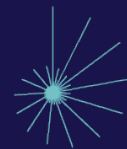# Hope and Optimism

October 2020

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Human beings are ambitious and goal-oriented creatures. Many, for example, aim at stable and fulfilling careers, good health, and happy families. Some also pursue broader aims, such as social justice, technological progress, or scientific discovery. But with such ambition comes adversity. When our central aims come under threat, as they inevitably do, we often find ourselves pessimistic or fearful. Despair might threaten to take hold. It is thus tempting to look to hope and optimism as ways of withstanding, or even smothering, these negative emotions. But should we? This review is a detailed examination of the nature and value of hope and optimism.

By and large, American society affirms the value of hope and optimism. A brief glance at your local bookstore's self-help section is sure to display such bestsellers as Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* and Jen Sincero's *You Are a Badass: How to Stop Doubting Your Greatness and Live an Awesome Life*. In similar fashion, politicians seeking votes regularly promise us hope. Here we are reminded of Barack Obama's well-known HOPE t-shirts and George W. Bush's slogan, "A safer world and a more hopeful America" (Stitzlein 2019a, p. 5). But are hope and optimism really all they're cracked up to be?

There are growing doubts about the value of positive thinking. Speaking about the threat of climate change, Greta Thunberg remarks, "Adults keep saying, 'we owe it to young people to give them hope.' But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic" (2019, p. 22). In a memorable exchange between Ezra Klein and Ta-Nehisi Coates on the problem of political polarization, Coates asked, "I wonder how much hope you hold out for curing those institutional ills, those deep-seated ills, in a way that we would all find peaceable." Klein responded, "I'm not here to give you hope." Coates then replied, "Good, because I don't want it" (Klein, 18 Feb. 2020).

In these remarks, Thunberg, Coates, and Klein are speaking of hope rather than optimism. This is important because they are distinct phenomena. One of the key tasks of this review will be to pry apart these two forms of positive thinking. Central to the distinction is that while optimism implies confidence in a successful outcome, hope does not. There is thus a possibility of "hoping against hope" even when optimism is lost.

Because hope and optimism are distinct, their respective advantages and disadvantages are best explored separately. Here I begin with optimism and move subsequently to hope. It can likewise be misleading to talk about whether hope and optimism are good "on the whole." Such abstract pronouncements obscure the differing roles that hope and optimism play in distinct aspects of our lives. Consequently, this review focuses on the functions of hope and optimism in different domains, including, for instance, healthcare, education, and politics.

The primary subject of this review is the Hope and Optimism Initiative, a $4.5 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation led by researchers at Notre Dame, Cornell, and the University of Pennsylvania. This grant also supported numerous sub-projects for scholars working around the world.

The aim of the project was to explore the nature and benefits of hope and optimism from philosophical, theological, and empirical perspectives.

## 2. DEFINING OPTIMISM

Optimism has received substantial attention within the field of psychology. And when academics in other fields discuss optimism, they tend to use similar definitions, often borrowing (or slightly amending) from psychology. In this way, it seems that psychologists have done a good job of capturing what we ordinarily mean by "optimism." However, as we shall see below, definitions of "hope" are substantially more controversial and there is little agreement across, and even within, academic disciplines.

### Dispositional Optimism

This review focuses on two major approaches to optimism. The first is *dispositional optimism* (Carver and Scheier 2014; 2018). A dispositionally optimistic person has a general tendency to expect that things will go well for them. A pessimistic person, by contrast, has a general tendency to expect that things will go poorly for them. The term "general" here indicates that this form of optimism is not about anything in particular. For example, one cannot be dispositionally optimistic that they will get the job offer, or that they will find love. Optimism about a specific goal is sometimes called *contextualized optimism* (see Carver and Scheier 2014, p. 293).

Theorists who study dispositional optimism are careful to pry it apart from closely related phenomena. As Charles Carver and Michael Scheier point out, while optimism is a form of "positive thinking," we should not assume that optimism entails active planning or fantasizing (2018, p. 214). A person might expect things to go well without actually planning how to bring their desire to fruition. They likewise may not spend much time imagining what a better future would look like. So while it may be true that planning and fantasizing are good things, and equally true that dispositionally optimistic people *tend* to engage in such activities, researchers keep them separate as much as possible to evaluate the distinctive value of dispositional optimism.

Dispositional optimism is typically measured with the Life Orientation Test (LOT) and the Life Orientation Test–Revised (LOT-R). The LOT asks participants the extent to which they agree with statements such as "I'm always optimistic about my future" and "If something can go wrong for me, it will." Possible answers include the following: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree (Scheier and Carver 1985). The LOT-R is similar but includes fewer questions (Scheier, Carver, and Bridges 1994). The items on both the LOT and LOT-R are included in the appendixes. The way in which dispositional optimism is studied reveals an important point, namely, that dispositional optimism comes in degrees. In other words, it is an oversimplification to think of individuals as dispositionally optimistic or else pessimistic; the trait exists along a spectrum. It is also true that people are generally more optimistic than they are pessimistic. According to Segerstrom (2006), less than one-fourth of

respondents disagree with optimistic statements while agreeing with pessimistic ones. This means that references to the effects of optimism are often referring, strictly speaking, to the effects of being more rather than less optimistic (Segerstrom, Carver, and Scheier 2017, p. 196-197).

Researchers tend to assume that the LOT and LOT-R probe a *single* trait. However, as indicated above, these tests ask some questions that target optimism and others that target pessimism. It turns out that respondents sometimes answer in surprising ways such that their answers to questions about pessimism do not correlate with their answers to questions about optimism (Marshall et al. 1992). It is thus an open question whether there might be two traits, dispositional optimism and dispositional pessimism. This raises the fascinating possibility that a person may, at a single time, be both an optimist and a pessimist. But for the purposes of this review, I follow the custom of treating dispositional optimism as a single trait measured along a bipolar scale (see Segerstrom, Carver, and Scheier 2017 p. 197).

Dispositional optimism is often contrasted with another form of optimism: *attributional style*. This approach has been popularized by Martin Seligman, a best-selling author and leading advocate of what is often called *positive psychology*. According to his approach, we can evaluate optimism by considering how people attribute causes to their successes and failures. Those who view the causes of their failures as "fixed" are likely to have a negative (pessimistic) outlook on the future. By contrast, viewing the causes of failure as changeable can lead to a more positive (optimistic) outlook (Peterson and Seligman 1984). According to Segerstrom, Carver, and Scheier (2017, p. 196), however, these approaches are importantly distinct. They also observe that researchers increasingly rely on the LOT, in part because attributional style has proven more difficult to measure.

## Positive Illusions

Yet dispositional optimism doesn't seem to capture *all* that we ever mean by "optimism." That's because optimism is often associated with foolishness and a lack of realism; but dispositional optimism is defined in a way that it is not irrational (Carver and Scheier 2014, p. 294). To illustrate the "irrational" sense of optimism, consider Thomas Friedman's remark on the growing threat of climate change:

> Because I always tell people, pessimists are usually right. Let's face it. Optimists are usually wrong. But all the great change in history, positive change, was done by optimists. (Kolbert, 2008)

This suggests that while optimism is useful, it is also generally misguided. The conception of optimism as *positive illusion* captures this idea. Positive illusions are generally characterized as "systematic small distortions of reality that make things appear better than they are" (Taylor 1989, p. 228; quoted in Bortolotti 2018, p. 522).

These positive illusions can take different forms. Here are a few illustrations. First, *illusions of control* occur "when we believe that we can control independent, external events" (Bortolotti 2018, p. 522; see also Langer and Roth 1975). Second, *illusions of superiority* arise "when we believe that we are better than average in a variety of domains, including attractiveness, intelligence, and even moral character"

(Bortolotti 2018, p. 522-523; see also Brown 2012; Wolpe, Wolpert, and Rowe 2014). Finally, optimism bias emerges "when we have the tendency to predict that our future will be largely positive and will yield progress, and that negative events will not be part of our lives" (Bortolotti 2018, p. 523; see also Sharot 2011). Optimism bias is similar to dispositional optimism but is measured in a different way. Whereas the latter is studied predominantly with the LOT and LOT-R, the former "is measured by comparing the perceived chance of an event occurring with its objective chance of occurring" (Bortolotti 2018, p. 523). For example, an optimistically biased person might perceive themselves as having a good chance of winning the lottery even though the actual odds of winning are negligible.

Lisa Bortolotti emphasizes two key differences between dispositional optimism and positive illusions (2018, p. 524). First, dispositional optimism is a personality trait that is more stable. Positive illusions shift more with circumstances and mood. Second, whereas dispositional optimism tends to be more uniformly positive in its effects, positive illusions can have significant drawbacks. (More on these advantages and drawbacks below.)

Recently, Bortolotti and colleagues have argued that the label, "positive illusions," is slightly misleading. While the label indicates that optimistic people have *false* beliefs, it sometimes turns out that positive illusions are true. For example, a couple might irrationally believe that their relationship is better than other people's relationships. Yet despite their irrationality, they may be right. Furthermore, optimistic beliefs concern the future, and so it is difficult to evaluate them in the present as true or false. Finally, it turns out that forming an optimistic belief can alter the odds. That is, believing your relationship is loving and healthy may increase the odds that it becomes loving and healthy (see Jefferson, Bortolotti, and Kuzmanovic 2017; Bortolotti 2018; Jefferson and Bortolotti 2018). Positive illusions can thus create what are often called *self-fulfilling prophesies* (Taylor and Brown 1988, p. 199; Jefferson 2017, p. 1173 n. 1). In thinking about positive "illusions," then, we should keep in mind that their distinctive feature is *irrationality* rather than falsity.

## 3. THE BENEFITS OF OPTIMISM

This section outlines optimism's likely benefits. Optimism's risks will be considered later. Most of the research described in this section focuses on the benefits of dispositional optimism (see Bouchard et al. 2017 and Carver and Scheier 2018 for detailed reviews). However, I also discuss the benefits of positive illusions, especially in the context of health and relationships.

Before getting into the weeds, it's important to flag some significant methodological points. The first is that measurements for optimism such as the Life Orientation Test (LOT) officially only tell us that optimism *covaries* with some other variable of interest (e.g., emotional well-being). And as Carver and Scheier point out, "This makes it exceedingly difficult to be certain that the predictor (in this case, optimism) is the cause of variation in the other variable" (2018, p. 216). Relatedly, even when there is good reason to believe that optimism is causally bound up with some benefit, it can be tricky to tell

whether the optimism leads to the benefit or vice-versa. In many cases, there may be causal influence going in both directions (Segerstrom, Carver, and Scheier 2017). As Carver and Scheier point out, these concerns about causation are an "occupation hazard for personality psychologists" (2018, p. 216).

