Disposable Thinking
Kelly Dean Jolley
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DRAFT, INCOMPLETE
...Be of good cheer! John 16:33

1 Introduction

Plato’s Socrates engages his interlocutors at once philosophically and ethically. Of course it is true that he often philosophizes about ethics—about ethical concepts: he spent his days talking virtue. But his talking virtue simultaneously urged his interlocutors to virtue—and in fact it was that hortatory aim, that protreptic project—that distinguished Socrates’ philosophizing. We might say that Socrates aimed to impart no knowledge not situated in newly acquired self-knowledge.

But that term—‘self-knowledge’—confuses. Socrates sought self-knowledge and sought to impart self-knowledge, not to remedy simple ignorance, but to remedy alienation, illusion, self-deception, refusals to know. That is, the knowledge that Socrates claims for himself in the Apology, and denies to the politicians, the poets and (in a more complicated way) the craftsmen, the “peculiarly human wisdom” Socrates possessed and that his accusers and their ilk, old and now, lacked, was not simple knowledge of his ignorance but rather an achieved acknowledgment of it. He recognized his ignorance—he lived in it; his ignorance was always before him. The understanding that he wanted for his interlocutors was understanding that involved inner change.

Wittgenstein engages his readers at once philosophically and ethically. He does so by having his interlocutors in Philosophical Investigations engage each other in both ways at once. I intend to provide an especially helpful way of recognizing this simultaneity. Internal to Wittgenstein’s philosophizing is the ‘virtue’ of disposability. Wittgenstein wants to think disposably and to help his reader so to think. I approach this task first by explaining disposability and its origins in the work of Gabriel Marcel. Doing that requires placing disposability and tracking out what we might call its Marcelist inflections.¹ That means saying something about hope,

¹In The Mystery of Being, Marcel scoffs at terms like ‘Marcelist’: he says of ‘Marcelism’ that “…the word rings in my ears with a mocking parodic note!” I use such terms only out of convenience, and not to imply a possessiveness on Marcel’s part toward his work or to imply any cultivated systematicity in it.
and also about admiration and fellowship. After explaining disposability, I first take up remarks of Wittgenstein’s that can be taken to reveal his concern to think disposably. Next, I take up the question of how we are to read the stretches of dialogue in *Philosophical Investigations*. I claim they are best read as exhibiting the interlocutory voices as thinking disposably, and I try further to explain what that means for our reading of *Philosophical Investigations*. I conclude by very briefly discussing works of philosophy that aim at disposability instead of at knowledge—and I do that by commenting on a passage from Marcel on how his readers should read his work.

## 2 Gabriel Marcel on Disposability

In his paper on Marcel’s concept of ‘availability’ or ‘disposability’\(^2\), Otto Bollnow writes:

> The concept of ‘availability’ [or ‘disposability’] played no previous role in the history of philosophy. Until Marcel designated it as a special quality, a peculiar human virtue, nothing like availability [or disposability] had ever been included among the various human virtues in the whole history of ethics. To this extent it constitutes a genuine discovery by Marcel, who was the first to recognize the fundamental significance of the concept and to elaborate upon it.

Marcel’s concept of ‘availability’ or ‘disposability’ (I will prefer the latter, although I will sometimes use the former) is, as Bollnow claims, a concept of fundamental significance in ethics, and Marcel is, if not its discoverer (can there by a *discovery* of such a concept?), he is the first to devote careful, sustained attention to it. But he does more than that. Marcel centralizes the notion in his work. He recognizes and elaborates the concept, returning to it again and again throughout his work, early and late; and, second, Marcel also writes philosophy aiming to exhibit disposability, to be disposable, and to call for disposability on the part of his reader. The format of Marcel’s writing is that of the task he is engaged in. Marcel’s work is written in a way that is internal to what and how it teaches.

\(^2\)“Marcel’s Concept of Availability”...

\(^3\)I understand Marcel and Wittgenstein and Socrates, each in his own way—to believe something that Heidegger believed too. In John Haugeland’s words:

> Grasping philosophical concepts...is no mere cognitive achievement. You do not actually understand them except insofar as they are making a real difference in how you live. In other words, you cannot genuinely come to have those concepts without also changing as a person. Heidegger is maintaining, for all philosophical concepts, something like that “integralness” of each individual’s understanding with his or her own concrete living. Thus understanding freedom, resoluteness, finitude, and the like includes—or is even tantamount to—living in a certain way. That is why characterizations of them, attempts to capture them in words, must always and essentially fall short.
2.1 Disposability and Indisposability

I start with the following observation of Bollnow’s:

Availability as a human virtue does not involve being passively and instrumentally used by another person; rather, it involves responding in complete freedom to a directed appeal. It involves, for example, being receptive to an appeal addressed directly to me as a person, not an object.

Of the many passages in which Marcel elucidates ‘disposibility’ I will begin with these (I quote at some length):

...[I]t seems to me that each of us, in a considerable part of his life or of his being, is still unawakened, that is to say that he moves on the margin of reality like a sleep-walker. Let me say that that the ego, as such, is ruled by a sort of vague fascination, which is localised, almost by chance, in objects arousing sometimes desire, sometimes terror. It is, however, precisely against such a condition that what I consider the essential characteristic of the person is opposed, the characteristic, that is to say, of availability.

This, of course, does not mean emptiness, as in the case of an available dwelling, but it means much rather an aptitude to give oneself to anything which offers and to bind oneself by the gift. Again, it means to transform circumstances into opportunities, we might even say favours, thus participating in the shaping of our own destiny and marking it with our seal. It has sometimes been said of late, “Personality is vocation.” It is true if we restore its true value to the term vocation, which is in reality a call, or more precisely the response to a call. We must not, however, be led astray here by any mythological conception. It depends, in fact, on me whether the call is recognized as a call, and, strange as it may seem, in this matter it is true to say that it comes both from me and from outside me at one and the same time; or, rather, in it we become aware of that most intimate connection between what comes from me

As for Heidegger, so for Marcel and Wittgenstein and Socrates: philosophical concepts are formal-indicative: their content is not a what but a how. This means that my opening descriptions of Marcel’s and Socrates’ and Wittgenstein’s projects can make it seem as though they are doing two things, one descriptive (what-ish) and the other protreptic (how-ish), but they are doing one integral thing (that requires one integral response), not two (not even two closely related) things (that require two closely related responses.) I explore these issues in Socrates and in Wittgenstein in my “Metaschematizing Socrates” in L. Anderson, ed., *Hamann and the Tradition*, “Wittgenstein, The Delphic Oracle and the Traditional Philosopher” (forthcoming in *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophical Methods*) and in “Reading Philosophical Investigations Resolutely” (forthcoming in *Revue internationale de philosophie*).

