

Rational Hope against Hope? A Pragmatic Approach to Hope and the Ethics of Belief

The aim of this paper is to explore a pragmatic approach to hope and the ethics of belief that allows rational hope against hope. Hope against hope is hope that goes beyond what the evidence supports by hoping for something that is highly unlikely and highly valuable.¹ However, this could take different forms. One could either hope against the evidence or merely go beyond it; and the evidence could be inconclusive or conclusive, conflicting or clear, misleading or plain, absent or neutral. Hope against hope then converts everything from hoping for something that appears unlikely to hoping for something that appears impossible, judged by available evidence.

However, there is a very long tradition for criticizing hope for being false or irrational.² But hope can only be false or irrational if it is *subject to rational assessment*. This presupposes that it is appropriate to ask for a reason or a justification for hoping, since one can be answerable or responsible for hoping. Moreover, this typically assumes that hopes can be changed in response to reasons. False hopes, notably, should be given up (if possible). However, if hope is subject to rational assessment, it is also possible for hope to be rational or justified.

Indeed, I will explore how hope against hope may be justified by practical reasons or pragmatic considerations, sketching criteria for rational hope that allows hope against hope. Section I introduces *evidentialism* and *pragmatism* about belief. Sections II and III discuss whether rational hope against hope is compatible with evidentialism or not, favoring a pragmatist approach to hope and belief. Section IV discusses evidentialism and pragmatism,

¹ Cf. Adrienne Martin, *How We Hope: A Moral Psychology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2014, 5; James Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope: The Conceptual Foundations of Religion*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1979, 13, 136.

² Claudia Blöser and Titus Stahl, "Hope," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2017 Edition, ed. by Edward Zalta, in [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/hope>] (last accessed: 26/4/2019).

whereas Sections V-VII sketches constraints on pragmatism and rational hope. To simplify matters I will largely abstract from questions of whether hopes and beliefs can be willed or not, either directly or indirectly. I also abstract from whether our actual hopes and beliefs result from reasoning or not, since this is a contingent psychological issue that is separate from whether such reasoning is good or not.³

I. Evidentialism and Pragmatism about Belief

Strict *evidentialism* about belief is based on W.K. Clifford's principles:⁴

(Synchronic Principle) "[I]t is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence."⁵

(Diachronic Principle) "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to ignore evidence that is relevant to his beliefs, or to dismiss relevant evidence in a facile way."⁶

Non-evidentialism, by contrast, is the view that not all rational beliefs require sufficient evidence (or that one knows that one has such evidence). This view is known as *pragmatism* about belief, since it was developed by American pragmatists, and the practical reasons that support non-evidentialist belief often involve pragmatic arguments for belief.⁷ Such

³ I am indebted to Marcus Willaschek here.

⁴ Andrew Chignell, "The Ethics of Belief," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2018 Edition, ed. by Edward Zalta, in [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/ethics-belief>] (last accessed: 26/4/2019).

⁵ William Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," *Contemporary Review*, Bd. 29, 1876-77, 295.

⁶ Peter Van Inwagen, "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence," in *Faith, Freedom and Rationality*, ed. by J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 1996, 145. Note that evidentialists or pragmatists need not endorse substantive views of evidence. Cf. Andrew Reisner, "Pragmatic Reasons for Belief," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, ed. by Daniel Star, Oxford University Press 2018, 705-728.

⁷ Cf. C. Stephen Evans, "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2014 Edition, ed. by Edward Zalta, in [<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/moral-arguments-god>] (last accessed: 26/4/2019); Jeff Jordan, "Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2018 Edition, ed. by Edward Zalta, in [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/pragmatic-belief-god>] (last accessed: 26/4/2019).

arguments aim to show that we have practical reasons for believing despite lacking evidence. Such belief will be referred to as *practical belief*.

The ethics of belief concerns normativity that governs the formation, maintenance and relinquishment of beliefs.⁸ Although the ethics of belief concerns belief in general, it is nevertheless particularly important to religious belief. Indeed, Peter Forrest notes, “Contemporary epistemology of religion may conveniently be treated as a debate over whether evidentialism applies to religious beliefs, or whether we should instead adopt a more permissive epistemology.”⁹ Generally, strict evidentialism supports the “agnostic imperative” to suspend “belief whenever the evidence is insufficient.”¹⁰

II. Hope without Evidence? A Hybrid Account and Its Problems

A hybrid account of hope and belief combines strict evidentialism about belief with a permissive view of hope. More specifically, it claims that rational belief requires sufficient evidence, although rational hope does not require any such evidence. John Stuart Mill sketched this hybrid view in “Theism” (1874), and Einar Bøhn, Sharon Ryan, and Carl-Johan Palmqvist defend contemporary variants.¹¹ Although Mill, Bøhn and Palmqvist tend to focus on religion, this hybrid account concerns hope and belief in general. Mill writes:

⁸ Chignell, “The Ethics of Belief”.

⁹ Peter Forrest, “The Epistemology of Religion,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2017 Edition, ed. by Edward Zalta, in [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/religion-epistemology>] (last accessed: 26/4/2019).

¹⁰ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

¹¹ John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society*, ed. J.M. Robson, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1969, vol. 10, 429-489, esp. 430f., 482ff.; Sharon Ryan, “Evidentialism, Hope, and Wisdom: Are Evidentialist Theories of Wisdom Hopeless?” in *Believing in Accordance with the Evidence: New Essays on Evidentialism*, ed. by K. McCain, New York: Springer 2018, 279-291; Einar Bøhn, “The Logic of Hope: A Defense of the Hopeful,” *Religious Studies*, Bd. 54, 2018, 107-116; Carl-Johan Palmqvist, “Faith and Hope in Situations of Epistemic Uncertainty,” *Religious Studies*, first view (online), 2018, 1-17.

The whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of Belief into that of simple Hope; and in that, for anything we can see, it is likely always to remain; for we can hardly anticipate either that any positive evidence will be acquired of the direct agency of Divine Benevolence in human destiny, or that any reason will be discovered for considering the realization of human hopes on that subject as beyond the pale of possibility.¹²

Those who defend the hybrid account may therefore suggest that it is rationally permissible to center one's life on the proposition that there is a God, by virtue of the propositional attitude of hope rather than belief.¹³ Mill writes:

[T]o any one who feels it conducive either to his satisfaction or to his usefulness to hope for a future state as a possibility, there is no hindrance to his indulging that hope[T]he indulgence of hope with regard to the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death, while we recognize as a clear truth that we have no ground for more than a hope, is legitimate and philosophically defensible. The beneficial effect of such a hope is far from trifling.¹⁴

Mill points out that hope and belief are not the same. He then argues that the constraints on belief are stricter than the constraints on hope.¹⁵ Mill takes hope to be permissible if and only if (1) "For all one knows or justifiably believes, the object of one's hope could obtain"; and (2) "One believes that hoping contributes to one's own happiness, or to the well-being of others."¹⁶

Ryan argues that evidentialism that is *permissive* about hope (but not about belief) "allows for all...hopes that do not clash with one's evidence."¹⁷ This permissive view allows *hope against hope* based on the following assumptions:

S hopes that/for p iff
(i) S lacks adequate evidence for believing p,
(ii) S believes it would be very good if p were to obtain,
(iii) S wants p to be true,
(iv) S believes p is possible, and
(v) S is positively personally invested in p being true.¹⁸

¹² Mill, *Essays on Ethics*, 483.

¹³ Cf. Böhn, "The Logic of Hope".

¹⁴ Mill, *Essays on Ethics*, 466, 485.

¹⁵ Cf. Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, 46f.

¹⁶ Jordan, "Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God".

¹⁷ Ryan, "Evidentialism, Hope, and Wisdom," 289.

¹⁸ Ryan, "Evidentialism, Hope, and Wisdom," 282.

Mill suggests that we have practical reasons for hoping if hope contributes to well-being or utility.¹⁹ Something similar is suggested by conditions (ii) and (iii) above, since rational hope seem to require practical reasons for assuming that it would be good if p obtained or were true. However, the practical reasons need not be limited to happiness or well-being. Kant, for instance, argues that we have moral reasons for hoping.²⁰

Initially, this hybrid account seems attractive, although I think that it is somewhat unstable and problematic. First, it suggests that hope is *not a doxastic attitude*, since one must be able to hope for something without believing it.²¹ But it seems that rational hope must be possible to defend or justify discursively.²² Even if the agent does not form a belief initially, he may very well form one later on, when he reflects on his hope and defends it against possible objections. At the very least, hoping requires that one *would* believe that what one hopes for is possible *if* one were to form a belief on the matter. It is not unlikely, however, that a hopeful person would or should form beliefs on the matter if his hopes were central to his projects, actions or practical identity.

Second, what one hopes for must be seen as possible to realize in some possible world (see Section VI). One cannot therefore rationally hope for something one believes is impossible.²³ The hybrid account acknowledges this by disallowing hope that clashes with evidence. Still, belief (iv) in possibility requires evidence, according to evidentialism. In addition, rational hope may require that we only hope for what is probable or above a certain probability threshold.²⁴ Even if this were not always the case, it would nevertheless raise the

¹⁹ Mill, *Essays on Ethics*, 466.

²⁰ Cf. Martin, *How We Hope*, 101ff.

²¹ Ryan, "Evidentialism, Hope, and Wisdom".

²² Cf. Martin, *How We Hope*, 20ff.

²³ Blöser and Stahl, "Hope"; Philip Pettit, "Hope and Its Place in Mind," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Bd. 592, 2004, 153.

²⁴ Luc Bovens, "The Value of Hope," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Bd. 59, 1999, 673; Martin, *How We Hope*, 8ff.

evidential burden significantly in many cases, something the hybrid account seems to overlook.

Third, both hope and belief comes in degrees. Einar Bøhn therefore formulates the following, plausible hypothesis about the rational permissibility of hopes and beliefs:

[T]he stronger your belief that *p* is, the less permissible it is to hope that not *p*; conversely, the more permissible it is to hope that not *p*, the weaker your belief that *p* must be....the stronger your belief that there is no God is, the less permissible it is to hope that there is a good; and conversely, the more permissible it is to hope that there is a God, the weaker your belief that there is no God should be. So, the stronger your atheism is, the less permissible it is to hope that there is a God. But, it is still only a matter of degree; it doesn't seem completely impermissible to hope that there is a God unless you transparently know or are certain that there is no God.²⁵

Firm belief requires sufficient evidence; weaker evidence only warrants weaker belief, Bøhn assumes. Yet, such weak belief may contradict strict evidentialism, since it involves belief without sufficient evidence. In any case, many beliefs and hopes come in degrees, although this is traditionally not the case with religious belief and hope.²⁶ To many, lukewarm, conditional or occasional belief is even worse than firm disbelief.²⁷ Much the same seems to be the case in the moral context, since morality seems to require categorical commitment.²⁸

III. The Connection between Hope and Belief—Against the Hybrid Account

On the hybrid account, it seems problematic to build either practical or religious commitments on hope, at least if one is to act on one's hopes (by acting as if what one hopes for is true).