To gather evidence about optimism's effects, it is crucial to disentangle optimism from related constructs (see Bennett 2011, p. 306). Otherwise, some benefit we ascribe to optimism may better be ascribed to some other trait. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the work of Stephen Smagula and colleagues as exemplary of this nuanced and careful approach (Smagula et al. 2016). In their study of dispositional optimism's benefits for health, they were careful to consider whether optimism predicts positive mental and physical health outcomes *when considered in isolation from related constructs*, notably conscientiousness (roughly, being well-organized and reliable) and goal-adjustment ability (roughly, the ability to disengage from unobtainable goals and find new ones). As it happens, they found optimism to be independently related to nearly all of the mental and physical health outcomes that they considered. The major exception was physical activity. However, their research revealed that optimism supports conscientiousness; and conscientiousness *is* independently predictive of physical activity. This study represents the kind of nuanced approach to optimism that is needed to really identify its function, whether considered in a health context or any other arena (see also Scheier and Carver 2018).

**Optimism's Motivational Benefits**

Dispositional optimism appears to support goal achievement (motivation). Much of the research here has focused on educational achievement, and one study found that optimistic students are less likely to drop out of college than their pessimistic peers (Solberg Nes, Evans, and Segerstrom 2009). Furthermore, optimistic law students were found to have higher salaries ten years after graduation (Segerstrom 2007). Assuming that a higher salary is a goal for most law students, this indicates that optimists are better at pursuing what is, at least for many, an important monetary goal (Carver and Scheier 2018, p. 217).

Dispositional optimism also supports planning, at least in certain respects. The evidence for this emerges from research on optimism and goal conflict. Goals can conflict in two ways. So-called *resource conflicts* arise when goals make conflicting demands on resources such as time or money. By contrast, *inherent conflicts* occur when the pursuit of one goal is inconsistent with the pursuit of another. For example, the goal of finding romantic love clashes with the goal of avoiding potential heartbreak and rejection.

As it happens, optimistic people are better at avoiding inherent conflicts. Why might this be? One study found that optimistic students were better able to identify and pursue important goals, while their pessimistic peers found themselves pursuing important and unimportant goals in equal measure (Segerstrom and Solberg Nes 2006; Bouchard et al. 2017, p. 115). That said, optimistic people do appear to face resource conflicts at a higher rate. Yet despite often facing resource conflicts, optimistic people tend to be happier. This indicates that resource conflicts may be less distressing than inherent conflicts (Bouchard et al. 2017, pp. 114-115; see below on the emotional benefits of optimism).

One might wonder, though, what happens when dispositional optimists recognize, or should recognize, that their goal is *unachievable*. In this case, it turns out that optimists and pessimists report finding it equally difficult to give up unachievable projects. However, optimists have the upper hand insofar as they are better at finding *new* goals to replace old ones. In this way, the greater flexibility of optimism helps them to plan for the future in ways that enhance their well-being. For example, one study found that optimistic patients who were forced to adjust their life due to illness were much happier one year later than their pessimistic peers (Rasmussen et al. 2006).

**Optimism's Benefits for Relationships**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, dispositional optimism comes with substantial social benefits. For example, people are more likely to pursue interactions with optimists than pessimists (Carver, Kus, and Scheier 1994; Brissette, Scheier, and Carver 2002). Individuals who believe that their future is more likely to be negative than their peers often face "social rejection" (Helweg-Larsen, Sadeghian, and Webb 2002, p. 92). Relatedly, those who are optimistic "view their own social partners as more supportive than do pessimists" (Bouchard et al. 2017, p. 116; see Srivastava et al. 2006).

Optimism also appears to enhance existing relationships in predictable ways. For example, married couples who score higher in optimism are more likely to stay married. They also tend to work together better to solve problems than do more pessimistic couples (see Assad, Donnellan, and Conger 2007). In this way, dispositional optimism's motivational benefits (described above) appear to intersect with its social benefits. Moreover, I suspect that the way in which optimists cope with problems more generally helps to explain why relationships high in optimism tend to be more stable and fulfilling. The way in which optimists tend to cope will be described below.

Keeping the focus on romantic relationships, let's turn now from dispositional optimism to positive illusions. Although there is more controversy about the benefits of positive illusions for relationships, the balance of evidence indicates that they are beneficial. These benefits appear to be rooted in the *relationship superiority bias* and the *love-is-blind illusion* (Murray et al. 1996a and 1996b). The former arises when a person believes their relationship is better than most. The latter arises when one fails to see a partner's faults and rates them as above average across many domains (e.g., beauty, virtue, intelligence). Some research indicates that such irrationality leads to disappointment in the long term. On the surface, this sounds plausible, for we might suppose that the short-term comforts of optimism will slowly give way to a soberer assessment of reality. According to these researchers, those who are more realistic throughout a relationship are better positioned for success (Swann et al. 1994).

But there appears to be more support for what Bortolotti calls the *self-fulfillment* model (Bortolotti 2018, pp. 526-527). Here optimistic beliefs insulate partners from doubts about the relationship. This creates a sense of security. Additionally, traits that we might perceive as weaknesses are reinterpreted as virtues. To borrow an example from Murray and colleagues, a spouse might view their partner's stubbornness as a sign of integrity rather than selfishness (Murray et al. 1996a, p. 80; see also Bortolotti 2018, p. 526). Finally, when one partner idealizes the other, the idealized partner will often come to view themselves in

terms of that ideal. This creates a self-fulfilling prophesy whereby the irrational, optimistic beliefs slowly remake the partner in their image. In sum, then, positive illusions can help relationships to succeed, providing emotional satisfaction in the early stages while transforming the partners in a way that secures long-term success.

**Optimism's Health Benefits**

Researchers are especially interested in the potential benefits of dispositional optimism for physical health. Numerous studies indicate that when it comes to cardiovascular disease, in particular, optimism is especially helpful (Bouchard et al. 2017, pp. 120-121). One major study involved over 95,000 Caucasian and African American women. These women were initially measured for dispositional optimism. Eight years later, the more optimistic women were less likely to suffer from coronary heart disease. The optimists were also less likely to have passed away from any cause (Kim, Park, and Peterson 2011). In general, though, the research on optimism's benefits for physical ailments other than cardiovascular disease is uncertain. For example, research on the benefits of optimism for HIV and cancer is conflicting (Bouchard et al. 2017, p. 121).

Other research looks at whether optimism predicts healthy *behaviors*. If so, then this may explain why optimism has some of the health benefits that it does. As it turns out, optimism supports a range of healthy lifestyle habits. For one, optimists tend to eat healthier (i.e., eat more fruits and vegetables) and consume alcohol in moderation (Giltay et al. 2007). Optimists are also less likely to smoke (Steptoe et al. 2010). They likewise tend to seek out information about how to improve their health. For example, one study found that optimists were more likely to know about the risk factors for a heart attack (Radcliffe and Klein 2002). Finally, optimists tend to engage in more physical activity (Giltay et al. 2007). This may be because optimism supports *conscientiousness* (being well organized and reliable), which Smagula et al. (2016) found to be an independent predictor of physical activity. A recent study on the impact of optimism's benefits *after* a diagnosis of advanced cancer found that avoiding alcohol and increased physical activity were associated with higher rates of survival. However, researchers in this study did observe that "in contrast to earlier research, optimism was not found to be significantly related to survival in this cohort of patients" (Krane et al. 2018, p. 3424).

As this last point indicates, even if optimism is helpful, it is no panacea. To add to this point, one recent study explored whether more optimistic older women were more likely to quit smoking. They found this not to be the case (Progovac et al. 2017). Other research explored whether optimism predicted better sleep among students in the week leading up to a major exam. Here, too, optimism was not found to have a positive effect (Pressman et al. 2017, p. 788).

Going forward, researchers advocate exploring the connections between optimism's social benefits (see above) and its health benefits. While there has been much research linking optimism to social support, and similarly much research linking social support and health outcomes, these research topics have proceeded largely independently. Scheier and Carver observe, "It may be time to integrate these research streams to determine if social variables, such as social integration, network size, and perceived support,

might not provide yet an additional set of mechanisms that link optimism to physical well-being" (2018, p. 1090).

Similar to dispositional optimism, researchers have found positive illusions to be beneficial in health contexts. Key research here has focused on HIV (Taylor et al. 1992) and breast cancer (Taylor 1983). Again, similar to dispositional optimism, positive illusions benefit us through the behavior that they support. For example, Taylor et al. (1992) found that seropositive men—those who have tested positive for HIV—were more optimistic than seronegative men that they would not contract AIDS. This is a peculiar result, to say the least, one which strongly indicates irrational thinking on the part of seropositive men. Furthermore, these men exhibited illusions of control (with respect to acquiring AIDS), and superiority (with respect to their immune systems). These optimistic beliefs were "associated with reduced fatalistic vulnerability regarding AIDS, with the use of positive attitudes as a coping technique, with less use of avoidant coping strategies, and with greater practice of health-promoting behaviors" (Taylor and Brown 1994, p. 24; see also Bortolotti 2018, p. 528).

Jefferson and Bortolotti argue that the benefits of positive illusions have implications for doctor-patient relationships. In particular, medical professionals should respect patient decisions, at least up to a point, even when they seem to be irrational (Jefferson and Bortolotti 2018; see also Blumenthal-Barby and Ubel 2018). For as we have seen, positive illusions can lead to health-promoting behavior; and this health-promoting behavior can increase the likelihood that optimistic beliefs will turn out to be true. In this way, it is helpful to remind ourselves of Bortolotti's (2018) observation, namely, that using the standard label "positive illusions" risks misleading, since those "illusions" are often about an as yet unsettled future.

**Optimism's Emotional Benefits**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, dispositionally optimistic people tend to experience greater emotional well-being. Much of the research here has focused on how optimism helps in challenging circumstances. Maintaining optimism through difficult times can ward against the anxiety, sadness, and despair that pessimists often experience. Much of this research is cross-sectional, comparing measures of optimism and measures of distress at a given time. But scholars recognize that these studies are limited. They can tell us that optimistic people tend to have a more positive emotional outlook in stressful situations. Yet we can get a better sense of how, and even whether, optimism interacts with distress with studies that take measurements at different points over time (Bouchard et al. 2017, p. 117; Segerstrom, Carver, and Scheier 2017, pp. 199-200; Carver and Scheier 2018, pp. 219-220).

Longitudinal studies of optimism and emotional well-being have tended to focus on health contexts. For example, in one study, researchers explored the impact of dispositional optimism on recovery from coronary artery bypass surgery. Evaluations took place before surgery, approximately one-week after surgery, and then again six months after. They found that "there was a strong positive association between level of optimism and postsurgical quality of life at 6 months" (Scheier et al. 1989, p. 1024). Another study considered dispositional optimism and rates of postpartum depression symptoms. An important feature of this study is that it controlled for initial levels of dysphoria (discontent). Even when

controlling for depressive symptoms in this way, dispositional optimism was still found to buffer against the effects of the stressful event (Carver and Gaines 1987, pp. 456).

One recent study explored whether optimism's emotional benefits in stressful situations decrease as one ages (Wrosch, Jobin, and Scheier 2017). This was a six-year longitudinal study with adults between the ages of 64 and 90. They discovered that among those in the earlier stages of old age, optimism appeared to serve as a buffer against depressive symptoms. This was not true for the older participants, however. They speculate that this may be due to the nature of the stressors. Younger participants are likely to confront stressors that can be mitigated through action, but those who are older are unfortunately likely to confront stressors that they cannot similarly control.