I quote at length in part because I expect that Marcel’s work will be unfamiliar, and in part because I would like to exhibit its easy, divagated, conversational style, its skillful, unembarrassed inconsequence.
and what come from outside, a connection which is nourishing
and constructive and cannot be relinquished without the ego
wasting and tending towards death.

We come up against a notion here which seems to me of capi-
tal importance but for which it is difficult to find an idiomatic
English equivalent—at least neither I, nor the English trans-
lator of my previous work, Being and Having, managed to do
so. The French terms I use are disponibilité and indisponibilité.
Literally, in English, one would render these as availability and
unavailability, but it might sound more natural if one spoke of
handiness and unhandiness, the basic idea being that of having
or not having, in a given contingency, one’s resources to hand
or at hand. The self-centred person, in this sense, is unhandy;
I mean that he remains incapable of responding to calls made
upon him by life, and I am not thinking merely of the appeals
for help that may be made to him by the unfortunate. I mean
rather that, over a much wider field, he will be incapable of
sympathizing with other people, or even of imagining their sit-
uation. He remains shut up in himself, in the petty circle of
his private experience, which forms a kind of hard shell round
him that he is incapable of breaking through. He is unhandy
from his own point of view and unavailable from the point of
view of others.

Disposibility is not to be taken in its ‘utilitarian sense’—although consid-
ering that sense can help understanding it in its appropriate philosophical
sense. (Here there is a minor parallel between Marcel’s disposibility and
Aristotle’s function (in the Nichomachean Ethics)). Disposibility in its
philosophical sense is not what we have in mind when we think of a tool
as disposable or available—such as something like ‘ready-to-hand’ in Heidegger.
Nor should we think of disposibility in its philosophical sense as befitting
a hotel room or rental that it is disposable or available. We are neither
talking about the way a tool is made to be handled nor are we talking of
empty space that is ready for occupation. In the appropriate philosophi-
cal sense, disposibility is a state not of tools or of rooms, etc., but rather
of persons. Indeed, for Marcel, it is crucial to full personhood—even es-
sential to personhood.

But we need to be cautious. Talking of persons as disposable or available
may seem strange, and we may be tempted to find Marcel’s talk morally
objectionable (despite what Bollnow says)—as somehow denoting a vacant
willingness to be used or to use, to be treated or to treat as a mere means.
But to be so willing is to fail morally, to be vicious.⁵ And of course this
is not what Marcel has in mind. It may also seem as though what Marcel

⁵Consider Henry Fairlie’s description of lust:

Lust is not interested in its partners, but only in the gratification of its own
craving, not in the satisfaction of our whole natures, but only in the appeasement
of an appetite we are unable to subdue. It is therefore a form of self-subjection,
in fact, of self-emptying. The sign it wears is: “This property is vacant.” Anyone
may take possession of it for a while...Lust accepts any partner for a momentary
has in mind is a passivity or mere receptivity. No. To be disposable is not, or is not exactly, to be passive or merely receptive: it requires activity or creativity; it is a spontaneous receptivity, if I may put it that way. Finding of spontaneity in the midst of receptivity, or vice versa, counts as a preoccupation for Marcel. As he notes in one of the passages I quoted, the call that fascinates him, to which he would have himself and us be disposable, comes both from inside and from outside, involving both spontaneity and receptivity.

So how exactly are we to define ‘disposability’? Well, Marcel offers no final, fixed definition of ‘disposability’—much like the word ‘life’ for F. R. Leavis, the word ‘disposability’ for Marcel defies definition—but we can thematize it in various ways. To be disposable is to be ready to allow oneself to be committed by someone or something else, by another person or by a challenge. When we consider disposability to another person, we can further say that it centrally exhibits itself in charity, love. Marcel comments that charity is presence, absolute availability, and he has in mind an unconditional readiness to make appropriate response, which requires being present to another in a deliberate, fully conscious, way. A disposable person yields to that which he encounters, and in so yielding, pledges himself. And the disposable person effects others: importantly and appropriate free himself, he frees others—he “freely sows the harvest of freedoms” (Marcel). The disposable person really lives: “A really alive person is not merely someone who has a taste for life, but somebody who spreads that taste, showering it, as it were, around him; and a person who is really alive in this way has, quite apart from any tangible achievements of his, something essentially creative about him...”

It helps too to consider the opposite of disposability, indisposability. A person who is absolutely indisposable is a person fully preoccupied with self, closed off to any sort of call from another, from outside. Such a person cannot be present, cannot be charitable, cannot love. Such a person is inwardly inert, completely unresponsive to any call.

Disposability grounds itself in appeal and response, on call and answer: it is antiphonal.

Echoing Marcel, I earlier used the phrase ‘absolute disposability’, and that may cause concern. After all, does Marcel really believe that anyone can be or is absolutely disposable? Can anyone be unconditionally ready to make appropriate response? No. Marcel is painfully aware of human limitations; he is neither Romantic enough nor Anti-Romantic enough to ignore them. He knows that we all struggle daily with indisposability, with our own inner inertness. Marcel sees our it as our daily task to work to reduce the extent of our indisposability. We often find ourselves unable to be present, unable to make appropriate responses, and this is experienced in a way that parallels our experience of our bodies when we are ill or service; anyone may squat in its groin. It has nothing to give, and so it has nothing to ask.

This sort of disposability or availability is not at all, is worlds apart from, what Marcel has in mind.
injured. We would respond, if we could—but nothing in us moves, or, if it moves, it moves too slowly, too painfully, or somehow in the wrong way.

