises made by a loyal

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<sup>23</sup> See Adam H e r n a s, “O codzienności,” *Kwartalnik Filozoficzny* 25, no. 2 (1997), 107.

<sup>24</sup> See *ibidem*, 108.

friend as fulfilled in advance: if a friend has promised us something and we have no reason to doubt their words, we expect that they will keep their promise and we consider it as fulfilled in advance. Although, in the objective sense, there is always the eventuality that the friend will let us down or that they will be unable to keep their promise due to unexpected adverse circumstances, we subjectively tend to consider the promise as fulfilled. In the same vein, the expectation of life after death is based on the faith in the promise made by God. If one believes that God is faithful, one can consider his promises as already fulfilled, even though their actual fulfillment will be verified only in the future. Thus one who expects eternal life partakes of it already.

Yet expectation may be also described in a negative sense, as a continuing absence of the desired object. Even though the occurrence of a certain good has been predetermined, the temporal distance from it might appear endless, as if time stood still. This is the case, for instance, when we anxiously await being handed the prize we have been awarded, or when we are waiting for the arrival of a loved person, knowing that they are already on the way. The feeling of missing them deeply may cause the impression that time is standing still and we find ourselves confined to the torture of endless waiting. "It is a torture to wait impatiently and to be unable to live to see what is to come."<sup>25</sup> The expected good, even though close and certain, remains continuously absent. Thus expectation may embrace not only the presence of some future goods, but also their continuous absence, and it is justified to say that expectation provides an opportunity to experience eternity both positively and negatively. Yet in both cases we are dealing with true eternity.

One might argue, though, that the future is inherently uncertain and no event we expect is certain to become the case. Thus no event can be described as inevitable, which suggests that future values cannot be experienced as actually present now.

And yet, in response, we need to point that expectation is a subjective experience and even should no future events be inevitable, a human being may well find them certain and actually present already now. If a runner is convinced of his victory beforehand, he or she may feel the winner even before reaching the finish line. Even should they lose, no one can take away from them the feeling of triumph they experienced seeing how far ahead of other competitors they were. It means that during the time when the runner considered themselves the winner they already delighted in a future good and that the moment in question was, to them, an experience of eternity in time.

We need to add that, in the case of each person, at least one future event is inevitable, namely, the person's death. Much as our consciousness might deny

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<sup>25</sup> See Tatariewicz, *O szczęściu*, 145.

it, we know that death is something we cannot avoid. In this sense, we can say that death is present already now: although it is part of the future, it continually accompanies us as our inevitable destiny.

It is occasionally suggested that expectation ruins the course of our lives. If we continually expect something new, it makes our lives become oriented exclusively towards the future and prevents us from enjoying the present moment or the past. In such instances, it is chaos that enters our lives and we tend to live without a set goal to reach. Thus we do not experience eternity; rather, we are immersed in the passing of time.

Responding to this argument, one might observe that (unlike hope) expectation is not a permanent stance in life. Rather, it has a particular object and addresses a specific future event. Should we persist in seeking a permanent attitude in it, it would be in regard to our ultimate destiny rather than the momentary and contingent goods. After all, even an insatiable pursuit of novelty can be a manifestation of the pursuit of an eternity which transcends time. A good example of such an attitude is offered by the character of Don Juan with his pursuit of absolute ecstasy bringing an ultimate satisfaction of all his desires. An orientation towards novelty does not need to be tantamount to a chaotic life. Rather, it signifies a pursuit to base life on an unshakeable foundation. In view of the above, expectation can be considered as an experience of eternity or, at least, as a pursuit of it.

## FEAR

Hope and expectation are generally positive sentiments, addressing a good to come which does not seem distant in the temporal sense. Yet experience teaches us that not all hopes or expectations are fulfilled and that some of them will forever remain what they are: a hope or an expectation. For this reason, another attitude towards the future one might find justified is that of anxiety, or fear: the awareness that the expected good may not come and that, instead of it, some evil we would rather avoid will occur.

Typically, two types of fear are distinguished, one of them being fright, an acute emotional sensation caused by a particular situation. Fright is normally short-lived and it passes once the imminent danger disappears or once we have dealt with a particular threat: having faced it, we are no longer afraid of it. The other type of fear has been described by the existentialists as an indefinite terror surfacing throughout one's lifetime in the shape of a fear of death conceived as nothingness. The latter rarely breaks through to become the main focus of the consciousness, rather, it permanently 'hangs' about a human existence in the shape of an anxiety. It does not make a human being dread a particular

danger, such as an illness, a famine, or an avalanche, so in principle it is not transformed into fright<sup>26</sup>; nevertheless the terror of death pervades even moments of greatest joy possible and empisons life with the consciousness of the inevitable end. Terror gives rise to other fears: was it not for the threat of losing existence, we would not be afraid of other dangers. Indeed, they horrify us, because we are mortal and may die at any moment.

