

Chapter 6

Philosophy of Hope



Michael Milona

Abstract The philosophy of hope centers on two interlocking sets of questions. The first concerns the *nature* of hope. Specific questions here include how to analyze hope, how hope motivates us, and whether there is only one type of hope. The second set concerns the *value* of hope. Key questions here include whether and when it is good to hope and whether there is a virtue of hope. Philosophers of hope tend to proceed from the first set of questions to the second. This is a natural approach, for one might expect that you must develop a basic understanding of what hope is before you can determine its value. The structure of this chapter thus follows this approach. But readers should not be misled: there is in fact a good deal of *feedback* between the two sets of questions. A theory of hope is more plausible to the extent that it fits well with plausible ideas about the value of hope. So the movement from hope's nature to its value is one of emphasis rather than a strict, step-wise process.

6.1 Introduction

There are two interlocking sets of questions at the center of the philosophy of hope. First, philosophers are interested in the *nature* of hope. Key questions here include the following: Can hope be analyzed and, if so, how? Does hope have a special motivational power and, if so, how do we account for it? Might there be different kinds of hope that require different analyses? The second set of questions concerns the *value* of hope. Key questions here include the following: Is it ever good/rational to maintain hope in the face of low odds? What are the dangers of hoping? Is there a virtue of hope?

The methodology of the philosophical literature on hope tends to proceed from the nature of hope to its value (Bovens 1999; Martin 2014; Milona 2019; *inter alia*). This is a natural approach, for one might expect that you must develop a basic understanding of what hope is before you can determine its value. The structure of the present chapter follows this methodology. But readers should not be misled:

M. Milona (✉)
Ryerson University, Toronto, ON, Canada

there is in fact a good deal of *feedback* between the two sets of questions. A theory of hope is more plausible to the extent that it fits well with plausible ideas about the value of hope. So the movement from hope's nature to its value is one of emphasis rather than a strict, step-wise process.

6.2 The Standard Account

We can begin to zero in on hope by comparing it to similar as well as opposing phenomena (cf. Milona and Stockdale 2018, p. 204). On the one hand, people tend to group hope together with *optimism*. But they are distinct. Consider the expression "hoping against hope." According to Adrienne Martin, we hope against hope when we highly value the object of our hope but do not expect it to happen; we may even believe that it likely won't happen (2014, p. 5). But given that one cannot be optimistic that something will occur while believing that it likely won't, it follows that we can have hope without optimism. Furthermore, hoping against hope indicates that it is possible to both hope that P and be *pessimistic* about P. In other words, a person can hold on to hope even as they begin to expect that their hope won't be fulfilled.

Hope is often contrasted with despair and fear. The word 'despair' indicates an absence of hope. If one despairs of their favorite team ever winning the championship, then this implies that they lack hope that they will win (at least in their moments of despair). But it is also clear that despair is *more* than this, for despair involves pain or suffering. Unlike hope, though, the details of despair are underexplored (but see Govier 2011, pp. 247–248; Ratcliffe 2013; Calhoun 2018). Hope is also contrasted with fear, but in this case, the two often arise in tandem. If we are told that a person fears that they will never find true love, then we expect that they likewise hope to find true love. So hope and fear are often two sides of the same coin (see Stockdale 2019b).

So what *is* hope such that it can stand in such relations to optimism, pessimism, despair, and fear? Recent philosophical analyses typically begin with what Ariel Meirav (2009) calls the *standard account* of hope (see Wheatley 1958; Downie 1963; Day 1969 for variations of this approach).¹ According to this view, hope involves *desire*; we only hope for what we want. But desires come in different varieties. Sometimes we wish for things that we believe to be impossible. For instance, I might desire (wish) to chat with Socrates, but I don't hope to do this. The standard account tells us that this is because hope requires a belief that the object of our desire is *possible but not certain*. If I'm certain that something will happen—say, that the sun will rise—or certain that it won't, then I don't count as hoping. The

¹See Claudia Blöser's "Enlightenment Views of Hope" (this volume) for several important precursors to the standard account.

standard account, then, defines hoping that P in terms of a desire that P and a belief that P is possible (but not certain).

This theory can apparently explain hope's relationship to optimism, pessimism, fear, and despair. Regarding optimism, we can both desire and believe possible what we expect to happen; and regarding pessimism, we can desire and believe possible what we expect *will not* happen. With respect to fear, we often fear something while desiring and believing it possible that what we fear won't come to fruition. On the surface, this account also seems to show that hope and despair are incompatible. This is because despair seems to involve (inter alia) believing that what one desires is no longer possible. But as we shall see, it is an unanswered question among hope theorists whether the standard account really delivers the result that hope and despair are incompatible.