I have been shudder-quoting the word ‘virtue’ when I have used it to speak of disposability. Although Bollnow does not do this when he uses ‘virtue’ to speak of disposability, he does at one point note that ‘virtue’ causes complications when so used. He points out that what he is calling a virtue goes deeper and wider and higher, we might say, than what we usually mean by ‘virtue’. When we speak of disposability we speak of “a fundamental style of human life”, and so something not easily captured as a single virtue that contrasts with a single vice, with, say, sloth. (I will say more about sloth below.) Bollnow attempts to clarify this by noting that disposability/indisposability are “comparable” to Heideggerian authenticity/inauthenticity. Disposability/indisposability stabilize at the level of what Heidegger calls ‘existentialia’. Stanley Cavell appeals to existentialia when he explains acknowledgment.

...[T]he concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. (It is the sort of concept Heidegger calls an existentiale.) A “failure to know” might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A “failure to acknowledge” is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not just a blank.

An existentiale, let’s say, characterizes a person’s response in a way that determines a range of questions to which there must be some answer or another. This is how I take Cavell’s comment that they do not describe a response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. Cavell underscores the fact that a failure to know contrasts with a failure to acknowledge because when a person fails to know that does not require that there be anything else to say about him or her. If I have never met, never heard of, a particular person, my failure to know that person’s cell phone number is just a piece of ignorance on my part; I am not omniscient. But that is not a failure related to an attempt. It is just how and what I am, or how and what I am not. I bear no responsibility (along any dimension) for this failure to know; I am not subject to evaluation. So to characterize me as failing to know is not to determine a range of questions to which there must be some positive answer, a presence of something for which I am responsible or answerable. If I fail to acknowledge a person’s pain, there must be an answer to the question of what (in or of me) prevents that acknowledgment: confusion, indifference, callousness, exhaustion, coldness? The same is true in the other direction of cases of acknowledgement. What (in or of me) allows my acknowledgment of your pain? Clarity, attentiveness, sensitivity, alertness, warmth? Disposability categorizes a given response for evaluation, as does indisposability. Consider this from Marcel:

Is it not obvious that if I consider the other person as a sort
of mechanism exterior to my own ego, a mechanism of which I must discover the spring or manner of working, even supposing I manage to take him to pieces in the process, I shall never succeed in obtaining anything but a completely exterior knowledge of him, which is in a way the very denial of his real being? We must even go further and say that such knowledge is in reality sacriligious and destructive, it does no less than de-nude its object of the one thing he has which is of value and so it degrades him effectively. That means—and there is nothing which is more important to keep in view—that the knowledge of an individual being cannot be separated from the act of love or charity by which the being is accepted in all which makes of him a unique creature or, if you like, the image of God. [emphasis mine] There is not doubt that this expression borrowed from the language of religion renders more exactly than any other the truth I have in view at the moment.

We might say that disposability indicates the ‘formal structure’ of the good life. It does not itself indicate the substantive content of such a life, but represents a comportment toward the substantive content of a life—as that life is lived amid the exigencies of circumstances, of places, traditions, others and stationed duties. The disposable person recognizes and responds to the temporal and spatial limitations of human life, and understands the way in which we come to be ourselves through the giving and receiving of ourselves, in dialogue with ourselves and others. –Hamlet, addled, was nonetheless right: “The readiness is all.”

2.2 Hope

2.2.1 Disposability in Time

Love...hopes all things. 1 Corinthians 13: 7

Perhaps disposability shows itself best in relation to time, as hope. The disposable person is disposable to the future—he lives in what Marcel terms ‘open time’. Open time is time experienced as undefined in front, as full of possibility, and as full of possibility as one ages as it was when one was young.

Marcel consciously positions hope against the anxiety of the (other) existentialists, as its aversion. So crucial is hope to us and indeed to what we are, that Marcel says of hope that it is the very substance of the soul. It is what the soul is made of. The person who is without hope, the person who lives in what Marcel calls ‘unhope’ lives a life that progressively deprives the person of (a) soul. I will say more of unhope later on.

Now, just as the (other) existentialists had thought of anxiety as taking on two forms, a focused and an unfocused one, an anchored or unanchored one, Marcel sees a similar structure in hope, but that structure works in a different way.
To see this, we need to distinguish between relative and absolute hope. Relative hope is hope for something or other, hope-that. Absolute hope is hope full stop. It is not hope-that anything or hope-for any particular something; it is just hope. Relative hope is hope-that, hope-for a particular something—“I hope that Richard will be on time for the party”, “I hope she will recover quickly.” The distinction that Marcel marks here looks something like the distinction Wittgenstein famously marks between transitive and intransitive peculiarity. Transitive peculiarity is a peculiarity that can be specified: “The odor in that gas station restroom is peculiar—a salinized artificial strawberry.” “Her coat was peculiar—strangely attention-getting for all its earth-tonality, as if it were neon brown.” But intransitive peculiarity is just what it is—peculiarity that only self-presents and that cannot be specified, characterized. It is a peculiarity so peculiarly itself that offers no hand-hold for a description that might also be pressed into service to specify the peculiarity of something else. Think of it as ineffable adjectival haecceity. “He was damned peculiar”. –“Really? How?” –“Just damned peculiar. You’d have to meet him.” So we might think that Marcel’s distinction is a distinction between transitive, that is, relative, hope, and intransitive, that is, absolute, hope. But that is not quite right. The real point of Marcel’s distinction is to note that it is possible to be hopeful full stop, and not simply hopeful for some particular thing that can only self-present its peculiarity. But remembering that there is a kind of intrasitivity here can help with Marcel’s idea, if only to keep us from thinking that we are considering a hope that can be particularized in any way.

