

Finding hope

Michael Milona[#]

Sage School of Philosophy, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper defends a theory of hope according to which hopes are composed of a desire and a belief that the object of the desire is possible. Although belief plus desire theories of hope are now widely rejected, this is due to important oversights. One is a failure to recognize the relation that hope-constituting desires and beliefs must stand in to constitute a hope. A second is an oversimplification of the explanatory power of hope-constituting desires. The final portion of the paper uses an enhanced understanding of the psychology of hope to make progress on normative questions about hoping well.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 24 April 2017; Accepted 29 January 2018

KEYWORDS Hope; desire; cognitive base; ideals; moral psychology

1. Introduction

Hope has fueled many of humanity's greatest achievements. Yet hope can also be dangerous, inclining us to wishful thinking and potentially miring us in fantasies of a future that will never come. It is therefore of significant practical importance to discern both when hope is appropriate to cultivate as well as the dangers involved in hoping. An impediment to making progress on these matters, however, is a lack of understanding about what hope *is*. Thus the primary tasks for this paper are, first, to defend a theory of the moral psychology of hope and, second, to show how that account helps to answer some important questions about the rationality and dangers of hope.

I begin by outlining the *standard account* of hope (as Ariel Meirav [2009] calls it), a theory tracing back to Hobbes and others, according to which hope has two components: a desire plus a belief that the object of the desire is possible but not certain.¹ I maintain that hope is composed of such a desire and belief, but in order to unravel the whole of hope's nature, we need to notice an additional feature of hope-constituting desires. The failure to notice this additional feature

CONTACT Michael Milona  mcm0127@auburn.edu

[#]Current affiliation: Philosophy Department, Auburn University, Auburn, AL, USA.

© 2018 Canadian Journal of Philosophy

is at the root of much confusion about hope. It is not enough to count as hoping that P to have a belief that P is possible which exists simultaneously with a desire that P. The belief must be among the mental states causally influencing the desire's character; or to borrow a term from the philosophy of emotion (Deonna and Teroni 2012), the belief must be in the *cognitive base* of the desire. Outlining this relation between hope-constituting beliefs and desires helps to address an important objection to the standard theory of hope, namely that it lacks the resources to distinguish between hope and despair (Meirav 2009). I call the emergent theory of hope the *revised standard theory*.

I next turn to the argument that even if *some* hopes are composed of only a desire and belief, hope in the 'substantial' (Pettit 2004, 157) or 'fullest' (Martin 2014, 62) sense requires more. I disagree. By attending closely to the nature of desiderative *strength*, or intensity, we can explain the differences between deep and superficial hopes without having to allow for multiple forms of hoping.² The trouble is not that the (revised) standard theory oversimplifies some instances of hope, but that many of its opponents work with oversimplified notions of desire.

I close the paper by exploring two important practical questions about hope. I first ask whether it is appropriate to maintain hopes in moral ideals that are extremely unlikely to ever come about, e.g. an end to racial oppression. This is an important question running through much work in feminism and race theory (e.g. Fanon 1967, 228–229; Bell 1992, 101; Campbell 1994, 52; Stockdale 2017; Lloyd 2017). Although some have argued such hopes would conflict with responses such as bitterness which are more appropriate to extreme moral failures (e.g. Stockdale 2017), this is not so; the revised standard view leads to a picture on which it is almost always appropriate to preserve such idealistic hopes. The key is to make sure that the underlying desires are cultivated in the appropriate ways across different dimensions of desiderative strength. I next turn to Adrienne Martin's (2014, 85–97) argument that hope is dangerous because it can easily lead us to become lost in outcome-oriented fantasies, without any regard for the real world or for the means required to fulfill the hopeful fantasy. She maintains that such fixation is inimical to good deliberation and agency. I argue that this is not a real danger of hope as such, and the revised standard view helps us to see why. The real danger of hope is wishful thinking, which the revised standard view also illuminates.

2. The standard theory

Philosophers have historically converged on a two-part theory of hope, what Meirav (2009) calls the *standard account*. According to this view, a person, S, counts as hoping that P if and only if S satisfies the following conditions:

- (1) S desires that P.
- (2) S believes that P has a probability between 0 and 1 of attaining.

As I will explain, the thoughts leading to this account are simple (cf. Pettit 2004, 153–154).

The initial thought behind the desiderative condition is that we do not hope for what we do not want, and so intuitively hope requires a desire. More strongly, though, hope seems to be partly *constituted* by a desire, for hopes have all the indicators, or marks, of desire. First, hopes and desires both motivate action. For example, a person's hope/desire to drink coffee can lead her to pursue drinking coffee. And even when a person's hope/desire is oriented to the past, e.g. a hope/desire that a friend's train arrived on time, the hoper/desirer will still often be motivated to seek out information about whether what she cares about came true. Second, hopes/desires influence patterns of attention. The person's desire for coffee won't just incline her to pursue coffee, but will also incline her to focus on the end – drinking coffee – as well as the means to achieving that end – going to the coffee shop. Finally, hopes/desires are often felt; a hope/desire for coffee can create what we might describe as a felt need for coffee.

To count as hoping that *P*, however, we need more than a desire that *P*; we also need a belief that *P* is possible but not certain.³ More precisely, *S* has to believe that the probability of *P* is *D*, where *D* is some value (often very imprecise) between 0 and 1. This second aspect of the standard theory is grounded in a pair of observations. We do not hope for what we take to be impossible. For example, I do not hope to ride a magical dragon across the Milky Way Galaxy, because I do not see this as possible, though I may *wish* to do this. Furthermore, we do not hope for what we take to be certain, such as that the sun will rise tomorrow. But I can hope that Donald Trump loses the 2020 US presidential election, for I see that outcome as possible but not certain. And since I also desire that he loses, I thereby count as *hoping* that he does, or so the standard theory tells us.

3. Hope and despair

An important objection to the standard theory is that it cannot distinguish hope from despair (Meirav 2009). The core idea is that two individuals can desire that *P*, believe that *P* is possible, yet one of these individuals hopes while the other despairs. A key assumption here, which I think is correct, is that hope and despair are exclusive of one another. Although one can waffle between hope and despair, one cannot hope for something and despair over it at the same time.