Using Mill's example of theistic hope, Jordan explains:

Suppose...that one seeks to build a theistic commitment on hope. The acceptance of theistic hope provides reason to act as if theism were true, not because one believes that it is true, but because one hopes that it is. What is it to act as if theism is true? It is to put into practice behaviors characteristic of

²⁵ Bøhn, "The Logic of Hope," 110, 112.

²⁶ Cf. Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, 119.

²⁷ Pace Palmqvist, "Faith and Hope".

²⁸ Cf. Anthony Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, chs. 2, 6-7.

a particular religious tradition...Acting as if a certain religious tradition were true would include reorienting one's values, priorities, and life-projects in order to reflect a commitment to a particular tradition. It would also involve engaging in the rituals and behaviors associated with the particular tradition; and investing a significant portion of one's time and money in support of causes associated with the tradition.²⁹

However, this leads to problem that described by social psychology. The problem is,

[B]ehavior can alter, influence, and generate attitudes, including beliefs...By regularly engaging in behaviors and practices characteristic of a particular religious tradition, one engages in actions that tend to inculcate religious belief. Belief is catching, as associating and imitating the faithful is an effective way of self-inducing the beliefs of the faithful. Those who seek to replace belief with hope will find themselves taking steps to build a theistic commitment on hope, while holding that they ought to avoid theistic belief. Yet, the very steps involved in fostering a commitment on hope—immersive role-playing as a theist, or acting as if theism were true—tend to generate theistic belief. Those who habitually or chronically imitate the actions and rituals of theists find eventually that those are not just tasks they perform, but are at the heart of who they are and what they believe. Yet, theistic belief is off-limits.³⁰

At this point, the hybrid account seems conflicted or double-minded, since it is divided between hope and belief: “One would have to take steps that inoculate against the contagious theistic belief. Yet, the reasons one has to build a theistic commitment on hope and not belief, would conflict with one's reasons to inoculate against catching belief. One is pushed to act as if theism were true, yet pulled to act to ensure that one does not come to believe that it is.”³¹

Bøhn resists this conclusion on the grounds that hope do not entail belief, although there is an empirical tendency that hope typically leads to belief. He concludes that hope is justified if it does *not* lead to non-evidentialist belief. Still, the following may be objected: First, Bøhn points to a conceptual possibility that is of limited relevance empirically. Even if rational hope is conceptually possible without belief, it still seems limited and unstable in reality, due to the strong empirical tendency that Jordan describes. Many hopes are then unlikely to be justified precisely because they do lead to non-evidentialist belief. Second, rational hope entails belief in possibility (or even probability), at least counter-factually. Finally, Bøhn's argument rests on the problematic assumption that hope does not aim at truth as belief does, something that is denied by Darrell Moellendorf and others. Moellendorf

²⁹ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

³⁰ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

³¹ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

argues that, “Hope is certainly truth sensitive....Hope in what is impossible to realize is false hope. Hope seems closest in character to a particular subset of beliefs, namely beliefs about the future, including predictions and imagined possibilities. But although the presence of doubt is destructive of belief, it is not destructive of hope.”³²

Muyskens, notably, argues that, “hope helps one in seeking the truth, by keeping certain possibilities open (even remote ones) which one would not, if he merely followed the [evidentialist] maxim to avoid error. By keeping these possibilities open, one is in a good position to look for, and discover, the truth of propositions which would otherwise have remained unknown.”³³

To avoid the problem of catching belief, the hybrid account can only allow a weak hope that is not acted upon. This hope is closer to a *wish* (or a mere *want*) than belief.³⁴

Muyskens explains the difference between wishing and hoping as follows:

(1) One can wish (counterfactually) that he had not taken a particular job or that he had chosen a different profession. But, logically, one cannot hope counterfactually....Hoping has a possibility condition that wishing does not have. (2) Hoping has a closer relation to action or dispositions to act than does wishing. The person who hopes that *p* acts as if *p* were true....An inclination to act as if one believed that *p* is not entailed by wishing that *p* (since one may wish counterfactually). (3) If hoping and wishing are both analyzed in terms of desire, wishing covers a much larger range than hoping. One can wish for things that he would not desire on balance. Yet one does not hope for such things.³⁵

Moellendorf describes the difference between hoping and wishing as follows: “The hopeful attitude necessarily includes motivation. The taking one’s beliefs and desires as reasons for action is a necessary condition of hoping. A person who fails to do so...fails to hope....Without [this aspect of hope], a person may wish for an outcome, but she does not hope for it.”³⁶

³² Darrel Moellendorf, “Hope as a Political Virtue,” *Philosophical Papers*, Bd. 35, 2006, 416.

³³ Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, 157n94.

³⁴ Cf. Mill, *Essays on Ethics*, 466.

³⁵ Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, 17.

³⁶ Moellendorf, “Hope as a Political Virtue,” 420.

Hopes are not only acted upon but they are also motivating, since they provides reason for action.³⁷ Miriam McCormick argues that, “[H]ope can be a source of motivation and can affect one’s emotional structure. Hoping affects where one’s energy goes, the way one relates to others, and this is especially manifest when what one does can make a difference in whether the hoped-for outcome comes to be.”³⁸ She therefore suggests that hope requires (not only desire and belief but) that one is “disposed [to] feel, act, expend energy, and/or relate to others in ways that views the possibility of the hoped-for outcome coming to be.”³⁹ Similarly, Adrienne Martin writes, “[T]he hopeful person takes a “licencing” stance towards the probability she assigns the hoped-for outcome—she sees that probability as licencing her to treat the desire for the outcome and the outcome’s desirable features as reasons to engage in...forms of planning, though and feeling.”⁴⁰

Unless supported by evidence or belief, the hybrid account then allows wishes and wants rather than hope. Worse still, it seems to support *despair* instead of hope against hope if the hoped-for outcome appears unlikely. As McCormick points out, “One can desire something, believe it is possible, but feel despair when thinking about the unlikelihood of the desired outcome coming to be.”⁴¹ Based on Frank Darabont’s film “The Shawshank Redemption” (1994), Ariel Meirav argues that “a person who hopes for a prospect and a person who despairs of the same (or qualitatively same) prospect may be exactly similar with respect to relevant desires and assignment of probability.”⁴² In the film, Andy hopes against hope to escape from prison, whereas Red despairs of this. However, they “have the same desire to [escape], and assign [escaping] the same probability.”⁴³ Meirav stipulates that they

³⁷ Martin, *How We Hope*, 5 indicates that hope against hope has a particularly strong motivating or sustaining power.