Consider the way that the (other) existentialists understand anxiety. The anxiety that interested them was a free-floating, unfocused anxiety. It was no an anxiety about a test, or an interview, or even about marrying or joining the Church. It was an anxiety about nothing (and of course many of them delighted in the ambiguity of that phrase, taking the anxiety that mattered to be objectless or to have as its object the non-object, Nothing). As they understood the relevant phenomena, focused or anchored anxiety tends to become unfocused and unanchored, to become anxiety about nothing. We might say that they were interested in relative anxiety because of its potential to become absolute anxiety—and absolute anxiety was really what they were interested in. At any rate, the structure here is one that begins with the relative and becomes, under the right circumstances, the absolute.

But Marcel takes the structure of hope to run in the opposite direction. Absolute hope tends toward relativity, toward relative hope. The difficulty of absolute hope is keeping it absolute. The person who is hopeful full stop all-too-easily allows that hope to condense into a relative hope or a set of relative hopes.

Absolute hope is in an important sense indomitable by circumstance. It cannot be disappointed because it never relativizes itself in a way that would state the conditions of its disappointment. Of course, it can also never fulfilled in any straightforward way either, since again it does not relativize itself in a way that would state its conditions of fulfillment. But that makes it sound like absolute hope is unfulfillable. That is not quite
right. The absolutely hopeful person can find fulfillment, or at least can continue to hope, whatever the future brings.

Absolute hope can seem mysterious; and, Marcel says rather little to develop the topic. But it can be made somewhat less mysterious if we see it in this way: the person who is absolutely hopeful is not laying down requirements on the future, not determining what the future would have to be so that his or her relativized hopes would be fulfilled. Such a person comports himself or herself toward the future in a way that allows for constantly bright expectations. The future presents itself as open time, virgin territory, unsettled and not divided criss-cross by relativized hopes, plans, schemes, etc. Centrally, it is this absolute hopefulness that allows the person who has it to meet what comes in a calm spirit, relaxed, ready to find new circumstances to be opportunities, favors, chances. Because the person does not meet new circumstances as either advancing or hindering a relativized hope, the absolutely hopeful person responds to new circumstances by finding how they can be turned for the possibility of good, because part of absolute hope is that he or she is convinced that they can be so turned.

The absolutely hopeful person lives a day, even a part of a day, at a time. And this leads to what may be most important about absolute hope. It allows a person to be genuinely presently present. Instead of having to search ahead with the calculating eyes of relativized hope, the absolutely hopeful person walks backwards into the future, as it were, fixed on the present: he or she fears no evil. The future will take care of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the good thereof—at least if we see it the right way, without cleaving our gaze between here and there, now and then, tending to a closed or anyway partially closed future.

Focusing on the present, using the freedom created by open time, creates patience and endurance. When our future is open, disposable, we are able to re-occupy our present, in a posture no longer tensed and directed toward particular outcomes, and so we can relax in the present. Importantly, it is only when we are relaxed in the present in this way that we can fully exhibit traits like fortitude or endurance. We can also glimpse here the important relationship between hope and sloth. While sloth is not the simple vice that is opposed to disposibility or hope, it is nonetheless ‘opposed’ to it. Sloth images death in life. Far more than laziness, sloth sorrows in the face of the possibility of the good. The slothful person cannot be roused, cannot be called, he or she is unreceptive to the abundance of the world. Such a person cannot transform circumstances into favors or occasions or opportunities. The slothful person meets the day with inappetence, disrelish; the day presents only time to kill (And as Thoreau notes, to kill time is to injure eternity.)

—Since I have mentioned the vice of sloth as ‘opposed’ to hope, to disposability, I want to here to note Marcel’s talk in passages quoted earlier of indisposability as shutting us off from one another and from life, of indisposability’s connection with self-centeredness. We can think of sloth as one destiny for vice—a kind of living death. And we can think of pride as another—a kind of solitary confinement. For Marcel, pride confines us
by blinding us, by blinding us to others, to the abundance of the world. Pride too is 'opposed' to disposability.

2.2.2 Disposability in Space

One thing that Marcel never mentions really, but that is important and helpful in this connection, is that disposability manifests itself also in relationship to space. And although Bollnow understandably never mentions the relationship between hope and space, since (so far as I know), Marcel does not—although one of Marcel’s early examples, the use of ‘disposable’ or ‘available’ to describe a room in a hotel does suggest the relationship—Bollnow’s failing to do so still surprises, for Bollnow himself has indicated how that relationship might be understood. In his fine little essay, “Lived-Space”, Bollnow ends by addressing the relationship (although he is not thinking explicitly about Marcel or disposability/hope).

Distances within lived-space depend strongly on how a man feels at the moment. Binswanger to my knowledge was the first to introduce the notion of the inclined space, whereby he means by inclination the total state of feeling which goes through a man and at the same time binds him to the surrounding world, and which underlies and influences in some way all the movements of the soul. In this sense we may say that lived-space depends on a man’s present disposition.

We all know how the distances of remote objects change with atmospheric conditions. In sunshine they reced into the blue mist and in the clarity preceding a rain again approach within reach. So also they change with the moods of mans. Binswanger quotes Goethe here: “O God, how the world and heaven shrink together when our heart cowers in its barriers.” Fear means literally constriction of the heart, and the outer world draws in oppressive and heavy on the man in fear. When fear departs the world spreads out and opens a larger space for action in which a man can move freely and easily...

A final closing remark: What is said here of outside space is true in due measure of the space of activity of human associations. Where the spirit of envy and rivalry take hold of man every one stand in the other’s way, and there is painful narrowness and friction. But when men come together in the true spirit of colleagues, friction disappears. One does not deprive the other of space; he rather increases the acting space of the other by working with him. “The more angels there are, the more free space”, Swedenborg once said, for he considered the essence of the angelic not the use of space but the creation of space by selfless devotion. Rilke repeatedly emphasized this as the work of the lover. “Lovers,” he once said, “continually generate space, breadth and freedom for each other.” With these meditative and beautiful world I should like to close my discussion.
The world of the hopeful man is more spacious than the world of the unhopeful man.

