What Is Hope?

Questions about Hope

I first became interested in hope as a subject of philosophical inquiry in 2004, when I took up a postdoctoral fellowship at the National Institutes of Health’s Department of Bioethics, and John Kerry began his presidential campaign against George W. Bush. In my daily life, hope was simultaneously an object of such strong approval and suspicion that I began to wonder what, exactly, it is. And, once I started paying close attention to what people said about hope, when they expressed it, and when they reared back from it, I began to think there was a fair amount of confusion about it.

The Department of Bioethics is institutionally and physically inside the NIH’s Clinical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, which is where the NIH’s clinical researchers carry out their trials—it is a hospital where every patient is a research participant. During my two years there, I spent much of my time following a cancer investigator on his rounds with participants in two phase I trials of Avastin. A phase I trial tests an experimental drug or potential treatment for toxicity and tolerance in humans. It is not until phase II, after the tolerable maximum dosage has been determined at phase I, that researchers begin to test an experimental drug’s effectiveness. The participants in phase I trials are either healthy volunteers or terminally ill patients who have exhausted the known treatments for their condition and wish to contribute to research and, perhaps, hope the experimental drug will unexpectedly benefit them. The chances of a participant in a phase I trial receiving medical benefit from the experimental drug are typically less than one percent, and participants are informed of this fact.

The participants in the trials I followed were terminally ill with forms of cancer for which Avastin was not yet approved as a treatment. Genentech (bought by Hoffmann LaRoche in 2009) makes Avastin/bevacizumab, which blocks the growth of blood vessels, including at some tumor sites. In 2004, it was first approved for use in combination with chemotherapy to treat both metastatic colorectal and metastatic small-cell lung cancer. It was, and continues to be, exorbitantly expensive, but many researchers...
believe it has great promise, and there are many trials seeking new applications for it.¹

Hope was a regular topic at the meetings I attended. If the investigator reported stabilized or reduced tumor size, the participant would light up and declare, “So, there’s hope!” If he reported increased tumor size, or raised reasons to think enrollment in a different trial might yield a better chance of medical benefit, the participant would, often, visibly steel him or herself and ask, “Is there still hope?” (Tumor size is one of the standard measures of a cancer drug’s effectiveness, despite the research community’s awareness that there is no correspondence between it and prolonged life or improved quality of life.) While the investigator never raised the topic of hope himself, the Center administrators enthusiastically embraced the unofficial name given the Center at a public event by longtime cancer research participant, Susan Butler: the “House of Hope.” “Hope” was emblazoned across press releases, ads for trials, and internal emails at the Center. It would be a feat for anyone entering the Center not to see it as offering hope, and intentionally so. Indeed, this is true of the medical research industry as a whole: hope is the watchword.

The investigator’s responses to these requests for hope were always measured. He feared both “taking away” hope, and generating or supporting “false hope.” Many medical caregivers see this as their most difficult quandary: too much blunt forthrightness and their patients will be crushed by despair; too much optimism and their patients will feel betrayed if they do not recover as hoped—and then, again, they may be crushed by despair.

At the Clinical Center, I also regularly attended the Palliative Care team’s meetings, where the team members—ranging from doctors and nurses specializing in pain medication to social workers to massage, art, and pet therapists—discussed their efforts to alleviate the suffering of some of the Center’s most seriously ill patient-participants. They took a more nuanced view of hope. Most of their patients had already given up on pursuing a cure or even extended life, and turned their focus to living their final days as comfortably as possible and dying well.² Thus, the team members had little fear of purveying “false” hope. They did not occupy the role of someone holding out

¹ In 2008, I published a paper titled “Hope and Exploitation,” in which I used Genentech as an example of a company that exploits the hopes of the terminally ill by charging excessive prices for questionably effective treatments. I was particularly concerned about their marketing of Avastin for the treatment of advanced metastatic breast cancer, which the FDA approved in February of 2008, despite the Oncology Drug Advisory Committee’s contrary recommendation in December 2007. Unfortunately, I was vindicated in July 2010, when the FDA revoked this approval. See Adrienne M. Martin, “Hope and Exploitation,” Hastings Center Report 38.5 (2008): 49–55.

² Palliative care is usually run this way—i.e., as the alternative to continued treatment, as preparation for death. Doctors often resist drawing on the resources of palliative care, because they see it as an admission of failure. This is too bad, because any patient could benefit from the forms of care I saw this thoughtful and innovative team provide.
the possibility of cure or extended life. They could focus instead on helping their patients find the most beneficial forms of hope.