Ariel Meirav (2009) spells out the objection with the help of an example:

Suppose I buy a lottery ticket, and come home full of enthusiasm, showing the ticket to my wife and wanting to share with her my great hope in winning a sizeable monetary prize. But she is unconvinced, and her sceptical gaze expresses an amused indifference. Of course, she desires the extra income no less than I do. And we do not disagree on the probabilities we assign to winning. She entirely agrees with the content of my enthusiastic claim (though not with its enthusiastic form) that there is a chance of one in a hundred thousand of winning. In other words:

We have the same desire to win, and assign winning the same probability. And yet I am hopeful of winning, and she is not. And this, of course, is incompatible with the Standard Account, according to which either both of us should hope or both of us should despair in these circumstances. (223–224)

This example is meant to show that there must be some *third* condition that explains why the husband hopes while the wife does not.

Meirav argues that the key to distinguishing hope and despair is a matter of understanding the *resignative* character of hope.⁴ According to Meirav, in hoping for something, 'I desire it while viewing it as beyond the reach of my causal or epistemic powers' (2009, 228). To illustrate, he imagines a case in which a person is asked whether she'll return a borrowed book by the due date. If she sincerely replies that she *hopes* that she will, this indicates that she takes herself to lack control over whether she will. Hoppers, Meirav maintains, have a sense that it is not fully within their control whether they will fulfill their hope-constituting desire. In other words, hoppers see *external factors* as working to determine whether their hope will be fulfilled.

Meirav argues that we can capture the positive outlook of hope, in contrast with despair, by considering how hoppers see the external factors. The key idea is that in hoping people view external factors as working in their favor. For example, if a sailor is uncertain about whether she will survive the upcoming voyage, yet she sees the gods as an external factor working in her favor, then she hopes. But if another sailor sees all external factors (the weather, the gods) as working against him, or as indifferent, then he does not hope. This is supposed to be true even if this second sailor assigns the same probability as the first (or even a higher probability) to survival. The external factor theory of hope is also meant to explain why in the lottery example the husband hopes while the wife does not. Even though the husband does not recognize any agents as working in his favor, he must, if he truly hopes, see fate or nature or *something* as doing so.

I am skeptical of the external factor theory. One worry is that is that hope-constituting desires do not always appear resignative. For example, a person aware of his boss's illegal business dealings can hope that he'll be courageous enough to blow the whistle when he meets with the district manager next week. In this case, he views it as entirely up to him whether he blows the whistle. He is certain everything is in place for him to do this action, if only he seizes the opportunity, but his fear, together with the temporal distance from his future self, are cause for uncertainty and for hope. One may be tempted to say, in defense of the external factor theory, that the agent's fear (and/or his future self) are external in the relevant sense. But as Meirav rightly points out, resignation is a subjective notion; it is a function of how the hoper *views* the factors determining the fulfillment of her hope (2009, 228–229). The trouble, then, is that hoppers *can* view everything as up to them (even if we think that they do so irrationally), contrary to the external factor theory.

There are additional concerns. Adrienne Martin (2014, 20) argues that the external factor theory does not distinguish hope from despair. For example, a person may desire a job, believe that it is possible for her to secure a job, see all significant external factors as converging to help her secure the position – including her family and various social programs – yet nevertheless despair overcomes her. To experience despair is (*inter alia*) to experience a felt loss of motivation and energy to pursue what one desires; and how an agent views external factors does not forestall such an experience. On the other hand, one may hope for some outcome despite seeing the world and everyone in it as cold and indifferent. For example, a person may hope that a thoroughly corrupt political system somehow produces a desirable result. This stance may be reflected even in her behavior, as the actions she takes accord with her view that the system and those around her are obstacles to be overcome. This seems to be a coherent kind of hope, one which is difficult to square with the external factor theory. In sum, given these several worries about the external factor theory, I am not optimistic about its prospects; I seek below a new solution to Meirav's important challenge.

4. The revised standard theory

We can avoid conflating hope and despair by clarifying the sort of desires and beliefs that constitute hopes. I begin this section by describing a qualification that we should make to the standard theory, and then return to Meirav's challenge.

To begin, an important feature of desires (as well as emotions) is that they have a *cognitive base*.⁵ The cognitive base of a desire is composed of the mental states – beliefs, perceptions, imaginings, etc. – that directly causally influence the desire. For example, my belief that ice-cream tastes good along with my perception of an ice-cream may cause a desire for ice-cream. These mental states are, moreover, *direct* causes of my desire; neither causes my desire (only) by virtue of causing some other mental states which in turn cause the desire. Importantly, a desire's specific characteristics – the way in which it influences motivation, attention, and feeling – will be subtly different depending on the mental states in its cognitive base.⁶ To illustrate, my perception of an ice-cream on the table, along with my belief that the ice-cream is for me, may generate a desire for ice-cream that causes me to walk over to the table and begin eating. By contrast, if you tell me that there is tasty ice-cream at a restaurant across town, then this may produce a desire for ice-cream that pulls my attention to questions about how I'm going to make it across town to enjoy the ice-cream. In both cases, there is a desire for ice-cream, but the different cognitive bases change the character of the desire.⁷

We are now positioned to see a key difference between a hope-constituting desire that P and a non-hope constituting desire that P (of the sort which may

be involved in despair). Imagine that, while dining at a restaurant, Cynthia forms a desire to have a slice of pie. At this point, she's not *hoping* for a slice – she just takes for granted that she'll order one at the end of her meal. But then she's told that they often run out of pie this late in the evening. Now let's assume that what was once an ordinary desire transforms into a *hope*. One might be tempted to say that the shift here is merely an intellectual one – the desire was already in place and now Cynthia has come to believe that it is uncertain whether the desire will be fulfilled. But there is an *affective* shift, too. The desire for a slice is now such that it motivates her to perform new actions, e.g. to flag the waiter as soon as possible to beat other patrons to what may be the final slice. Taking the judgment of possibility (but not certainty) to be in the cognitive base of the desire explains her newfound urgency, as evidenced by changes in her desiderative motivations, attention, and feeling.