Frank Capra illustrates the relationship between disposability and space repeatedly in “It Happened One Night”. Although I cannot now explore the illustration in detail, I will remind you of some of the ways that Peter and Ellie crowd each other, close in on one another, of the endured narrowness and friction of their early relationship: the need to sit bodkin in the tiny seat at the back of the bus; their quarrelsome piggy-back creek-crossing; the fateful blanket walling them off from each other at the autocamp. All of these signal their indisposability to each other. But gradually, as they change, they begin to find a mutual, open space. And the trumpeted fall of the Walls of Jericho (the blanket) sacramentalizes their creation of space for each other, a space they share: two angels dancing on the ever-expanding head of a pin.

2.2.3 Unhope

Marcel borrows a term from Thomas Hardy when he talks about the attitude opposed to hope—‘unhope’. The term tolls the final bell in Hardy’s poem, “In Tenebris”:

Wintertime nighs;
But my bereavement-pain
It cannot bring again:
Twice no one dies.

Flower-petals flee;
But since it once hath been,
No more that severing scene
Can harrow me.

Birds faint in dread:
I shall not lose old strength
In the lone frost’s black length:
Strength long since fled!

Leaves freeze to dun;
But friends cannot turn cold
This season as of old
For him with none.

Tempests may scath;
But love cannot make smart
Again this year his heart
Who no heart hath.
Black is night’s cope;
But death will not appal
One, who past doubtings all,
Waits in unhope.

It is easy enough to see what Marcel saw in the poem. The person who lives in unhope cannot be called forth, answers no summons; he lives in closed time and space. The absolutely indispossession person waits only for the end of his death.

2.2.4 Hope v. Optimism

Still, you may fret: “Marcel talks of hope–absolute hope, whatever that is–but he should come clean: really he talks of optimism, a gaudy optimism that refuses to hear the truth, that lacks a tragic sense, that refuses to see shadows and darkness or to feel despair.” I understand the worry. But it misses the mark. Marcel is not talking of optimism. He takes up the differences between optimism and hope, and he attempts to teach the differences, although he notes that the differences are less logical than musical differences. (By which Marcel means something very like what Kierkegaard means by “qualitative dialectical differences”.) For Marcel, optimism takes itself to know, or at least to be able reliably to discriminate, relevant features of the future, and to see how those features interlock with his own current features or with the current features of those with whom he identifies. So the optimist, at his optimistic moments, says “I” or “We” in an accidentally first-personal way. The optimist, qua optimist, also believes that he or he and his others, have a keenness of vision that allows for his or their discrimination of relevant features of the future. “If only you had my/our eyes.” Interestingly, Marcel also contends that optimism is essentially oratorical, it is necessarily typically prone to speech-making. Gifted with second-sight as the optimist is, given that he is in on some cosmic secrets, he cannot keep himself from sharing, correcting, even preening. The optimism of the optimist is sectarian: it stands in judgment on everyone else, on all the non-optimists. (Marcel takes the same sort of ‘musical’ features, reversed, to be essential to pessimism.) Optimism involves a wish and an in-on-a-secret confidence that the future will grant the wish. The optimist, qua optimist, distances himself from the temporal process and does not experience himself as in temporal process. Standing on the shore of the river, he can see around the bend. But the hopeful person contrasts sharply with the optimist. The hopeful person does not take himself to know or to be able reliably to discriminate relevant features of the future in this way. Nor does the hopeful person view himself in such a way as to identify his own current features so as to see how the future interlocks with them. The hopeful person says “I” or “We” essentially first-personal. He claims no keenness of vision, no gift-of second-sight, no insider’s status with the cosmos. Hope shuns oratory. Hope does not involve a wish and a in-on-a-secret confidence that the future will grant the wish. The hopeful person inhabits the temporal process and experiences himself in temporal process. He does not know
what he will become, although he becomes it. Afloat on the river, he can see only what is visible where he is; he cannot see around the bend and is not trying to.

But perhaps the optimist and the hopeful person differ most crucially in that the hope of the hopeful person responds to despair. The hope of the hopeful person does not attempt to cover over despair, to blind itself to despair. The hopeful person recognizes despair, worm-in-the-apple, in the midst of hope, and must overcome it. (Although that overcoming may not involve any sense of effort or striving.) Still, the hopeful person does not ignore and is not ignorant of despair or of those who are in despair. But the hopeful person does not think that he knows something that the despairing person fails to know. The optimist thinks that. (Thus, in part, optimism’s tendency toward oratory.)

I should slow down. Marcel does think that the hopeful person can be said to know something. But Marcel carefully qualifies what he means. He notes that hope can really only be achieved when the line demarcating what we know from what we wish for or desire has been obliterated or at least obscured. Hope, he continues, is a knowing that outstrips the unknown. However, it is a knowing that excludes all presumption; it is a knowing that is an according, a granting, a grace, and that is not and cannot be a conquest. So the difference between the optimist and the hopeful person is not so much that one claims to know and the other does not. It is rather in the character of the knowledge. The optimist’s knowledge involves presumption; it is a conquest. The hopeful person’s knowledge is a gift. If we say that the despairing person lacks this knowledge, we impute no failure to the despairing person. Rather, he has not been given something that the hopeful person has been given. The optimist will think of himself and the despairing person as distinguished by success and failure in knowledge. The knowledge of the hopeful person is best understood as a form of confidence; his ‘know’ is crucially promissory, not claimative. The hopeful person offers his hope to the despairing person—not reasons for hope, and especially not reasons that the hopeful person takes himself to have collected by deploying an instrumental cleverness. The hopeful person does not take himself to have ‘seen through’ despair, as the optimist has. Rather, he takes himself to have been freed from it: he has been liberated, but not through revolt. –Do not forget here that the hopeful person we are talking about is the charitable person, the lover. The lover does not trade in ‘worldly wisdom’, and he does not wear his past like a hardened shell or as dead weight. As Kierkegaard observes in Works of Love, “The lover...hopes all things; for him no indolence of habit, no pettiness of mind, no picayunishness of prudence, no extensiveness of experience, no slackness of the years, no evil bitterness of passion corrupts his hope or adulterates his possibility. Every morning, yes, every moment, he renews his hope and enlivens possibility, if love endures and he endures in love.” At the end of the day, the most significant musical difference between the optimist and the hopeful person is that, as such, the hopeful person’s life is, but the optimist’s is not, a love song, a ‘romantic’ comedy.
2.2.5 Fellowship and Admiration

Marcel also believes that disposability manifests itself in fellowship and admiration. What Bollnow said about the relationship among true colleagues gives some sense of why it is that fellowship involves disposability. Marcel puts the point memorably, when he says that the word of fellowship is: “I hope in you for us.” But disposability also funds admiration. The person who cannot admire has become closed to others, to finding genuine novelty in others, and to answering the call that admiration makes on the self. What I admire calls on me; it lifts me. But it does so in a way that does not involve making me fitful about the distance between what I admire and me. That is, it lifts me without creating any debilitating self-consciousness. I become conscious only that: *This is possible!* What I admire I do not glance at side-long, but watch with full and rapt attention, face-forward.