As a result of my experiences in this medical setting, I formed a lot of questions about hope. Is it really the last and best bulwark against crushing despair? If so, how does it work, and how is it lost? What does it mean to say hope is “false”? Is supporting hope ever literally deceptive? What are the best forms of hope? How does hope influence deliberation and decision-making?

With my ear attuned to the rhetoric of hope, I was struck by what would otherwise have seemed the laughably trivial struggle between John Kerry and John Edwards over the slogan for their White House campaign. When Kerry accepted the Democratic nomination, his speech included the declaration “Help is on the way.” Edwards, who had campaigned as a practitioner of a “politics of hope,” transformed Kerry’s phrase into “Hope is on the way.” Some pundits criticized Edwards for this move, on the grounds that help is a concrete promise, while hope is both a vague and a naïve thing to offer. Others were moved by Edwards’ hope rhetoric, finding it an uplifting clarion call to change divisive and negative Washington politics. It is noteworthy that we saw exactly the same split over Barack Obama’s hope campaign in 2008: some believed it pointed up his relative youth and inexperience, and revealed him as a naïve dreamer without a concrete plan; others rallied to it as the answer needed in a time of strife. This division amplified the questions I was already entertaining, and convinced me of their interest beyond the medical arena. It also added another question to my list: How could hope seem to one person an unrealistic vagary and to another a solid anchor in a storm? I suspected this division in the political arena was due to the audience’s imaginative resources—some responded to a call for hope with drifting and dreams, and others with reality-responsive plans. It was their own responses coloring their interpretation of the call. What, then, I wondered, is the connection between hope and imagination?

There are many places one can look for answers to such questions. Positive psychologists have developed several instruments intended to measure hope, and there have been numerous studies of the relation between hope so measured and both mental and physical health outcomes, as well as decision-making. Christian theologians place hope at the center of a virtuous life, and Aquinas in particular has a detailed analysis of hope. Existential philosophers see hope as an essential part of the human condition, not so much the alternative to as the natural companion of the angst and despair we feel when we confront the meaninglessness universe. For Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, the hope for a better life, expressed in human activities ranging from daydreams to fashion to political utopianism, is the key to discerning and dismantling ideology. The list could go on. The tradition I work in, “analytic” philosophy, has been oddly reticent about hope, and this book aims to rectify that situation. I do touch and draw on many of the sources named above, but
I believe the methods of philosophical analysis and the theories of mind and action developed within this tradition yield unique insights on the subject. I equally believe that, were analytic philosophy unable to yield unique insights on hope, it would be the worse for analytic philosophy. So this book is also a test of these methods and theories.

The Orthodox Definition and Its Critics

Within the analytic tradition, the small literature that does address hope coalesces into a definite thematic dialogue, centered on what I will call the “orthodox” definition of hope as a combination of the desire for an outcome and the belief that the outcome is possible but not certain. This definition has its roots in the early Modern period, and may be understood as a reaction against the way hope was conceived by the Scholastics—namely, as a distinctive kind of subrational motivational force. Thomas Aquinas bases his faculty psychology on that of the Platonic and Peripatetic schools. The latter distinguish between the “appetitive” and “spirited” parts of the soul, both of which are supposed to have motivational functions. Although the spirited part is supposed to “partake of” or “share in” reason in some way, it is not itself supposed to be a rational motivational faculty; instead, it is the rational soul’s enforcer, ruling over the (also nonrational) appetites according to reason’s dictates, at least when the soul is well ordered.3 Modifying this distinction, Aquinas holds that the nonrational—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say subrational—appetite has two powers: the “concupiscible” and the “irascible.” The concupiscible appetite is our capacity to be attracted to the things we perceive as good, and repelled by those we perceive as bad; the irascible appetite is our capacity to strive against obstacles to our achieving the good or avoiding the bad. Hope, he argues, is an irascible passion.

Most Western philosophers from the sixteenth century on abandon this distinction within the appetites, proposing instead a psychology with a single subrational motivational power—call it “Desire,” or “Appetite,” or “Passion.” This power may manifest in different ways in different epistemic circumstances. For example, it may be fear in the context of uncertain harm and despair in the context of present harm. Nevertheless, it is a single power. Of course, many rationalist philosophers during this period also propose a rational motivational power (and extreme rationalists like Spinoza make out even desire to be a rational power, eliminating the subrational faculties entirely). In chapter 2, I will argue that the idea that we have both subrational

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and rational motivational powers is crucial to our understanding of hope. For
now, however, the essential point of contrast is that while Aquinas and the
Scholastics who followed him consider hope and desire distinct forms of sub-
ratational motivation, the Modern period abandons the distinction between the
irascible and concupiscible passions, thereby setting the stage for analyzing
hope as a specific case of desire. Thus the orthodox definition: to hope for an
outcome is to desire it while believing it is possible but not certain to obtain.