It is worth dwelling on the way in which hope-constituting desires motivate, since this turns out to be a paradigmatic difference between hope and despair, one naturally explained by taking the probability assignment to be part of the cognitive base of the desire. Hoping that P paradigmatically involves motivation to promote P. For example, if I hope/desire to win the game, then I will have some motivation to pursue winning. This motivational influence may not win out – e.g. if my child gets sick then I might not be able to attend the competition – but it is still present so long as my hope remains. In other cases, a hope-constituting desire won't motivate me to promote the relevant desire since I do not see myself as having any control over whether the desire is fulfilled. But such hopeful desires still have a defeasible influence on motivation and attention. For example, if I desire that your train arrived on time, my desire will defeasibly incline me to check on whether what I care about came true. We can capture the basic idea in metaphorical terms: hope-constituting desires motivate behavior and patterns of attention that *take seriously* the possibility that the desire will be, or already is, fulfilled. In other words, a hope-constituting desire that P is directly causally influenced by a belief that P might come (or be) true in such a way that the desire defeasibly leads the agent to behave and attend as if P might come (or be) true.

Now we are positioned to see why hope is distinct from despair. An agent hopes that P just in case they have a belief that P is possible in the cognitive base of their desire that P. So long as the desire and belief stand in this relation, the agent has at least a 'shred' of hope. Hope is compatible with sadness, fear, and anxiety; but despair is avoided so long as the hope-constituting desire's character is directly causally influenced by the belief that fulfilling the desire is still possible. In the case of despair, the belief that P is possible may be *co-present* or *simultaneous* with a desire that P; but one does not count as hoping because the belief is not among the mental states directly influencing the desire; the two have become psychologically disconnected. That is, in despairing over P, the desire that P is a *mere wish*.

It is crucial to remember that a mental state is only in the cognitive base of a desire if it is a *direct* influence on the desire. To illustrate, a belief that one's desire that P has only a small chance of being satisfied may be part of the total causal explanation of why one comes to form the belief P *won't* happen; and it may only be this non-probabilistic belief that exerts any direct influence on the motivational, attentional, and phenomenological characteristics of the desire. This is *not* a hopeful desire. To illustrate, a sports fan may concede that their favorite team has a chance to win, but they ultimately do not believe they will; and this latter belief is what influences their desire, sending them into a state of despair (e.g. such that they lack motivation to even watch the games).

The aim here is not to give a full theory of despair. I am not trying to explain, for example, the distinctive way in which despair *feels bad*, which is not captured by the presence of a wish that is alienated from any belief that fulfilling the wish is possible.⁸ My goal is rather to revise the standard theory of hope in a way that avoids the objection that hope collapses into despair. According to the *revised standard theory*, a person, S, counts as hoping that P if and only if S satisfies the following conditions:

- (1) S believes that P has a probability between 0 and 1 of attaining.
- (2) S has a desire that P which takes the belief as part of its cognitive base.

5. The depth of hope

5.1. A challenge to the (revised) standard theory

Belief plus desire theories of hope still face an important challenge. Philipp Pettit (2004) and Adrienne Martin (2014) argue that the standard theory may well be sufficient to account for some (superficial) hopes, but it fails to capture our most 'substantial' (Pettit 2004, 157) or 'fullest' (Martin 2014, 62) hopes. Pettit says the following about the standard theory:

This analysis would equate hope with a more or less obvious arrangement among the distinct phenomena of belief and desire. In that sense, it would analyze it away, denying it any interest as a phenomenon in its own right. The belief that hope can be defined away in this fashion may explain why hope has received relatively little attention in philosophy. (2004, 54)

On this line of thought, the standard theory is not false, strictly speaking, but it misses many important hopes. We need a more complex theory distinguishing between different types of hope. Furthermore, I am doubtful that the revised standard theory, or at least what I have said about it thus far, is going to satisfy theorists worried that the standard theory cannot account for (all of) our deepest hopes.

Martin (2014, 14–15) develops a detailed example, labeled *Cancer Research*, to illustrate substantial hope. In this example, Alan and Bess both suffer from apparently terminal cancer. With no other treatment options remaining, they

agree to participate in an early-phase drug trial. Both know that there is less than a one-percent chance of being cured and both desire to be cured to the same degree. Yet there are key differences. Alan claims to hope for a cure, but he has a 'glass half empty' attitude about it. He regularly points out how poor of a chance he has and claims to have enrolled in order to benefit others. Bess, however, cannot help but fantasize about being cured; she reports that the small chance of a cure is what keeps her spirits up and this chance is why she decided to participate in the trial. While both Alan and Bess hope, they do not hope the same. This is despite the fact that they have equally strong desires to be cured and despite assigning the same probability to being cured.

If everything Martin says about hope in Cancer Research is possible, then, the standard theory leaves out some significant hopes (what are variously labeled 'full', 'substantial', or 'deep').⁹ With regard to this line of objection, the revised standard theory arguably stands or falls with the standard theory.¹⁰ Martin can plausibly build into her example that Bess's and Alan's desires to be cured take the belief that a cure is possible into its cognitive base without changing the attractiveness of her claim that hope is more than a desire and probability assignment.

Before defending the revised standard theory, I consider Martin's and Pettit's attempts to capture the nature of our deepest hopes.¹¹ I argue that both are counterintuitive in ways that should motivate us to reconsider the lessons we should draw from Cancer Research.

5.2. Martin and Pettit on hope

According to Pettit (2004) and Martin (2014), an agent substantially hopes that P just in case they *endorse* an underlying superficial hope that P (understood along the lines of the standard theory), although they differ on the precise nature of the endorsement. Pettit's view is that substantial hope requires *cognitive resolve* on the part of the hoper to act as if what is hoped for will come about, or at least as if it were likely to come about (2004, 157). Hope, then, often involves ignoring, or setting offline, a belief that what we hope for is not likely come about (159). This theory leads to a simple explanation of what is going on in Cancer Research: Bess resolves to act as if her desire to be cured will be fulfilled while Alan does not. Such a decision to act in accord with one's *superficial* hope is what makes a hope *substantial*.