An additional virtue of the standard account is that it allows for temporal flexibility in our hopes. At one time, it was common to maintain that hope is fundamentally directed to the future (Aquinas 2007; Augustine 2008). And while it is certainly true that many paradigmatic examples of hoping, e.g., for heaven, for a job, for peace, are for future objects, we also speak of hoping for past objects, say, that one's package arrived on time, or that one's relatives had a safe trip home. According to advocates of the standard view, then, the realm of hope is *uncertainty*. And even though most philosophers nowadays reject the standard account (despite its being called the *standard* account), they largely agree that hope is not essentially tied to the future (though see Walker (2006, p. 45) for resistance).

The standard account is also meant to explain *intentional* hopes, or hopes which are *about* something. But some theorists have recently argued that there can be hopes that lack intentionality; they do not have the form of a hope that P. For example, Cheshire Calhoun proposes what she calls *basal hope*:

Basal hopefulness is not hope for this or that outcome but, rather, is what Matthew Ratcliffe describes as a non-propositional, pre-intentional sense of the future—"a kind of general orientation or sense of how things are with the world" or an "experiential backdrop" against which particular hopes for this or that become intelligible. (2019, p. 74; see also Ratcliffe 2013, p. 600, 603)

Calhoun is distinguishing basal hope and intentional hope in a way that is structurally similar to how some theorists have distinguished moods and emotions. Whereas emotions (e.g., anger, sadness) always seem to be *about* something, moods (e.g., cheerfulness, gloominess) seem to be a general orientation to the world and not about anything in particular (see Deonna and Teroni 2012, p. 4). But against the view that moods are non-intentional, some have argued that they have very general targets. For example, cheerfulness might be about the following: *life is going well* (cf. Solomon 2007, p. 265). And so perhaps basal hope is a way of seeing the importance of continuing to live one's life and plan for the future (Milona and Stockdale 2018, p. 219; cf. Kadlac 2018 for a similar view). Since the question of basal hope turns on general questions about how to think of mood-like forms of affect, we will not be able to settle the question here of whether basal hope, as Calhoun and others imagine it, exists. But readers should know that the question is

relevant to whether the standard theory of hope (and theories to be discussed below) are best construed as purporting to capture all forms of hoping.

6.3 Hope and Despair

The most common view among philosophers today is that the standard account captures two *necessary conditions* for hope but is ultimately insufficient. Some allow that our *less substantial* hopes consist only of beliefs and desires. But then they argue that our most robust hopes require more. Others insist that belief and desire are never sufficient for hope. In either case, what they are looking for is the so-called *third factor* to complete the analysis of hope.²

Ariel Meirav (2009) argues that the standard account fails to capture any of our hopes. According to him, this is because the standard account allows that a person can hope and despair at the same time. But to despair is by definition to be without hope. So the standard account must be false. Meirav's argument is motivated by cases, the central being from the film, the *Shawshank Redemption*.³ The story, as some readers will know, is about Red and Andy, both of whom are being held in prison. Both characters desire to escape. In fact, as Meirav imagines it, they desire to escape with equal intensity. Both agree that escape is possible. Yet according to Meirav's interpretation, only Andy hopes. Here is how he puts it:

Andy lives in the hope of escaping, whereas Red despairs of this. Indeed, Red thinks that hope should be resisted, suppressed, for hoping in this virtually hopeless situation would threaten his sanity. It seems reasonable to say that the film suggests that Andy hopes for freedom and Red does not, in spite of their similar desire for freedom and their assignment of similar probability to attaining it, and to that extent it challenges us with a counterexample to the Standard Account. (2009, pp. 222–223).

According to Meirav, cases like this illustrate that hope must be more than a desire and belief. In effect, then, Meirav accepts the possibility of both despairing of escaping and believing that escape is possible. If he is correct, then assuming that hope and despair are incompatible, there must be some (at least) third factor that completes the analysis of hope.

6.4 Substantial Hope

A second style of objection to the standard account allows that while some hopes may consist only of a desire and a belief, our substantial hopes require more (Pettit 2004; Martin 2014). This style of objection is also motivated by cases.

²Others, still, have given up on this quest for a third factor. I discuss this move below.

³This case was originally discussed in the hope literature by Luc Bovens (1999).

