

Expectation, Confidence & Hope

From watching the Western family-saga >Yellowstone< I cannot forget a short passage of dialogue from season III, episode 6. It runs as follows: „You said it would be easy.“/ „It should have been.“ / „>Should< is a useless word, almost as useless as >hope<.“

The last is, in its context, of course not a linguistic remark. Taken as such it is evidently wrong. No word we have opportunities to apply is useless – its usefulness lies in the fact, that we can and, sometimes, must use it to express what we mean to say. The CEO-figure uttering the last proposition means in context to say: the pursuit of our goals is best based on the facts, not on unwarranted expectations and mere optimism.

But being a >linguistic> philosopher I finally took the mind-teasing remark as an incentive to clarify the conceptual field of expectation, confidence and hope. The result is the following.

I.

As the basic expression in this field should be seen >expectation<. It is connected internally to what we essentially are: persons, acting animals in command of a propositional language and therefore self-evaluating beings. For to be in command of one's language one has to have learnt to correct oneself in cases of misuse or error and thereby to evaluate oneself as having been wrong.

The fact that we cannot *not* hedge expectations depends on our activities needing time and our actions not being guaranteed success. Linguistically this constitutes expectations as *propositional attitudes* directed towards states of affairs that turn into facts if fulfilled in the success of an action *or not*. Language contains expressions apt to mislead us about this bipolarity¹ by suggesting that what we expect are objects. When one says >I expect him< the object of expectation seems to be a person.² But what one expects really is propositional: *that he comes or to meet him*.

1 Cp. Wittgenstein *PI* para. 461.

2 Cp. Wittgenstein's discussion of the example: *PI* para. 444.

II.

When taken as the basic expression in the field of future-regarding attitudes, >expectation< is a neutral term. >Confidence< and >hope< can be explained by using >expectation<, but not vice versa. Taken as neutral, >expectation> has no opposing contrast whereas >confidence< contrasts with its opposite >inconfidence<, >hope< with >fear< or >anxiety<. >Confidence< is a positive expectation towards a specific outcome of some developing process or activity, >hope< a more general positive attitude of expectation towards unspecified developments or reality. Even if one >hopes for< something, >hope< is more indeterminate than >confidence<. More thoughtful people therefore time and again wondered why we have hope at all.

III.

Is this a question without an answer? I hope not. – Having hope(s) could be seen as a price to be paid for being active animals which cannot but form expectations about the possible outcome of processes in reality and our activities which need time. Hope seems to be the general expecting attitude which naturally develops from hedging determinate expectations towards the outcome of processes and activities. Or so I submit.

IV.

The question put and tentatively answered in the last small section has been not often confronted directly. Instead the question predominantly discussed was how to value and evaluate hope. In Greek antiquity hope has most be seen as an evil. Famous is the myth of Pandoras last gift told by Hesiod:

„Humans know that the container that Pandora brought was full of evils, and [yet] they think that the last evil in the container is a vehicle of the greatest happiness – it is hope. Zeus, that is, did not want humans, no matter how tormented they were by the other evils, to throw away their life, but rather he wanted them to continue again and again to allow themselves to be tortured. That is why he gave humans

hope, it is in truth the worst of all evils, because it ³draws out their torment.“

Christianity, by contrast, understood hope as one of the three cardinal virtues of the believer according to the saying of St. Paul (1st Corinth. 13,13), although *caritas* should be the greatest virtue.

Raymond Geuss, by whom I was taught about this, thinks with Nietzsche that Socrates (as portrayed by Plato) was an exception to the general conception of hope in ancient Greece, because he considered even death not to be an evil. In this Socrates anticipated Christianity – so Geuss writes.⁴

Science and philosophy take neutral ground between Greek >pessimism< and Christian >optimism<. They try to understand reality and its boundaries – philosophy, specifically, is occupied with demarcating the >bounds of sense<⁵ – , what there is as it is. There is hope – meaning here, humans for the most part do hope and have hopes. The realism of science and philosophy must not take issue with that, although it has often reasons to object to what is, in fact, hoped for in specific situations.

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3 Hesiod, *Opera et dies*, 42-105. (Translation from the German by Raymond Geuss: *Seeing double*, Cambridge (Polity Press) 2024, 173 sq.

4 „Socrates was perhaps, as some Christians thought, not so far from them after all.“ (l.c., 175)

5 This is, of course, a quotation of the title of a commentary to Kant CPR by Sir Peter Strawson (which I happen to have translated into German) *Die Grenzen des Sinns*, Meisenheim (Hain) 1981. [Engl. 1966; 1978 (Methuen)]