My worry with Pettit's account is that it conflates a way in which an agent can relate to a hope with a distinct way of hoping. This point can be brought out by comparing hope to other emotions. For example, a person who fears flying on planes may resolve to ignore her fear as much as possible, or she may resolve to acquiesce to her fear, accepting that flying really is dangerous. If she flies on the plane despite her fear, we may praise her for *overcoming* her fear. Crucially, in overcoming her fear, it does not seem as if she *ipso facto* fears in some lesser

sense than if she resolved to acquiesce to her fear. Emotions are one thing, resolutions to follow emotions another. Turning to hope, it seems to stretch the ordinary concept to treat it differently from emotions in this respect. A person who has hoped for years to be a Broadway performer, and has resolved to pursue this hope (to act as if it will likely come true), may, in light of new information about the strain that her ambitions have placed on her family, resolve *not* to pursue such a career. But in changing her resolution, it does not seem intuitive that she *ipso facto* changes her underlying hope. As this example (as well as others mentioned below) illustrate, a deeply rooted hope can be analogous to a deeply rooted fear that persists despite contrary intentions or judgments. Barring no other way to capture what is going on in cases such as a Cancer Research, then, I propose that we set aside the cognitive resolve theory of hope.

Martin defends an alternative endorsement model of substantial hope. On her view, a person hopes that P in the fullest sense only if she (i) desires that P, (ii) believes that P is possible but not certain, (iii) sees the probability assigned to P as licensing taking the desire for the outcome (and the outcome's desirable features) as a reason to think, feel, and plan with respect to P, and (iv) takes the desire and desirable features as sufficient reason for those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (2014, 62). 'Sees' and 'takes' do not denote individual mental states but are rather a matter of standing ready to offer justifications for one's thoughts and behavior on the basis of the probability assignment, desire, and desirable features of what is hoped for (see Martin 2014, 36, n. 2). Her theory thus goes beyond the standard theory insofar as hope involves, as she puts it, 'incorporating' the desire and probability assignment into one's agency. This theory produces the following explanation of Cancer Research: Bess counts as hoping in the fullest sense because she treats as reasons for participating in the trial each of her desire to be cured, the desirable features of being cured, and the belief that being cured is possible; Alan, on the other hand, does not take such a licensing stance and so does not hope in the fullest sense.

Martin's theory is counterintuitive in the same basic way as Pettit's, namely that it conflates a way of relating to a hope with a way of hoping.¹² The trouble here is specifically with *recalcitrant* hopes, namely hopes which persist despite a belief that we ought not have them. The phenomenon of recalcitrance is familiar from the philosophy of emotion (see D'Arms and Jacobson 2003). For example, a person's fear of a spider is recalcitrant if they fear it despite believing it to be harmless. Or, a person's shame about their sexual orientation is recalcitrant if they are ashamed by it despite believing it not to be shameful. In dealing with recalcitrant emotions, we will often try to get the emotion to align with our belief. One way to do this is to focus on the grounds for the belief that the emotion is not appropriate in an effort to get the emotion to become sensitive to that same information. To try to overcome recalcitrant fear of a spider, for instance, one might focus on how this species of spider is unable to bite through human skin. But, intuitively, there is not a sense in which we no longer experience fear,

shame, etc. in the fullest sense simply by believing that the fear, shame, etc. is not appropriate. Similarly, Luc Bovens (1999, 679) comes close to providing an example of a recalcitrant hope when he imagines a car racing enthusiast who hopes to see a crash but is ashamed of this hope. What we need to add to get a recalcitrant hope is that the agent also *believes* that car accidents are very undesirable yet hopes for them anyway. An agent afflicted with such a hope may try to focus on the undesirable features of crashes (e.g. the potential for death and injury) to vanquish her disturbing hope; but she cannot hope less for a car accident simply by believing that she should not hope in this way. To suppose we can is, once again, to conflate a way of relating to a hope with a way of hoping.¹³

In the next section, I explain how the revised standard theory can account for deep and serious hopes, which I anticipate will further reduce the attraction of these more intellectualized theories.

5.3. Revisiting the (revised) standard theory

Many criticisms of the standard theory operate with a vague notion of what it is for a desire to be of a certain strength. But if we clarify the nature of desiderative strength, then I think it will emerge that proponents of the standard theory have not oversimplified hope, but that its opponents have instead oversimplified desire. I first characterize how hopes can be deep on the revised standard theory, and, thereafter, turn specifically to Martin's key example, Cancer Research, to see how a proponent of the revised standard theory should explain it. Going forward, a crucial point to keep in mind is that I do not wish to squabble about which hopes count as 'deep'. I use this language loosely to denote the range of hopes that Martin and Pettit claim the standard theory leaves out, as well as any other hopes we pretheoretically consider significant. My task, as it were, is to 'leave no hopes unturned'. I will have failed if there are some genuine hopes that cannot be accounted for by the revised standard account.

Desires can be strong or weak along several dimensions.¹⁴ First, one desire is stronger than another to the extent that it has greater motivational power. So if I desire to spend the day skiing but also desire to spend the day lounging about, then (holding fixed other sources of motivation) if I do not ski and instead act on my desire to lounge, we can say that my desire to lounge is, at least in this one respect, stronger than my desire to ski. A second sense in which desires can be strong has to do with how they affect our attention. My desire for coffee is in some sense stronger than my desire to continue working if, as a product of my desire for coffee, I constantly find myself fixating on the prospect of drinking coffee, and the means to obtaining coffee, rather than focusing on my work. Desires are strong in this second sense, we might say, to the extent that they 'occupy our mind'. Finally, desires can also be stronger or weaker with respect to how they feel. To take a familiar example, a coach's pregame pep talk aims

to *ramp up* the felt intensity of her team's desire to win, which will affect the energy that they bring to the upcoming game.

