Xu Wang

Hope as Atmosphere

An Existential-phenomenological and Intercultural Study into the Phenomenon of Hope



V&R



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments 5

List of Figures 11

Introduction 13

1. Philosophical Understandings of Hope 19
   1.1 Grammar of Hope 20
      1.1.1 The Objective Side of Hope 20
      1.1.2 The Subjective Side of Hope 23
      1.1.3 Hope in Different Parts of Speech 27
   1.2 Fundamental Hope 28
      1.2.1 The Distinction between Ordinary Hope and Fundamental Hope 28
      1.2.2 Fundamental Hope as a Fundamental Human *Existential* 30
   1.3 Ontological Presuppositions of Hope 32

2. The Possibility of a Phenomenology of Hope 37
   2.1 Hope in Heidegger's Existential Phenomenology 37
   2.2 Critiques of Heidegger's Existentiality 41
   2.3 Marcel's Phenomenology of Hope 43
      2.3.1 The Ontological Foundation of Hope 43
      2.3.2 The Two-fold Definition of Absolute Hope 45
      2.3.3 Hope for the Immortality of Love 47
      2.3.4 Critical Acceptance of Marcel's Phenomenology of Hope 49

3. Christian Theological Understandings of Hope 51
   3.1 Philosophical Hope and Christian Hope 51
   3.2 Christian Hope in the Context of Christian Eschatology 53
   3.3 The Trinitarian Basis of Christian Hope 54
   3.4 The Human Bearers of Christian Hope 58
   3.5 Deification as the Unambiguous *Spes Quae* of Christian Hope 61
   3.6 Hope in a Christian Context 64

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ISBN Print: 9783525568583 — ISBN E-Book: 9783647568584

4. Atmosphere, *Qi*(气) and the Existentiality of In-betweenness 67
4.1 The Concept of Atmosphere 67
4.1.1 Atmosphere as the Reformulation of Affectivity 68
4.1.2 Atmosphere as the Sphere of Bodily Presence 69
4.1.3 Atmosphere as the Affordances of Air 72
4.2 Being-in-the-air and Atmospheric Co-existence 74
4.3 Zhang Zai's Philosophy of *Qi* 77
4.3.1 *Qi* as the Cosmological and Ontological Foundation of Chinese Philosophy 77
4.3.2 *Qi* as Resonance and Void 79
4.3.3 The Way of Great Harmony 82
4.4 In-betweenness as the Most Basic Characteristic of Human Existence 84
4.4.1 Atmospheric Co-existence as an Expression of Existentiality of In-betweenness 84
4.4.2 The Relativity of Self-center 86
4.4.3 In-betweenness and Mineness 88

5. Fundamental Hope Revisited 91
5.1 Fundamental Hope in an Existentiality of In-betweenness 92
5.2 Changing Metaphors from Light to Atmosphere 94
5.2.1 The Metaphor of Light in Hope 94
5.2.2 Hope as Atmosphere 95
5.3 Hopeful Co-existence *in Patria* and *in Via* 96
5.3.1 Hopeful Co-existence *in Patria* 96
5.3.2 Hopeful Co-existence *in Via* 99
5.3.3 Hopeful Co-existence *in Via* and *in Patria* 101
5.4 Hopeful Co-existence in Joy 101
5.4.1 The Connection between Hope and Joy 102
5.4.2 The Joy of Hopeful Co-existence 102
5.5 Hopeful Co-existence in Love and towards Life 104
5.5.1 Hopeful Co-existence in Love 104
5.5.2 Hopeful Co-existence towards Life 106
5.6 Hopeful Co-existence as Virtue 108
5.6.1 Hopeful Co-existence as a Good Way of Co-existence 108
5.6.2 Hopeful Co-existence as Moral Directions 109
5.6.3 The Desperate Ways of Existence 112

6. Resonating with Confucian and Christian Traditions 115
6.1 The Confucian Way of Hopeful Co-existence 115
6.1.1 *Ren* (仁) as Co-humanity 115

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ISBN Print: 9783525568583 — ISBN E-Book: 9783647568584

6.1.2 Compassion as the Concrete Beginning of Co-humanity (*Ren*) 117
6.1.3 One Body with the Universe 119
6.1.4 The Confucian Way of Hopeful Co-existence 121
6.1.5 Singing Together in the Spring Breeze 123
6.2 The Christian Way of Hopeful Co-existence 124
6.2.1 The Triune God as Hopeful Co-existence 124
6.2.2 The Human Person and the Church as the Concrete Loci of Christian Human Hopeful Co-existence 125
6.2.3 Deification as Way of hopeful co-existence between God and Human 127
6.2.4 The End is Music 129
6.3 Fundamental Hope and Ultimate Hope 129

