

Agnieszka LEKKA-KOWALIK

A HOPE FOR REASON

Hope is a common phenomenon in human life. And yet once we try to conceptualize it, we face the problem St. Augustine described while trying to define time: “If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not.”¹ Nevertheless there have been continuous attempts at explaining the nature of hope. According to the standard account, hope is always a relational phenomenon: a human person hopes for a certain outcome, and to hope for this outcome is to desire it and to believe that its realization is possible, although not inevitable. On this view, hope is considered as a compound attitude.

However, a current discussion on hope² shows that the standard account faces various difficulties. The first is that hope comes in degrees and the ‘degree’ of hope a person cherishes might determine what she will decide about her future. For instance, an ill person may *greatly* hope to recover and book a holiday trip despite her illness. Another person, though, suffering from the same condition, may have somewhat smaller hopes of recovery and will prefer not to make any holiday plans. There is no difference between the two cases in respect of the beliefs and the desires of the persons involved: each of them knows that, by the time her vacation approaches, her recovery is possible, although not certain (i.e., not inevitable), and recovery is what both of them desire. What is, then, the factor determining the degree of the hope each of them cherishes? One can certainly assume that there may be circumstances justifying the first person’s greater hope, for instance, she may be younger and have no concomitant diseases. Still, even such information does not fully explain the difference, and one may easily imagine a situation in which two persons with more or less the same medical condition, subjected to the same experimental treatment applied by the same team of doctors, will not show the same degree of hope. Thus the standard account of hope needs to be supplemented.

The contents of this ‘supplement,’ though, require further analysis. One might claim that the degree of hope a person cherishes depends on the strength of the person’s character or personality. Yet it is not that simple, for an act of hoping may be directed towards various objects. In this context, Phillip Pettit introduces the concept of ‘substantial hopes.’³ One may hope for things like having a good lunch, passing an exam, or being qualified

¹ *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Book XI, trans. Edward Bouverie Pusey (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 87.

² See Jack M. Kwon, “What is Hope?” *European Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 1 (2019): 243–54.

³ See Phillip Pettit, “Hope and Its Place in Mind,” *The Annals of the American Academy* 592(2004), 152–65.

for an experimental cancer therapy. There is no need for a deep analysis of the listed cases to see that the objects of hope differ in their *objective* importance to a human life and that the importance in question is not unrecognized. Whenever hope concerns things which are vital to a human life *and* the chance of the object of hope being accomplished is low, one might argue that, at the time of ordeal, hope will provide additional strength. This is why one usually tries to awake hope in a seriously ill friend rather than build up her character; it is hope which will have a motivational potential helping the ill person decide on an experimental treatment, even though her *belief* in its effect might not be justified by the body of medical data. In order to explain why hope is a source of energy and motivation, Luc Boven introduces the idea of mental-imagining, that is, imagining what it would be like should the ‘hope for’ a given state of affairs actually come true.⁴ According to Boven, hoping involves (1) the desire of a certain state of affairs, (2) the belief that the state of affairs in question *can* actually come true and that things will then evolve for the better, as well as (3) an image of the state of affairs and of the world in general after the particular hope is accomplished. On this view, any ‘substantial’ hope must show marks of durability and stability which will help sustain one’s actions and one’s attitude, should things begin to go awry.

However, Boven’s proposal renders the difference between hope and despair non-existent, since in both cases the person shares certain desires and beliefs, and can entertain the image of the desired outcome coming true. Yet, which Boven fails to address, in the case of hope the image in question might be a ‘source of energy’ for the person to ‘fight for the desired outcome,’ while in the case of despair it might significantly weaken her attitude. Ariel Meirav has attempted to distinguish despair from hope by pointing to an external factor.⁵ While in both cases we can recognize there is a gap between, on the one hand, the state of affairs we desire and see as possible, and, on the other, actions which are within our power to ascertain this state of affairs, whether we hope or despair depends on how we evaluate the factors which ‘close’ the gap: if we think that they work in our favor, we hope, if we think they are against us, we despair. Jack M. Kwong rightly points out that such an explanation hardly works, for we might not know the factors in question, or they might simply be neutral natural forces. He uses the following example: We hope to win the lottery, but in this case the ‘external factors’ are the accidental workings of the physical forces in the lottery drum, and we are not in the position to evaluate them either as good or as bad for us—nevertheless, we hope to win the lottery.⁶ Still another insight has been developed by Adrienne M. Martin, who complements the ‘orthodox’ view of hope by adding an ‘incorporation’ element: what distinguishes hope from attitudes such as despair is that the hopeful person incorporates her desire as a *reason* for her actions.⁷ Hope makes it possible for a human person to organize her activities around a certain outcome, for instance, plan a vacation despite her illness rather than cancel all her plans. Such an incorporation comprises two elements: (1) one needs to regard the probability of the desired outcome as sufficiently high to engage rationally in its pursuit and

⁴ See Luc B o v e n, “The Value of Hope,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59, no. 3 (1999), 667–81.

⁵ See Ariel M e i r a v, “The Nature of Hope,” *Ratio* 22, no. 2 (2009): 216–33.