In thinking about the true depths of some of our desires, we should look not only at momentary *snapshots* of desires and their corresponding strengths, but also how they *pattern* relative to one another over time. This will help us to understand the sense in which many desires that do not often 'bubble to the surface' are still substantial. For example, consider a person, Jasmine, who desires to work at an art museum in a major metropolitan area. This desire does not influence her motivation, attention, and feeling on a daily basis, but it will 'take over' much of her psychology when a job opportunity appears at one of the desired locales. In comparison, Jasmine also has a desire to play card games with her friends during lunch, which exerts a significant, daily influence on her motivations, thoughts, and feelings. Despite the more consistent influence of this latter desire, there is still an important sense in which the former is stronger. For when the opportunity to pursue her desired job arises, the desire for such a career suppresses many of her quotidian urges, propelling her toward her dream. Thus some of our deepest desires are also *patient*; their strength is revealed by how they take a leading psychological role (in terms of influence on motivation, attention, and feeling) at key moments in which the possibility of fulfilling them becomes salient.

It's important to notice, however, that some of our apparently patient desires may exert a more profound influence on our daily lives than at first appears. For example, Jasmine's desire to work at a major art museum leads her to take art history classes in the evening. Part of the reason that she takes the classes is because she's interested in the subject matter, but another is that she wants to fulfill her desire to work in a big-city art museum. Thus even though she may only intermittently focus on her career goal, the desire for such a career explains the pursuit of many of her day-to-day projects that are instrumental to that end.

The complex character of desiderative strength helps us to understand the distinction between more and less significant hopes. The distinction is not sharp, but is along a spectrum, one that is multidimensional according to the different dimensions of desiderative strength. To recap, the different dimensions of strength mentioned here are as follows: motivational, attentional (both regarding ends and means), and felt quality. Furthermore, some hopes/desires that are substantial are patient, not exerting a significant daily influence, but, instead, residing in the psychological background until a perceived opportunity to promote the desire emerges. I will have more to say about these patient hope-constituting desires below.

Now that we have the different dimensions of desiderative strength in view, we can see the ways in which the (revised) standard theorist can account for what is happening in Martin's example, Cancer research. Recall that Alan and Bess were supposed to have the same beliefs about the possibility of being cured as well as equally strong desires to be cured. Yet, according to Martin,

the way in which Bess treats her underlying desire and belief suggests that she hopes in the fullest sense while Alan hopes in a lesser sense. I argue that proponents of the standard theory can offer an intuitively attractive redescription of the case. To begin, they will insist that we must make sure that we are really conceiving of Alan's and Bess's desires as equally strong, since certain features of Martin's description may subtly suggest otherwise. Consider this passage:

[A]lan says he was motivated to enroll in the trial primarily by a desire to benefit future people with cancer. 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. (2014, 15)

But remember, if the desires are of equal strength, then Bess's desire to be cured must not *itself* motivate her any more than Alan's desire to be cured motivates him. When we really hold fixed in our minds that the motivational, attentional, and phenomenological influences coming from their respective desires to be cured are the same, and that their probability assignments are the same, the intuitive force of the case as an objection to the standard theory dissipates. Alan does not hope differently but relates to his hope in a different way. More precisely, a proponent of the standard account will insist, quite reasonably, that Alan hopes in the same sense as Beth but that his hope is *recalcitrant* (see Section 5.2).

The revised standard theorist can take advantage of the same response but can also offer a second explanation of what may be happening, one according to which Alan is *not* hoping, after all. When Martin (2014, 15) says of Bess that 'the bare possibility is what keeps her going', then we may want to understand this in accord with the important qualification of the revised standard theory. The view, recall, says that hope-constituting desires take as part of their cognitive base the probability assignment. Applied to Cancer Research, then, we may say that Bess's desire arises not only in response to her beliefs about what it would be like to be cured (e.g. that she would be able to see her grandchildren grow up) but also in response to her belief that she might be cured. Alan's desire, however, may be alienated from his probability assignment and instead be responsive to a belief that he won't be cured. This explanation of the difference between Alan and Bess assumes that it is (psychologically) possible to believe that P is possible while also believing that P won't happen. And this does seem possible. For example, a person might say, 'Of course it's *possible* that we'll win the championship, but I believe it won't happen.'¹⁵

Cancer Research, then, is not a compelling counterexample to the standard theory, as it is meant to be, and is even less effective against the revised standard theory. Furthermore, given what I have said about how our hopes can be deep on this approach as well as the possibility of recalcitrant hope, I hypothesize that no dialectically persuasive counterexamples are forthcoming.

6. Practical questions about hope

6.1. Two questions

My goal in this section is to show how the theory outlined above about the nature and depth of hope helps us to make progress on two important practical questions. The first is whether it is ever rational to hope in a deep and serious way for socio-political ideals that are extremely unlikely to ever come about. Although one important line of thought answers no, I argue that what I have said about the depth of hope (Section 5) makes room for an affirmative answer. I then turn to the question of why hope can sometimes be dangerous. I criticize Martin's (2014, 85–97) view that hope can easily lead us to become lost in unrealistic fantasies, thereby inhibiting good deliberation and agency. What I have said about the nature of hope (Section 4) helps us to see why Martin is not quite right, but the revised standard theory also helps us to see an important way in which hope truly can be hazardous.

6.2. Hope for ideals: lessons from the depth of hope

Should we hope for ideals that are extremely unlikely to come about? I address this question through the lens of a specific case, namely that of whether to hope for a racially just society. Martin Luther King Jr. addresses this question in his sermon 'Shattered Dreams', observing that while racial justice is of incredible value, it is also incredibly *improbable*:

What does one do under such circumstances? This is a central question, for we must determine how to live in a world where our highest hopes are not fulfilled. (2007, 518)

He answers:

On the one hand we must accept the finite disappointment, but in spite of this we must maintain the infinite hope. This is the only way that we will be able to live without the fatigue of bitterness and the drain of resentment. (2007, 522)

In this sermon, King says, that 'our ability to deal creatively with...blasted hopes will be determined by the extent of our faith in God' (2007, 526). But *must* we turn to the divine, or is there also a secular pathway to maintaining hope? In what follows, I explore whether it may be rational to maintain such a hope from within a secular worldview, taking for granted the revised standard theory and, in particular, my defense of it in the face of Martin's and Pettit's objections.