³⁸ Miriam McCormick, “Rational Hope,” *Philosophical Explorations*, Bd. 20, 2017, 129f.

³⁹ McCormick, “Rational Hope,” 130.

⁴⁰ Martin, *How We Hope*, 35; cf. Bovens, “The Value of Hope,” 679.

⁴¹ McCormick, “Rational Hope,” 129.

⁴² Ariel Meirav, “The Nature of Hope,” *Ratio*, Bd. 22, 2009, 222.

⁴³ Meirav, “The Nature of Hope,” 224.

differ in their attitudes to a relevant *external factor* such as fate or providence. This factor seems important since the object of hope lies “beyond the reach of [the agent’s] causal or epistemic powers.”⁴⁴

Andy hopes because he regards the external factor as good, whereas Red despairs since he regards it as not good.⁴⁵ However, Red need not regard it as bad. Rather, he could regard it as amoral or indifferent to our desires. Andy hopes to escape despite poor prospects, whereas Red despairs based on the very same prospects. They do *not* disagree about the evidence (or the probability of escaping), but take very different *attitudes* towards the situation. Meirav argues that they have conflicting attitudes towards an *external factor* beyond their control. Andy goes beyond the evidence by hoping, presumably because he has practical reasons for believing that the external factor is good.⁴⁶ Red does not share this view, presumably because he refuses to go beyond the evidence as Andy does. I therefore stipulate that we may think of Andy as a pragmatist about belief, whereas Red could be an evidentialist about belief (at least his view does not require non-evidentialism as Andy’s view does). In cases like these, evidentialism seems to favour despair, whereas pragmatism allows hope against hope.

In this case, Claudia Blöser and Titus Stahl point out “the rationality of hope depends on the rationality of the belief in the goodness of an external factor.”⁴⁷ Here *rational hope requires practical belief* in a good external factor. But even if Meirav were “wrong about what ‘factor’ the hopeful person’s justification appeals to,” he nevertheless seems “right that the difference between hope and despair is a matter of the *justificatory attitude* one adopts.”⁴⁸ Hopeful and desperate persons have fundamentally different justificatory attitudes toward

⁴⁴ Meirav, “The Nature of Hope,” 228.

⁴⁵ Meirav, “The Nature of Hope,” 230.

⁴⁶ Still, this attitude may be a way of seeing rather than a belief. Martin, *How We Hope*, 20.

⁴⁷ Blöser and Stahl, “Hope”.

⁴⁸ Martin, *How We Hope*, 20, my italics.

difficulties beyond their control or power. They hope for, or despair of, something that is *difficult* to attain (e.g. escaping from prison), since there is no room for hope or despair if the object of hope or despair is easily attainable or within our power.⁴⁹

We have seen Martin arguing that the “the hopeful person sees th[e] probability [of the hoped-for outcome] as licencing her to treat the desire for the outcome and the outcome’s desirable features as reasons to engage in...forms of planning, though and feeling.”⁵⁰ However, in the case of hope against hope, these reasons are not only epistemic but also *practical*. Andy may justify hope on pragmatic grounds, but can hardly be an evidentialist, since he acts on his hopes. Even in other cases, rational hope may involve beliefs in possibility and probability (or even an external factor) that transcend evidence (cf. Section VI). For these reasons, it seems that the hybrid account hardly reconciles strict evidentialism with rational hope against hope. Indeed, evidentialism and hope against hope hardly seems compatible, at least if hope requires probability. When evidence is lacking, evidentialism does not so much support hope as despair, wishes, and wants (where the two latter cannot be acted upon). Pragmatism, by contrast, allows hope against hope that *can* be acted upon. At the very least, pragmatism allows a much more radical hope than evidentialism does since hope is stronger if it is supported by relevant beliefs.

Hope and belief are therefore somewhat connected both conceptually and empirically, and the connection between hope and belief holds independently of one’s preferences for either evidentialism or pragmatism. One may abandon either hope or evidentialism, if evidence does not support hope. But there is neither room nor need for hope if the available evidence is conclusive and certain, showing that what one hopes for will be realized. Such

⁴⁹ Cf. Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, 15-17; Victoria, McGeer, “The Art of Good Hope,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Bd. 592, 2004, 103.

⁵⁰ Martin, *How We Hope*, 35.

evidence would warrant belief or knowledge, not hope.⁵¹ Hope therefore presupposes uncertainty or inclusive evidence. To put it in probabilistic terms, hope requires a probability that is below 1 and above 0.⁵²

IV. Against Strict Evidentialism about Belief

There are several reasons why strict evidentialism seems problematic. First, it seems self-referentially inconsistent, since there is not sufficient evidence available for evidentialism.⁵³ At least, the available arguments for evidentialism fail to show that practical belief is impermissible.⁵⁴ Arguments for evidentialism indicate that it is *epistemically* rational only to believe on sufficient evidence. But they do not preclude that practical belief is rational in some other respect. *Ecumenicists* concede this by admitting both epistemic and practical reasons for believing, since we are both epistemic and practical agents.⁵⁵ More specifically, practical belief is not epistemically (theoretically) rational, although it is practically rational (or perhaps even rational all-things-considered). This ecumenical view is both weakly evidentialist and weakly pragmatist at the same time. Strict evidentialists, by contrast, deny that practical belief is rational in any respect, whereas strict pragmatists deny that practical belief is irrational in any respect. However, strict evidentialists base reasons solely on

⁵¹ Cf. Moellendorf, "Hope as a Political Virtue"; Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*; Bøhn, "The Logic of Hope," 112.