Much of the contemporary literature accepts the orthodox definition as
an analysis of some “lowest common denominator”1 form of hope. On this
view, the orthodox definition is true in particular of the rather trivial way we
often express hope: “I hope the train comes on time”; “I hope you are well”;
“I hope the weather is clear tomorrow”; and so on. I myself disagree with this
conciliatory notion, and will eventually argue that the orthodox definition is
inadequate to even such trivial hope. However, among those who accept the
orthodox definition for lowest common denominator hopes, there is a meth-
hoodology I find fruitful. This methodology is to begin an inquiry about hope
by focusing on what I will call hoping against hope,5 or hoping for an outcome
that one highly values but believes is extremely unlikely. Hoping against hope
has two features in particular that appear to elude the orthodox definition.

First, the orthodox definition strikes many as inadequate to the phenom-
ology of hoping against hope. When we hope against hope, overcoming
our circumstance captures our attention and imagination in a way that seems
to go beyond desire. As Margaret Urban Walker writes, hope is “an emotional
stance or ‘affective attitude,’ a recognizable syndrome that is characterized
by certain desires and perceptions, but also by certain forms of attention,
expression, feeling, and activity.”6 When we hope, the experience often seems
more profound than is typical of desire; hope seems to color our experience
in a way that is both richer and more specific than does desire.

Second, it is a common pretheoretical intuition that hoping against hope
has a special kind of sustaining power, that it is uniquely supportive of us in
times of trial and tribulation. The orthodox definition seemingly cannot ac-
commodate this intuition. Desiring, even desperately so, to overcome such
situations doesn’t have any special kind of motivational power. Moreover,
recognizing extremely slim odds seems likely only to hold one back or make
one’s efforts more timid.

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5 Some people tell me that, to their ear, “hoping against hope” rings of irrationality. I am
assuming, however, that as I define it, it is at least not obviously irrational. An important part of my
inquiry goes to whether and, if so, when, such hope is rational. The phrase has its origins, I believe,
in St. Paul’s description of Abraham as he “Who against hope believed in hope, that he might be-
come the father of many nations” (Romans 4:18).

Of course, both of these claims about the orthodox definition are empty without a convincing account of desire—the defendant of this definition may simply claim that we have underestimated desire’s ability to engage our minds and feelings, or to motivate us in challenging circumstances. Indeed, in chapter 1 I will argue that, on the most widely accepted philosophical conception of desire, the orthodox definition can account for much of the phenomenology of hope—even hope that is “against hope.” However, I will also argue that this definition is nevertheless insufficient to fully distinguish certain cases of hoping against hope. Moreover, once we add the missing element to the orthodox definition, we see that it does fall short when it comes to explicating hope’s sustaining power; desire is pretty unreliable as a form of motivation, while hope has the potential to regulate our imaginative and agential activities in a steady and sustaining way. Hope truly emerges, as in Walker’s words, a “syndrome” of attitudes and feelings. Once we see the fullness of hope as a syndrome, it also becomes apparent that even so-called lowest common denominator hopes are more complex than the orthodox definition would have it, even if their constituent syndromes are largely unrealized dispositions.

Hope as a Syndrome

Syndrome analyses of emotional attitudes like hope have a number of theoretical advantages. By incorporating distinct but related elements such as feelings, modes of perception and thought, and motivational states, a syndrome analysis is faithful to the sense of richness we associate with these attitudes. This richness can be difficult to account for, if we analyze an attitude as a belief or judgment, or a sensation, or a desire or intention, or even a combination of two or three such elements. A syndrome analysis is also rarely proposed as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather as a set of paradigmatic marks of the analysandum. Thus it can shed light on why we are sometimes ambivalent about attributing hope (or whatever attitude is under analysis) to a person. Sometimes, a person is only partially hopeful. Perhaps she desires an outcome and her thoughts occasionally drift to it, but she is not disposed to expend much energy or thought on its possibility; she has a fairly idle, borderline case of hope. That is, she entertains some of the elements of the syndrome, but does not hope in the fullest sense—she does not embody the full syndrome.