To begin, the hope for a racially just world can seem foolish. The United States, for example, remains painfully distant from true racial equality, despite the end of slavery in the nineteenth century and de jure segregation in the 20th, among a variety of other achievements.¹⁶ Today's United States is witness to the mass incarceration of black males and de facto segregation in schools. If a substantial hope for racial justice involves acting as if these and other obstacles will (likely) be overcome and some ideal of racial harmony realized, then hope can seem a

failure to face up to the tragedy of the situation. But this is precisely what some theories – most notably Pettit’s cognitive resolve theory – would require. Given such an account of hope, one might think *hopeless resistance* would be a more honest and effective (by virtue of being a more realistic confrontation of the difficulties) approach.¹⁷

Yet given the revised standard theory, it seems as if holding onto hope for racial justice can be rational. On this approach, hopes are catalogued in a fine-grained way according to their influence on motivation, attention, and feeling; and hopes do not necessarily involve acting as if the hoped-for outcome will (likely) come about. Some people may be able to harbor idealistic hopes that exert a daily influence on their psyche. But this can be difficult given a clear-headed awareness of the minimal chances. Oftentimes, emotions such as sadness and grief seem more appropriate to the state of the world. Crucially, on my approach, these emotions are *not* incompatible with, or even necessarily in tension with, hope. A person can be deeply sad about racial injustice in the world and sad that a racially just world is an unlikely prospect; yet none of this rules out a deep hope for a morally ideal world. Even at times in which sadness has a profound influence on one’s psyche, there can still be a deep, *patient* hope for the distant possibility of justice.

There is value in such a hope. It positions one to recognize opportunities to work toward the ideal. After all, on the revised standard theory, hope-constituting desires dispose the hoper to attend to the means to fulfilling the desire. Furthermore, a substantial hope for racial justice can, and I think often does, cultivate and explain ‘intermediate’ hopes for, say, morally superior voting (de-) regulations, voter districting, and allocation of tax payer money. In other words, idealistic hopes can provide an effective psychological breeding ground for many of our more realistic day-to-day ethical hopes to emerge. By contrast, despairing over the ideal may make the pursuit of such intermediate projects, which ought to be pursued, more difficult. In general, the keys to seeing why idealistic hopes are rational are the following: (i) hope is compatible with a variety of negative emotions such as sadness and grief that may also be appropriate to a situation, (ii) idealistic hopes needn’t exert a profound day-to-day influence on one’s psyche but can be patient, and (iii) deeply rooted idealistic hopes can foster admirable patterns of more realistic socio-political hopes.

There is an additional worry about hoping for racial justice, however. Katie Stockdale (2017) has recently argued, entirely correctly in my view, that *bitterness* is a justified response to such racial injustices. But then what is bitterness? Stockdale defines it as follows:

Bitterness involves anger, but it is, to varying degrees, *hopeless* anger. In bitterness, we remain committed to the moral expectations others have violated, and at the same time, begin to lose hope that they will attend to the harms about which we’re angry and abide by our moral expectations in the future. (2017, 368; Stockdale’s emphasis)

Thus if we agree that bitterness is a justified response to much of the racial injustice in the world, then given Stockdale's definition of bitterness, a loss of hope must also be justified. Indeed, Stockdale is explicit that this is her stance. Furthermore, King's sermon quoted above appears to support Stockdale's point that there is a choice between hope and bitterness (though King sides with hope).

At least two kinds of solutions are available. The first is to argue that bitterness and hope on the part of the oppressed are compatible because their fitting targets are, upon closer inspection, distinct in key ways.¹⁸ Bitterness is appropriately directed at, say, the current perpetrators (witting or unwitting) of injustice, while idealistic hopes are appropriately directed at those currently working to fix the problems and to future generations. Another response, which is the one that I favor, says that bitterness is not always *hopeless* anger but may also be *pessimistic* anger. According to the sense of 'pessimism' that I have in mind, one is pessimistic about something when one expects it not to come about. This form of pessimism is compatible with hope, since one can hope that something will occur despite not expecting that it will (cf. Bell [1992, x] on pessimism in the 'victory sense'). Although I cannot argue for the view in full here, it seems to me that taking bitterness to involve pessimism, rather than hopelessness, better explains why (some) bitter people bother trying to convince the wrongdoers that morality requires that they repair the wrongdoing. At the very least, adopting this alternative account of bitterness seems to be a reasonable move for those who maintain (as I think we should) that hope and bitterness are sometimes jointly appropriate. In general, patient hope, which the revised standard theory makes room for, is a serious form of hoping, yet not one which is psychologically consuming; it can reside alongside profound negative emotions, even bitterness.

6.3. The dangers of hope: lessons from the nature of hope

It is uncontroversial that hope has the power to sustain us through difficult trials. This idea is encapsulated by the common injunction to *keep hope alive*, for when we lose hope, the thought goes, we will lose much, if not all, of our motivation. This view suggests that hope will typically be a good thing, at least so long as it is directed at appropriate ends. Martin, however, wants to temper enthusiasm for hope, for according to her, hope can easily lead to poor deliberation and a lack of appropriate motivation.

To understand Martin's concern, we should begin by noticing that hopes often give rise to hopeful *fantasies*. Consider, for instance, Martin's example of a high school student who hopes to be accepted into a certain college (2014, 90–91). This hope is likely to give rise to a variety of different fantasies, including visions of the hoped-for *outcome* – attending classes, living in the dorms, etc. – and the *means* to achieving that outcome – doing well in her high school classes,

writing a compelling personal statement, etc. Fantasizing about the hoped-for goal can reacquaint one with the desirable features of the end, solidifying one's commitment to the project; and fantasizing about the means can help one to stumble upon new strategies for bringing the hoped-for project to fruition. The trouble with hopeful-fantasies, however, is that we can too easily become lost in them. As Martin points out, it is not rare for a fantasizer to lose touch with reality such that the fantasy is harmful to wise deliberation, and may even lead to no action at all. Thus hoping *well* involves keeping the real world in mind.