Adrienne Martin's *Cancer Research* case has been among the most influential. In this example, two cancer patients, Alan and Bess, have agreed to participate in an experimental drug trial. Both have been informed that the odds of success are less than 1 percent. Both accept these odds and consequently do not expect to be cured. Both desire to the same extent to be cured. Yet they have very different stances toward the trial:

Alan will say he does indeed hope the experimental drug will turn out to be, for him at least, a miracle cure. But he will also emphasize how poor a chance 1 percent is, and he rarely appeals to his hope as a justification for his decisions, moods, or feelings. . . Bess, instead, while noting that it is almost certain she will not be cured by the experimental drug, says the bare possibility is what keeps her going, and often appeals to her hope as a justification for her decisions, moods, and feelings. One percent is enough, she says. She hopes to be the 1 percent, and that is her main reason for enrolling in the trial. For example, he says he was motivated to enroll in the trial primarily by a desire to benefit future people with cancer. (2014, p. 15)

Martin takes this case to be an example of *hoping against hope*, which is hope in its most complete form. It's not that Alan does not hope, for indeed he does, it's just that, according to Martin, "there is some sense in which her hope is higher or greater or stronger than Alan's" (2014, p. 15). The Cancer Research case illustrates the interaction between questions about what hope *is* and how hope *motivates*. According to the example, Bess's motivations are distinct from Alan's in a way that the standard account fails to explain.

These two objections to the standard account—the despair objection and the substantial hope objection—frame much of the dialectic in the contemporary literature on the nature of hope. Any persuasive theory of hope needs to address both.

6.5 The Search for a Third Factor

There is little agreement about what needs to be added to the standard account. Different theories have been offered by, among others, Bovens (1999), Pettit (2004), Meirav (2009), Martin (2014), Milona and Stockdale (2018), and Kwong (2019). Several of these theories have already been extensively discussed in the literature (namely, Bovens's, Pettit's, Martin's, and Meirav's), and I mention them only briefly here.

6.5.1 *The External Factor Account*

According to Meirav hope also involves taking some external factor—something independent of the hoper—as *good*, or *on one's side*. Possible external factors include other people, God, nature, or fate. Whatever exactly this external factor is, the key is that it be seen by the hoper as working to facilitate their hope-constituting

desire (Meirav 2009, p. 230). A major concern about this approach, however, is that it's often unclear what the external factor could be. When I hope, say, to win the lottery, I don't necessarily see anything as working to fulfill my desire for winning the lottery (Kwong 2019).⁴

6.5.2 *Mental Imaging Account*

A second theory is Luc Bovens's (1999) *mental imaging* account. The basic thought behind this proposal is that a person doesn't count as hoping unless they have given some conscious thought to the object of their hope. For example, I can't truly report that I was hoping to see you unless I had given thought to the possibility (Bovens 1999). Hope-constituting thoughts may be imagistic or discursive; Bovens uses the label *mental imaging* as a general label for either possibility. This is an intriguing proposal, one which, if correct, would rule out unconscious hopes (see also Martin 2014, pp. 17–19).

The mental imaging theory arguably faces some of the same difficulties as the standard account. For example, if Meirav is right that Andy hopes to escape while Red despairs of escaping, even while both share the same desire and probability estimate, then it seems doubtful that Red could begin to hope just by fantasizing about escaping. In other words, it seems doubtful that a person can lift themselves from despair simply by imagining their desires being fulfilled. Similarly, with regard to Martin's Cancer Research example, it seems doubtful that Alan could bring himself to hope just as much as Bess by fantasizing about being cured.

6.5.3 *Cognitive Resolve Account*

Philip Pettit proposes the *cognitive resolve* theory of hope. According to this proposal, a person who hopes that P *resolves* to act as if P will occur, or at least is likely to occur, even if they believe that P has only a low probability of occurring. The difference between Bess and Alan, then, is explained in the following way: Bess, unlike Alan, resolves to act as if she will (likely) be cured, even though she doesn't believe that this is actually likely. Yet we can easily imagine Bess not doing this. For example, we might expect Bess, who is hoping against hope, to nevertheless make preparations for her likely death, perhaps to avoid creating additional hardship for her family (see Martin 2014, p. 22). But then if we can easily imagine her behaving as such despite hoping against hope, then Bess is hoping in a substantial way without resolving to act as if her hope will likely be fulfilled. Thus the cognitive resolve theory mischaracterizes some substantial hopes.

⁴See Martin (2014, p. 20) and Milona (2019, pp. 713–14) for additional criticism.

6.5.4 *Pathways Account*

Jack Kwong (2019) has recently defended the *pathways* theory of hope. According to this proposal, hoping that P requires a desire that P, belief that P is possible, and the recognition of a possible way in which the desire could come to fruition. Importantly, the agent must see this possible route to satisfying their desire as *genuinely* possible. This is what explains the difference between Andy and Red: even if both desire to escape prison and assign the same probability to escaping, only Andy can conceive of a possible way of escaping as a genuine possibility. Similarly, in Cancer Research, Bess sees possible routes to being cured as a genuine possibility while Alan does not.