2.2.6 Hope for Self

Let me return now to something else Marcel said in one of the initial quotations. There he notes that disposability occurs in relation to ourselves, and does not just occur in relation to others and to time and to space. As he puts it, we can be handy or unhandy to ourselves. We must remember this. I can be indisposable toward myself. I can fail to relate to myself in a way that opens me to myself, that allows for disclosure of myself to me. To be disposable to myself is to be properly charitable to myself. Perhaps the best discussions of what this means are in passages of St. Francis de Sales, but here is Marcel’s own fine passage on the idea:

As to self-love, it is easy to discern the complete opposition which exists between an idolatrous love, a heauto-centrism—and a charity toward oneself which, far from treating the self as a plenary reality sufficing to itself, considers it as a seed which must be cultivated, as a ground which must be readied for the spiritual or even the divine of this world. To love oneself in this second sense is not the same as self-complacency, but is rather an attitude toward the self which permits its maximum development; it is clear that there is an infatuation which is in itself unfavorable to the development of any truly creative activity whatever...On the other hand, it can be assumed that a harshness or an excessive malice toward oneself can be paralyzing...[H]ence there is a need for patience toward oneself, a patience that may be reconciled with complete lucidity..

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6For example, in his “Gentleness Toward Ourselves” chapter of his *Introduction to a Devout Life*
3 Disposable Thinking In Wittgenstein

Consider the following passages, all taken from the collection of Wittgenstein’s remarks entitled *Culture and Value*. The remarks are taken from 1930-1949.

Working in philosophy—like work in architecture in may respects—is really more a working on oneself. One one’s own interpretation. On one’s way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.) (6e)

I ought to be no more than a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right. (18e)

The edifice of your pride has to be dismantled. And that is terribly hard work. (26e)

Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself. (34e)

No one can speak the truth; if he has still not mastered himself. He cannot speak it; —but not because he is not clever enough yet. The truth can be spoken only by someone who is already at home in it; not by someone who still lives in falsehood and reaches out from falsehood toward truth on just one occasion. (35e)

To say, when they are at work, “Let’s have done with it now,” is a physical need for human beings; it is the constant necessity when you are philosophizing to go on thinking in the face of this need that makes this such strenuous work. (75-6e)

Ambition is the death of thought. (77e)

This is how philosophers should salute each other: “Take your time!” (80e)

I take these remarks to indicate a persistent concern with disposability on Wittgenstein’s part. I do not claim that I can prove that this is the right way to take them. But it does seem to me that we find Wittgenstein in these remarks reminding himself that doing philosophy as he does it requires that he cultivate himself as a certain kind of person, and that he never forget that his philosophical work grows out of and again grows into the kind of person he is. For Wittgenstein, philosophy is personal. It is a personal endeavor; it is done by a particular person; it is done in particular circumstances; and it is done so as to engage other particular persons, qua particular persons, in their particular circumstances. Far from being done by nobody and for nobody, it is done by somebody for somebody. 

Kierkegaard constantly gives notice that he works as an Individual and for the Individual—in short, his work Individualizes. It is work aimed particular persons—and at creating and enhancing personhood.
is a particular danger both for the worker and for the other: it blinds us. (Think of a similar remark from On Certainty: “Pretensions are a mortgage on a philosopher’s ability to think.”) Because philosophizing is really more a working on oneself, it is terribly hard work, shot through with all the bitterness of self-acknowledgment, and all the meanness and drudgery inevitably involved in inner change. But we are not to let the bitterness embitter us. We must take our time. We must endure the strain. So philosophy requires patience and endurance, and so it requires hope. If we think in hope, we philosophize into an open futurity.

4 Philosophical Investigations—The Interlocutory Voices

4.1 Disposable Dialogue

...[T]hinking and discourse are the same thing, except that what we call thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself...Sophist 263e

The text of Philosophical Investigations takes the form of typically small dialogues between (at least) two interlocutory voices. How should we understand those dialogues? Do the voices of Philosophical Investigations jostle each other hard? Must they be heard as rivals, contestants? Can’t they be heard collegially, as true colleagues, as in fellowship? I want to say that one of the important sources of misreading is the tendency to see them as indisposed toward one another, indeed as locked in a contest of opinions to settle who is right and who is wrong.

So it is important not to hear the interlocutory voices of Philosophical Investigations as locked in a contest. In fact, it is best to hear them as two sides of one and the same mind. But the aim is not for one voice or the other to win a contest. Rather, their aim is to work toward an obtainable reunion, to become, not two different minds thinking the same, but one mind thinking what it thinks. The ‘dividing line’ between the voices of Philosophical Investigations runs not between different philosophers of different philosophical persuasions, but through the mind of each philosopher.

One problem we often have with the voices is that we reckon one right and the other wrong. But, as I said, that is a mistake. It is an understandable mistake. For certainly one of the voices seems to have the upper hand, to enjoy a ‘priority’ over the other. There is something right about that—it does seem, it is—that way. But it remains a mistake to hear one voice as ‘perlocutionary’, as right full stop. We can call one voice ‘the voice of temptation’ and the other ‘the voice of correctness’ but that should not make us see the voices as contesting one another or make us fail to see them as cooperative, even as in fellowship.