Regardless of the type of fear or its intensity, it plays a positive role, for instance, by protecting humans from taking excessive risks. Nevertheless, fear may also have negative consequences, in particular when it assumes power over our consciousness, thus eliminating other sensations and feelings. Fear is also a factor negatively affecting our rational appraisal of particular situations and paralyzing our respective actions: there are those suffering from agoraphobia or from a fear of night. Oftentimes, we find ourselves gripped by the fear of a particular danger, but occasionally terror may have the same effect: in such cases, our fear of nothingness becomes the only (or the main) content of our lives.

Regardless of the function a particular fear performs, or its rational or irrational nature, it is congeneric with hope. Just as hope, fear appears in a situation of uncertainty, potential loss, or evil. And just as hope does, fear makes its object actually present at a given moment, thus enabling us to transcend time, which is particularly observable in the case of an intense fear of which are unable to take control. On such occasions, we panic as if there was a misfortune pending and we approach it as if it were inevitable, or even as if it has actually affected us already. Thus fear removes the distance between an uncertain future and the present moment, conceiving of a potential evil as already actual.

Moreover, fear not only removes the temporal distance between the present moment and potential future misfortunes, but—the moment it is being experienced—exemplifies a subjective experience of time having stood still. Thus, in the case of fear, we experience an ‘eternal now’ which continues endlessly, resembling the confinement of a prison from which all routes of escape have been blocked off. In this way, fear turns out an actual experience of the eternity of hell.

However, the above conclusion might be confronted with objections similar to those which were raised in reference to hope and expectation. The object of fear is not present here or now, so the misfortune of which we are afraid might actually happen, but is not inevitable. The future might positively surprise us

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<sup>26</sup> Occasionally, such a phenomenon may be grounded in biology. For instance, a person suffering from malignant cancer which has not been diagnosed yet might find themselves worrying about their lives, as if they were having a premonition of death. See Antoni Kępiński, *Rytm życia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978), 172.

by being different from what we have portended and for this reason a fear of the future might appear irrational, which has been observed by numerous philosophers, among them by the stoics, who believed that one should not visualize future misfortunes. Should they actually happen, we will have suffered twice on their grounds: both now and in the future, but were they to be avoided, we would poison our lives by living them through as if they actually happened.

Addressing this difficulty, we need to note that fear is not will-dependent and neither does it yield to rational persuasion. Much as an external observer might not see a reason for the fear gripping another person, the person in question is incapable of defeating it, even though they might understand the arguments presented to them. Since a human being can neither control the occurrence of a fear nor is in power to overcome it, the condition the person who fears something experiences must not be interpreted in terms of fault, error, or irrationality.

It also seems that fear can ‘immunize’ us against future misfortunes by making us capable of surviving them once they happen. Not infrequently does fear make us imagine a future evil more tragic than it turns out once it actually affects us. The reason is not our erroneous image of the evil in question; rather, by being afraid of it, we get prepared to face the evil. Consequently, one might say that a fear of an evil prior to the evil in question may weaken our sensibility to it and make us better prepared for handling it once it becomes real. However, regardless of the function a given fear performs, it is undoubtedly an experience of eternity, since the moment we experience it we do not see a possibility to change the course of events. Fear is a totalizing experience and, as such, it precludes the sense of time, sharing these characteristics with other human experiences, such as those of pain, suffering, and despair.

#### PAIN AND SUFFERING

Suffering is related to pain and it is difficult to distinguish them. Nevertheless, suffering is considered as a separate phenomenon: while pain is a purely physical condition, suffering may be purely psychological. Therefore, even if each and every pain is suffering, not each and every suffering is pain. For instance, the sadness we experience after a loved person has passed away, may not be accompanied by any physical ailment. The concept of suffering may be still narrowed down by pointing out that not every physical pain is simultaneously suffering. Thus an analysis of suffering suggests that it has an additional quality to it, which is absent from pain: one related to the fear for one’s life or to the uncertainty of the causes of the pain one experiences, or to the impossibility of killing the pain in question. In view of the above suggestion, even an

acute pain (for instance, a toothache) which, however, is not accompanied by an existential concern is not to be considered as suffering. Pain is a particular condition of a living body and it may be relieved. Suffering, in turn, is like an abscess which cannot be healed and which makes it impossible for us to forget it. Thus suffering gives a specific aura to our experiences and affects their nature as such.