The pathways theory faces a pair of important difficulties. First, it does not seem as if conceiving of pathways is necessary for hope. Consider a person who despairs over any solution to the melting polar icecaps. They are then told by a credible climate scientist that a solution may be possible, after all. Before becoming aware of any ways in which we might avert the melting of the icecaps, they are flooded with newfound hope. In this case, they believe that there is some way which is a possibility, but *they cannot yet see what that way is*, even faintly. Believing that there is some way which is a possibility isn't, according to the pathways theory, sufficient for hoping. This is because a person always believes that there exists *some* possible way that their desire is fulfilled whenever they assign any non-zero probability to the desire's fulfillment. To be sure, we often transition from not hoping to hoping by coming to see a pathway to fulfilling our hopes. But some cases illustrate that this is not always true. And so the pathways account seems to identify a method for *cultivating* hope rather than something which is *constitutive* of the nature of hope.

A second problem with the pathways theory is that it is not clear what it is to see something as a *genuine* possibility. Crucially, it isn't a matter of assigning a certain probability to the perceived pathway (Kwong 2019, p. 250). But then what exactly does seeing something as a genuine probability amount to? To illustrate, consider Remy and Kunal, who are considering buying a lottery ticket. Remy has hope that he will win while Kunal does not have any hope that he will. As it happens, neither quite knows the real odds. And even though Kunal has no hope of winning, he does assign higher odds to winning than does Remy. Both are aware of the same pathway to victory, namely writing down the set of numbers that match the winning numbers. So why does Remy see that pathway as a genuine possibility while Kunal does not? The pathways theory, as Kwong presents it, simply doesn't theorize this central component.⁵

⁵Kwong says, "To see a way to the outcome as a *genuine possibility* is therefore not only to see that it exists but also to see that we can *move forward* on it towards the outcome, whether in action or in thought" (2019, p. 248).

6.5.5 *The Incorporation Account*

Adrienne Martin argues that the key to hope is *incorporation*. Hoping that P, or at least hoping that P in the fullest sense, involves four central elements. The first two are the desire that P and the belief that P is probable to some degree. The third element involves taking the probability assignment as licensing, or rationally permitting, engagement in hopeful activities such as planning and fantasizing. The final element involves taking the desire, and desirable features of P, as *sufficient* reason to pursue those hopeful activities. In this way, the hoping agent *incorporates* her desire into her agency. According to Martin, the incorporation account explains what makes the difference between Alan and Bess; despite having the same desires and beliefs, Bess relates to hers in a very different, distinctively hopeful, way.

Martin's account has been criticized for overintellectualizing hope. For example, it has seemed to many theorists that hoppers are occasionally ashamed of their hopes. A hope to reform a relationship with an abusive partner, for example, may be a hope that one repudiates and refuses to incorporate into one's agency. But just as fear, anger, jealousy, and anger that we repudiate aren't thereby a lesser form of such emotions, so, too, it is with hope (Milona and Stockdale 2018; Milona 2019).⁶

6.5.6 *The Perceptual Theory*

My own favored theory of hope, developed with Katie Stockdale, aims to build on Martin's incorporation theory as well as to remedy its difficulties. Similar to Martin, we contend that hope involves a normative evaluation on the part of the hoper. According to the proposal, hoping that P involves a desire that P, a belief that P is possible, and a non-doxastic, perceptual-like experience of reasons to promote the object of one's desire (Milona and Stockdale 2018; see also Roberts (2007), Döring (2014) for similar theories). For example, a person who hopes to have a career as a computer programmer experiences certain features of this career (e.g., the challenge of learning to code, the opportunity to be creative, and the high salary) as reasons to promote that they become a computer programmer. The difference between this view and the incorporation theory is that it does not require agents to actually take or judge themselves to have reasons to promote the object of their desire.

This key difference allows the perceptual theory to handle cases of shameful hoping. Just as a person might visually experience a stick in water as bent while believing their experience to be inaccurate, a hoper may experience reasons to

⁶See Segal and Textor (2015) and Blöser (2019) for similar objections to Martin's theory. Interestingly, at one point, Martin shifts from the language of *judging* to the language of *seeing as* (2014, pp. 48–52). The trouble with this approach is that in typical cases of “seeing as,” e.g., the famous duck-rabbit, we are often able to exert a level of control that is at odds with what seems possible with hope. See Milona and Stockdale (ms.) for discussion.

promote some end that they do not believe that they should promote. In this way, the perceptual theory of hope aims to bring hope theory into closer contact with recent developments in the philosophy of emotion. A familiar point from the philosophy of emotions is that each emotion appears to have an essential relation to a corresponding value. For example, fear relates to danger, sadness to loss, anger to wrongs, and so on (see Kenny 1963). Some theorists have taken this relationship between emotion and value to be that of *judgment* (Solomon 1976; Nussbaum 2001). So, for example, fear that P would be analyzed as a judgment that P is dangerous. But this approach faces a problem when our judgments about danger conflict with our fears. For instance, one might fear flying on a plane despite judging it to be safe. An analogy with perceptual experience, which allows for conflict with judgment, helps with this problem. (For instance, fear might involve a perception of danger rather than a judgment.) Given that hope is often thought of as an emotion, or as something near to an emotion, a perceptual theory of hope seems promising.