⁵² Bovens, "The Value of Hope," 673.

⁵³ Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1983, 60.

⁵⁴ Reisner, "Pragmatic Reasons for Belief"; Jordan, "Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God"; Miriam McCormick, *Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief*, London: Routledge 2015, 52.

⁵⁵ Cf. Reisner, "Pragmatic Reasons for Belief". McCormick (*Believing Against the Evidence*, 8, 31) argues that truth is important due to its practical value, and that we can only make sense of epistemic value by connecting it to practical value. It is important that beliefs not only track truth but also that they are interconnected and feature in practical reasoning.

epistemic agency, separating it from agency more generally in a manner than seems problematic.⁵⁶

Second, a principled objection to strict evidentialism concerns “restricted propositions” or “restricted truths.” Here practical belief is necessary (but not sufficient) to acquire new evidence. Belief is first based on practical reasons but is later supported by evidence. The non-evidential belief is therefore only provisional and perhaps but a means towards acquiring new evidence. William Wainwright, for instance, writes the following about pragmatic arguments for religious belief: “Mature religious belief can, and perhaps should, be based on evidence but...the evidence can be accurately assessed only by men and women who possess the proper moral and spiritual qualifications. This view was once a Christian commonplace; reason is capable of knowing God on the basis of evidence—but only when one’s cognitive faculties are rightly disposed.”⁵⁷

Jeff Jordan comments: “If Wainwright is correct, then James’s argument [for pragmatism] is not just a pragmatic argument, but also an epistemic argument, since he is arguing that one of the pragmatic benefits is a more reliable access to reality.”⁵⁸ The difficulty here is that the relevant evidence is only available to pragmatists, and is therefore not likely to be acknowledged by strict evidentialists. Something like this is indeed conceivable, but it is bound to be controversial.

Third, “dependent propositions” or “dependent truths” represents another principled objection to strict evidentialism. In this case, belief (at least partially) makes something true.⁵⁹ Practical belief is a *truth-maker* that somehow (at least in part) produces evidence and facts. James famously discusses a mountain climber who has no alternative but leaping across a chasm in order to return back home. The climber does not know if he is able to jump across

⁵⁶ McCormick, *Believing Against the Evidence*; cf. Reisner, “Pragmatic Reasons for Belief”.

⁵⁷ William Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 3.

⁵⁸ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

⁵⁹ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

the chasm based on the evidence. But the practical belief that he will succeed in doing so is necessary for actually succeeding.⁶⁰ In this case, even impartial spectators could in principle judge if belief contributes to success and if it generates evidence.

However, James' main example of dependent propositions is social cooperation. He writes, "[A] social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned."⁶¹

There seems to be a tendency that believing in others without sufficient evidence, will help them to become more trustworthy and reliable. Conversely, not believing in them tends to make them worse, in the sense that they become less trustworthy and reliable. Someone who is largely met with distrust is therefore far less likely to become trustworthy and reliable than someone is who is believed in without sufficient evidence. It therefore seems that we should think well of others and assume their innocence, even if we lack evidence of this.⁶²

However, it may be objected that in cases of social trust, belief does not make propositions true, although it is still a "necessary precondition for the continued pursuit of the end we have set for ourselves."⁶³ We can only trust someone if we are willing so believe despite a lack of sufficient evidence. We have strong practical reasons to trust others, since we are reliant on them in many ways. For example, it seems that "partners in a monogamous romantic relationship have strong pragmatic reasons to [b]elieve in their respective partner's

⁶⁰ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York: Dover 1956 [1897], 96f.; Jakob Huber, "Pragmatic Belief and Political Agency," *Political Studies*, Bd. 66, 2018, 658.

⁶¹ James, *The Will to Believe*, 24.

⁶² Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, 50f.

⁶³ Huber, "Pragmatic Belief and Political Agency," 658.

faithfulness until evidence to the opposite is conclusive.”⁶⁴ Even if this is not an example of dependent truths, it implies that practical belief is necessary for social trust.

Forth, the moral duty argument may undermine strict evidentialism.⁶⁵ It says that it is never irrational, all-things-considered, to do one’s moral duty. This view is relevant to belief management, since practical belief could represent a moral duty. Jordan provides one example of such a case: “Dr. Jones knows that the prognosis for Smith’s recovery is poor, but if she acts on that knowledge by telling Smith of his poor prognosis, she may well strip Smith of hope. Jones believes that maintaining hope is vital for quality of life. Overall, Jones decides it is better not to inform Smith just how poor the prognosis is and she does not disabuse Smith of her evidentially unsupported belief.”⁶⁶ Although there are many similar cases, the duty argument is controversial because it conflicts with evidentialism and presupposes that moral duty cannot be irrational, all-things-considered.⁶⁷

Finally, evidentialism seems too demanding, since its standards are too high to work in all circumstances. For this reason, strict evidentialist are hard to find, at least if we look beyond programmatic statements and see how philosophers actually reason. Not even Clifford is a strict evidentialist, since his defense of evidentialism relies on a pragmatic argument for evidentialism. Paradoxically, Clifford appeals to the pragmatic or practical advantages of evidentialism:

[I]f I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief ; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough ; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them ; for then it must sink back into savagery.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Huber, “Pragmatic Belief and Political Agency,” 658.

