

**Luk Bouckaert, Kies voor Hoop (Choosing Hope), Hoe spiritualiteit de economie kan veranderen, Garant, Antwerpen, 2017**

The immediate cause of this book was a breakfast seminar organized by ILSE[[1]](#footnote-1) in the late 2016. To introduce his project of hope in theology and economics, Patrick Nullens presented some definitions of hope. I was intrigued by the divergent character of them: some definitions were focused on the outcome of our desires while other were not related to any outcome at all but only to an inner commitment. How to understand this divergence? Is hope mainly defined by its external goals/objects (outcome-related definition) or by the nature of an inner emotion (non-outcome related definition) ?

Chapter 1 deals with the search of a good definition of hope. An example of an outcome-related definition is the one given by A. Martin (A. Martin, *How we hope* I, 7-8): “ To hope for an *outcome* is to desire (be attracted to) it, to assign a probability somewhere between 0 and 1 to it, and to judge that there are sufficient reasons to engage in certain feelings and activities directed toward it.“ Translated in common sense language, hope means the belief that we can reach our goals. *Yes we can*. *Wir schaffen das.* A non-outcome related definition of hope is the well-known statement of Vaclav Havel: “Hope … is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is hope, above all, which gives the strength to live and continually try new things.” (Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*). In Havel’s definition hope is not related to the probability of success but only to the intrinsic meaning of our activities. The dual nature of hope – its outcome and its intention – is expressed in the French language which has two different words for hope: the masculine *espoir* and the feminine *espérance.* The masculine case suggests an outcome and action orientation (active hope) while the feminine case expresses a more ‘contemplative’ attitude of trustful expectation of what is coming or of what Erich Fromm calls an attitude of ‘being ready for that which is not yet born’... (Erich Fromm, The Revolution of Hope). *The little girl* *espérance* (as the French poet Charles Péguy calls it) is the primary sense of hope and the source of all other forms of hope.

Chapter 2 introduces hope in the field of economics. Although future prospects and scenario’s play a very important role in economics, the concept of hope is foreign to economic science and practice. The horizon of the *home economicus* is a self-defined set of individual and collective goals and preferences articulated as a welfare or happiness function. Economics provide us with a box of instruments to maximize or at least to optimize our future happiness given the limits of scarce means, time and uncertainties. Of course we can link the relative high probability of goal attainment with a feeling of hope but this is only a derived emotional effect of what in its essence is a rational choice procedure. In contrast to this, *Choosing hope* claims that hope in a context of deep change is a necessary condition to create meaning and coherence. Each chapter in the book provides a specific argument of why and how the virtue of hope (in its active as well as in its contemplative form) is a necessary part of flourishing economics.

The first argument is related to the presence of so called wicked problems in economics and what Schumacher calls ‘divergent problems’. If we can’t any longer solve a wicked problem by a rational procedure, the first thing do is to accept our limits, to accept the point of *not-knowing* (Socrates) or *not-doing* (Lao Tse). But not-knowing does not mean knowing nothing, and not doing is not the same as doing nothing. Not-knowing and not-doing are modi of transition to a deeper source of knowledge and action. Hope coincides with the attitude of opening our minds for a possibility beyond rational expectations. Actually we do not solve unsolvable problems but we ‘transcend’ them by disclosing a new visionary perspective or, in the case of practical conflicts, by unveiling the goodwill of reciprocal love. In both cases we activate a spiritual intuition of life that helps us first to release the problem and second to give it a new meaning. These hermeneutics of hope are illustrated by some examples.

Chapter three ‘Thinking from the future’ explores three ways of thinking the future: the scientific method (projection of past trends into the future), the utopian and dystopian art of imagining a future society and the spiritual method of ‘presencing the future’ (Otto Scharmer) or ‘rambling into the future’(Ricardo Semler). Presencing the future is not based on the utopian projection of an ideal state, neither is it an evidence-based scenario of future events. It is a way of connecting ourselves intuitively with time as a creative process of disclosing new meaning. Although an integral perspective of hope needs the three methods, it is clear that the most creative part is related to the spiritual method. For the French philosopher Henri Bergson the inner connection with time as a source of creativity was the essence of authentic leadership.

In a similar way the other chapters introduce the idea of hope as the backbone of leadership (chapter 4), economic democracy (chapter 5), the new scarcity (chapter 6), the problem of inequality (chapter 7), business for peace (chapter 8) and Entrepreneurship in Education (chapter 9).

Modern, secularized societies are characterized by the rational belief that we can and should create our own future of happiness. I believe that the current search for spirituality is an effort within secularized societies to reconnect with a metaphysic of hope[[2]](#footnote-2). In periods of crisis and deep change, when there is no longer consensus about the goals and values of life, we need a deeper spiritual ground for hope. Rational theories of happiness – of which economics is part - do not suffice to overcome the disorder and lack of convergence in periods of deep change. This does not mean that we do not have wishes or goals nor that we do not have any interest in their realization. Of course we have. But the spiritual source of hope starts from something that is *prior* to our desires and goals and makes sense independently from their fulfilment. We may call this awareness of meaning prior to our wishes and desires the *disclosure of Life as a meaningful Presence.*  Not life as it is filtered and conceptualized through our needs, mental capabilities and imagination. But life as it is intuitively experienced as a given, sense making *Presence* that always creates new opportunities and hope despite the many failures and disappointments.

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1. Institute of Leadership and Social Ethics, which is a research institute of the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit (EFT) at Leuven, Belgium. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This does not necessarily imply a return to a pre-modern ontological metaphysic. Philosophers such as Bergson, Levinas, Buber and many other open a perspective for a *relational* metaphysic. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)