The perceptual view offers solutions to the problems with the standard account. For example, the reason that Andy hopes is that he experiences reasons to promote the idea that he escapes from prison; but Red does not experience such reasons. And when it comes to Bess and Alan, Bess experiences the prospect of being cured as giving her reasons to participate in the trial. Alan does not experience these reasons, or at least does not experience them as being as weighty as Bess does (in which case Alan would hope but hope less).

The perceptual theory faces important questions. The most pressing question concerns the nature of the non-doxastic, perceptual-like experience it treats as central to hope. Milona and Stockdale give a detailed phenomenological description of this experience (2018, pp. 210–213). The basic idea is that one cannot describe the phenomenology of hope—*what it is like* to hope—without making reference to reasons to act; reasons to act are manifest in the experience of hope. A second question for the perceptualist concerns the precise content of the normative evaluation involved in hope. Traditionally, philosophers who have thought that hope involves a normative evaluation have taken that evaluation to concern *goodness* (Aquinas 2007, p. 760; Augustine 2008, p. 36; Roberts 2007). But as we have seen, Milona and Stockdale take hope to involve a representation of reasons. Their argument for this position is rooted in the observation that hoping well is sensitive to the *likelihood* of outcomes, and while reasons for action are sensitive to likelihood, the goodness of outcomes is not similarly sensitive to how likely they are (see 2008, pp. 214–216) for the details of this argument).⁷

⁷One may worry that a reasons-based perceptual theory faces a problem with hopes in which an agent knows that there is no way to promote the object of the underlying desire (and so presumably lacks any reason to act). This is an important challenge. According to Milona and Stockdale (2018, p. 216 n. 14), there are several different forms of “wishful” hope and different solutions are required for different forms of wishful hope. One such case is analyzed in the penultimate paragraph of this section. It must be admitted, though, that more work needs to be done working through the nuances of how the perceptual theory captures each case of hoping.

It is worth noting that one natural way of developing the perceptual theory brings us back to a version of the standard account. To begin, consider that many philosophers are attracted to perceptual views of *desire*. On this approach, to desire that P is to have a non-doxastic, perceptual-like experience of reasons to promote P (see Scanlon 1998; Schroeder 2007; Milona and Schroeder 2019). If this view of desire were correct, and if the perceptual theory of hope were correct, then hope may only have two components, after all.

Advocates of a perceptualist reading of the standard account seem to face a devastating problem. The whole point of the Andy and Red case, for example, was that they have the same desire to escape and belief about the probability of escape. So is the perceptualist version of the standard account simply denying the possibility of Andy and Red having similar desires and beliefs while differing radically in their hopes? In a word, *yes*. Andy and Red have radically different motivational profiles, which is suggestive of a difference in underlying desires. The difference in their desires is plausibly rooted in the following: Andy's desire is responsive not only to his beliefs about what it would be like to escape prison, but also his belief that escape is possible. In other words, Andy desires to escape *because he sees escape as a possibility*. Even though Red also believes that escape is possible, he doesn't desire to escape *because of this*. While Andy has a full-blooded desire, one which presents to him reasons for action, Red merely wishes. His "desire" is more akin to a fanciful daydream, seeming to present him with reasons to act only on the condition that he live in some other possible reality. Even though Red believes escape is possible, this belief is alienated—causally disconnected—from his desires. If Red were to begin to desire because of his belief, then he would count as hoping (see Milona 2019).

In general, then, my favored theory of hope says that hope has two key components, namely a desire that P and a belief that P is possible (or, for reasons that become clear below, *some form of uncertainty about P*). The desire is understood as an experience of reasons to act (distinct from a mere wish), arising in part because the object of the desire is believed to be possible (but not certain).

6.6 Are Belief and Desire Necessary for Hope?

Claudia Blöser has recently argued that the common assumption that belief and desire are *necessary* for hope is mistaken. If her arguments work, then the standard theory should no longer be the starting place for theorizing hope. Blöser herself ultimately defends the position that the *concept* of hope cannot be reduced to other concepts, such as belief and desire.⁸

⁸Blöser does not deny that particular instances of hoping are composed of other mental states. For example, some hopes may be composed of a belief and desire, but not all are. She allows, then, for *ontological* reductions of particular instances of hoping, but the concept of hope is irreducible.

Blöser argues against the belief requirement by offering a counterexample. According to her, it can make perfect sense for a person to claim to hope that P despite also claiming to be in doubt about the possibility of P. In this case, the person is *suspending judgment* about the possibility of P.⁹ Philosophers of hope should accept a belief *constraint* on hope. What's essential for hoping that P is that the hoper not believe that P is impossible.

