

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Tyranny of Expectation: How the Quest for Certainty Undermines Human Fulfilment

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Abstract

Modern culture increasingly equates freedom with control, predictability, and the precise realization of expectations. This paper challenges this assumption by arguing that the dominance of expectation and the quest for certainty undermine the conditions of human fulfilment. Through a phenomenological analysis, expectation is shown to narrow the openness of the future, eliminate the dynamic tension essential to anticipation, and preempt meaningful experience. In contrast, hope is interpreted as an open, receptive orientation toward the future that preserves the possibility of surprise and genuine encounter. The paper argues that fulfilment depends not on the certainty of outcomes but on the preservation of openness and uncertainty. The contemporary pursuit of certainty is thus revealed as a source of insatiability and existential impoverishment.

Keywords: Hope, Expectation, Certainty, Fulfilment, Phenomenology, Temporality, Human Existence.

1. Introduction

In contemporary life, the pursuit of certainty has become a defining feature of human striving. From technological planning to personal aspirations, increasing emphasis is placed on predictability, control, and the precise realization of expectations. This development is often associated with progress and even with an expansion of human freedom.

However, this paper argues that the dominance of expectation and the quest for certainty carry a hidden cost. Rather than enhancing human fulfilment, they undermine the very conditions that make fulfilment possible. The more the future is controlled and predetermined, the less it is able to offer anything genuinely new.

The aim of this paper is to provide a phenomenological analysis of expectation and to show how it differs fundamentally from hope. While hope preserves openness and sustains human engagement with the future, expectation restricts this openness and ultimately leads to dissatisfaction and existential

impoverishment. In this respect, the analysis resonates with the phenomenological understanding of temporality developed by Martin Heidegger, for whom human existence is essentially structured as a projection toward possibilities that are never fully determined in advance.

2. Expectation and the Narrowing of the Future

Expectation is characterized by its specificity. It is directed toward clearly defined outcomes that are anticipated in advance. In expecting, the individual projects a determinate image of the future and measures reality against this projection.

This process has a narrowing effect. The future, instead of remaining open and indeterminate, becomes confined to what is already envisioned. Whatever does not correspond to the expected is either ignored or experienced as a failure.

In this way, expectation reduces the richness of the future to a limited set of possibilities. It replaces openness with prefiguration and thereby diminishes

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the capacity of reality to surprise. Instead of existing as an open horizon of possibilities, the future becomes a fixed extension of the present. Such a closure stands in tension with the insight that human existence is fundamentally “ahead-of-itself,” projecting into possibilities that cannot be exhaustively predetermined (Heidegger 1962).

3. The Loss of Tension and Anticipatory Joy

A central feature of genuine hoping is the dynamic tension between certainty and uncertainty. This tension sustains anticipation and gives rise to what may be called anticipatory joy—the enjoyment that accompanies the movement toward a possible fulfillment.

Expectation disrupts this structure. By seeking certainty in advance, it eliminates the uncertainty that is necessary for this tension. The result is a form of pre-emption in which the future is, in a sense, already consumed before it arrives.

This pre-emption has significant consequences. The anticipatory joy associated with hope is replaced by a latent or abstract satisfaction that is not fully experienced. When the expected outcome is eventually realized, it often fails to produce genuine fulfilment, because its value has already been exhausted in advance.

The elimination of this tension also has existential consequences. Even in conditions of apparent success, individuals may experience a sense of emptiness or lack of meaning, a condition that Viktor Frankl describes as the “existential vacuum.”

4. Pre-Emptive Possession and the Illusion of Having

Expectation is closely linked to a particular understanding of “having.” To expect something with certainty is, in a sense, to treat it as already possessed. The individual relates to the expected object as if it were already secured, even before it is actually obtained.

This pre-emptive possession creates an illusion of fulfillment. It generates a form of satisfaction that is neither fully realized nor genuinely experienced. As a result, the actual attainment of the object does not bring the expected sense of completion.

Instead, it often leads to indifference or even disappointment. The anticipated fulfillment fails to materialize, not because the object is inadequate, but because the structure of expectation has already

undermined the possibility of experiencing it meaningfully.

This analysis resonates with the distinction drawn by Gabriel Marcel between “having” and “being,” where an overemphasis on possession diminishes the depth of lived experience.

5. Insatiability and the Empty Present

One of the most striking consequences of the dominance of expectation is the emergence of insatiability. Once an expected outcome is realized, it quickly loses its significance, and attention shifts to the next expectation.

This cycle prevents the individual from dwelling in the present. The present moment is continually bypassed in favor of a projected future that has not yet arrived. Even when the future becomes present, it is immediately absorbed into a new expectation.

In this way, the present is impoverished. It becomes a mere transitional point between anticipated outcomes, rather than a space of lived experience and fulfilment. The individual is caught in a perpetual movement of anticipation without genuine satisfaction. This condition corresponds to the broader loss of meaning in modern life described by Viktor Frankl.

6. The Disappearance of Surprise and Encounter

A crucial dimension of human fulfilment lies in the experience of surprise. Surprise opens the individual to what is unexpected and allows for genuine encounter with reality.

Expectation, however, eliminates this possibility. By defining in advance what is to be received, it leaves no room for the unforeseen. The future becomes a repetition of what is already known, rather than a source of new meaning.

This has profound implications for human relationships and cultural practices. Without surprise, encounters lose their transformative power. They become predictable transactions rather than meaningful events. Such a stance reflects a diminished openness to being itself and stands in contrast to the phenomenological emphasis on receptivity to what discloses itself in experience (Heidegger 1962).

Furthermore, the human capacity to adapt by transcending circumstances—a flexibility rooted in freedom—is hindered, just as the inclination toward gratitude, that most beautiful and pleasant attitude, is diminished.

7. Disappointment and the Correction of Expectation

When expectations are not fulfilled, the result is disappointment. At first glance, disappointment appears purely negative, leading to frustration and discouragement.

However, disappointment also carries a corrective potential. It reveals the inadequacy of expectation as a mode of relating to the future. By exposing the gap between projection and reality, it invites a reconsideration of the underlying attitude.

In this sense, disappointment can function as a form of disillusionment. It removes illusion and opens the individual to a more authentic mode of hoping that does not rely on rigid expectations but remains receptive to what reality may offer.

8. Toward an Open Mode of Hoping

In contrast to expectation, hope preserves the openness of the future. It does not fixate on specific outcomes but remains receptive to the possibilities that may emerge.

This openness is not a weakness but a condition of fulfilment. It allows for surprise, encounter, and genuine participation in reality. It also sustains the dynamic tension that gives human striving its vitality.

To hope in this sense is not to abandon direction but to remain open without demanding certainty. It is

grounded not in calculation but in a deeper trust in reality, which allows the future to disclose itself in ways that cannot be predetermined.

9. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the contemporary emphasis on expectation and certainty undermines the conditions of human fulfilment. By narrowing the future, eliminating tension, and pre-empting experience, expectation leads to insatiability and existential emptiness.

In contrast, hope preserves openness and sustains meaningful engagement with the future. It allows the human being to encounter reality in its richness and unpredictability.

The challenge, therefore, is not to eliminate uncertainty but to embrace it as an essential dimension of human existence. Only within an open future can fulfilment genuinely arise.

10. References

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