

The Primacy of Hope for Human Flourishing

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Abstract: In this paper we argue that the eudaimonist virtue of hope holds pride of place in development of psychological traits that promote human flourishing. The argument is part theoretical and part empirical. On the theoretical side, hope, the virtue, is the disposition to envision future good possibilities for oneself and one's community and to move towards those possibilities. This renders hope necessary for any agent's self-conscious pursuit of the goods that constitute flourishing, and also for the development of other virtues. On the empirical side, we draw on evidence from psychology to argue that early in development, humans need relationships of trust with caregivers to develop the future orientation and features of agency constitutive of the virtue of hope. Thus the virtue of hope generally needs to be fostered, in part, through trusting relationships for humans to flourish.

1 Introduction

The vast majority of contemporary literature in philosophy on hope focuses on the attitude or the trait as it appears in mature adults. The discussion often revolves around the rationality of hope or what hope might make it rational to do or believe (Martin 2014, Pettit 2004, Bovens 1999, Milona 2020, Bobier 2017, Milona and Stockdale 2018, Benton 2021).¹ In general, we do not hold children or adolescents to the same standards of rationality we apply to adults.

¹ We will discuss McGeer (2004) as a notable exception to this. Her account of substantial hope overlaps with ours in significant ways but is dissimilar in its focus first, on how hope reorients us vis a vis our limitations and frustrations, and second, on the role of hope being invested by adults in children. Our paper will focus instead on the future orientation towards goods and on the role of hope had by children and adolescents in the unfolding and development of their agency.

Since the contemporary accounts offer ideals applicable to mature adults, it is unsurprising that most have little to say about hope in early stages of human life.

Some contemporary philosophers consider hope a virtue—a character disposition that contributes to human flourishing (Foot 1979, Snow 2018, Kadlac 2015, Cobb and Green 2017, Jeffrey 2017), while others contest this characterization (Bobier 2017, S). Historically, hope has not been classed as a moral virtue, but a proto-virtuous emotion, a theological virtue, or a mere emotion (Milona 2021, Jospe 1971, 122, Jeffrey 2019, Bobier 2017). Absent from historical and contemporary views on hope is the notion that hope is a virtue that helps one to develop other virtues and thus to flourish in earthly life. This is surprising when we attend to the psychological literature, where hope has been studied in children and adolescents and considered important for developing agency and subsequently, for wellbeing (Snyder et al. 2002b, Snyder 2002a, Kerpelman and Mosher 2004, Snyder 2011, Johnson et al. 2014).

Are philosophical accounts of hope missing something significant by not attending to the role of hope in early stages of human development generally, and moral development specifically? We think so. We will argue that hope plays a significant role in the pursuit of flourishing and acquiring other virtues. Further, we draw on developmental psychology to argue that one of the preconditions for acquiring hope is the experience of trusting relationships with caregivers. When trusting caregivers and exemplars tend to children and adolescents, facilitating positive beliefs about their own capacities to act and a positive future orientation, they cultivate the virtue of hope.² We conclude that hope and its components

² We arrived at the idea that hope plays a central role early in the development of virtue and is necessary to acquire early on to flourish through collaboration with a community in the southern US that partnered with us in a research project over the course of two years. The community stakeholders stressed the importance of hope in youth as enabling them to live well and in ways that promote community good. See Mehari et al. (2023a, 2023b) for detailed discussions of the methods and results of this project.

generally need to be fostered partly through trusting relationships early on for a person to flourish.³

2 Hope in Mature Agents

Dominant accounts of hope in the contemporary philosophical literature depict it as a disposition or attitude that children and adolescents are ill-suited to have or deploy well. For ideal, rational, or virtuous hope is constituted by cognitive or affective components that seem out of reach for immature agents. So we will illustrate in this section. Later we will argue that these accounts can be made to accommodate the idea that hope is a virtue available to children and adolescents without completely losing their integrity.

2.1 Standard philosophical accounts

To see how contemporary accounts of hope have been built with adults in mind, first consider Adrienne Martin's seminal text, *How We Hope* (2014). Martin explores the role that hope plays in giving us reasons for specific courses of action when the prospects for success look dim. On Martin's view, hope is an attitude composed of belief in the possibility of some outcome, a desire for the outcome, and a stance of letting the possibility license one to make certain plans, act in certain ways, based on the possibility of that outcome. A central example in the book is of two adult patients with the same terminal cancer diagnoses; the one who has hope acts and plans as though she will live on and beat the cancer, whereas the one without hope but with the same chance of living does not.