⁶ K w o n g, “What is Hope?”

⁷ See Adrienne M. M a r t i n, *How We Hope: A Moral Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

(2) to become a reason justifying her activities, the outcome must be appealing enough to the person. This approach seems analogous to Mieczysław A. Krąpiec's explanation of the interplay of reason and will in an act of decision-making: Something appeals to the person as good and makes her will move from being passive to action by giving her a reason and motivation to act.⁸ The claim Philip Pettit makes goes even further: Hoping embraces a 'cognitive resolve' to act *as if* the desired outcome was going to occur, even should one admit that the possibility of it being the case is rather low.⁹ However, Kwong claims that none of the above attempts at supplementing the account of hope as a compound attitude allows to distinguish between hope and despair, and he develops his own solution: "My proposal for the missing ingredient in the standard account of hope is that a person must, in addition to possessing the relevant belief-desire structure, be able to *see* a way in which the desired outcome can come about. Moreover, she must see the way to the hoped-for outcome as a genuine possibility."¹⁰ Kwong goes as far as to claim that should a person despair but suddenly discover a way leading to the desired outcome, she will shift from despair to hope.

Some other thinkers argue in turn that hope is a primitive mental state. The view is expressed, for instance, by Gabriel Segal and Mark Textor.¹¹ Claudia Blöser radicalizes their position by questioning the claim that desire and belief are necessary conditions for hope. We hope in a great variety of ways—she claims—and the search for elements that are common to all cases might be fruitless. At best we may assume that cases of hope are related in terms of Wittgenstein's family resemblance.¹²

We do not need to delve further into philosophical or psychological debates. What has been said so far is enough to show that hope is a peculiar phenomenon. It is omnipresent, and one might say that there is no domain of human life from which the language of hope is absent. Yet proverbs, which are supposed to be the wisdom of nations, teach us that people express contradictory views on the meaning of hope and on its significance, such as 'Hope is the mother of fools,' 'He who lives on hope, dies of hunger,' 'He that lives in hope dances to an ill tune,' or 'Hope and expectation are a fool's income,' but also 'Hope is the physician of each misery,' 'Hope is the last thing ever lost,' 'As long as there is life, there is hope,' or 'Hope is grief's best music.'¹³ Regardless of how hope is conceived, we seem to agree—as already Thomas Aquinas stressed—that "the object of hope is a future good, difficult but possible to obtain."¹⁴ In the same vein, Paul J. Wadell adds, "There is no need for hope if we can easily get what we want, but neither is there

⁸ See Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, "Decyzja – bytem moralnym," *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 31, no. 2 (1983): 47–65.

⁹ See Phillip Pettit, "Hope and its Place in Mind," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 592, no. 1 (2004): 152–65.

¹⁰ Kwong, "What is Hope?": 246.

¹¹ See Gabriel Segal and Mark Textor, "Hope as a Primitive Mental State," *Ratio* 28, no. 2 (2015), 207–22.

¹² See Claudia Blöser, "Hope as an Irreducible Concept," *Ratio* 32, no. 3 (2019), 205–14.

¹³ See The List of World Proverbs: Proverbs about Hope, <http://www.listofproverbs.com/keywords/hope/10.htm>.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 17, a. 1, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3017.htm>.

any reason to hope when what we desire is completely beyond our grasp.”¹⁵ Aquinas considers hope as a kind of passion and the authors whose views we have discussed seem to grasp it precisely in the same way, although they do not emphasize as strongly as he did that the good in question should be difficult to get. So understood, hope becomes—as noted earlier—a reason for acting. But hope can become a reason for action only when it is *justified*: the person must recognize that the desired outcome is really attainable and can see a way of attaining it. Hope is then different from irrational optimism, a pure emotion which prompts ‘everything will be all right,’ and it differs from the blind faith that ‘this way or another things will turn out fine,’ as well as from the illusion that ‘something good will come up.’ Thus, genuine hope is rational, realistic and empirically grounded, or, in other words, based on experience. It might then be that proverbs critical of this passion refer to phenomena which are unlike genuine hope.

The term ‘desire’ also deserves attention. A hopeful person sees the hoped-for outcome as something good, but we might ask whether the outcome in question should be objectively good or it will suffice if it is good merely for the hopeful one. The opposition is certainly not straightforward, for certain goods might be both objectively and subjectively good. However, there might be cases of outcomes which are only subjectively good. Thus, to overcome this problem one needs to answer the question, ‘Who am I *really*?’ rather than, ‘How do I understand myself?’ or ‘How do other people perceive me?’ We cannot obviously begin a discussion of the nature of the human person here, but neither can we disregard the fact that we tend to find hope to succeed in morally bad actions at least disturbing. Although statements like, ‘I hope my uncle will be murdered soon,’ ‘I hope to rob a rich friend of mine,’ ‘I hope he will abandon ill-wishing his uncle,’ or ‘I hope his friend will prevent the robbery,’ all seem to express genuine hope, we tend to disapprove of the two former ones. Thus, following our natural insight, we need to put forward the hypothesis that we are dealing with genuine hope only if its desired outcome is objectively good. Our intuitive response can be further justified by the joy and relief we experience whenever we find out that ‘hopes’ for objectively immoral outcomes have been frustrated. Agatha Christie’s short story *Wasps’ Nest* is a good illustration of this point: John Harrison, who is terminally ill, plans to commit suicide so as to make his rival for the love of a woman arrested on suspicion of murder and hanged. In a sense, Harrison hopes to murder his rival. However, Hercule Poirot, the famous detective who happens to be a friend of his, spoils the plan. At the end of the story, Harrison expresses his gratitude to Poirot, who has ruined his hopes: although he will die, he will not die as a murderer.