**Optimism and Coping**

Researchers are especially interested in *why* dispositional optimists have so many advantages. We have already touched on some of the potential reasons. Optimism predicts healthier eating, and healthier eating has a number of physical health benefits (Giltay et al. 2007). This section highlights the healthy ways in which optimists tend to *cope* with stressful situations. Optimists' coping methods are often held up as the means by which optimism has so many benefits (Segerstrom, Carver, and Scheier 2017, pp. 201-202; Bouchard et al. 2017, pp. 118-120; Carver and Scheier 2018, pp. 221-222).

Coping is typically understood by highlighting two principal distinctions. First, there is the distinction between *problem-focused* coping and *emotion-focused* comping. The former aims to address the source of stress, whereas the latter aims to regulate one's emotional responses (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). A second distinction is between *engagement* coping and *avoidance* coping. Engagement coping means confronting the stressor itself or the emotions caused by that stressor. By contrast, avoidance or disengagement is an attempt to turn one's attention elsewhere (Skinner et al. 2002).

It turns out that optimists tend to engage in productive coping strategies that are sensitive to their situations. In general, optimists tend to deal with stressful situations and difficult emotions (engagement coping) rather than to avoid them (disengagement coping). Whether an optimist emphasizes problem-focused engagement coping or emotion-focused engagement coping tends to depend on whether the situation is perceived as controllable. If the stressor is something controllable, then the optimist is likely to address it head on. For example, in the previously mentioned study of patients undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery, it was found that optimistic patients tended to plan what they would need to do to increase their chances of a healthy recovery (Scheier et al. 1989). If optimists experience a traumatic event that they can do nothing about, however, then they are likely to emphasize soothing their emotions.

Carver and Scheier (2018, pp. 222-223) emphasize that the ways in which optimists cope with stress makes them much likelier to *accept* that something unfortunate has happened rather than to deny that it has. This can help us to understand why optimists are more effective at restructuring their plans in the face of life's inevitable challenges. And the way in which optimists confront, rather than avoid, problems

can help us to understand why they are more often successful in their coping strategies and thus tend to have greater physical and emotional well-being.

Turn now to positive illusions. Might they help us to cope in similar ways? There is evidence that such beliefs *can* lead to problem-focused and engagement coping (see Taylor and Brown 1994 and Bortolotti 2018 discussed above). But for this to happen, the biases need to include *illusions of control*. An irrational belief about one's degree of control over the achievement of some goal makes it more likely that one will persevere through challenges (Bortolotti 2018, p. 528). But positive illusions can also be harmful, too, as we shall see below. Once we see these dangers, we will be in a better position to ask whether and how positive illusions should be encouraged (see below on cultivating optimism).

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## 4. THE DANGERS OF OPTIMISM

Despite optimism's benefits, there are some potential drawbacks. This section begins by raising some worries about dispositional optimism. It then turns to positive illusions.

### The Dangers of Dispositional Optimism

A natural concern about dispositional optimism is that it is risky, leaving people open to crushing disappointment. The world is full of heartbreak and tragedy, after all. By contrast, a person that is pessimistic, or at least less optimistic, may be more insulated from the emotional damage of failure and tragedy.

But this concern may be unfounded. There are important studies measuring optimism before and after tragedy. According to Carver and Scheier (2018, pp. 224-225), the results of such studies indicate that greater optimism before tragedy doesn't lead to greater distress after; and in some cases, optimism even seems to insulate against such distress. Here they point to studies involving failed in-vitro fertilization, breast cancer diagnosis, and cardiovascular disease relapses (Litt et al., 1992; Helgeson 2003; Stanton and Snider 1993).

Why isn't optimism undermined in these cases? Optimism is generally resistant to change because it is a personality trait. Personality traits tend to be resilient in the face of bad (or good) life events (cf. Bouchard et al. 2017, p. 123). For example, one study found that dispositional optimism was fairly stable even after a diagnosis of cancer (Bredal and Ekeberg 2016; but compare Krane et al. 2018). Another point to remember here is that optimists tend to be better at finding new goals than pessimists. While optimists may indeed struggle when faced with tragedy, their ability to reorient their lives in new directions may still leave them at an advantage (Rasmussen et al. 2006).

Another concern one might have about dispositional optimism is that, even in contexts where optimism is beneficial, one can sometimes be *too* optimistic. For example, perhaps being too high in dispositional

optimism, as measured by the LOT or LOT-R, will lead one to simply expect good outcomes to occur without actually doing what needs to be done to bring those good outcomes about. Scheier and Carver (1993) themselves raise this concern. However, they observe that there is no evidence that being high in optimism thwarts motivation. Of course, this doesn't rule out that there may sometimes be *other* negative effects of too much optimism. For example, in one study involving entrepreneurs, being relatively low in optimism but high in experience predicted greater business growth and revenue (Hmieleski and Baron 2009). The authors speculate that this may be because too much optimism led entrepreneurs to "suffer from overconfidence, and discount negative information" more so than their peers who were less optimistic (ibid., p. 481) But as the researchers observe, "low" optimism entrepreneurs are still high in optimism compared to the wider population (ibid., p. 482). Carver and Scheier allow that there may be some rare cases pessimism may be good but only to a point.

In at least one context, though, optimism is more uniformly worrisome. Optimism appears to be linked to unhealthy gambling practices (Bouchard et al. 2017, p. 122; Carver and Scheier 2018, p. 224). It's not difficult to see why. When it comes to typical gambling contexts (e.g., a casino), one should rationally expect to lose. Casinos wouldn't stay in business otherwise. But optimists expect things to go well. Although dispositional optimism is not specific, that is, not about gambling in particular, it can lead people to be more confident about winning than they should be. (In this way, gambling may illustrate a link between dispositional optimism and positive illusions.) As evidence of this phenomenon, researchers found that, in a laboratory setting, optimists were less likely to lower their bets after losing (Gibson and Sanbonmatsu 2004). However, survey data indicated that optimists did not gamble *more often* than pessimists. They speculate that this may be because pessimists still seek out gambling "to distract themselves from their everyday troubles or because they enjoy the action" (Gibson and Sanbonmatsu 2004, p. 10).

**The Dangers of Positive Illusions**

In one sense, positive illusions are intrinsically defective. While these beliefs are not necessarily *untrue*, they are by definition *irrational*. Yet as we have seen, this sort of irrationality can have positive effects. Not always, though. For one, positive illusions can make it difficult for people to respond well to constructive feedback that runs counter to their optimism (Bortolotti 2017). And unlike dispositional optimism, positive illusions do make us prone to disappointment (ibid.).

The dangers of positive illusions are especially significant in the context of education. Students with irrational beliefs about their abilities tend at first to experience greater emotional well-being. However, conflicts quickly arise between their perceived abilities and their academic results. Research indicates that this conflict damages their self-esteem, reversing the initial boost to their well-being that the biased beliefs provided. Furthermore, their biased beliefs don't appear to improve their results compared to their peers who have unbiased beliefs about their abilities. In the end, their optimism leads them to downgrade the importance of academic success. In this way, positive illusions in education can make one susceptible to "sour grapes" (Bortolotti 2018, p. 522).

Positive illusions also create trouble in certain health contexts. For example, according to some researchers, individual smokers typically believe that their chances of contracting lung cancer are less than other smokers. In fact, even the number of cigarettes smoked daily does little to change the odds that they assign (Weinstein et al. 2005). In this case, as Jefferson observes, one important complication is that addiction may affect smokers' tendencies to make rational predictions about the risks of their smoking (2017 p. 1173). However, other research doesn't involve this confound. A study of college students during an influenza outbreak discovered that optimistically biased students were less likely to take measures to avoid contracting illness (Kim and Niederdeppe 2013). Such health-related drawbacks are perhaps surprising in light of the health benefits outlined above. But according to Bortolotti (2018), the key to understanding when positive illusions are beneficial and when they are not may have to do with the form that the bias takes. I address this in the next section.

## 5. CULTIVATING OPTIMISM

This section considers where optimism comes from and how it might be cultivated. As in previous sections, I focus first on dispositional optimism, moving afterwards to positive illusions.

### Cultivating Dispositional Optimism

Given the benefits of dispositional optimism, one may wonder what its origins are. Is optimism simply a function of our genetic make-up, or can we cultivate it? Well, to begin, there is some evidence that optimism is heritable. But it appears to be less heritable than many other personality traits (Segerstrom, Carver, and Scheier 2017, p. 198). Existing research suggests that 25% to 35% of one's degree of optimism is heritable (Plomin et al. 1992; see also Scheier and Carver 2018, p. 1090). There is also evidence that optimism changes throughout adulthood, suggesting the possibility of finding ways to enhance it. For example, Scheier and Carver (2018, p. 1084) indicate that optimism tends to increase with age. Yet optimism can, at least to an extent, be damaged by traumatic events. Krane et al. (2018) found this with respect to people who had been diagnosed with an advanced stage of pancreatic cancer (but compare Bredal and Ekeberg 2016).

Unfortunately, however, even if optimism is only partially heritable, the traits that ordinarily lead to greater optimism may themselves be largely out of our control (cf. Bennett 2011, p. 307 on optimism and extroversion). One study, for instance, found that those who are perceived as physically attractive are more optimistic (Urbatsch 2018). Physical attractiveness here is determined by interviewer ratings of interviewees. One (partial) explanation for this attractiveness-optimism link might be that physical beauty tends to lead to economic success and upward mobility, and as one's socio-economic status increases, one's optimism also tends to increase (Urbatsch 2018, pp. 25-26; see also Heinonen et al. 2006). Additionally, the predictive power of attractiveness decreases once education is controlled for. Since attractive people "are often favored by teachers," educational achievement may likewise mediate the attractiveness-optimism link. Because physical attractiveness seems to support optimism through socio-

economic standing and education, this suggests that socio-economic and educational reforms may better support optimism.

Jason Fletcher (2019) explores how neighborhoods and schools influence optimism. In carrying out his research, Fletcher did not rely on the dispositional optimism construct and accompanying Life Orientation Test (LOT). But the survey data that he used, which were part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, arguably probed the same trait. Indeed, the survey items were a subset of those on the LOT-R. For instance, participants in the National Longitudinal Study were asked how much they agreed with statements such as "I'm always optimistic about my future" and "Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad." Fletcher was particularly interested in the effects of neighborhoods and schools on optimism. He found, perhaps surprisingly, that neighborhoods and schools only explained about 3% of the variation between respondents in terms of hope and optimism.

In interpreting these results, it's important to note that this research focuses on neighborhood-level rather than individual-level factors. For instance, while an *individual* transitioning out of poverty appears to lead to greater optimism, an intervention at the level of a neighborhood may have a much smaller effect on its own. As Fletcher observes, cleanly identifying the role of neighborhoods (distinct from individuals) is notoriously difficult (see also Diez Roux and Mair 2010). It should likewise be emphasized that Fletcher was only able to consider variations between *existing* neighborhoods that may explain variations in optimism. As he points out, this leaves open the possibility that *entirely novel* changes to neighborhoods and schools may lead to more dramatic improvements in optimism.