⁶⁵ Evans, “Moral Arguments for the Existence of God”; Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

⁶⁶ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

⁶⁷ For a critique of the latter view, see Dale Dorsey, *The Limits of Moral Authority*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016.

⁶⁸ Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” 294.

The operative assumption is that we have practical reasons for being evidentialists, since evidentialism avoids the danger and savagery of non-evidentialism. However, even if Clifford were correct about the dangers of non-evidentialism, this is self-defeating as a pragmatic argument for strict evidentialism. But it is not self-defeating to support weak evidentialism with pragmatic arguments for weak evidentialism does not require sufficient evidence in all contexts.⁶⁹

Much of everyday life and common sense seems incompatible with strict evidentialism. It seems that someone who requires sufficient evidence for every belief may never leave the study or even accept food served at the door. For instance, there may neither be sufficient evidence for the existence of the external world nor for human freedom (to use the classical examples of Hume and Kant, respectively). Still, we cannot always suspend judgment when the evidence is lacking, since we are not only epistemic agents but also practical agents that must sometimes act.⁷⁰ Evidentialism is therefore difficult to practice universally. It is particularly difficult to reconcile with interpersonal trust and social cooperation. At least, strict evidentialism seems at a disadvantage in some cases, compared to pragmatism or ecumenicism. In order to avoid error, evidentialism risks losing a vital good and truth (notably restricted and dependent truths). Pragmatism, by contrast, “Risks error for a chance at truth and a vital good.”⁷¹ As such, evidentialism and pragmatism represent fundamentally different epistemic strategies.

⁶⁹ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

⁷⁰ Cf. McCormick, *Believing Against the Evidence*, 55ff.

⁷¹ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”. But even the latter may concede that “in general, the way to get truth is to proportion one’s belief to the evidence and that we have good reason to prefer that we mostly have true beliefs.” (McCormick, “Rational Hope,” 128)

V. Requirements for Practical Belief

In order to avoid irrationality and wishful thinking, pragmatism and ecumenicism about belief requires rational constraints. In the “Will to Believe,” James formulates the classical requirements for pragmatism about belief that also seems relevant for hope against hope. He argues that we may only go beyond the evidence if what we believe represents a “genuine option” that is “living,” “momentous,” and “forced.”⁷²

(1) A living option requires a decision between two real candidates for belief (e.g. theism and atheism) that have intuitive appeal and do not clash with available evidence. Practical belief is only permissive if it does not undermine truth or suppress evidence.⁷³ (2) A momentous option requires that something important depend on the choice or that “the option may never again present itself, or the decision cannot easily be reversed.”⁷⁴ (3) A forced option requires that the decision cannot be escaped.⁷⁵

Practical belief thus require both epistemic undecidability and some form of practical necessity (e.g. moral necessity). These rules out many forms of dreaming as well as belief that is unnecessary or unimportant. Specifically, it rules out belief that is falsified by evidence, since it only allows beliefs that could be true.

VI. Modal Constraints on Rational Hope

⁷² James, *The Will to Believe*, 2f.

⁷³ McCormick, *Believing Against the Evidence*, 55.

⁷⁴ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

⁷⁵ Jordan, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God”.

However, the requirements for hoping differ from the requirements on belief. On the much-discussed standard (composite) account of hope, hope requires both desire and a belief in possibility.⁷⁶ In the case of rational hope, Andrew Chignell sketches this requirement:

“S rationally hopes that *p* only if

RH1: S rationally desires that *p*, and

RH2: S is justified in believing that *p* is possible.”⁷⁷

Chignell admits the possibility of hoping that *p* without dispositional or occurrent beliefs about its modal status. In order to allow non-doxastic hope, the following modification therefore seems necessary:

RH2rev: S *would* be justified in believing that *p* is possible if he were to form a belief on the matter.

Logical possibility is too weak because it would allow hope for something that is impossible to realize if it is only internally consistent (e.g. a coherent phantasy). The possibilities must therefore refer to something that can be realized. The most promising candidate for rational hope in all contexts therefore seems to be the following:

RH2metaphysical: S *would* be justified in believing that *p* is metaphysically possible if he were to form a belief on the matter.

Vaidya explains, “The metaphysical possibilities are the logical possibilities that are also allowed by the natures of all of the things that could have existed.”⁷⁸ Metaphysical possibility can then be “defined as truth in some possible world.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Blöser and Stahl, “Hope”; McCormick, “Rational Hope”.

⁷⁷ Andrew Chignell, “Rational Hope, Possibility, and Divine Action,” in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Gordon Michalson, Cambridge University Press 2014, 102.

⁷⁸ Anand Vaidya, “The Epistemology of Modality,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2017 Edition, ed. by Edward Zalta, in [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/modality-epistemology>] (last accessed: 26/4/2019).

⁷⁹ Vaidya, “The Epistemology of Modality”.

This requirement is so weak that clear evidence against it should not be overridden by practical reasons. Indeed, many forms of hope seem to require stricter modal constraints.

Consider the following:

RH2practical: *S would* be justified in believing that *p* is practically possible (to achieve by acting) if he were to form a belief on the matter.

RH2physical: *S would* be justified in believing that *p* is physically possible to realize if he were to form a belief on the matter.

RH2causal: *S would* be justified in believing that *p* is causally possible if he were to form a belief on the matter.