I suspect that Blöser is right that one can suspend judgment about the possibility of P and yet still hope that P. But might hope still require *some* belief that entails uncertainty about P? This depends on delicate questions about what it is to *suspend judgment*. One might think that suspending judgment about a proposition is *simply* not believing it, or perhaps not believing a proposition after having considered whether that proposition is true (cf. Wedgwood 2002, p. 272). But other theorists maintain that suspending judgment is more than the absence of belief; it is itself an attitude of indecision toward a proposition. Some suggest that this attitude may be a *belief*: a belief that one does not know some proposition (see Friedman 2013, p. 170).¹⁰ A philosopher attracted to this view might say that, in Blöser's example, the agent who hopes that P despite not believing that P is possible nevertheless believes something, namely that they do not know whether P is possible or not. Perhaps, then, hope requires an "uncertainty-entailing" belief, the specific content of which can take different forms. In the hope literature, one can already discern different ways of describing the belief requirement. For instance, one might believe that P has some specific probability of occurring (say, 1%), or one might just have a bare belief that P is possible.¹¹ So, one might take the lesson of Blöser's thought experiment to be that hoping that P requires some uncertainty-entailing belief about P. Settling this question, though, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Blöser also makes the case that desire is not required for hope. According to her, while desire implies motivation to promote the object of one's desire, hope does not. To be sure, the connection between desire and motivation is *defeasible*; a person who desires that P is only going to be disposed to promote P under certain conditions. For example, in some cases, one might not know how to promote one's desire. In other cases, one might have overriding motivations to do other things (e.g., some motivation to give to charity that is overridden by a desire for an upgraded computer). But Blöser contends that some cases of hope do not even involve a disposition to promote the object of one's hope. She imagines a person who tells themselves, "I *hope* that we will find a solution to climate change, but how that hope is realized is none of my business, so I won't forgo flying to far-off holiday destinations every year" (2019, p. 7). She continues, "In such cases, it is meaningless to still ascribe

⁹See also Chignell (2014, p. 101).

¹⁰Friedman also suggests that suspending judgment may be a *sui generis* attitude rather than a belief (2013, p. 180). This raises additional possibilities for how we might conceptualize the cases Blöser imagines.

¹¹Philosophers of hope often waffle between these two ways of talking about the belief requirement.

motivational force in a dispositional way, because it is uninformative to characterize the hope in question in terms of something that *never* becomes actual” (2019, p. 7).

One concern with Blöser’s climate change example is that it seems equally to be an argument against an essential link between desire and motivation. A person in that situation could also say that they desire to stop climate change but aren’t inclined to do anything about it. The theory of desire proposed above, according to which desires are an experience of reasons for action, allows for desire without a disposition to promote the desire. This is because an agent might experience reasons but not be inclined to act on them. Additionally, it is not clear that the agent *does* hope in the climate change case, if they really wouldn’t be inclined to promote an end to climate change should they come to believe that doing so would be easy for them. Blöser is aware of this possible reply. She maintains that “We should resist this temptation, which is grounded in the wish to equalize all realizations of hope and to exclude those instances that do not fit the preferred generalization” (2019, p. 7).¹² But there is an alternative explanation, namely that the refusal to assign hope without any disposition to act is rooted in a grasp of the concept of hope. Going forward, it would be helpful to find a way to push through such clashes of intuition about the nature of hope.

6.7 The Value and Danger of Hope

6.7.1 Hope and Agency

Hoping may, at first, seem to be of little value, and perhaps even foolish. Luc Bovens has an eloquent way of putting this worry. If we hope for something good and fail to get it, then we are likely to be disappointed. But if we do not hope for something good and then get it, we will be no less pleased for not having hoped. But as Bovens goes on to observe, this overlooks at least one familiar way in which hope is valuable. Hope can have *instrumental* value (1999, pp. 670–673). Hope can have instrumental value because hoping for something can make it more likely that it will happen. Suppose, for instance, that it would be good for Jordan if she gets a job. If Jordan doesn’t hope for a job, then she is less likely to search for jobs, apply for jobs, pursue valuable training, and prepare for interviews. By contrast, if she does hope, then she is likely to do these things. The instrumental value of hope here is rooted in its motivational power.

Some theorists maintain that the question of whether we should hope at all ultimately makes little sense. According to these theorists, agency itself requires hope. Victoria McGeer, for instance, says “to be a full-blown intentional agent—to be a creature with a rich profile of intentional and emotional states and capacities—is to be an agent that hopes” (McGeer 2004, p. 101; see also Ben-Ze’ev 2000, p. 475;

¹²For additional support of Blöser’s position on hope and motivation, see Rosen (2019, p. 207).

Stockdale 2019a, p. 28). The thought appears to be that if we see any reason at all to move forward, then we qualify as hoping. For to lose all hope is, as McGeer says, “to cease to function—as a human being” (McGeer 2004, p. 101).