There is some evidence that joining a religious community supports optimism. But caution is needed here. Researchers in this area have focused on optimism as *attributional style* (Sethi and Seligman 1993). Recall that, according to the attributional style approach to optimism, those who view the causes of their failures as fixed are likely to have a negative outlook on the future. By contrast, viewing the causes of failure as changeable can lead to a more positive outlook. Questionnaires revealed not only that religious people were more (attributionally) optimistic than those from more liberal groups, but also that people from fundamentalist groups were more optimistic than those from moderate ones. Insofar as being part of a religious community supports attributional style optimism, it is plausible that it supports dispositional optimism, too, given the close relationship between these two constructs (see Section 2).

Researchers have found that dispositional optimism can be boosted, at least temporarily, through mental exercises and habit formation (see Carver and Scheier 2014, p. 297). For example, optimism can be boosted by spending five minutes each day imagining one's ideal self (Meevissen, Peters, and Alberts 2011). Additionally, researchers focusing on attributional style have found that forming a habit of explaining the causes of good/bad outcomes in optimistic ways can support being optimistic (Seligman 1991). Rather than explain a negative outcome as due to unchangeable features of oneself, one can cultivate optimism by forming the habit of looking for explanations due to changeable features of one's environment. Similarly, Scheier and Carver (2018, p. 1091) advocate training oneself to deploy healthy coping strategies (see above). The thought is that acting in the way that optimists act, and reaping the corresponding benefits, may lead one to become more optimistic.

We know much less about how to support optimism than we do about its benefits. Optimism researchers emphasize that this is among the most important topics for future research (Carver and Scheier 2014, p. 297; Bouchard et al. 2017, p. 124; Scheier and Carver 2018, p. 1091).

**Cultivating Positive Illusions**

Some theorists believe that we are hardwired by evolution to form positive illusions. One popular explanation for this is *error management theory*. But Anneli Jefferson (2017) argues that this common explanation of the emergence of positive illusions fails. Her criticisms reveal the important ways in which positive illusions do, in fact, emerge. As it turns out, we do have some control over the emergence of positive illusions. But whether we *should* cultivate them (or at least not interfere with existing beneficial illusions) is a delicate ethical question, since doing so would amount to supporting irrationality.

To begin, an error management explanation says that "in situations of uncertainty, organisms have evolved to favor the least costly error" (Jefferson 2017, p. 1159). For example, this theory explains our tendency to "over-perceive" snakes in terms of the comparative costs. If we perceive a snake when a snake is not actually present, the cost of error is low. You're likely just to be momentarily startled. By contrast, there is greater risk in failing to perceive a snake when one is present. According to Haselton and Nettle (2006), matters are analogous for positive illusions. The costs of forming an optimistically biased belief and being wrong are low compared to the potential benefits. As Jefferson outlines, for those drawn to an error management explanation of positive illusions, "the role that lack of realism plays is a motivational one, in that it makes it easier for us to take calculated risks because we do not perceive them as quite so risky" (2017, pp. 1162-1163).

Yet Jefferson argues against the error management explanation for the evolutionary roots of positive illusions. One major reason for this is that the factors regulating the biases that generate positive illusions have nothing to do with comparative costs and benefits. I will explain each of these in turn (see Jefferson 2017, pp. 1170-1171; Harris, Griffin, and Murray 2008).

First, unrealistic optimism often emerges when a person recognizes that they fail to fit a relevant *stereotype*. For example, the stereotype of a person who suffers a heart attack is someone who is stressed out and/or eats unhealthily. Now take a person who eats healthily and has a low-stress job. Since this person doesn't fit the stereotype for a person who has a heart attack, they might believe that they are less likely to have a heart attack than they in fact are. Second, those who realize that they will need to justify their predictions to others are likely to shift to more realistic beliefs. The anticipation of debate and discussion pushes people toward realism. Third, how common an event is affects how biased people tend to be. For example, if a negative event occurs only rarely, people are likely to be optimistic that it won't happen to them. Given that these and other factors influence our optimistic bias, it is not clear whether we need to appeal to error management theory's evolutionary explanation of positive illusions. Furthermore, we have already seen in our discussion of the dangers of positive illusions that people are often biased when the costs of error are comparatively high. In other cases, positive illusions lead to complacency, making

success less likely. In general, while positive illusions *might* have evolutionary origins, this question remains outstanding; it doesn't appear to be supported by error management theory.

Whether or not we have evolved tendencies toward positive illusions, these tendencies are flexible to some extent. Thus the question arises, *Should we nurture any of our tendencies toward positive illusions?* The answer to this question has concrete implications, notably with respect to therapy and doctor-patient relationships (see also Section 3).

Bortolotti identifies two popular answers, ultimately rejecting both before offering her own answer (Bortolotti 2018, pp. 525-526). First, we have the *traditional view*. Advocates of the traditional view maintain that well-being is best supported by rational and accurate beliefs. Bortolotti observes that support for this view can be found in scholars who see the roots of depression in irrational negative thought patterns (e.g., Beck 1967). Consider the following from Jourard and Landsman (1980, p. 75):

> The ability to perceive reality as it "really" is is fundamental to effective functioning. It is considered one of the two preconditions to the development of the healthy personality. (quoted in Bortolotti 2018, p. 529)

By contrast, the *trade-off view* recognizes that well-being doesn't always harmonize with rationality and truth. There are some cases in which inaccuracy is preferable. In particular, a fully realistic view of our talents often results in negative feelings. Proponents of this view advocate "self-enhancing distortions" (Lewinsohn et al. 1980; see also Taylor and Brown 1988). However, the trade-off view recommends only minor distortions. For if our bias is too extreme, then we may not adequately prepare for setbacks and failures (Sweeny, Carroll, and Shepperd 2006). Here is a representative illustration from Taylor (1989, p. 228):

> Increasingly, we must view the psychologically healthy person not as someone who sees things as they are but as someone who sees things as he or she would like them to be. Effective functioning in everyday life appears to depend upon interrelated positive illusions, systematic small distortions of reality that make things appear better than they are. (quoted in Bortolotti 2018, p. 529)

Bortolotti rejects both these answers (2018, pp. 525-526). The traditional view is undermined by the various benefits of positive illusions that we have already noted. Moreover, it doesn't appear to be true that depression is (typically) best explained by a lack of realism (Lewinsohn et al. 1980). That said, the trade-off view suffers from problems of its own. The first is that it misses the ways in which some kinds of self-enhancing positive illusions are harmful, even if the bias is small. Second, it just isn't true that positive illusions are only ever conducive to well-being if the distortions are small. Sometimes more extreme idealizations are best. This is often the case in relationships, for example.

Bortolotti argues that interventions should aim at *agency enhancing optimism*. Sometimes we can overcome a problem, or avoid a potential one, through perseverance and strategic thinking. As indicated above, this is especially true in health and relationships contexts. In confronting challenges in these domains

(among others, potentially), we should aim to cultivate "illusions of control." A tendency to think that we are in control creates patterns of thought of the form, "I can do this," which tends to lead to constructive behavior. This bias toward a sense of control can be combined with additional irrational beliefs to the effect that one is superior and that things will turn out well. But it is crucial to recognize that bias that functions *only* to enhance one's mood and self-esteem, rather than one's agency, is likely to undermine well-being in the long run.

## 6.  DEFINING HOPE

Hope is something we can hold on to even when we've lost confidence. For example, a person may *hope* for justice even when they expect that it is not forthcoming and thus they aren't optimistic. We often call this "hoping against hope." This section begins with the question, *What is hope?* This question has been at the center of recent philosophical work on the topic. The guiding assumption is that, if we can gain a better understanding of what hope *is*, then we'll be in a better position to understand its benefits and dangers. As we shall see, unlike with optimism, the definition of hope is hotly debated.

**"Hope Theory"**

When it comes to defining hope, we see important differences across disciplines. Within psychology, C. R. Snyder's account of hope has received the most attention. This approach to hope is often labeled "Hope Theory." Given its prominence in psychology and given that it has received substantial attention in the popular positive psychology movement, it is worth briefly discussing. I should say up front, though, that philosophers working on this topic tend to think that Hope Theory misses paradigm cases of hope, which I'll explain below.

According to Snyder's approach, hope is "the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and to motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways" (Snyder 2002, p. 149). That's quite a mouthful, but we can break it down as follows. "Pathways" refers to the ways in which goals can be achieved. Those who measure high in hope tend to perceive themselves as capable of identifying ways to achieve their goals. But there's more to hope, according to Snyder, since hope is also motivational. "Agency thinking" thus refers to the motivation to pursue those pathways. For Snyder, hope thus requires both "pathways thinking" (perceiving means to goals) and "agency thinking" (motivation to act on those means). Hope in this sense is studied with the use of *hope scales*, which are questionnaires that probe pathways thinking and agency thinking (see Buchanan and Lopez 2013). The most prominent such scale is Snyder's *Trait Hope Scale*, which is printed here in the Appendix.

Hope Theory appears to probe an important psychological construct (see Rand and Cheavens 2009). But many scholars think (rightly in my view) that this construct isn't really hope as we ordinarily understand it (Blöser and Stahl 2017a). For example, Hope Theory views hope as increasing when one becomes more confident that one will be able to act to achieve one's goals. But we often appeal to hope

when our confidence wanes. Recall the familiar phrase, "hope against hope." Whereas the realm of optimism is that of *expectation*, the realm of hope seems to be *doubt*. This has been observed by some psychologists as well as several philosophers. I thus focus this review on accounts of hope that aim to make sense of this important distinction between optimism and hope (Averill, Catlin, and Chon 1990; Lazarus 1999; Pettit 2004; Martin 2014; Miceli and Castelfranchi 2015).

The discussion that follows focuses primarily on the work of philosophers and theologians. But it is worth highlighting an example of psychological research on hope that is outside the boundaries of Hope Theory. As part of the Templeton Foundation's Hope and Optimism Initiative, Jason Fletcher and Jinho Kim (2019) explored the effect that adult mistreatment of youths had on the hopefulness of their classmates. In studying these effects, they relied on questionnaires that asked directly about hope (e.g., questions about how often one feels hopeful about the future). They found that while not all forms of adult mistreatment of youths tended to lower the hopefulness of their classmates, physical abuse did have this effect. This difference is likely due to the visibility of physical abuse in contrast with emotional abuse. Such research that moves outside the boundaries of Hope Theory is arguably poised to help us better understand hope in its everyday sense. For a detailed overview of hope in psychology not limited to Hope Theory, see Scioli (2020).

**Hope as Belief, Desire, and Beyond**

Philosophers working on hope almost unanimously agree that hope requires two elements. First, a person who hopes must *believe* that what they hope for is possible. For example, Ahmed doesn't hope to meet Socrates, even if he wishes he could talk to him, since Ahmed exists now and Socrates died more than two millennia ago. Second, a person who hopes must also *desire*, or *want*, the thing that they hope for. So while Ahmed may agree that a devastating nuclear war is possible, he doesn't count as hoping this will happen since he hardly desires such devastation. Hoping for something, then, involves both believing that what you hope for is possible and desiring it. At least this is what most philosophers of hope maintain (e.g., Wheatley 1958; Downie 1963; Day 1969; Bovens 1999; Meirav 2009; Martin 2014; Milona and Stockdale 2018; Milona 2019). For an argument that desire is not required, see Blöser (2019). For arguments that belief is not required, see Chignell (2014) and Blöser (2019).