The danger of a syndrome analysis is that it runs the risk of being ad hoc. If we simply read off the elements of the purported syndrome from our observations of robust cases of hope, we have not really defined or analyzed or had an insight into hope at all. An insightful syndrome analysis must identify a unifying element, a part or aspect of hope that makes sense of the other constitutive elements, that truly makes hope a syndrome rather than a random
collection of things. I dedicate the first two chapters of this book to determining what element unifies hope as a syndrome of feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and motives. Here, it may be useful to provide a sketch of the view at which I arrive. I call it the “incorporation analysis.”

The Incorporation Analysis

I argue that the key to understanding hope—first hope held “against hope,” and then hope more broadly speaking—is to begin with the right general theory of human motivation. I reject, first, a Humean theory, according to which all human action is the product of a single kind of nonrational motivational representation: usually called “desire” (I will ultimately prefer the term “attraction,” in order to highlight the nonrational nature of the representation). A second inadequate theory is a purely rationalist theory, according to which all human action is the product of a single kind of rational representation: for example, the judgment that a consideration is a reason for action. I argue that we have independent reason for thinking both of these monist theories inadequate to the first-personal experience of deliberation and choice, whereby we seem capable of both desiring (being attracted to) an outcome and judging that desire no reason at all to pursue the outcome. Moreover, neither monistic theory can capture the difference between two people who in some sense equally desire and assign the same probability to the same outcome, and yet differ in how much they hope for it—and such cases abound. We need, instead, a dualist theory of motivation, according to which we are capable both of representing an outcome as desirable (attractive) and of representing some of the outcome’s features—including our own desire for it—as providing or failing to provide reasons to pursue it.

Once we adopt a dualist theory of motivation, we can see that hope has the following structure: to hope for an outcome is to desire (be attracted to) it, to

7 The Humean theory is probably the most widely-accepted philosophical theory of human motivation. Canonical expressions of this view can be found in Bernard O. Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” reprinted in Moral Luck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 101–13; and Michael Smith, “The Humean Theory of Motivation,” Mind 96 (1987): 36–61. (However, see chapter 2, n.8 of this book for some reasons to doubt that Williams’ argument actually supports the Humean theory.)

8 Recent proponents of the rationalist theory are T. M. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Derek Parfit, On What Matters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

assign a *probability* somewhere between 0 and 1 to it, and to judge that there are sufficient *reasons* to engage in certain feelings and activities directed toward it. The element that unifies hope as a syndrome is this final element, which I argue is a way of *incorporating* hope’s other elements into one’s rational scheme of ends.

I develop this account in detail in chapters 1 and 2, by identifying the central feelings and activities associated with hope (chapter 1), and arguing that the rational norms governing the incorporation element of hope are exclusively *practical*—that is to say, what makes hope rational as far as this element is concerned is exclusively a matter of whether it coheres with and contributes to one’s rational scheme of practical ends (chapter 2). I then spend two chapters drawing out the implications of the resulting conception of hope for hope’s influence on motivation, and in particular for its purported power to sustain us in times of trial. Finally, in the last chapter, I argue that our ordinary mode of relating to each other interpersonally (and relating to ourselves intrapersonally) essentially involves a normative variation of hope. In more detail, the chapters proceed as follows.

Summary of Chapters

In chapter 1, I present a series of challenge cases for the orthodox definition, cases that show this definition cannot distinguish strong hopes for highly unlikely outcomes from either weaker hopes or even despair directed at those outcomes. To truly capture what it is to “hope against hope,” we need to supplement the orthodox definition. I then consider and reject three recent proposals about how to supplement the definition. Although these three proposals—from Philip Pettit,10 Luc Bovens,11 and Ariel Meirav12—are not ultimately successful, I argue that there are important lessons we should take from each. In light of these lessons, I propose the incorporation analysis of hope, whereby hoping for an outcome is a distinctive way of treating one’s own attitudes toward the outcome. Specifically, one treats them as reasons to engage in various feelings and activities, and thereby *incorporates* them into one’s rational scheme of ends.