Bovens (1999) draws on the case of two mature agents—Red and Andy from *Shawshank Redemption*—to illuminate the nature of hope. Red and Andy are convicts in prison; they estimate the likelihood of their escape equally, and both desire to escape to the

³ We say “generally” here to leave open the possibility that relationships with caring adults later in life could play the same functional role of trusting caregiver relationships early in development.

same degree. Bovens and others (Chignell 2022, Martin 2014, Meirav 2009) use this and similar examples to draw out that mere desire and belief are not sufficient conditions for hoping. Instead, hope, on Bovens' view, involves "mental imaging," that is, a "devotion of mental energy to what it would be like if some projected state of the world were to materialize," (Bovens 1999, 674). He then points out that a person who hopes is liable to a kind of fanciful or wishful thinking precisely because hope involves mental imaging. To hope well, he argues, requires tethering one's beliefs to reality such that one is not caught in epistemic irrationality. Fleshing this out, he suggests that the agent who hopes well has to treat her own epistemic agency as an end in itself rather than a means to, say, peace of mind (ibid., 681). On Chignell's focus theory of hope, the extra element beyond belief and desire is a disposition to focus on the desired outcome "under the aspect of unswamped possibility," (Chignell 2022, 11). This involves not allowing considerations telling against the possibility of the desired outcome to be more salient than the possibility.

Philosophical explorations the virtue of hope have followed the contemporary analyses of the attitude of hope in these respects (Bobier 2018, Cobb 2015, Kadlac 2015, Lamb 2016, Milona 2020, Moellendorf 2006, Snow 2018). The diverse accounts of hope, the virtue, have in common an assumption that it is a psychological disposition that belongs to mature, rational agents or requires epistemic or practical rationality at least in the cognitive and conative constituents of hope (Milona and Stockdale 2020). Hope has been characterized as the ability to modulate optimism and pessimism (Kadlac 2015), organize abstract priorities rightly (Milona 2021), or facilitate the achievement of the ends of democracy in our institutions (Snow 2018, Moellendorf 2006). The exemplars of hope offered by proponents of these theories are all mature agents, replete with sophisticated cognitive and social abilities that allow them to do what the theory says is characteristic of the person with the virtue of hope.

What constitutes *good* hope on the dominant conceptions (whether the virtue or the beneficial instances of the attitude) appears to demand engagement of psychological, social, and cognitive capacities children and adolescents simply have not developed fully. Children and adolescents' immature executive functioning, for instance, limits their ability to fully engage in the cognitive activities perceived to be fundamental to good forms of hope. Children and adolescents have more difficulty in considering long-term outcomes compared to short-term outcomes in their decision-making when compared to adults (Wahlstrom et al. 2010, Luna et al. 2010). Adolescents also have an optimistic bias, or an irrational myth of invulnerability, such that they are more likely to believe that they will not experience natural consequences of risky behaviors. This, in turn, makes difficult effective modulation of optimism and pessimism (Arnett 2014). The picture that emerges when we consider empirical evidence about the psychology of children and adolescents is that rational or virtuous hope is just not for them.

2.2 Standard psychological accounts

Much of the psychological literature on hope, by contrast, focuses on children and adolescents and its role in their acquiring a sense of their agency. Two of the most widely used scales related to hope are the Children's Hope Scale (Snyder 2005) and Hopelessness Scale for Children (Kazdin 1986). Psychological theories of hope attend particularly to child development (Snyder 2002). Some psychologists maintain that as early as age three or four, children acquire the ability to "envision alternatives, a vital skill for moral development," (Emde 2016, 47). When there are deficits in the development of proximal goal generation or alternative response options, this can seriously impede the child from developing a sense of agency, an internal locus of control, and flexible problem-solving, which are essential to dealing with daily stressors in an adaptive way (Bandura 2001, Emde 2016, 83).

While the dominant philosophical models seem disengaged from this psychological literature, Victoria McGeer's account of hope stands out in this respect. McGeer aims to integrate work on hope across disciplines (2004). She envisions hope as "a unifying and grounding force of human agency," and thus, to the extent that children and adolescents acquire and enact agency it would be in principle open to them to acquire and enact hope (ibid, 101). In the foregoing section we provide further reasons for agreeing with McGeer on precisely this point from an Aristotelian eudaimonist perspective.

The second aspect of McGeer's account of hope that answers to the empirical evidence we will draw on is the "deeply social" nature of hope (ibid 108). She argues that parents scaffold agency-constituting hope in children in two ways. First, when parents provide emotional comfort children need to tolerate distress associated with frustration when they face their own limitations and to keep going (ibid 107). Second, parental scaffolding can help to generate responses in children that tune, enhance, and direct latent capacities that then become part of their agency. McGeer describes the resulting experience of children as "an initial experience of limited and dependent quasi-agency" and instilling "precursors to hope" (108). While we think McGeer is right to note the way hope requires scaffolding from others, the empirical part of our argument will provide reasons for thinking that any nurturing caregiver, not just a parent, can play the needed role and that what is generated not a precursor to hope and quasi-agency but hope itself and proper agency.