But desire and belief are not enough for hope, many argue. Ariel Meirav (2009) illustrates the need for a third ingredient. He asks us to consider the two main characters from the movie *Shawshank Redemption*, Andy and Red. In that movie, Andy hopes to escape from prison while Red despairs of ever escaping. Yet the movie makes it clear that both *want* to escape. It thus can't be the lack of desire that explains why Andy hopes but Red despairs. At the same time, though, both seem to be aware of the incredibly low odds. According to Meirav, in watching the movie one can easily imagine Red saying, "I grant you it is *possible*, but the chance is only one in a thousand!" (ibid., p. 223). By contrast, we can imagine Andy saying, "I grant you the chance is only one in a thousand, but it is *possible*!" (ibid., p. 223).

So what does Andy have that explains why he counts as hoping? Much of the contemporary literature on hope focuses on the question of hope's additional ingredient, which is often presumed to explain

what's so special about hope. Unfortunately, to say that there is no consensus among philosophers on this question would be an understatement. Meirav himself, for instance, says that those who hope must view factors "external" to themselves—whether other people, God, nature, etc., are working to bring about what they hope for. But as Adrienne Martin (2014, p. 20) points out, someone in Red's position might well view external factors (e.g., his friend Andy) as working in his favor and yet still despair. For example, one may despair of ever finding a satisfying career even though family and friends are trying to help (see Milona 2019, p. 714). Needless to say, resolving this question about hope's missing ingredient is difficult. In what follows, I briefly outline a proposal that emerged from the John Templeton Foundation's Hope and Optimism Initiative. Full disclosure: This is my own proposal, which I developed along with my colleague, Katie Stockdale.

According to Milona and Stockdale (2018), we can understand hope by theorizing it alongside emotions more generally. But what are emotions? Many philosophers nowadays think of emotions as ways of "seeing" the world around us. When you're afraid, you see the object of fear as dangerous. When you feel guilty, you see yourself as having done something wrong. It's an important feature of this approach to emotion that you might not *believe* that your emotions are correct. For example, you might believe with near certainty that taking a ride on Disneyland's "California Screamin'" is perfectly safe, but your fear response might tell you otherwise. In this way, emotions such as fear are like perceptions. Just as a ventriloquist might cause us to hear a sound as coming from a puppet's mouth rather than his own, an emotion might lead us to see the world in a way we don't in fact believe it to be.

Interestingly, as Milona and Stockdale (2018) emphasize, similar conflicts can arise with hope, which indicates that hope may also involve a kind of perception (see Roberts 2007 and Döring 2014 for similar views). A person might find themselves hoping to get back together with an emotionally abusive ex-partner, even while they firmly believe that they should not be hoping for this outcome. Or, to borrow an example from Luc Bovens, a person attending a car race might find themselves hoping to sit in the part of the stadium that is likely to have the best view of a violent crash. Despite being ashamed of this hope, it persists nonetheless (1999, p. 679). So if we think of hope as not only a desire and belief, but also an emotional perception, the question then becomes, *What is hope a perception of?*

According to Milona and Stockdale, a hopeful perception is a perception of *reasons*. For example, the person who hopes to see the car crash experiences the prospect of a violent, fiery explosion as a reason to sit in the part of the stands that would give them the best view. Perhaps they don't *believe* that this is what they should do any more than the person who fears the roller coaster believes that the roller coaster is dangerous. (We'll see below that there are also cases in which people's emotions seem to be a better ethical guide than their beliefs.) But as we know, perceptions don't change just because we believe that they are misguided.

The perceptual view of hope offers an attractive explanation of why Andy hopes but Red despairs. Both want to escape and believe that escaping is possible (if unlikely); the difference is that Andy has an emotional perception that Red lacks. Red doesn't perceive the possibility of escape as giving him reason to actually try escaping. By contrast, Andy does see the small chance as giving him reasons. To be sure,

we might want to know more about how these emotional perceptions work. This question would push us into the weeds of the contemporary philosophy of emotion, which I won't explore here, but see Milona and Stockdale (2018, pp. 210-213). For criticisms of the perceptual view of emotions more generally, see Deonna and Teroni (2012). For a complex argument that the perceptual dimension of hope may be identical with the desire dimension of hope, see Milona (2020a) and Milona and Stockdale (2018, pp. 211-212).

The perceptual theory of hope, then, represents one attractive way of explaining what is involved in hope beyond belief and desire. However, as the list of references given above illustrates, this debate is far from finished.

**Hope and "Positive Thinking"**

Hope is often thought of as a kind of "positive thinking." This section explores whether this is true and why it matters.

There is at least a weak sense in which hope counts as positive thinking. In hoping for something, we are drawn to it, if not in action, then in thought. To borrow an example from Bovens (1999), if I'm hoping that my friend comes to the party, then I might be led to call her and, at the very least, I'll devote some mental energy to thinking about her coming. However, it is often thought that hope is positive in the sense that it generates pleasurable *feelings*. For this assumption in philosophy, see Bovens (1999, p. 675).

When we think of hope as generating positive feelings, it can make hoping in certain contexts seem foolish. For example, Mary Annaïse Heglar objects to those who insist that we must maintain hope amidst the damages and risks of climate change:

> In our context now, rosy hopefulness feels downright sociopathic. ...As these tragedies fade and blend into a continuum, the climate community's insistence on hope everlasting begins to sound anything but realistic. It becomes emotionally immature. A hurdle unto itself. (Heglar 2019)

Heglar's analysis of the climate community is multidimensional, but here I want to focus on the idea that hope involves pleasure, which is suggested by the phrase, "rosy hopefulness." If hope is *always* like this, then it is easy to see why Heglar is open to a hopeless outlook. A pleasurable hope can seem to reflect a detached, Pollyannaish attitude of the privileged.

But as it turns out, scholars increasingly doubt that hope is always pleasurable (see Winters 2015; Milona 2019). And according to Katie Stockdale (2019b), we can notice hope without pleasure by recognizing hope's relationship with fear. Hoping for something is always accompanied by fear. Even when one confidently hopes, there is an element of uncertainty; and with that uncertainty comes fear. By the same token, when one fears some potentiality, there is always a chance that what one fears won't come true. In other words, uncertainty is the province of hope and fear. According to Stockdale, when we find ourselves "hoping against hope," the negative sensations of fear dominate our psychology. But insofar as

we continue believing that what we fear won't come true and continue seeing reasons to go on, we still count as hoping.

Stockdale calls hope without pleasure *fearful hope*. So according to Stockdale, when Heglar rejects "rosy hopefulness" and when Greta Thunberg says "I want you to panic," these are not necessarily incompatible with hope. The key is to hope *in the right way*, namely, with a healthy dose of fear. The only negative emotion that hope rules out is *despair*, for in despairing, we see no reason to move forward (Milona 2019, p. 715). Insofar as despair is not useful for achieving our aims, we should be careful about recommending a rejection of hope.

In general, people can hope for the same thing but in very different ways. For example, while one person may hope with a confident belief that their hope is likely to be fulfilled, another may hope despite believing that the odds are incredibly small. And while one person may fervently hope in a way that consumes their daily attention, another may patiently hope in a way that is less intense but that allows them to avoid despair (Milona 2019). So in thinking about whether hoping in some context is good or bad, it is wise to consider the different shapes that hope might take.

With these preliminary remarks in place, I turn to consider some of the oft cited dangers and benefits of hope.

## 7.  THE DANGERS OF HOPE

Until recently, hope has tended to be cast as foolish. And the previous section (along with the introduction to this review) indicates that this attitude toward hope is making a comeback. Thus it isn't surprising that arguments for the value of hope often begin on the defensive. My discussion of hope's risks closely follows Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf (2020). As we shall see, however, what we have already said about hope helps to answer some of the concerns.

### Overconfidence

Hope was famously maligned by Thucydides. For him, hope was a kind of unfounded confidence that things would turn out for the best. He viewed it as a delusion at the root of Athenian political calamity (see Schlosser 2013, p. 172). In essence, Thucydides conceptualizes hope as being similar to the positive illusion model of optimism. Understood in this way, hope will be subject to the same criticisms (see above). But as we have already seen, philosophers nowadays separate hope and optimism. Hope is compatible with a recognition of low odds and an absence of confidence. Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf (2020) remind us of an important insight from Cornel West's book, *Hope on a Tightrope*. West observes, "real hope is grounded in a particularly messy struggle and it can be betrayed by naïve projections of a better future that ignore the necessity of doing the real work" (West 2008, p. 5).

## Demotivation

Another familiar concern about hope is that it can demotivate us (Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf 2020, p. 3). For example, politicians who use the language of hope seem to invite us to put our hope *in them* to bring about change. More generally, there is a thought that hopers often look to external factors to achieve their desires. This might be luck, God, politicians, etc. (see Meirav 2009). Taking advantage of people's tendency to put their hope in external factors can be a way to preserve oppressive structures (see Teasley and Ikard 2010). Adrienne Martin observes that hope can demotivate in a different way. In particular, she observes that hopers risk becoming lost in hopeful *fantasies*, paying little attention to the concrete steps that need to be taken to achieve their goals (2014, pp. 90-95). Matt Sleason expresses a similar worry but in stronger terms, referring to hope as a "a malevolent force in politics" (Sleat 2013, p. 131; quoted in Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf 2020, p. 3).

It is certainly fair to worry that hope can demotivate us, either by inviting us to put our hope entirely in others or by directing our attention away from the means of achieving our goals. But hope *needn't* have these effects. Even when we put our hope in others (e.g., a politician), it doesn't follow that we must then sit back and expect those external forces to do all of the work for us. Similarly, in hoping well we may also think about the means to achieving our goals as well as the goal itself. Milona (2019, pp. 724-726) argues that insofar as hope involves desire, the nature of hope itself pushes us to think about means as well as ends. For when we desire something, the desire draws our attention to the means of satisfying the desire (e.g., a desire for a soda leads us to think about how we might satisfy this desire by going to the fridge).

## Otherworldliness

Some also worry about the theological roots of hope (Newheiser 2019). This worry begins with the thought that Christian hope is oriented ultimately toward God and the afterlife, and contemporary Western thinking about hope is certainly influenced by a long history of Christianity. In this way, some worry that hope's roots are inherently "otherworldly," redirecting our attention away from the problems of this world. Critics worry that even when we try to translate hope into a secular context, we end up retaining its dubious teleological structure (see Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf 2020, p. 4). A prime example here is Ernst Bloch's philosophy of hope (Bloch 1986). Rather than God, for Bloch a Marxist vision is the supreme object of hope. According to some critics, this is equally otherworldly and distracting.