The extent to which one agrees with McGeer may depend on how one theorizes hope. Suppose, for instance, that to hope that P is to desire that P and to believe that P is possible (or at least that P is uncertain). According to Christopher Bobier (2017), this view entails that all practical deliberation about what to do requires hope. After all, we can only deliberate about what we take to be possible (or uncertain). As Bobier points out, it makes no sense to deliberate about whether $2 + 2 = 4$, given our certainty in the proposition. And people also do not deliberate about whether to do things that they have no desire to do.

Bobier’s argument has recently been challenged by Andy Mueller (2019). According to Mueller, the trouble with the argument is that it relies on an overly simplistic theory of hope. What needs to be added to the standard account (even on Milona’s (2019) revised standard theory) isn’t necessary for practical deliberation. Adjudicating this debate requires returning to different theories of hope and carefully studying a variety of different cases. But whichever party to this debate is ultimately correct, we can at least say that hope is *central* to human agency, if not necessary. For even if there are cases of deliberation without hope, deliberation over major life projects is typically rooted in hope. For instance, perhaps I can deliberate about how to obtain a slice of pie without hope (Mueller 2019; Milona 2019, p. 715). But it is difficult to imagine someone deliberating about which career to pursue, or who to marry, without the support of hope. Our desires point us toward candidates for major life projects, and these projects are infused with uncertainty. Claudia Blöser and Titus Stahl’s notion of *fundamental hopes*, which I turn to now, helps us to understand the inescapability of hope for a good life.

6.7.2 *Fundamental Hopes*

Claudia Blöser and Titus Stahl argue that our *practical identities* are partly constituted by hopes. A practical identity is “a set of commitments that an agent has that single out a certain conception of that agent’s life as worth living (from the perspective of the agent) and certain considerations as reason-giving in virtue of that fact” (2017, p. 359). As an illustration, a person may view themselves as committed to helping those suffering from hunger and malnutrition; and they view acting to alleviate such suffering as a central source of value and meaning in their lives (Blöser and Stahl 2017, p. 359). Part of what it is to have such a practical identity oriented to alleviating suffering is to have hopes to alleviate suffering. The reasons such a person has to maintain these hopes are not simply rooted in the fact that maintaining the hopes may actually facilitate alleviating suffering, but also because the hopes are part of who they are. Blöser and Stahl call these hopes *fundamental hopes*. It seems to me that they have put their finger on an important point: insofar as we view our identity as partly constituted by long-term projects, it is

difficult to see how we could uphold such a project and identity without also having certain hopes.

6.7.3 *Social and Politic Hopes*

Lee-Ann Chae begins her paper “Hoping for Peace” with a poignant description of Vedran Smailović, the “Cellist of Sarajevo.” During the siege of Sarajevo, he continued to perform for twenty-two days amidst the rubble of a ruined marketplace and under constant threat of sniper fire. Chae sees his behavior as a valuable expression of hoping for peace. The value here is not instrumental. Smailović was aware that his hopeful actions were not likely to bring about peace. Chae characterizes his hope as *meaningful hope*, which has intrinsic value. As she puts it, “When we act on meaningful hope, we reach out towards the world that we seek, and draw the value of that good future into what we are doing now” (2019, p. 5). Because peace would be valuable, and because Smailović understands his performances as part of what makes for a peaceful world, it inherits its value as a piece of that future. Meaningful hope, then, emerges when the object of one’s hope is itself of intrinsic value and when one expresses that hope by engaging in activities that would be constitutive of a world in which the hope is realized.

Jakob Huber describes some less dramatic but highly significant ways in which hope can be valuable in a socio-political context. He focuses on hope’s value in upholding democratic ideals. As Huber observes, democracies require us to *act with others* to achieve political goals. We are thus constantly confronted with our limitations as individuals (e.g., when considering whether to vote). Thus one important role of hope is to supply us with the energy needed to overcome obstacles, when the pathways to doing so may be far from clear (Huber 2019, pp. 11–12). Additionally, a healthy democracy requires reasoning and debating with others about who to elect and which laws to enact. Citizens are more likely to engage in the collective activity of democracy if they hope that others share their commitment to reasoned public discourse (even if they disagree about policy). This hope can support trust in our fellow citizens (Huber 2019, pp. 13–16)

Thus far, there is a thread running through the discussion of valuable socio-political hopes, namely that they lead to valuable *actions*. Following Victoria McGeer, I call hopes that don’t lead to action *wishful hopes*. In wishful hoping, we offload our own agency to others, putting our hope almost entirely in them that they will achieve our hoped-for ends. McGeer sees such wishful hopes as a way of hoping poorly (2004, p. 110). But Stockdale argues that we should not condemn wishful hoping altogether. Under conditions of oppression, people are sometimes unable to exercise their agency to promote the objects of their hope, or doing so would require sacrifices that they arguably should not make. Stockdale offers the following example:

A single Black mother from a low socioeconomic background working multiple jobs to feed her children may have no time, energy, or resources to contribute to struggles against gender and racial injustice that may increase (however slightly) the likelihood that her hopes for gender and racial equality will be realized. (2019a, p. 39)

Sometimes it can make sense for a person to hold on to hope even while there is nothing they can do to promote the hope. For a given individual, the benefits to peace of mind and well-being provided by hope may outweigh giving up hope altogether.