Just as joy, delight, and fear, also pain and suffering have totalizing tendencies. "The sufferings we experience get extrapolated in our consciousness, resembling the ripple on the water into which a stone has been thrown."<sup>27</sup> While suffering may not eliminate other experiences, it may affect them, thus suppressing the person's ability to feel happiness or joy. Numerous philosophers (e.g., Voltaire or Schopenhauer) believed suffering to be natural and inherent in the human condition, and they defined man as a being who suffers. According to Schopenhauer, each of us has a measure of suffering to take, proper for him or her, which will not be exceeded, yet taken fully. This means to say that a human being always suffers accordingly, neither more nor less, and once a suffering is gone, it is instantly replaced by another of the same (or even stronger) intensity.

While pain cuts us off from both the past and the future, having confined us to an 'eternal now,' suffering, in particular the purely psychological one, seems to break the confines of the present moment, especially whenever we suffer not only due to the evil that affects us now, but also on account of the evil we have already experienced or the one that is only to come. This suggests that suffering colors the entire life and therefore we cannot recall a time when it was absent from our existence. And so, just as we love since forever, we also suffer since forever, the difference being that in the case of love we have faith that we will love forever, and in the case of suffering we are overwhelmed by the sense that there is no hope for our anguish to end. Thus suffering is also an experience of eternity.

The above description of suffering may be questioned if we point out that in fact suffering does not involve extrapolating the present moment into the future. On the contrary, we suffer by contrasting the present moment with the past, which was free from anguish and which we remember as a time of paradisiacal happiness. We must not forget that there are also cases of groundless, or even fictitious suffering. Since phantom pains (e.g., in the limb that is no longer there) can be the case, one can certainly experience also imaginary suffering, related to a false evaluation of the situation. And there are those who suffer only because they wrongly suspect others of hostility towards them, and in such cases we may speak about an illusion of suffering.

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<sup>27</sup> T a t a r k i e w i c z, *O szczęściu*, 146. Translated by Agnieszka Ziemińska.



In response to the above arguments, one needs to observe that even should suffering not involve an extrapolation of the disagreeable condition into the future, it is itself extrapolated into the future, since we consider it as the present condition, excluding the possibility that the course of events will change. And certainly there are no fictitious sufferings as each of them is experienced as an actual state. While, in the objective sense, there may be no reason for suffering (or a given suffering may appear disproportional to its causes), the very experience of suffering is real to the person who is its subject. Even though the cause of the suffering may be illusory, the suffering itself is real.

### DESPAIR

Much as they appear endless or interminable when actually experienced, and regardless of their former intensity or duration, pain and suffering may stop, but they may well result in a complete and lasting despair.

Centuries ago, despair was considered as melancholy, or even as sin.<sup>28</sup> After Peter Lombard wrote his *Sentences*, despair was defined as a sin against the Holy Spirit, consisting in unbelief in salvation and one, of which one cannot be absolved. Despair was taken to be a state of mind which a person deliberately adopts and thus an act of refusal to receive God's grace, rather than merely a mood. In the present considerations, we shall disregard such an approach to despair, though. Instead, we shall see it as a psychological condition which one develops without willfully adopting it and which, not infrequently, manifests itself as a depression. Regardless of its physiological background, despair does not involve public acts, like tearing one's clothes or wailing, but it is characterized, above all, by falling into an extremely gloomy mood. Despair destroys a human being inwardly, occasionally resulting in a suicide attempt on the part of the person suffering from it. Despair epitomizes the condition of absolute unhappiness<sup>29</sup> and is the quintessence of the negative.

Despair is sometimes perceived as an opportunity for showing heroism or developing a deeper understanding of the human condition. A person who has experienced despair is considered to be free from illusions and to have touched the absurdity of being, which might suggest that despair is a metaphysical attitude and a response to the cruelty life brings.<sup>30</sup> However, it actually manifests an abject existential experience in the case of which a human being sees no

<sup>28</sup> For an exquisite description of the various forms of despair, see Marek Bińczyk, *Melancholia: O tych, co nigdy nie odnajdą straty* (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> See Tarkiewicz, *O szczęściu*, 159.

<sup>30</sup> See Emil M. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, transl. by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990). See also Emil Cioran, *The Fall*

possibility of rescue and loses all hope. Despair is marked by absolute helplessness and a lack of faith in any future.<sup>31</sup> Those immersed in despair experience the ‘eternal now’ of an extreme unhappiness which will never end. Precisely for that reason, St. Augustine held that despair kills the soul and in this sense is dehumanizing, while Isidore of Seville warned that despair resembles eternal damnation and that to despair is to descend into hell.