Martin argues that much of the twentieth century self-help literature inadvertently illustrates precisely the sort of dangerous hopes about which she worries. She takes Wallace Wattles (2011), in particular, to task. Wattles laid the groundwork for the popular 'law of attraction', according to which we are able to draw the good things we want toward us by imagining that we already have those things and by banishing any thoughts that we will not be able to obtain them. Martin (2014, 94) quotes Wattles's injunction: 'See the things you want as if they were actually around you all the time. See yourself as owning and using them ... Do not waiver for an instant in the faith that it is real.'¹⁹ Martin's view is that these purely outcome-oriented fantasies are 'unmotivating, possibly demotivating' and that 'fantasies that go unchecked against reality...produce a degree of motivation unresponsive to the odds' (2014, 95). The danger of hopeful fantasy, then, leads her to be 'skeptical of the unquestioningly positive assessment of hope' (2014, 94).

If the revised standard theory of hope is correct, however, the problem Martin has identified is not with hope as such. To begin, consider two ways in which a hoping agent may end up immersed in fantasies detached from reality. One uninteresting way is when *false beliefs* about how to fulfill a hope generate misguided and destructive hopeful fantasies. The sort of phenomenon that Martin has in mind, however, is more interesting; the idea is supposed to be that hope *itself* can sometimes lead us to engage in fantasies inimical to good deliberation and agency. But the self-help literature, on inspection, only illustrates the former phenomenon. The trouble with Wattles is that he *believes* in a bizarre 'law of attraction', according to which imagining that you really have the objects of your desires will in some mystical way draw those things toward you. The sort of hopeful fantasies that Wattles recommends *are* concerned with the means to achieving goals; they are not, as Martin (2014, 95) suggests, 'demotivating'. It's just that his false worldview leads him to recommend fruitless methods of fulfilling our hopes.

But even if the example isn't very compelling, should we still worry that hope itself (rather than hope rooted in false empirical beliefs) may immerse us in fantasies inimical to good deliberation and action? I don't think so. According to the revised standard theory, a hope-constituting desire always takes as part of its cognitive base a belief that the object of the desire is possible. In other words, a desire is only a hopeful desire if its influence on our psyche is constrained by

the hoper's belief about the possibility of fulfilling the desire; hopeful desires are in this way yoked to (the hoper's view of) reality. To illustrate, consider that for many of our hopes, there are ways in which those hopes can be fulfilled that are more or less likely. A person who hopes to go to a decent college, for instance, could fulfill her hope by going to the Ivy League or a good state school. But if for whatever reason she believes that the probability of being accepted at an Ivy League university is less than the probability assignment in the cognitive base of her hope-constituting desire, then it is hard to see why *this* hope would generate fantasies about attending the Ivy League. Given the cognitive basing relationship between the probability assignment and the desire, it is more intelligible that her hope pulls her toward hopeful fantasies that are (by her own lights) within the bounds of her probability assignment, e.g. going to a state school.

It's important to keep in mind that some fantasies are not *hopeful*, but are rather what we might call *playful*. In the example above, the would-be college student may get lost in fantasies about the Ivy League, perhaps because they are pleasurable fantasies, but these fantasies do not seem to be *hopeful*. To further illustrate the point, an avid fan of *Star Trek* may spend large portions of her time fantasizing about engaging in space exploration and intergalactic diplomacy; but, except in unusual cases, these fantasies aren't based in a *hope* for such a universe. There may be hopes in the vicinity – e.g. a hope to work at NASA – but those hopes aren't the direct source of the *Star Trek* fantasies. Furthermore, these fantasies may get in the way of fulfilling her real hopes, but it is a mistake to identify the hopes as the source of the problem.

The real danger with hope, I suspect, is familiar from everyday discourse about hope, namely that it makes us especially prone to *wishful thinking* (see Bovens 1999, 678). Wishful thinking occurs when a person's desires cause her to believe that something is true, or is likely to come true. For example, if Jordan's desire to be a great author leads her to believe that she is (likely) a great author, then this is wishful thinking. Hope, especially on the revised standard theory, seems to leave us especially prone to wishful thinking. This is because in hoping that P, the desire that P and the belief that P is possible are intimately related. More specifically, the desire takes the probability assignment as part of its cognitive base, and this may facilitate feedback in the other direction whereby the desire that P leads us to increase our estimate that P will occur.²⁰

7. Conclusion

Contemporary philosophers of hope argue that we must go beyond the standard belief-desire theory to capture the nature of hope, or at least the nature of (some of) our deepest hopes. Yet the prominent non-standard theories considered here face serious problems. I proposed that instead of going beyond the belief-desire account of hope, we clarify the sort of beliefs and desires that can be hope-constituting. I defended the *revised standard theory* of hope: a

hope that P involves a desire that P and a belief that P is possible which is in the cognitive base of the desire. I argued that this theory is a plausible basis for a complete and unified theory of the nature of hope. Having defended the revised standard theory, I then relied on it to address practical questions about the rationality and dangers of hope. These efforts illustrate how debates about the anatomy of hope are not simply academic, but inform answers to everyday questions about hope.