But even if some people are able to cling to hope in dire situations, others find themselves losing hope. Stockdale (2017) argues that the absence of hope can itself be a fitting and valuable response. Her reasoning begins from an observation about *bitterness*. According to her, “bitterness is a form of unresolved anger involving a loss of hope that an injustice or other moral wrong will be sufficiently acknowledged and addressed” (p. 364). And if a wrong is real and the probability of moral repair justifiably thought to be low, then bitterness is warranted. For example, people of color in the United States have long suffered racial oppression, and there is arguably little reason to expect these wrongs to be sufficiently repaired in the future. As Stockdale observes, bitterness is not only a fitting response in such situations but also one which *calls attention* to perceived injustices. So even if hope can sometimes help us to achieve our socio-political ends, it also threatens to cultivate a false sense of security in what is a dire situation (Stockdale 2017, p. 370; 2019a, p. 37).

6.7.4 Hope as a Virtue

Thus far I have outlined several ways in which hope can be valuable (as well as dangerous). But is there a *virtue* of hope? The Christian tradition has long classified hope as a *theological* virtue alongside faith and love. But might hope be a non-religious virtue, too?

Darrell Moellendorf (2006), for instance, has argued that hope can be a *political* virtue. According to Moellendorf, the hopes that can be virtues have a *practical aspect*, namely those hopes which guide our plans and actions (2006, p. 423). Hope for just political institutions can count as a virtue for two main reasons. First, such hopes are instrumentally valuable for pushing us to overcome injustices (e.g., politically motivated voter identification laws in the United States) in the face of substantial uncertainty. Second, hope can support *self-respect*. This is because hope supports *confidence* in one’s ability to promote a more just society as well as the sense that one is *entitled* to a just society. Such confidence and entitlement are important parts of self-respect. Similar to Moellendorf, Nancy Snow (2018) has recently argued that hope can be a democratic virtue. And Adam Kadlac (2015) has argued that any hope can count as a virtue, at least so long as it is a powerful enough hope.

Chris Bobier (2018) argues that such attempts to make sense of hope as a non-theological virtue are bound to fail. The core of his objection is simple: hope is an emotion (or passion), and virtues are not passions. To observe that hope is

valuable in various ways is not enough to show that hope is a virtue. Virtues are complex traits of character that *regulate* virtues. So unless we are willing to say that other valuable emotions, including fear, anger, shame, etc. are virtues, then we should not say that hope is a virtue, however valuable it may be.

In my view, Bobier's challenge raises a pair of questions. First, is there a virtue that primarily has to do with the regulation of hope? Second, if there is such a virtue, do we already have a name for that virtue? If the answer is *yes* to the first question and *no* to the second, then we have a plausible basis for thinking that there is a virtue of hope. For a defense of hope as a virtue, see Milona ([forthcoming](#)).

6.8 Conclusion

As philosophers delve more deeply into the nature of hope, they raise (and clarify) more questions than they definitively answer. The nature of hope, in particular, continues to prove elusive. This is especially true when it comes to “hoping against hope,” that Martin (2014) rightly emphasizes as central. When it comes to the value of hope, the difficulty rests in the diversity of ways in which we can hope and the impact that those different ways of hoping can have in our lives. While philosophers continue to map the various benefits and dangers of hoping, it will take a great deal of practical wisdom to know when hoping is appropriate. Philosophers seeking such wisdom benefit by stepping outside the boundaries of their own discipline, looking to the wisdom of history and lived experience.

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Michael Milona (Ph.D.) is an Assistant Professor in Philosophy at Ryerson University. He was previously a postdoctoral fellow at Cornell University (affiliated with the Templeton Foundation’s Hope & Optimism Initiative) and an Instructor at Auburn University. He received his PhD in Philosophy (advised by Mark Schroeder) from the University of Southern California. His research centers on the question of how we ever come to know what is right or wrong, good or bad. He has come to think that the emotions are foundational for answering this question, and that hope is among the most significant of our emotions in this regard. This has led him to a related research program on the nature and value of hope. Recent and representative publications include “Finding Hope” (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy*) and “Intellect versus Affect: Finding Leverage in an Old Debate” (*Philosophical Studies*).

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