We need to learn to speak as the voice of temptation and not only as the voice of correction. Giving voice to temptation is itself a philosophical
achievement, an act of self-acknowledgement. Now my point is not that we should pray, as it were, to be led into temptation, but rather that we are always already philosophically tempted: but we are not always already ready to acknowledge that temptation. (In fact, if often seems as if we are never already ready to acknowledge that temptation. —But maybe that is too much autobiography.) Resisting temptation requires the releasing it by acknowledging it and giving voice to it. The danger rests not so much in being subject to the temptation, but in refusing to acknowledge the subjection—in whatever specific form—and the specific forms are many, many—that the refusal takes. The voice of temptation fits nicely with Marcel’s insistence that the calls to which we respond originate both from inside us and from outside us: that seems to me a phenomenologically precise characterization of acknowledged temptation—it is both mine and not mine, but still finally me. When it is first given voice it is mine and not mine; but when it is acknowledged, responded to disposably, corrected, it is finally me. I am both the bearer of the temptation and the maker of the correction. Correction does not alienate the temptation from me, jettison it, but reconciles me to it, allows me to integrate it into what I am, so that it no longer stands in some way outside me, but now has been internalized. It has not been falsified: to try to falsify it would be to try to isolate the content of the temptation from its very temptingness, from its status as internal to a temptation. (A similar mistake can happen with correction.) We can term the entire process ‘ingathering’—listening to the voices of Philosophical Investigations and internalizing them as our own in the complicated way I am describing, allows us to ingather ourselves. And we can only do that when our own voices of temptation and correction are disposable to one another, when we ourselves become disposable.

Consider again Wittgenstein’s comment that philosophers should salute one another: “Take your time!” We need to hear the voices as patient with each other. Neither stiffens or rebels against the other: each takes his own time. (But to recognize this, we have to take our time with the little dialogues, care about what each voice says, and not press forward to what we take to be “the answer”, the correct view.) Marcel writes: “What exactly do these words [“Take your time!”], so foreign to the vocabulary of technical philosophy, mean?...Do not force the personal rhythm, the proper cadence of your reflection, or even of your memory, for if you do you will spoil your chances...”

Famously, Wittgenstein likens philosophical puzzlement to captivity. The voice of temptation is captivated and gives expression to that captivation. Hope, as we have seen, is responsive to captivity. The person who hopes responds to captivity patiently. Marcel underscores this by comparing the person who responds to captivity hopefully to the person who, in some difficulty, responds patiently to herself. That person never lets her inexperienced ego (an ego that needs to be educated) contract or shy away from the difficulty but also never lets it take control unjustifiably. What Marcel wants to make clear is that hope means accepting a trial as “an integral part of the self, but while so doing it considers it as destined to be absorbed and tranmuted by the inner workings of a certain creative
process." These words strike me as fitting the interplay of voices. The interplay is not a contest to see who wins, but rather a creative process, a creative process of self-development, growth. The voices are the voices of someone who is becoming someone. Call the interplay dialogical tranfiguration. What the voice of temptation says eventually is absorbed and transmuted by the inner workings of the tranfiguring process—but so to is what the voice of correction says. Each voice hopes in the other for them both. How we treat ourselves when we are thinking is mirrored by (and will mirror) how we treat others when we are thinking. Marcel continues his discussion of patience with oneself by considering patience with another.

This most certainly consists in never hustling or being rough with another person, more exactly, in never trying to substitute our own rhythm for his by violence. Neither should the other person be treated as though he lacked an autonomous rhythm, and could accordingly be forced or bent to suit us. Let us say positively this time that it consists in placing our confidence in a certain process of growth and development. To give one's confidence does not merely mean that one makes an act of theoretical acceptance with no idea of intervention, for that would, in fact, be to abandon the other purely and simply to himself. No, to have confidence here means to embrace this process, in a sense, so that we promote it from within. Patience seems, then, to suggest a certain temporal pluralism, a certain pluralism of the self in time. It is radically opposed to the act by which I despair of the other person, declaring that he is good for nothing, or that he will never understand anything, or that he is incurable.

*Philosophical Investigations* aims to teach disposability, to show us what that is and how it is achieved in the midst of philosophizing. "What is your aim in philosophy? –To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." That is, the aim is to bring the indisposed to disposability, the shut-off into the open. What we are trying to achieved is a practiced readiness of philosophical response, one that can and does respond when called upon philosophically—whether the voice that calls is (ultimately) our own or another's. But the aim is not to collect doctrines, say by compiling what is said by the voice of correction. Doing that would be to run straight against what the book would have us do. Marcel comments on this sort of danger by noting that the thinker guards herself from becoming attached to ideas and opinions, ideas and opinions she calls "mine" and of which she can become proud (or ashamed). When ideas and opinions, say philosophical ideas and opinions, become "mine", they endanger her because they begin to tyrannize her: she becomes inert toward them or they toward her (Marcel regards this as coming to the same thing). The result is that she becomes worrisomely alienated from her own thinking. But the thinker keeps this from happening by transcending or etherealizing this danger in the creative act of thinking, an act in which the duality of possession and possessor does not exist. The thinker guards against
the fossilizing of her thought, and the whole of what she has thought she calls into question from moment to moment. She calls her thinking into question not in Cartesian ways, by instituting doubt, but in a Marcelist or Wittgensteinian way, by tacitly attaching a To-Be-Continued/Started-Again tag to each thought, and to her thought as an up-to-the-minute whole. She is a serial thinker. Each addition to her thought implicitly or explicitly re-evaluates her thought. As disposable, she wants neither the first word nor the last: she is, from the first, between destinations, in transit, a traveler, homo viator. Her work may stop, but it has no end—of course not. Still, she does not philosophize in despair, but in hope, absolute hope; her philosophical future opens and remains open. Lichtenberg has an aphorism that wonderfully captures disposable thinking: “Putting the finishing touches on one’s work. That is, burning it.” Truly disposable thinking must be, at the last, and from the beginning, and at all times in between, disposable—even, shall I say? flammable.