Notes

1. See Hobbes ([1668] 1994, paragraph 14), Downie (1963), and Day (1969).
2. When qualifying hopes, I use 'deep', 'substantial', and 'full' as synonyms.
3. For the sake of brevity, I often drop the 'but not certain' qualification.
4. The idea that hope is resignative traces at least back to McGeer (2004).
5. I borrow the term 'cognitive base' from Deonna and Teroni's (2012) discussion of emotion. Wedgwood (2001, 220) articulates the same basic idea.
6. Whether a mental state causes a desire as such or only properties of the desire depends on metaphysical questions about the identity conditions of desires. Nothing I argue here turns on such arcane issues.
7. On the view that I favor, the mental states in the cognitive base of a desire not only causally influence the desire's motivational, attentional, and phenomenological properties, but also partly *constitute* the desire. Although I cannot go into detail here, I believe that this picture explains why two desires with the same object can nevertheless *feel* very different, e.g. a desire for ice-cream triggered by a *belief* that there is ice-cream versus a desire for ice-cream triggered by *visual* and *olfactory* experiences of ice-cream. The difference in the phenomenology of these desires seems to be explained by their different cognitive bases. One might worry that something cannot be both a cause and a part of something, but on inspection, this isn't such a peculiar idea. For example, bread is used to produce a sandwich but is also part of the sandwich. I do not insist on this picture, however.
8. One important asymmetry between hope and despair seems to be that while despair is essentially unpleasant, hope is not essentially pleasant.
9. Readers may wonder whether Martin's example is importantly different from Meirav's lottery case discussed above (Section 3). The difference is that Martin allows that *both* agents hope, at least in her original description of the case. Although the lottery case could be adapted to make Martin's point, I focus my efforts on the example Martin finds to be most persuasive for her purposes.
10. I point out below one way in which the revisions to the standard theory helps with this example, however.
11. An important question is whether Martin's and Pettit's theories can distinguish hope from despair. Meirav argues that Pettit's theory cannot (2009, 226–227). Martin (2014, 11–71), however, explicitly develops her own theory in recognition of the challenge. I am not certain her theory avoids the problems, but this is a complex debate between other theorists that I cannot adjudicate here. In particular, I think such a project would require a more detailed picture of the nature of despair, and which patterns of mental states are compatible with despair given its nature. The new objections that I develop are independent of the objection from despair and help to illustrate the attractions of my own approach.
12. For more discussion of Martin's view, see Milona and Stockdale (*forthcoming*).

13. We might say that hopers who endorse their hopes are *hopeful*. (A similar point goes for fearful, too.) But the target is not hopefulness but rather hope. Luc Bovens first brought this distinction to my attention (in conversation). Additionally, Winters (2015, 27) hints at this distinction in a chapter titled, 'Unhopeful but Not Hopeless,' which is inspired by DuBois (1994, 98).
14. The notion of desiderative strength is often treated as if it were too obvious to bother explaining, but as McInerney (2004) observes, the notion is complex and multidimensional. Martin (2014) is aware of the complexity of desire, but she doesn't consider how proponents of the standard theory might draw on it to respond to putative counterexamples.
15. Bess may also believe that she won't be cured. If she does, her desire isn't sensitive to *that* belief but rather the belief that being cured is possible. That such beliefs can co-occur may explain why we so often waffle between hope and despair.
16. See Lloyd (2017) on Afro-pessimism, a worldview which emphasizes the near insurmountable nature of racism toward American blacks.
17. Stockdale (2017), following McFall (1991), holds that hopes for extremely unlikely outcomes are *ipso facto* irrational.
18. Stockdale (2017, 375) may be suggesting a solution along these lines.
19. See Wattles (2011, 22).
20. This is an empirical hypothesis, though not one for which I believe there is currently any data. Nevertheless, it is a common idea that hope leaves us especially prone to wishful thinking, and the revised standard theory leads to a natural hypothesis about why.

Acknowledgments

For valuable feedback on this paper, I am grateful to Andrew Chignell, Alex Esposito, Nicole Hassoun, Anne Jeffrey, Katie Stockdale, Hannah Tierney, and two anonymous referees. I also thank audiences at Cornell University, Carroll College, and Nebraska Omaha for stimulating discussion.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This project was made possible through a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation; the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the foundation.

Notes on contributor

Milona Michael is an Instructor in Philosophy at Auburn University. He was formerly a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Sage School of Philosophy at Cornell University. His principal research interests are at the intersection of ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind. Recent publications include "Intellect Versus Affect: Finding Leverage in an Old Debate" (*Philosophical Studies*) and "Taking the Perceptual Analogy Seriously" (*Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*).

References

- Bell, Derrick. 1992. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bovens, Luc. 1999. "The Value of Hope." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59 (3): 667–681.
- Campbell, Sue. 1994. "Being Dismissed: The Politics of Emotional Expression." *Hypatia* 9 (3): 46–65.
- D'Arms, Justin, and Daniel Jacobson. 2003. "The Significance of Recalcitrant Emotion (or, Anti Quasijudgmentalism)." In *Philosophy and the Emotions*, edited by Anthony Hatzimoysis, 127–146. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Day, J. P. 1969. "Hope." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (2): 89–102.
- Deonna, Julien, and Fabrice Teroni. 2012. *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Downie, R. S. 1963. "Hope." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 24 (2): 248–251.
- DuBois, W. E. B. 1994. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press.
- Hobbes, Thomas. (1668) 1994. *Leviathan*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- King Jr, Martin Luther. 2007. "Draft of Chapter X, "Shattered Dreams"" In *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume VI*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Susan Englander, Troy Jackson, and Gerald L. Smith, 514–527. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Lloyd, Vincent. 2017. "Afro-Pessimism and Christian Hope." In *Grace, Governance, and Globalization*, edited by Martin Poulson, Lieven Boeve, and Stephan van Erp, 191–205. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Martin, Adrienne. 2014. *How We Hope: A Moral Psychology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McFall, Lynne. 1991. "What's Wrong with Bitterness?" In *Feminist Ethics*, edited by Claudia Card, 146–160. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- McGeer, Victoria. 2004. "The Art of Good Hope." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 592: 100–127.
- McInerney, Peter. 2004. "Strength of Desire." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 41 (1): 299–310.
- Meirav, Ariel. 2009. "The Nature of Hope." *Ratio* 22 (2): 216–233.
- Milona, Michael, and Katie Stockdale. *Forthcoming*. "A Perceptual Theory of Hope." *Ergo*.
- Pettit, Philip. 2004. "Hope and Its Place in Mind." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 592: 152–165.
- Stockdale, Katie. 2017. "Losing Hope: Injustice and Moral Bitterness." *Hypatia* 32 (2): 363–379.
- Wattles, Wallace. 2011. *The Wisdom of Wallace D Wattles*. New York: SoHo Books.
- Wedgwood, Ralph. 2001. "Sensing Values." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (1): 215–223.
- Winters, Joseph. 2015. *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.