Hope is a genuinely personalistic phenomenon. Aquinas observes that the desired outcome can be attained by one’s own effort, but also with the help from others. “Hope is made more perfect, because we hope chiefly in our friends,”¹⁶ he says. What he means is that there are more reasons for hope when we have friends to rely on rather than when we act on our own. This insight is grasped in the current philosophical and psychological literature on hope, which frequently refers to its particular cases. A person hoping, for instance, for the victory of her favorite sports team may be motivated by the fact that the team has a new coach who is better than the previous one. A writer hoping to finish

¹⁵ Paul J. Wadde11, “Hope: The Forgotten Virtue of Our Time,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, Nov. 21, 2016, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2016/11/07/hope-forgotten-virtue-our-time>.

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 17, a. 8.

a new book on time may put his hopes in a friend who might provide an organizing idea for the material the writer has gathered. This line of reasoning may be further developed so as to show that, even in cases when the hopeful person apparently relies on things like amulets or rituals, there is always a personal element involved in the situation of hoping. For instance, the hopeful one will believe that the person who has sold her the amulet did not cheat and that the amulet is genuine, or the person resorting to a ritual will trust that it has been appropriately chosen and is performed by an authorized person. Aquinas's claim that our hope is more perfect when we have friends should be taken seriously, for what distinguishes friends from strangers is the mutual love that connects us with them. Our hope to attain an objective good we desire is better justified—and therefore more rational—once we believe that our friends will help us. Hope then necessarily entails trust.

However, we need to bring out yet another element. We have claimed that the hope which provides a reason to act and which sustains the person's actions and attitudes whenever things go awry must be realistic, rational, based on experience, but also stable, durable, and firm. Otherwise it cannot be a *reason to act*. So, whenever we hope, we build ourselves as hopeful persons. And, as such, we will ever more readily adopt a hopeful attitude if only our realistic and rational evaluation of a given situation renders *reasons* to hope. Therefore hope may be seen as a virtue not only in the theological sense, but also in everyday life. The theological sense of hope, however, confirms our analysis. *The Concise Catholic Dictionary* defines hope, as follows: "The theological virtue which is a supernatural gift bestowed by God through which one trusts God will grant eternal life and the means of obtaining it providing one cooperates. Hope is composed of desire and expectation together with a recognition of the difficulty to be overcome in achieving eternal life."¹⁷ The view of hope as a trust-based rational, realistic, and personal passion explains well the phenomenon of 'hoping against hope.' Whenever we desire something and discover that attaining it is beyond our and our friends' power, there is still the last resort, the omnipotent Love, that is, God. Thus 'hope against hope' is not a manifestation of an over-optimistic attitude: In such cases hope becomes a rational defense against fear and despair.

The above analysis prompts one more conclusion. We have identified hope as a rational phenomenon. The object of genuine hope is an actual good and hope can always be justified, which means that there is always an answer to the question of *why we hope*, and this answer is different from the one to the question of *why we hope for this particular thing*. Any genuine, that is, justified hope might become a reason to act in a certain way, and thereby our decision to act this way is, in such cases, rational. Thus, through the phenomenon of hope, rationality shows itself as a crucial quality of the human person. Hope presupposes reason as a distinct human faculty. In order to genuinely hope, a person must employ reason. We may then say that in order to hope reasonably we need to hope for our reason to work properly and we need to have faith in reason. This, in turn, brings up the question of truth. We need to believe that the object of our hope is truly good, that it is truly attainable, and that our friend truly loves us and will work to make our hopes come true. Genuine hope presupposes the truth of things, the hopeful person's love of truth and her objection to living an illusion. Fr. Jerzy Szymik

¹⁷ Robert C. Broderick, "Hope," in Robert C. Broderick, *The Concise Catholic Dictionary* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1944), 77.

has summarized this idea by saying that “faith is a hope for love,” whereas “hope can be there because faith tells the truth about love.”¹⁸ The reason to hope, hope for the cognitive power of reason, love of truth, a recognition of the truth about love, faith in reason and the reason to believe—all of them are intertwined in an act of hoping. This is why we may conclude by referring to the famous words attributed to Pliny the Elder, “Hope is the pillar that holds up the world.”

¹⁸ Jerzy Szymiak, “Piękno katolicyzmu: wiara: Jak się łączą – wiara, nadzieja, miłość,” <https://biblia.wiara.pl/doc/2309801.Piekno-katolicyzmu-wiara>.