Ultimately, however, this objection isn't persuasive. Consider first Christian hope. It's true that Christian hoping is fundamentally oriented to God and salvation (but see Section 9 for details). Some Christian thinkers, Augustine especially, have been accused of "instrumentalizing" worldly hopes. At one point, Augustine suggests we should not love others *on their own account* but only in a way that *uses* them to cultivate a greater love for God (1997, p. 1.22.20). On the surface, this sounds problematic. But as Michael Lamb (2018) persuasively argues, Augustine's point is easy to lose in translation; his idea is simply that we should not love and hope for things in the world in a way that loses sight of God. In other

words, we should genuinely care about our neighbor, but we should do so in a way that recognizes them as part of God's creation. Of course, there *is* an "otherworldly" dimension to Christian hope, but it is difficult to see why that is a problem if the hope demands ethical action here and now. So even if our way of thinking about hope does have theological roots, this isn't obviously a problem. For a secular view of virtuous hoping that draws heavily on insights from Augustine, see Milona (2020b).

## 8. THE VALUE OF HOPE

### Hope's Motivational Value

Luc Bovens (1999) begins his seminal article, "The Value of Hope," by imagining a hope "skeptic." The skeptic offers a simple line of thought to argue that hope has no value. Suppose, for example, that Beatrice would like to become a full-time chef at a fancy restaurant. The skeptic thinks that it's not worth her time to *hope* for this. After all, if she hopes for this and she is not successful, then she will be more disappointed than had she not hoped at all. But if she hopes for this and is successful, then she's no worse off for not having hoped.

As Bovens points out, though, the skeptic is clearly missing the *instrumental* value of hope. When we hope for something, we are motivated to bring about the object of our hope. For as we have seen, hope essentially involves desire. So if our would-be chef fails to hope to become a chef, they are less likely to do what needs to be done to maximize their chances. Indeed, if the perceptual theory of hope is right, they might not perceive any reasons to pursue that project. The same holds when it comes to grander hopes as well. Perhaps we open ourselves up to greater disappointment by hoping, say, for a more serious governmental response to climate change, but if we do hope for this, we are (all else equal) more likely to take steps as citizens (e.g., voting, protesting) to increase the odds.

Granting that hope *can* motivate us, we might be led to ask the following question: is hope *necessary* for motivation? In other words, are we ever moved to do anything of significance without hope? As we have seen, some activists have seemed to favor fear and panic as motivators, at least in certain contexts. But if fear always comes with hope, as Stockdale (2019b) argues, then perhaps fear and hope are teammates when it comes to motivation.

Even still, Stockdale maintains that motivation without hope may be possible (Stockdale 2017). One way in which this is possible is through *bitterness*. According to Stockdale, bitterness is a form of anger. But whereas ordinary anger involves a hope that the wrongdoers will acknowledge and respond to their perceived failure to live up to moral expectations, bitterness does not. Bitterness involves a lack of hope that wrongdoers "will attend to the harms about which we're angry and abide by our moral expectations in the future" (2017, p. 368). According to her analysis, not only can bitterness be justified, but it can also motivate hopeless resistance. She finds support for this possibility in the work of activists and authors such as James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates.

But when considering the possibility of genuinely hopeless motivation, we have to be careful. Take a person who is motivated to resist racial injustice but who claims to be hopeless about the prospects for achieving this goal. In this case, it doesn't necessarily follow that they aren't motivated by *any* hope. The only lesson we should draw is that they aren't motivated by a hope to achieve racial justice. This leaves open whether they are motivated by, say, a hope to live up to certain moral ideals. Indeed, on inspection, it may seem clear that in some such cases, a person who hopelessly resists injustice does the following: desires to stand up to injustice, believes it is possible for them to do this, and perceives reasons to do this. In this way, it seems that they are motivated by *a* hope. This is almost certainly the correct conclusion to draw if we accept the perceptual theory of hope.

**Hope and Personal Identity**

The value of hope extends beyond simply helping us to achieve our goals. According to Blöser and Stahl (2017b), some of our hopes may comprise *who we are*. Consider, for example, a deeply religious person who hopes for salvation. For her to lose this hope would be, in a sense, to lose an important part of who she is. Similarly, we might consider a person who has long hoped to live the lifestyle of a bohemian artist but who, upon falling in love, finds themselves hoping for a family and a more stable career. There is an important sense in which this transformation in hopes is likewise a transformation in personal identity.

Blöser and Stahl argue that because fundamental hopes are part of our identity, we have reason to maintain them independent of the instrumental value that they may have. Consider a married couple who deeply hope for a happy future together. On the one hand, they have a reason to maintain this hope because it will increase the likelihood of a happy future together (instrumental value). But they also have reason to nurture that hope because that hope represents an important part of their persons.

**Hopes, Dreams, and the Revelation of Value**

I mentioned above that our emotions sometimes conflict with our beliefs. A person who is afraid of the "California Screamin'" roller coaster may not believe that it is really dangerous. In this case, the belief is right while the emotion is wrong. But sometimes it's the other way around. Consider Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (cf. Arpaly 2014, p. 63). When Huck was helping Jim to escape from slavery, Huck *believed* that what he was doing was wrong and yet his feelings for Jim indicated that what he was doing was right. Here, Huck's emotions are telling him what is morally right while his moral beliefs—corrupted by his circumstances and upbringing—are threatening to lead him astray. In general, philosophers and psychologists working on the emotions generally agree that our emotions can *sometimes* serve as a helpful guide to what we ought to do (e.g., Damasio 1994; Ellsworth 1994; Tappolet 2016). Might *hope* then sometimes tell us what we ought to do?

I have recently argued that it can (Milona 2020a). This project focuses on hopes that are commonly called "dreams." These are the kinds of hopes that Martin Luther King Jr. referred to with his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. They are also the hopes that we refer to when we speak of personal dreams

to become, say, a carpenter or a teacher. To push the intuition that we should (sometimes) follow our dreams, consider the following scenario:

Wanda knows that she should pursue the life of a physicist, while Jack knows that he should pursue that of a pianist. How do they know? They have similar talents, opportunities, and values, and so it isn't anything about how they view the feasibility or importance of the relevant projects that is the basis for their knowledge. However, they are different in a key respect, namely, that while Wanda dreams of becoming a physicist, Jack dreams of becoming a pianist. Continuing in the language of metaphor, we might say that their different dreams are their different *callings*, which helps us to account for both the rationality of their pursuing different ends and how they know that they are making the right choices (Milona 2020a, pp. 2-3).

In this example, Wanda and Jack have nothing to point to other than their dreams to justify why they pursue one way of life rather than another. The idea that we ought to follow our dreams can gain additional support if it is considered in light of the perceptual theory of hope. Recall that, according to that view, hope is an emotional perception of reasons for action. Just as we rely on ordinary perception to form beliefs about the world, so too may emotional perceptions like hope serve as a perception of what to do (i.e., how to *change* the world). We can even imagine a version of this case whereby Wanda *believes* that she shouldn't pursue a career as a physicist, perhaps influenced by her parents to believe that she should take over the family restaurant instead. In that case, her hope (dream) would be telling her something important that she has failed to recognize at the level of her beliefs. This is analogous to the Huck Finn case above.

The lesson we should take from this is certainly not that we should *always* follow our dreams (cf. Kirk 2013; Trespicio 2015). That would be silly! But just as the advice to keep your promises is good advice, despite the fact that we should sometimes break our promises, so too is the advice to follow your dreams, at least if suitably qualified. For example, critics often point out that people sometimes follow dreams without regard for the likelihood of success. Or in other cases, people follow dreams based on misguided representations. Someone's dream to be a lawyer, for instance, might be based on television crime dramas rather than any awareness of what being a lawyer is actually like. Thus while our dreams can sometimes point us in the right direction, they can also mislead. This is the trouble with all emotions, however.

**Hope's Political Value**

Hope is also thought to have value in the political sphere. Much of this work has focused on contemporary *democratic* contexts (Snow 2018; Huber 2019; Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf 2020; Stahl 2020).

Stahl (2020) identifies three ways in which hope is politically helpful. First, as we have already seen, is that hoping for desirable political outcomes makes those outcomes more likely. Less obvious, however, is the idea that hope is essential for the *existence* of democratic political life. A functioning democracy

requires us to work with fellow citizens. But if we have no hope that our fellow citizens will work with us toward collective solutions, the trust that is crucial for democracy will begin to erode. Stahl also emphasizes the *justificatory* role of hope in politics. One way to justify a potential policy is to show that it would expand possibilities of hope for its citizens. For example, one might observe that a new educational policy would enhance the opportunities for children in lower-class communities, and these greater opportunities expand the space for hope. Hope can also play a slightly different justificatory role by helping us to find common ground. In particular, a citizen might argue that some proposal would further hopes that they share with their political opponents. This can be a way of working toward greater consensus.

Scholars also emphasize the political significance of *losing* hope. As described earlier, Katie Stockdale (2017) maintains that sometimes the oppressed are justified in being bitter toward perpetrators of injustice and unjust systems. And according to her, bitterness is a form of anger that emerges when the hope that people will live up to moral expectations has been undermined. More recently, Stockdale (2019a) has argued that damaging hope can be itself a form of oppression. In effect, this is the reverse of Stahl's point above. Whereas Stahl argues that institutions that enhance hope are generally desirable, Stockdale emphasizes that policies that undermine hope are often oppressive.

**Hope and Death**

Many believe that hope can help us to confront our inevitable deaths. One obvious way it might do this is through religion. Christianity and Islam, for example, offer the prospect of life after death, and by hoping for God's salvation, one can find comfort. But what can hope offer to those with a secular worldview? Or what of those who do not *want* eternal life?

In "Secular Hopes in the Face of Death," Bovens (2018) identifies four categories of secular hope that can help us to view our lives as worthwhile and thereby better confront death. The first category includes *hopes about one's life*, which can take a couple of different forms. A person might hope to live a life of kindness, virtue, and/or aesthetic appreciation. There's no specific goal here apart from the activity itself. It's not about tallying up a certain number of kind actions, for example. By contrast, a person may have a hope that aims to make a more concrete mark on the world; they may hope to write a best-selling novel or be elected to the city council. Hopes that aim at a way of life, rather than a concrete achievement, are arguably wiser to structure one's life around. For when people view their life in terms of concrete achievements, even fulfilling the hope doesn't lead to contentment; it typically leads one to hope for the next achievement.

The second category includes *hopes about one's death*. In some cases, people hope to die in a way that reflects their values. Imagine, for instance, a soldier who has devoted their life to their country and who thus hopes to die in battle. In another case, a person may hope to die in a way that benefits other people. Bovens points to those who ask for euthanasia in order to offer their organs for donation. If they could not help others, they might not request euthanasia, but dying in this way earlier than they otherwise might confers meaning to their death.

The third category includes *hopes about the attitudes of others*. These hopes take several different forms. One might hope that one's friends and families will miss them. Of course, one doesn't wish for one's family to suffer indefinitely, but some suffering is a sign of love. A person may also hope to be remembered. While some simply hope to be remembered, others hope to be remembered in a positive light. Remembrance can function as an alternative to immortality. Bovens also observes that many people hope to be respected. For instance, one may be disappointed if their personal journal is used as a doorstop after their death, or (more morbidly) if their corpse is defiled.