We will go even further, arguing that hope is a virtue children can acquire, and one that facilitates their development of other virtues and achievement of other goods constitutive of their flourishing. On traditional virtue ethical theories, none of the virtues are available to developing moral agents like children (Swanton 2017, Jimenez 2020). At the same time, especially Aristotelian virtue ethics concerns itself with theorizing about how virtues are acquired through a process that involves the virtuous person's exercises of agency. We will

argue that developmental psychology can aid philosophy in charting such a course, and that course typically involves children acquiring and enacting the virtue of hope.

3 The theoretical case for the primacy of hope

In what sense is hope a virtue that could be acquired in childhood or adolescence? We aim to show that a certain form of hope deserves to be considered such a virtue because of the role it plays in achieving human flourishing.⁴ We begin with our general conception of hope as a virtue, assuming a eudaimonist framework. Then we argue that having the disposition of hope is sufficient to meet a key condition of flourishing, namely, achieving goods by exercise of one's own agency. Finally, we will argue the disposition of hope is necessary for flourishing.

3.1 A eudaimonist definition of hope

Virtues on the eudaimonist picture are psychological dispositions that promote, while not guaranteeing, the flourishing of those who have them. Virtues are individuated by the spheres of human activity in which they fit their possessors for excellence (Nussbaum 1988). For instance, traditionally temperance is moderation in the spheres of bodily pleasures—food, drink, and sex as Aristotle says. Different virtues might interact to produce the best action in a circumstance, for instance, when having temperance about food helps Gandhi perform courageous acts like fasting in protest of tyrannical rule. Finally, virtues are habits deeply entrenched in a person's psychology (Murillo and Bernacer 2014).

The place where hope gets categorized as a virtue most frequently is in western medieval theology, where it is chiefly characterized as orienting a person to the difficulty but

⁴ In what follows we focus on just this form of hope. To be sure, there are attitudes that count as full-fledged hope and dispositions to have such occurrent attitudes that do not answer to the conception we will offer but deserve the name hope. They are simply not sort of psychological entity the Aristotelian or Thomist eudaimonist will count as the virtue of hope. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us to make this clear.

possible future good of union with God in heaven (Jeffrey 2019, Pinches 2014). For Aquinas, for instance, hoping is an emotion that one can have toward any difficult future good, but the habit that hones such emotions rightly is a habit of focusing on being united with God as the ultimate future, difficult good. We can, however, remain agnostic about what the best future, difficult good *is* (God or something else) and get something from such accounts of hope as a virtue. The disposition to hope (or the art of hoping) well involves an orientation to future goods that are seen as difficult but possible.

Virtually every contemporary theory of hope as an attitude and as a virtue includes the notion that what is hoped for by a person with hope is something one deems *worthwhile*.

While the attitude of hope can be directed at events or states of affairs that we find worthwhile or good but which we can do nothing to effect, like the US women's soccer team winning the Olympics, hope *the virtue* is typically thought to relate to goods we can at least participate in bringing about.

Finally, it is generally agreed that hope involves belief that whatever one finds worth pursuing is possible to get. Almost everything contemporary philosophers want to say about hope can remain intact if we simply suppose that hope excludes believing that the good is impossible to attain, and that is of course a much weaker requirement on hope. But, it does seem that hope, the virtue, positively involves an assessment of the future good one wants as possible or attainable for oneself.

All of this yields an initial eudaimonist definition of the virtue of hope:

1. Hope is a disposition to envision future difficult goods as attainable for you and worth your pursuit.

This conception captures a cognitive element of hope, namely, envisioning something good as a possibility, without making this inaccessible to the young. It also captures a

desiderative element, namely, that what is hoped for is wanted. Again, though, it does not require the person with the disposition to hope to have some sophisticated affective machinery. What differentiates hope, the virtue, from accumulation of the mere attitude or emotion of hope is agential. The person with the virtue of hope not only has certain beliefs and desires but also *is moved to achieve or participate in achieving* what they hope for by those beliefs and desires. Someone who habitually hopes for events to come to pass, for instance, that the Buffalo Bills will win, while being unmoved to help bring it about cannot thus be characterized by having the virtue of hope. This further aspect of hope especially will help us begin to make the connection between hope and flourishing needed for it to qualify as a virtue on the eudaimonist picture.

3.2 Hope as a sufficient condition for agency in pursuit of flourishing

On that picture, a good human life will progress toward *human flourishing*. By flourishing, we do not mean passive experience of subjective pleasure, but something active, namely:

2. Human flourishing consists in enjoyment of the best goods achievable in action.

A flourishing person differs from a mere recipient of pleasure because the person who flourishes is an agent in her own flourishing. Her happiness consists in large part of enjoying what she does and the products of what she has done, not simply what is done to and for her:

3. The goods a flourishing human enjoys must be, in some sense, achieved by the person whose flourishing it is.

These three premises are commonly assumed in Aristotelian virtue ethics, so we will simply note rather than argue for them here (Nussbaum 1988, Hursthouse 1999, Annas 2011).