Agents who rationally hope that something is caused presuppose causal possibility, which refers to events or states that could be caused in the world (something that presupposes physical possibility, which represent “the logical and metaphysical possibilities that are also allowed by the physical laws of nature.”⁸⁰). Agents who hope for physical states or events presuppose physical possibility, whereas agents who rationally hope to achieve something by acting presuppose practical possibility that the agents could act on.

However, it is often claimed that what we hope for must be seen as probable or likely. At least, the probability must be above zero and below one.⁸¹ This may indeed be true in most cases but probably not in all cases. First, it is not always easy or even possible to estimate or quantify probability, based on evidence (or even practical reasons). In such cases, possibility may suffice. Hope may not presuppose probability,⁸² since accounts of hope were developed independently and prior to accounts of probability. Hobbes, for instance, describes hope in terms of opined attainability, without invoking probability.⁸³ Second, the probability relevant

⁸⁰ Anand Vaidya, “The Epistemology of Modality,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2017 Edition, ed. by Edward Zalta, in [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/modality-epistemology>] (last accessed: 26/4/2019).

⁸¹ Cf. Meirav, “The Nature of Hope,” 219; Bovens, “The Value of Hope,” 673; Martin, *How We Hope*, 8ff.

⁸² Cf. Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, 157n5; Blöser and Stahl “Hope”.

⁸³ Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, 12f.

to hope is subjective or person relative probability.⁸⁴ Subjective (epistemic) probability differ from physical probability, and only the former is directly available to the rational agent at the time of hoping.

Finally, there is widespread disagreement over the appropriate probability and evidential threshold for hopes. More specifically, should the epistemic requirements be raised or lowered when much is at stake? Some hold the former view, while others holds the latter.⁸⁵ The former view leads to difficulties in extreme cases. Kierkegaard, for instance, argues that an infinite interest in the highest good makes any (historical or empirical) evidence insufficient. His example is a religious person interested in eternal salvation. In this case, any evidence of historical-critical theology is insufficient, amounting only to an approximation.⁸⁶ There is always room for doubt and uncertainty, since the evidence is neither infallible nor absolutely certain. Instead of suspending judgment, he suggests that the matter be decided on practical grounds, implying that pragmatic considerations are decisive if much is at stake. Others make similar points.⁸⁷ Hume, for instance, argues that the greatness of value compensates for low probability.⁸⁸

Either way, this still implies that the adequate evidential threshold is dependent on pragmatic considerations, indicating that epistemic agency is connected to practical agency. The available evidence could be insufficient for settling theoretical or academic disputes, at least for reaching definite conclusions that are not revisable and criticizable. Yet, it may be

⁸⁴ Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, 8ff.

⁸⁵ E.g. McCormick, "Rational Hope"; Marcus Willaschek, "Must We Believe in the Realizability of Our Ends? On a Premise of Kant's Argument for the Postulates of Pure Practical Reason," in *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy*, ed. by Thomas Höwing, Berlin: de Gruyter 2016, 223-243.

⁸⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, 28 vols., Copenhagen: Gad 1997-2013, vol. 7, 31ff.

⁸⁷ Meirav, "The Nature of Hope," 224; cf. Willaschek, "Must We Believe in the Realizability of Our Ends?," 239.

⁸⁸ Hume focuses on evil here but the point seems also to hold for goods, as assumed by Sabine Döring, "What May I Hope? Why It Can be Rational to Rely on One's Hope," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Bd. 6, 2014, 125.

sufficient for most practical purposes (e.g. everyday projects). Justifications may then be context-dependent, as contextualists claim.⁸⁹

Another reason that supports dependency between evidential threshold and pragmatic considerations is that what is objectively possible or probable may in some circumstances partially depend on our subjective desires and ideals. In the context of politics, Jakob Huber argues that our ideals “feed back into what is practically possible.”⁹⁰ More specifically, he argues for,

a reciprocal, indeed mutually constitutive relation between our subjective aspirations (the ends for the sake of which we act) and objective possibility (what we can practically attain through our actions). This claim is motivated by an observation about political agency: the observation that, from the perspective of the agent, the most ambitious ideals often underlie the most concrete political efforts, thus feeding back into the ultimate limits of political possibility.⁹¹

This is an important point that is relevant not only to politics, but also to many other normative domains, including morality, prudence, law, and religion. In many of these domains, our desires and practical agency may over time partially change or modify what is possible and probable. Many of the things that we now consider possible were once (considered) impossible and improbable (e.g. banning of slavery and torture). On the other hand, our desires may change due to insight into possibility and probability. Still, there are limits to this reciprocal relation between subjective desires and objective constraints. Immortality, for instance, may not become any more likely just because we desire it or hope for it.

⁸⁹ Cf. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Skepticism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2015 Edition, ed. by Edward Zalta, in [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/skepticism-moral>] (last accessed: 29/4/2019).

⁹⁰ Huber, “Pragmatic Belief and Political Agency,” 651.

⁹¹ Huber, “Pragmatic Belief and Political Agency,” 654.

VII. Further Constraints on Rational Hope—and the Value of Hope

The dependency between evidence and pragmatic considerations supports the view that rational hope is subject both to *theoretical and practical* constraints. One clear practical constraint is that we should only hope for goods or values we have *reason* to value or desire. Moreover, we should not hope for goods or values that are overridden or defeated but only for those who have normative priority. The object of hope should therefore be the object of overriding desire.⁹² The proper object of rational hope therefore represents what is practically good or best *all-things-considered*.

Traditionally, this object is described as the highest good, a synthesis of virtue and happiness, morality and prudence. It is exactly this good that that is the proper object of hope according to Kant and much of the Augustinian tradition. In any case, it seems that morality and prudence are more significant normatively than other normative domains.⁹³ Even those who question the strict overridingness of morality tend to concede that moral considerations have a special authority and priority,⁹⁴ indicating that what we hope for must be morally *permitted*. Still, those who dismiss moral overridingness will see this only as a *pro tanto* requirement.