The last category includes *hopes about the future*. These may be altruistic hopes. A person may hope that their grandchildren live happy lives, or that the world becomes more peaceful. Alternatively, a person may see future events as effecting the quality of their life. They might believe that whether their children go on to be good or bad people has an effect on how good their life was.

For some people, Bovens's proposals may not be enough. Anthony Wrigley (2019) worries that for many who confront death without the hope of an afterlife, they may find it difficult to hope for *anything*:

> If there is nothing we can direct our hope towards when facing only the prospect of a painful, short existence followed by death, then it would seem that the only means of maintaining hope for individuals in such terrible circumstances would be to engage in some sort of deceit about their prospects. (Wrigley 2019, p. 189)

Wrigley argues that hope does not always have an object, however. Sometimes we can hope *in* and *with* others without looking toward any particular goal. People who suffer may join together in solidarity to comfort or support each other in their mutual suffering. Here is how Wrigley puts it:

> As long as there are people around the world who are dying, who are themselves experiencing the same fears, and who find mutuality in confronting those fears, then hope can be placed in "us;" in all those who share that common bond. It keeps open the communal aspect to life that is lost when the temptation to despair takes hold. (ibid., p. 201)

On this picture, hope in the face of death isn't aimed at anything. In philosophy-talk, the hope doesn't have the form of a "hope that $p$." But it does ward against the threat of despair by embedding us in a community with others who must also face death. It should be admitted that hope without a specific goal is unusual. Yet as we shall see below, Wrigley's proposal has some similarities with religious views according to which hope is fundamentally hoping *in* another being (namely, God).

# 9. HOPE, FAITH, AND CHRISTIANITY

Hope has a central place in the Christian tradition. In this section, I follow Anne Jeffrey's account of Christian hope (Jeffrey 2019). I then consider her argument that a better understanding of Christian hope can help to address important objections to Christian faith (Jeffrey 2017).

**What is Christian Hope?**

Jeffrey (2019) begins with the question, *What are the objects of hope?* Here she distinguishes hoping *in* from hoping *that*. Thus far, we have mainly focused on the latter. (The discussion of Wrigley on hope in the face of death is the one exception.) But according to Jeffrey, Christian theologians see a hope in God as fundamental. Hoping *in* God is a way of trusting or relying on God (cf. Bobier 2017). From this vantage point, we then come to hope *that* Christ will return, *that* we will be saved, and so on. Jeffrey illustrates the primacy of hoping in God by asking us to consider the story of Abraham leaving his home at God's directive. There isn't any specific outcome he is hoping for, but he is hoping in God insofar as he is trusting and relying on God.

Jeffrey turns next to the question, *What is the relationship between hope and knowledge*? On the one hand, it doesn't seem as if one can hope for something if one *knows* that what one hopes for is, or will be, true (see Benton 2019). But as Jeffrey points out, hope should also be compatible with faith. And for many Christians, faith is a kind of certainty. So how can hope in God be compatible with faith in God if faith involves certainty? The solution, Jeffrey argues, is to notice that faith is a kind of certainty in the *unknown*. The kind of knowledge that faith and hope exclude is direct acquaintance (knowledge rooted in experience). Faith is certainty in what is unseen, and thus unknown; and certainty in the unknown is, according to Christian thinkers like St. Thomas Aquinas, compatible with hope. In other words, the Christian can have faith/hope that they will be saved because they do not know salvation in the strong sense of having already *experienced* it, even if they know it will be true.

Jeffrey's observations about faith and hope indicate an important difference with respect to how Christian theologians and secular philosophers tend to talk about hope. The latter tend to emphasize hope when we are *not* confident that our hopes will be fulfilled. By contrast, Christianity tends to associate hope with confidence. This is because Christianity pairs hope together with faith. Indeed, according to Jeffrey, it is the intellectual confidence supplied by faith that gives rise to the Christian virtue of hope. The virtue of hope is fundamentally about confidently relying on God. But this virtue of hope—like the other theological virtues of faith and charity—cannot be achieved on our own. They require God's grace.

To further illustrate Christian hope, it is worth considering two distinctive ways in which a Christian might fail to hope virtuously. On the one hand, a person may suffer from the vice of *despair*. The person who despairs desires union with God and salvation, but sees it as out of reach. But hope is within our reach if only we would accept God's help. On the other hand, a person may suffer from the vice of *presumption*. The presumptuous person is confident that they will achieve union with God and salvation but doesn't properly rely on God to help them toward this end. They assume that it is something they

can achieve wholly through their own power. As Jeffrey points out, the Christian who hopes virtuously navigates a middle ground between the twin vices of despair and presumption.

When we achieve the Christian virtue of hope, it not only orients us correctly to the world hereafter, but also to our earthly reality. In this way, hoping well isn't just about the divine, it also requires hoping for goods in this world. But by centering divine hopes, we avoid "ascribing to [earthly hopes] a significance they cannot bear" (Roberts 2007, p. 151; quoted in Jeffrey 2019). For further discussion of the complex ways in which divine hopes relate to earthly hopes, see Lamb (2018) and Milona (2020b).

**Hope and the Moral Objection(s) to Faith**

Philosophers and theologians have long grappled with the question of whether Christian faith is *rational*, or intellectually justifiable. A similarly important, but much less discussed question is whether Christian faith is *morally* justifiable. It turns out that there are several arguments according to which it is not. Jeffrey (2017) defends a general strategy for answering each of these moral objections to Christian faith. According to her, the solutions involve getting clear about the relation between Christian faith and Christian hope. To begin, here are the different forms of the challenge that Jeffrey identifies:

i.  *Degradation*: Christian faith leads one to have low esteem of oneself and others. For example, it requires the admission that we cannot be virtuous without God's help; and yet, if we aren't moral, eternal suffering awaits. As Jeffrey puts it, "these two claims provide grounds for us to think of ourselves and other human beings as unworthy" (Jeffrey 2019, p. 196).
ii.  *Non-acceptance*: Religious and cultural diversity are a social good and, in any case, we ought to be tolerant of other religions and worldviews. But Christian faith conflicts with this. It says that religious and cultural diversity are not good because Christianity is the only path to salvation. Christianity thus pushes us to be intolerant. Given the stakes, Christian faith requires Christians to advocate for laws and institutions that favor Christianity.
iii.  *Bigotry*: Christianity requires us to oppose actions that are opposed by God. And while Christianity tells us to condemn sins rather than sinners, this is incredibly difficult, if not psychologically impossible. For instance, according to standard interpretations of Christian texts, being gay is a sin. Opposition to being gay is difficult to disentangle from opposition to the people who identify as gay.
iv.  *Self-deception*: Even if Christian faith is rational, it requires the faithful to view themselves as having privileged access to the truth, discounting the beliefs of those with alternative viewpoints. In many cases, however, the people we are discounting are intellectually similar to us. Christians deceive themselves and treat their non-Christian (intellectual) peers disrespectfully when they persist in faith despite the latter's reasonable misgivings.

Jeffrey answers each of these objections in turn. In each case, hope is crucial. The first thing to recognize is that faith requires hope. As she puts it, the person who has faith "also has a firm disposition to put hope in God and to hope for God to give her eternal beatitude" (2017, pp. 202-203). This faith-hope connection helps to explain why the faithful are motivated to live a Christian life, since hope goes beyond

the purely intellectual. Likewise, the idea that faith involves hope explains why demons lack faith even though they believe in the God of Abraham.

Here, then, is how the faith-hope connection helps to address the moral challenges to faith:

i. *Response to Degradation*: Christian faith involves a hope for redemption. And the possibility of redemption lifts one up from a sinful past. It is this hope that helps us to avoid viewing ourselves and others as entirely base and unworthy.

ii. *Response to Non-acceptance*: Christian hope looks to God for salvation. But this needn't mean relying on political systems as tools to pressure citizens toward Christian ideals. Furthermore, intolerantly forcing one's religion on others is a sign of *losing* hope in them that they will come to Christ of their own accord.

iii. *Response to Bigotry*: The bigotry objection assumes that Christians will be unable to condemn sins without making the moral mistake of condemning sinners. But a Christian outlook guards against this error by requiring certain positive attitudes toward all people. For even as one condemns a sinful action, one hopes for the good of that person. Interestingly, the condemnation may be on account of concern for the other's eternal well-being. Hope thus ensures a fundamentally positive attitude toward the person.

iv. *Response to Self-deception*: Faith is not purely intellectual but is supported by hope. Even when a Christian confronts serious arguments against their faith, they are still justified in hoping. And this hope can justify engaging in the actions (e.g., attending services) that support one's faith. This needn't involve deception of oneself or disrespect of others.

In sum, then, Jeffrey argues that a proper understanding of the role of hope in Christianity helps to address key moral objections to Christian faith.

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## 10. PRAGMATIST HOPE, GRIT, AND EDUCATION

Sarah Stitzlein's study of the role of hope in education and democracy merits detailed consideration. This is because her research aims to make a material impact on current educational practices. She begins from the thought that education should be about more than just "teaching to the test." It should also be about developing character traits. But *which* ones? There has been a surge of interest in a phenomenon called *grit*, which was popularized by Angela Duckworth's *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. But while Stitzlein finds much of value in grit, it is deficient in important ways. According to her argument, if education is about creating good citizens, we should be particularly interested in cultivating what she calls *pragmatist hope*.

**Grit**

Let's start with Stitzlein's critique of grit. According to Duckworth (2016), grit is a passionate commitment to a long-term project. When you're gritty you "care about the *same* ultimate goal in an abiding, loyal, steady way" (2016, p. 64). With the help of several colleagues, Duckworth developed the Grit Scale as a way of measuring grit (Duckworth et al. 2007) The scale asks individuals the extent to which they agree with a series of six statements measuring *consistency of interests* (e.g., "My interests change from year to year") and another six statements regarding *perseverance of effort* (e.g., "I finish whatever I begin"). Not surprisingly, there is evidence that grit supports achievement in education. It does so independently of IQ (Duckworth et al. 2007, p. 1098).

Grit is thought to be teachable. Stitzlein outlines several ways this could be the case (2019a, p. 90). One method is simply *deliberate* practice. For example, if one wishes to become a better runner, then one should make precise their long-term goal (e.g., to run a 5k in under 25 minutes) and then identify the subgoals that will make this possible. Achieving goals through deliberate practice can create a habit of grittiness (see Duckworth 2016, p. 135). One may also support individual grittiness by way of a culture of grittiness. In other words, if those around us accept grit as a central virtue, then we will be more likely to do so as well (Duckworth 2016, p. 244). And, last, developing a "growth mindset" can support grit. A growth mindset is rooted in "the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts" (Dweck 2008, p. 7).

It is not difficult to see why grit is so attractive. We tend to think of passion and tenacity as virtues. Gritty people also tend to take personal responsibility for achieving their goals, and they are not easily thrown off course by day-to-day distractions (Stitzlein 2019a, p. 93). And as we have seen, grit is also measurable and teachable. Consequently, KIPP charter schools are one example among many that have implemented Duckworth's model of grit in their approach to education (Stitzlein 2019a, 90-1). Similar models of grit have also been implemented. Consider Paul Stoltz, who has put his own ideas about grit into action in High Teach High School in San Diego. As he puts it, grit can "fend off the mass wussification (weakening) of kids worldwide" (2014, p. 11).