Contrary to such gloomy descriptions, one might argue that despair is not, or at least does not have to be, a permanent condition, and that due to the temporal nature of human consciousness and the fact that a human being continuously experiences new stimuli it can be overcome. One might also add that human nature exhibits an inherent will to live which is capable of handling all adversities. Thus human beings must be conceived as beings that hope and are always in the position to find a will to live in spite of the tragedies that mark their existence.<sup>32</sup>

The above argument is certainly wrong, since cases of utter despair which is impossible to overcome actually happen. The volitive faculty of a human being has no power over despair, just as it turns out powerless in the case of pain or suffering, and therefore one who has fallen into despair turns out absolutely helpless in the face of his or her condition. This is precisely the essence of despair: one cannot see even a ray of hope for better, all the defense mechanisms have failed and only death remains, but does not come. Thus Søren Kierkegaard calls despair ‘sickness unto death,’ yet one in the case of which death is impossible.<sup>33</sup> Neither is suicide possible, since it requires at least a vestigial will to act, enabling one to take the respective decision and carry it out, of which a human being experiencing despair is devoid. Therefore despair is an eternal hell from which there is no route of escape.

## HOPE FACING DEATH

### A Conclusion

While despair might seem the antithesis of hope, the two sentiments need not be mutually exclusive. Although, immersed in despair, a human being can hardly cherish the illusion that the fortune will ever change, there still remains

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*into Time*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), and Emil M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Seaver Books, 1976).

<sup>31</sup> See Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, 3–5.

<sup>32</sup> See Tatariewicz, *O szczęściu*, 159.

<sup>33</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). See also Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Belmont, NC: Wiseblood Books, 2013).

the certainty that, at some point, death will come. And if we can hope for death to be the ultimate annihilation of consciousness, we can also hope that death will terminate despair. Another relation between hope and despair is revealed if we consider the fact that despair frequently occurs as a result of hopes which have failed. Hope may be a positive force, capable of sustaining life, but we cannot be certain hope will last forever and therefore there is a smoldering possibility of despair already at the very heart of hope. Even a hopeful person is ultimately aware that no good is granted us forever and one of the reasons is the inevitability of death: even if there is an afterlife of some form, one can hardly yield to the illusion that it will embrace earthly goods. Regardless of how the hopeful and the despairing live their lives, death as the ultimate hope (for the absolute end of life or for its continuation) is the point of reference for both groups.

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## ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Ireneusz ZIEMIŃSKI, *Between Hope and Despair: The Experience of Eternity*  
DOI 10.12887/32-2019-4-128-06

There are two basic approaches to the experience of time. It is conceived either as a power which gradually destroys a human life or as duration which resists change and death. The focus of the article is the latter model, which allows experiencing moments of eternity within the experience of a sustained continuation of one's own being. While hoping for a particular good (or expecting it), the human being already possesses it in some form and, in this way, hope (or expectation) turns out to be an actuation of the future, which, although is yet to come, is already experienced as real and actually present. Among other moments of eternity in an earthly life, despite their negative nature, are those of physical pain, psychological suffering, and despair. Experiencing them, a human being feels that time is standing still and life has changed into an eternal hell which is impossible to overcome. The model moments of eternity which have been described in the article are manifestations of the only form of eternal life accessible to a human being in earthly life. However, they may also become starting points for constructing either philosophical or theological models of eternal life after death.

Keywords: time, eternity, hope, despair, pain, boredom, suffering

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Ireneusz ZIEMIŃSKI, *Między nadzieją a rozpaczą. Doświadczenie wieczności*  
DOI 10.12887/32-2019-4-128-06

Istnieją dwa główne sposoby doświadczenia czasu – jako siły niszczącej ludzkie życie i jako trwania, które opiera się zmianie i śmierci. W artykule opisuję ten drugi model, w ramach którego możliwe jest doświadczenie chwil wieczności, polegających na doznaniu niezmiennego trwania własnego bytu. Mając wszak nadzieję na określone dobro (lub oczekując go), człowiek w jakiejś mierze już je posiada; w ten sposób nadzieja (i oczekiwanie) okazują się uobecnieniem przyszłości, która – mając dopiero nadejść – już jest doświadczana jako realna i aktualnie obecna. Podobnymi chwilami wieczności, tyle że negatywnymi, są takie doświadczenia, jak fizyczny ból, psychiczne cierpienie czy rozpacz. W przypadkach takich człowiek ma poczucie, że czas się zatrzymał, wobec czego życie zamienia się w niemożliwe do pokonania, wieczne piekło. Opisane przykładowo chwile wieczności są jedyną formą życia wiecznego dostępną człowiekowi na ziemi; mogą one jednak również stanowić punkt wyjścia do

konstruowania (filozoficznych czy religijnych) modeli życia wiecznego po śmierci.

Słowa kluczowe: czas, wieczność, nadzieja, rozpacz, ból, nuda, cierpienie

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