Another practical constraint concerns the significance and “benefits to the agent of having the [hopeful] attitude.”⁹⁵ If there is reason to assume that hope makes a difference for the better as far as the hoper is concerned, this counts in favor of hoping. However, the advantages of hoping are not always dependent on the hope’s fulfilment. There are some advantages to hoping that remains even if the hope is disappointed (e.g. due to the placebo effect).

⁹² Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope*, 18.

⁹³ Dorsey, *The Limits of Moral Authority*, 171.

⁹⁴ Dorsey, *The Limits of Moral Authority*.

⁹⁵ McCormick, “Rational Hope,” 132.

Philip Pettit writes, “One reason that hope may often be pragmatically rational is that it promises to be able to lift us out of the panics and depressions to which we are naturally prey and to give us firm direction and control. Without hope, there would often be no possibility for us of asserting our agency and of putting our own signature or stamp on our conduct.”⁹⁶

Hope has *instrumental* value, since it avoids “panics and depressions,” giving us “direction and control.” It makes it possible to overcome hindrances by supporting agency in difficult situations where the prospects are poor. Darrell Moellendorf therefore notes, “paradigmatically hope sustains agents in projects in the face of danger or slim odds.”⁹⁷

Sabine Döring, however, argues that hope is not only useful but also indispensable for some tasks:

In hoping we are confident, which gives us stability in the ebb and flow of evidence for or against the likelihood of the occurrence of what we hope for. So what is important to us seems possible, which makes our life appear meaningful and motivates us to do everything within our reach to bring about the things about that we hope for. This is, I suppose, an evolutionary advantage of hoping, and it makes hope indispensable for long-term tasks or projects. By presenting the success of these tasks or projects as both valuable and possible, hope enables us to stay patient and to not become weak, as is exemplified by the hope of Abraham in *The Epistle to the Romans* (Rom.: 4-5).⁹⁸

Hope accepts neither reality as it is nor does it give up ideals or desires. Rather, it accepts the given circumstances and endures it by assuming that the desires or ideals can be realized in the future. The present situation is then simultaneously unacceptable in its actuality and acceptable in its potentiality.⁹⁹ Merely accepting everything as it is would mean to succumb to the evil and injustice of history. Hope, by contrast, makes it possible to overcome evil and injustice by progressing towards our ideals. Without hope that reconciles ideals and facts, our practical identity is double-minded, split between the situation we find ourselves in and our ideals that we identify with. Hope is necessary, since our ideals often transcend evidence and

⁹⁶ Pettit, “Hope and Its Place in Mind,” 160.

⁹⁷ Moellendorf, “Hope as a Political Virtue,” 423.

⁹⁸ Döring, “What May I Hope?,” 128.

⁹⁹ Gabriel, Marcel, *Homo Viator*, London: Gollancz 1951, 38f.

makes it necessary to act in the face of uncertainty and put up with difficulties. More specifically, hope allows a coherent practical identity that reconciles ideals and facts.

Luc Bovens argues that hope can be “conductive to an increased self-understanding,” since it helps us understand what we want and what we consider attainable.¹⁰⁰ Hope is “intrinsically valuable” not only because of increased self-understanding but also because it seems “constitutive of intrinsically valuable attitudes such as loving and having a sense of self-worth.”¹⁰¹ Partially based on this, it has been argued that hope has an intrinsic value by representing a constitutive feature of our practical identity. Specifically, hoping represents a part of a practical identity that decisive for how we see and interpret the world.¹⁰²

Finally, the attitude of hoping sometimes effects the desired outcome, either negatively or positively. If there is reason to believe that hoping has a positive effect on the outcome, this counts in favor of hoping.¹⁰³ But if it has no such effect, there is no reason for hoping, other things being equal. Similarly, hope that neither has an instrumental nor intrinsic role for us may be abandoned, particularly when they are unlikely. Whether hope is rational or not, depends not only on how strong the justification for hope is but also on what the alternative to hope is, all-things-considered. To be permitted, hope cannot be worse than the alternative (e.g. despair).

This paper represents a pragmatic approach to hope in two different senses. First, it indicates that pragmatic considerations or practical reasons matter greatly for assessing the rationality of hope. This is a view that is partially compatible with the permissive evidentialism of Ryan. Second, the paper goes beyond strict evidentialism and supports hope with ecumenicism or pragmatism about belief (without presupposing American pragmatism).

¹⁰⁰ Bovens, “The Value of Hope,” 676.

¹⁰¹ Bovens, “The Value of Hope,” 680.

¹⁰² Claudia Blöser and Titus Stahl, “Fundamental Hope and Practical Identity,” *Philosophical Papers*, Bd. 46, 2017, 350, 356.

¹⁰³ McCormick, “Rational Hope,” 132f.

The permissive evidentialism of Ryan “allows for all...hopes that do not clash with one’s evidence.”¹⁰⁴ Still, evidentialism requires evidence for believing that what one hopes for is possible or—in some cases—probable. In addition, it might require evidence for a good external factor in order to prevent despair. At least, it must support the assumption that one can cope with difficulties beyond one’s power. Pragmatism, by contrast, requires neither evidence of a good external factor nor evidence of possibility or probability. As a result, pragmatism allows rational hope against hope, something evidentialism hardly does. When hope is supported neither by belief nor by evidence, evidentialism only allows hope that is so weak that it is difficult to distinguish from despair, wishes, and wants that cannot be acted upon.

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¹⁰⁴ Ryan, “Evidentialism, Hope, and Wisdom,” 289.

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