At the end of the first chapter, I characterize the activities of thought, feeling, and planning that are paradigmatic of hope. Then, in chapter 2, I further elaborate the incorporation analysis. Hope does indeed involve the basic elements of the orthodox definition—the desire for an outcome and a subjective

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10 Pettit, “Hope and Its Place in Mind.”
probability estimate between 0 and 1. In addition, hope, when most fully realized, makes use of our capacities of self-reflection and rational justification; when we hope, we treat both our desire and our probability assignment as justifying reasons for hopeful activities such as, for example, fantasizing about the hoped-for outcome. This is the feature that unifies the syndromatic elements of thought, feeling, and planning, and makes hope a distinctive and cohesive practical attitude. I argue further that the justifications to which we commit ourselves in virtue of hoping are practical justifications, and that there are few epistemic or theoretical limitations on rational hope. One natural worry about this analysis is that it makes hope into an overly reflective or sophisticated attitude—for example, under this analysis, it appears very young children and nonhuman animals are not capable of hope. I conclude chapter 2 by addressing this worry.

The core set of questions that sparked my interest in hope regard its role in motivation. Is it really the last, best bulwark against despair? Is inspiring hope a good way to motivate people to action? How, more generally, does hope influence deliberation and motivation? In chapter 3, I therefore turn to consider the implications of the incorporation analysis for these questions. I focus on hope in the context of a “trial”—an extreme challenge to one’s ability to live well or flourish, a circumstance that makes literal or figurative suicide tempting—but my argument extends to less profound circumstances, as well. I argue that hope has the potential to influence motivation in an interesting and distinctive variety of ways, but that its influence is, for the most part, contingent: hope is not, in itself, a uniquely powerful or reliable form of sustenance. Contrary to popular opinion, whether hope is indeed a good resource in terrible circumstances is an entirely contingent matter. It is contingent on how we express our hopes, especially on how we exercise our hopeful imaginations.

The conclusion of the third chapter, that hope’s ability to support us in times of trial is contingent, applies to hope in general. There is, however, a specification of hope that is both structured to close off suicide (literal or figurative) as an attractive option and immune to disappointment. Or so I argue in chapter 4. This specification of hope is directed at an “unimaginable” outcome, or an outcome that outstrips our available concepts and has the marks of the attitude we often call “faith.” One might wonder if this is bad news for atheists. Have we lost a crucial survival tool? I argue, to the contrary, that there is such a thing as secular faith, an attitude that has the sustaining power and immunity to disappointment of religious faith, but that does not presuppose any religious commitments. There is, then, a form of hope that is a unique bulwark against despair and capable of sustaining us through trials, no matter what comes. However, though it is available to the religious and secular alike, it is quite specific, and not easily attainable. Again, then, popular appeals to hope and its value require serious qualification.
In the final chapter, I shift gears to argue that hope plays a crucial role in our standard ways of relating to each other “interpersonally” (and to ourselves intrapersonally). One way that we relate to each other interpersonally—or from what Peter Strawson dubs the “participant stance”—is to hold each other responsible. This mode of interaction is best construed, I argue, as what Jay Wallace calls “normative expectation.” Departing somewhat from the details of Wallace’s view, I argue that to normatively expect someone to comply with a requirement is to be prepared to justify a narrow set of “reactive” feelings: resentment, indignation, and guilt. Normative expectation and these reactive feelings are at the heart of relating to people as rational agents by holding them responsible.

What I call “normative hope” is an attitude closely related to, but distinct from normative expectation. To place normative hope in a person is not to hold her responsible, exactly, but it is still to relate to her as a rational agent, because it means holding up principles to her as rationally aspirational. It is to be prepared to justify feelings such as interpersonal disappointment and gratitude. When we feel gratitude for a supererogatory action, this does not reflect our normative expectation of some lesser action (though we may have this expectation); instead, it reflects our feeling that the action’s principle is something to which ordinary agents need only aspire. When we feel gratitude for a dutiful action, this reflects our attitude that the target faced genuine challenges, so that dutiful action is a genuine accomplishment. When a parent feels disappointment in an errant child, this reflects his sense that the child’s status as a reasoner provided a similar challenge. And, I argue, when we invest normative hope in the morally vicious, this amounts to a condemnation of their vice, as well as an aspiration on their behalf.

Hope deserves rather a different reputation than it has. On the one hand, it does not deserve a reputation as either unqualifiedly good or unqualifiedly reliable. Its relation to rational action and a good life is more complex. On the other hand, it is of far deeper philosophical interest and significance than most have recognized. It is revelatory of the structures and operations of reflective human consciousness, and it can be a strategically valuable response to the fact that we are creatures with animal attractions, with the capacity for rational deliberation and choice, and the capacity to be aware of our own epistemic and agential limitations. In the conclusion to this book, I pull together these points and outline recommendations for the philosophy of psychology and the emotions that follow from this investigation of hope.