Conclusion 133

Bibliography 135

Index 145

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List of Figures

Figure 1 The Scale of Mineness 38
Figure 2 The Closed-circuit Authenticity..... 39
Figure 3 Böhme and Ingold's Concepts of Atmosphere 72
Figure 4 Two Ways of Writing *Qi* in Chinese 78
Figure 5 Meshwork 85
Figure 6 The Scale of In-betweenness 86

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Introduction

This thesis explores the meaning of hope in the language of atmosphere. Generally speaking, it belongs to the existential-phenomenological endeavor of interpreting hope as existentially fundamental. Following the anthropologist Tim Ingold's insights in his concept of atmosphere and the Chinese neo-Confucian philosopher Zhang Zai (张载)'s philosophy of *qi* (气), fundamental hope is formulated as a hopeful co-existence in the conceptual constellation of atmospheric co-existence, meshwork, in-between, resonance, and void. So understood, hope not only gains new meaning and metaphor within the Western context but also finds expression in other contexts. As this thesis will present, it can also find anchorage and expression in Confucian central doctrine of *ren* (仁, co-humanity), which is usually claimed to be devoid of the discourse of hope.

As a human phenomenon, hope is not merely situated at the margin, beginning or end, but in the midst of our everyday life.[1] In human life, hope is found everywhere. For example, the hope for something desirable to happen, the hope in you as the one who I can trust, and the hope with other companions together. These different forms of hope cannot simply be packed into a formula, because hope is a complex human phenomenon that has many interwoven aspects and layers of meaning. Indeed, as Karl Woschitz claims, "a concept in each case is the focal point (*Konvexpunkt*) of a variety of historical experiences and thing-affair-relations (*Sachbezüge*)."[2]

In the Western context, the current usage of the concept of hope is a mixture of both human hope and Christian theological hope.[3] On the one hand, in the Western philosophical tradition, the concept of hope is highly ambiguous and controversial. It is sometimes powerful and sometimes weak, sometimes positive and sometimes deceptive, it sometimes consists of passive waiting and sometimes of resistant act, sometimes with a clear aim and sometimes merely a personal disposition, sometimes individual and sometimes social. Besides these tensions in this concept, there are also various competing theories regarding the basic status of hope and its value. Moreover, everyday hope seems to be always entangled with other phenomena such as wish, desire, fear, imagination, belief, expectation,

1 See Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Hoffnung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 43.

2 Karl M. Woschitz, *Elpis, Hoffnung: Geschichte, Philosophie, Exegese, Theologie eines Schlüsselbegriffs* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1979), 335.

3 See Karl Lehmann, "Gegen Hoffnung in Hoffnung. Ihre anthropologischen und theologischen Grundlagen," in *Die Kunst des Hoffens: Kranksein zwischen Erschütterung und Neuorientierung*, ed. Giovanni Maio (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2016), 7–37, 8.

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trust, and optimism, making it all the more difficult to formulate an unambiguous understanding of hope philosophically.

On the other hand, Christian theology offers a very well-formed and clear concept of hope within the constellation of the triune God, Christian eschatology, salvation, and promise. To speak generally, in Christian theology, hope is theologically rooted and anthropologically fundamental. As one of the three theological virtues that reveal the fundamental connection between human existence and God, hope serves as a central concept in Christian doctrine.

In contrast to the fundamental significance that Christian theology attributes to hope, the dominant assumption in Western philosophical history is that hope is peripheral to human existence and to reality as a whole. That is to say, although hope is everywhere within our everyday life, it is only a decorative phenomenon, sometimes helpful and enthusing, sometimes blind and poisonous, but is never profound enough to decide what human being is and has no bearing on truth and reality. Accordingly, hope is only treated in passing. As Paul Ricoeur claims, "hope does not primarily belong to philosophical discourse; the theologians of the past were right when they call it a 'theological virtue' – along with faith and love."[4] However, among various philosophical approaches, the existential-phenomenological approach stands out and takes hope as a fundamental and central human experience. In this scope, hope is fundamental for human *Dasein* in relation to an inexhaustive and bearing reality.

In summary, hope is unambiguously fundamental to human existence in the Christian theological context, while understood philosophically, it can be either peripheral or fundamental. Therefore, in philosophical understanding, a distinction between ordinary hopes and fundamental hope can be made. Ordinary hopes are those common ones that pass by without much bearing on our essential identity, reality, and Being, whereas fundamental hope is constitutive and decisive for them.

This thesis also follows this distinction and focuses mainly on fundamental hope. In this thesis, fundamental hope is expounded as hopeful co-existence – a fundamental existential mode of in-betweenness, which finds its proper expression in atmospheric co-existence and atmospheric reality. Concretely speaking, it is our conscious and persistent enactment of atmospheric co-existence that finds orientation in an atmospheric reality.

4 Paul Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 203–216, 204. Regarding this point, Schumacher also argues that "as a topic for study, hope has largely been left to psychologists and theologians. For the most part philosophers treat hope *en passant*." Bernard N. Schumacher, *A Philosophy of Hope: Josef Pieper and the Contemporary Debate on Hope* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), xi.

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