**Pragmatist Hope**

Despite its advantages, Stitzlein warns against embracing grit. First, grit encourages us to "deal with" our circumstances rather than seek to change them. According to Stitzlein,

> We want students to examine and challenge the social, economic, and political conditions that support or hinder their success and that of others…not just blindly withstand them, focusing merely on achieving their personal goals despite the obstacles they face." (Stitzlein 2019a, p. 94)

Second, and relatedly, grit tends to "romanticize struggle, glorifying hardship as a source of or demonstrable location for grit" (ibid., p. 94). But poorer students may struggle to focus on long-term goals when day-to-day needs demand so much focus and attention. It is therefore not a surprise that measures of grit are sensitive to wealth. To view a lack of grit as a moral vice risks placing "blame on the victim for not being 'gritty enough'" (ibid., p. 95).

## 10.2   Pragmatist Hope

Given these difficulties with grit, Stitzlein recommends turning our attention to hope. Hoping well, according to Stitzlein, involves what she calls *pragmatist hope*. "Pragmatism" refers to a school of philosophy rooted in the work of thinkers such as William James and John Dewey. A central dimension of pragmatism is its philosophically unusual conception of "truth." Philosophers ordinarily conceive of truth in terms of a correspondence between a proposition and the world. But as Stitzlein points out, "Unlike truth as a corresponding match between proposition and reality, pragmatist truth is something that occurs when the goals of human flourishing are satisfied, at least temporarily" (2018b, p. 235; see also Stitzlein 2019b). She is saying, in other words, that pragmatist hope seeks truth in this sense of *what works*. She identifies several key features of this kind of hope.

One is the idea of *growth*. Whereas grit emphasizes tenacity with respect to long-term goals, pragmatist hope advocates flexibility and change. This means that insofar as we have hopes for a distant future, these should be open-ended, consisting of indefinite horizons rather than clear goalposts. More determinate hopes should focus on the short-term—what Stitzlein calls "ends-in-view"—that aim at improving our present situation. Each hope for one of these "ends-in-view" is like a scientific hypothesis. We act on the hope, see if it works, and then adjust our hopes as necessary (Stitzlein 2018b, p. 234). In this way, hoping well requires creative problem solving and imagination (Stitzlein 2016, p. 33).

Pragmatist hope is also *historical*. We find a path forward by looking back. Throughout history, efforts for positive socio-political change have succeeded to greater and lesser degrees. We can look to the details of how such progress was made to imagine a way forward in our current moment. Such progress is often the output of many citizens' arduous work, which is easy to gloss over in oversimplified narratives (cf. Solnit 2017). Oversimplification can make change seem wholly miraculous, but change is the product of the hard work of many people working together (see Stitzlein 2018b, p. 235; 2019a, p. 119). For example, if we are hoping that our local government spends more on education and less on militarizing the police, we will hope better to the extent that we learn how similar hopes have been put into action elsewhere and how they succeeded or failed.

Another central idea is that pragmatist hope is *melioristic* rather than optimistic. She illustrates with the help of Cornel West, a fellow advocate of pragmatist hope:

> Optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Yet when we know that the evidence does not look good…Hope enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles against the evidence. (West 2004, p. 296)

As Stitzlein points out, the pragmatist hoper recognizes the radical contingency of the future. There is no inevitable march of progress. But progress is *possible*. In this way, hope and grit are similar: both demand hard work and action.

Unlike grit, however, pragmatist hope emphasizes working with others to achieve collective goals. Partly this is because this form of hope has an ethical dimension in that it advocates the goal of collective flourishing. But cooperation is also baked into the pragmatism itself. We are better able to achieve our goals and learn from the past through discourse, compromise, and collective action.

**Pragmatist Hope in Education**

For Stitzlein, pragmatist hope is fundamentally democratic. Working with others, learning from the past, and testing new ideas are features of pragmatist hope that support a healthy democracy. This makes it especially suited for education. After all, part of the point of education is not simply to maximize test scores but to mold future citizens.

Pragmatist hope is actualized through *habit*, and these habits can be cultivated in the classroom. According to Stitzlein (and coauthor Lori Foote), a habit isn't just doing something again and again. Instead, a habit actively seeks its characteristic behavior. For example, a habit of going to the gym involves a felt urge to go to the gym. Similarly, a person with pragmatist hope seeks to work with their fellow citizens (classmates, family members, etc.) to bring about change that is better for all. When confronted with failure, the hopeful person learns from their mistakes and crafts a new hypothesis rather than succumb to despair (Foote and Stitzlein 2016, pp. 32-36).

The best way to cultivate pragmatist hope, Stitzlein argues, is to view the classroom as more than mere preparation for citizenry but as "a mode of social life itself" (Foote and Stitzlein 2016, p. 35; see also Stitzlein 2018a). The classroom should raise problems of real social concern, although the complexity and scope of these problems should be tailored for the age of the students. They should then work together to come up with potential solutions. Through a process of dialogue and planning, students find themselves arriving at a collective plan of action, then compromising with fellow students who may have started out with very different views. They may also find themselves developing more creative solutions than they originally thought possible. Such exercises combat the temptation to apathy and defeatism.

To maximize the chance that such exercises go well, teachers need to create an orderly process that models effective planning. For example, Foote and Stitzlein observe that brainstorming should precede the choice of a plan. To foster creativity in this process, the teacher should take care to emphasize the distinction between an idea and the person who comes up with that idea. And when it comes to actually deciding on a solution, the teacher can allow the students to explore different methods of making the decision. For instance, a familiar approach will be a majority vote, but alternative approaches have advantages, too. Seeking a solution that everyone can live with may require substantial creativity, combining ideas from majority and minority opinions. Once the exercise is complete, time should be set aside for the students and teacher to reflect on how well the class achieved their aims (2016, pp. 37-38).

Foote and Stitzlein emphasize that students should not be shielded from failure. Pragmatist hope is realistic rather than idealistic. Still, it should be emphasized that success and failure come in degrees. An apparently successful outcome may require ongoing attention if it is to be maintained, and the teacher

should emphasize this. Moreover, an unsuccessful effort can still invigorate future action. This attitude toward success and failure should be represented when it comes to the presentation of history and the choice of class readings. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. should not be presented as unequivocally successful. To do so is to paint a misleading picture of change.

In sum, then, Stitzlein argues that it is possible to cultivate pragmatist hope in the classroom. This is not easy, however. It requires time, effort, and creativity on the part of educators. The incentives to do so may not be in place, either, given the emphasis on testing. Yet Stitzlein finds grounds for hope in the recent rise of grit; the trouble is that those efforts need to be reoriented toward pragmatist hope, a virtue that better supports our collective good.

## 11.     FUTURE RESEARCH

Researchers have made substantial progress on the nature and value of hope and optimism. But important questions remain unanswered and/or underexplored. Hope continues to be mysterious. But despite the difficulty of characterizing it, progress appears to have been made on hope's risks and benefits. It is plausible that examinations of hope's value will inform investigations of what hope is, and vice-versa. By contrast, while there is more agreement about the different forms of optimism (dispositional optimism and positive illusions), questions about the precise causal role of optimism will benefit from continued study (see Carver and Scheier 2018, p. 218). Relatedly, there is additional work to be done separating the effects of optimism from related constructs (Bennett 2011, p. 306).

In light of the touted benefits of hope and optimism, there is keen interest in the origins of hope and optimism and how they can be cultivated. Although some empirical work has been done on dispositional optimism, the extent to which this personality trait can be developed is not well understood. And with respect to hope, we have seen preliminary work from some philosophers, including Sarah Stitzlein and Katie Stockdale. We have also seen some relevant work in psychology/sociology, including Fletcher (2018) and Fletcher and Kim (2019). But Hope Theory remains a dominant paradigm in psychology, despite arguably not corresponding with the everyday concept of hope. It would be exciting to see more empirical work on the concepts of hope that are ascendant among philosophers and other humanists.

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# 13.    APPENDIXES

## Appendix A

Life Orientation Test (see Carver and Scheier 1985, p. 225)

The Life Orientation Test (LOT) asks respondents the extent to which they agree with twelve statements. These include four filler items that are not part of the optimism measure. For each statement, respondents are asked to indicate one of the following: (4) strongly agree, (3) agree, (2) neutral, (1) disagree, or (0) strongly disagree. Here are the twelve statements:

1. **In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.**
2. **It's easy for me to relax. (Filler item)**
3. **If something can go wrong for me, it will.***
4. **I always look on the bright side of things.**
5. **I'm always optimistic about my future.**
6. **I enjoy my friends a lot. (Filler item)**
7. **It's important for me to keep busy (Filler item)**
8. **I hardly ever expect things to go my way.***
9. **Things never work out the way I want them to.***
10. **I don't get upset too easily. (Filler item)**
11. **I'm a believer in the idea that "every cloud has a silver lining."**
12. **I rarely count on good things happening to me.***

*These items are negatively worded and thus reverse scored (i.e., lower numbers indicate greater optimism).

## Appendix B

Life Orientation Test–Revised (see Scheier, Carver, and Bridges 1994, p. 1073)

The Life Orientation Test–Revised (LOT-R) asks respondents the extent to which they agree with ten statements. These include four filler items that are not part of the optimism measure. For each statement, respondents are asked to indicate one of the following: (4) strongly agree, (3) agree, (2) neutral, (1) disagree, or (0) strongly disagree. Here are the ten statements:

1.  **In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.**
2.  **It's easy for me to relax. (Filler item)**
3.  **If something can go wrong for me, it will.***
4.  **I'm always optimistic about my future.**
5.  **I enjoy my friends a lot. (Filler item)**
6.  **It's important for me to keep busy. (Filler item)**
7.  **I hardly ever expect things to go my way.***
8.  **I don't get upset too easily. (Filler item)**
9.  **I rarely count on good things happening to me.***
10. **Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.**

*These items are negatively worded and thus reverse scored (i.e., lower numbers indicate greater optimism).

## Appendix C

The Trait Hope Scale (see Snyder 2002, p. 274; original version in Snyder et al. 1991, p. 585)

Respondents are asked the extent to which they agree with twelve statements. This includes four items probing agency thinking, four probing pathways thinking, and four filler items that are not part of the measure. For each statement, respondents are asked to indicate one of the following: (1) definitely false, (2) mostly false, (3) somewhat false; (4) slightly false; (5) slightly true; (6) somewhat true; (7) mostly true, (8) definitely true. Here are the twelve statements:

1.  **I can think of many ways to get out of a jam. (Pathways)**
2.  **I energetically pursue my goals. (Agency)**
3.  **I feel tired most of the time. (Filler)**
4.  **There are lots of ways around any problem. (Pathways)**
5.  **I am easily downed in an argument. (Filler)**
6.  **I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me. (Pathways)**
7.  **I worry about my health. (Filler)**
8.  **Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem. (Pathways)**
9.  **My past experiences have prepared me well for my future. (Agency)**
10. **I've been pretty successful in life. (Agency)**
11. **I usually find myself worrying about something. (Filler)**
12. **I meet the goals that I set for myself. (Agency)**