Marcel knows that a thinker naturally tends to merge with her thinking and to identify with it. That should be a temporary condition. The disposable thinker must detach from her work. Note, though, that detachment is not disownment. (Neither, importantly, need burning be disowning.) But it is to refuse to be owned by her work. The thinker remains bound to the work, if by nothing else then through a kind of parental affection for it and through the pain endured in the thinking of it. But she remains the thinker she aims to be only if she can free herself of it to a certain extent. Remaining disposable to herself in her thinking requires she be responsive to a call that warns her against becoming fixated on her own work, that warns her against sclerosis and devitalization. She is devoted to the work of thinking, not the works of thought that may have been created in her work of thinking. As Marcel memorably puts it:

I wonder if we could not define the whole spiritual life as the sum of activities by which we try to reduce in ourselves the part played by indisposability.

The disposable thinker’s thinking, even as it produces thought, aims at reducing in herself the part played by indisposability. As St. Augustine somewhere says, “I write as I grow and I grow as I write.”

4.2 The Corrupt Consciousness

OMIT THIS? Let me try to refocus all this. The goal of Wittgenstein’s little dialogues, the goal of *Philosophical Investigations* is the elimination, so far as it is possible, of what I will call an untruthful or corrupt philosophical consciousness. R. G. Collingwood, in his *Principles of Art*, elucidates the relevant phenomenon in a penetrating discussion of corruptions of consciousness. In brief, Collingwood reveals that at any level of consciousness, from artless sensation to the most artful abstract thinking, a person may be either aware or not aware of what is presented to consciousness as a result of her paying attention to it or not. It is in her power to attend or to withdraw attention from most of what is presented to her
consciousness. (Violent and immediate feelings may be the only common exception.) Without this power to attend and withdraw attention, persons would hardly be able to think effectively at all. But this power can be and is abused. We often withdraw attention from things not because they do not matter but because they do—say, because they disturb us. We often withdraw attention from what we think or feel because we do not want to think or feel in those ways. “A true consciousness is the confession to ourselves of our feelings; a false consciousness would be disowning them, i.e. thinking about one of them ‘That feeling is not mine’.” A truthful consciousness is indispensable to self-knowledge:

To know ourselves is the foundation of all life that develops beyond the mere psychical level of experience. Unless consciousness does its work successfully, the facts which it offers to intellect, the only things on which the intellect can build its fabric of though, are false from the beginning. A truthful consciousness gives intellect a firm foundation on which to build; a corrupt consciousness forces the intellect to build on a quicksand. The falsehoods which an untruthful consciousness imposes on the intellect are falsehoods which it can never correct for itself. In so far as consciousness is corrupted, the very wells of truth are poisoned.

Poisoned. How so?

...[W]henever some element in experience is disowned by consciousness, that other element upon which attention is fixed, and which consciousness claims as its own, becomes a sham. In itself, it does genuinely belong to the consciousness that claims it; in saying “This is how I feel,” consciousness is telling the truth; but the disowned element, with its corresponding statement “And that is how I do not feel,” infects this truth with error...The untruth of a corrupt consciousness belongs to neither of the commonly recognized species of untruth. We divide untruths into errors and lies...But at the level of consciousness the distinction between these two things does not exist; what exists is the protoplasm of untruth out of which, when further developed, they are to grow. The untruthful consciousness is not making a bona fide mistake, for its faith is not good; it is shirking something which its business is to face. But it is not concealing the truth, for there is no truth which it knows and is concealing.

Corruptions of consciousness court us on every side in philosophizing. A desire to win or at least be right encourages false consciousness, disownship. We do not want to attend to whether we are consuming a well-rounded diet of examples or force ourselves into dwelling on just those thoughts or feelings of ours that disturb us, that would complicate winning or make being right harder. We want to give voice to only one element of ourselves and to shut up the other: “This is how I feel; that is...
how I do not feel.” So we hurry past what we might attend to, and make our ‘view’ a sham. Every word we say then chagrins us—or should. How can we be right when we are all wrong? How can we speak the truth if we have not mastered ourselves? Maybe Collingwood rightfully proclaimed the corrupt consciousness “the true radix malorum”.

5 Conclusion: Disposable Philosophy

One final time, here is Marcel, now closing the first volume of The Mystery of Being:

And it is perhaps at this point, as we draw, for the time being, towards the close of these difficult investigations, that we at last get a precise notion of one of the essential notes of the type of philosophy that is being put forward here. It should by now be very clear that a philosophy of this sort is essentially of the nature of a kind of appeal to the reader, or a kind of call upon his inner resources. In other words, such a philosophy could never be completely embodied into a kind of dogmatic exposition of which the listener or reader would merely have to grasp the content...In the last analysis, the idea of an acquisition...is inadequate in such a context as this. The greatness of philosophy, though it will seem to most people the disappointing side of philosophy, is just the impossibility of regarding it as a discipline which can be acquired.

The same could be said of Philosophical Investigations (and its understanding of philosophy); it has the same essential note. I know what Philosophical Investigations teaches by becoming disposable to it, or by being indisposable to it. The book makes a call on my inner resources—and in the face of that call, even not answering is a response, an answer. Because Philosophical Investigations instantiates an existentiale, it runs risks beyond the familiar philosophical ones, the risks of fallacy and falsity. It also runs the risks of self-deception, personal confusion, simple or complicated dishonesty, and of a heauto-centrism that turns the world into a hell populated only with one’s own demons. Because the book calls on our inner resources, it can create discipleship and not merely agreement. But that happens, when it happens, per accidens. Wittgenstein’s work (and Marcel’s too) is, as Cavell puts it, “deeply practical and negative”. It aims make us disposable, to break the control over us exerted by modes of thought and of sensibilities whose origins are unknown, unrecollected or shrouded by self-deception. But the point is not for Wittgenstein to take control. Wittgenstein calls on us to change, true; but he does not call on us to change into him. We are to change into ourselves.8

8This final paragraph is a pastiche of the final paragraphs of Cavell’s “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”. (The embedded quotation is from there too.) But there is an important sense in which I intend my entire essay to extend themes of Cavell’s. Indeed, the happy accident (as I take it) of Cavell using ‘availability’ in his title and of that word
being (sometimes) used in translating Marcel’s key term played a role in my own interest in disposability or availability.