The implication of these commonplaces is that any person who wants to flourish will have to do something to effect that flourishing by her action. We can see this implication clearly by reflecting on the difference between passively receiving a good and achieving a

good. Suppose a divine being were to instantly infuse someone's life with all the goods we usually associate with a flourishing human life—family, friendship, aesthetic experience, work, and so on. The recipient of those goods would not have come by flourishing via virtue but by luck (or providence, one might say). We would not be right to say she had achieved her flourishing, since her agency seems in no way involved in producing the goods normally constitutive of flourishing.

Someone might object that the person who has all the human goods in her life is flourishing regardless of how she came by the goods. But notice that this goes against the grain of the eudaimonist virtue ethical view. For one of the cornerstones of that view is that having and acting from the virtues lead to flourishing. Thus the virtue ethicist is committed to action from virtue playing an important role in producing the goods that the flourishing person enjoys.

Now we can draw the connection to hope as a virtue with its priority in time for the person moving towards flourishing. The first connection comes to light when we reflect on what it takes for one's attainment of human goods to be an achievement of her own agency at least in part. Minimally, the actions that lead someone to enjoy the goods constitutive of flourishing in this way cannot be performed accidentally. To illustrate, imagine you are on your way to visit a friend, you turn south after stepping off the bus and find yourself in the middle of a march to expand voting rights. You are carried forward by the crowd and arrive on the steps of the capitol building. Around you, thousands of people chant in solidarity, and the sheer volume of the people in the march moves the political leaders to agree to sign a bill expanding voting rights. You enjoy a human good—democracy, or solidarity with fellow citizens—and you do so as a result of something you did—get off the bus and join the march. But you did not enjoy that good as something you *intentionally* did. What you intentionally did was walk south; you only happened to, in walking south, join the march.

A flourishing life is not made up of accidental acts that lead a person to enjoy human goods. Rather, when someone acts deliberately aiming at human goods, her agency can be said to be involved in the achievement of those goods and thus her flourishing. In other words:

4. A condition on the possibility of attaining the goods of flourishing by one's action is intentional movement towards them.

Someone might object that there is a sense in which we can call your joining of the march intentional, even though you are not aiming at the good it leads you to enjoy. After all, you did not actively resist the crowd and push the other way. The problem with this way of thinking, though, is that you are missing a standard hallmark of intention, namely: the object of the intention is also an object of desire.

In support of this orthodoxy about intentional action, consider another example. Your friend thinks that a protest is likely to happen today, and that the result is likely more widespread enfranchisement in the community. But your friend lacks any desire for that result. She too gets caught up in the march up to the capitol. It seems extremely odd to think that she intentionally acts to bring about that good she then experiences. In fact, as some philosophers have argued, a good cannot be enjoyed *as a good* by someone who does not also desire it (Parfit 1984, Heathwood 2020). (One way to support that claim is to hold the guise of the good view of desire).

If this orthodoxy about intentional action is correct, it entails:

5. Movement towards a good is only intentional insofar as one desires it.

Now hope, as we said earlier, has a desiderative element. What is hoped for is wanted. A person with hope is disposed to *desire* goods even when she is less than certain she will get what she wants. It is this desire that impels her to move towards such goods. The desiderative

element of hope ensures that the person who experiences a good like solidarity or democracy as a result of what she does enjoys it as a good, and when she acts to bring it about she does so intentionally. Therefore a person with hope will meet this condition on the possibility of achieving the goods constitutive of flourishing.

3.3 The necessity of hope for flourishing

The above suggests that having the virtue of hope is sufficient for meeting one condition on moving towards one's flourishing in the right way—by exercise of one's agency. But is hope necessary for flourishing such that it deserves to be called a virtue? Below we argue that it is.

The cognitive element of hope, we said, is belief in the possibility of attaining the future and difficult goods one finds worthwhile. But someone cannot get the goods of human life and enjoy them in a way that constitutes her flourishing if she does not believe it is possible for her to get those goods at least *in part* by dint of her own actions.⁵ To see this, imagine you live next door to a very famous singer. You would love to be friends with her. But you are convinced she would never deign to be friends with the likes of you. You do things that endear her to you, both because you are generally a considerate neighbor and because of your subconscious desire to be friends with her. You find yourself offering to water her plants when she is away, lending her a cup of sugar, helping her with home repairs, clearing your schedule and sitting on her front porch to exchange stories of the day's weal and woes. After a while, you do become friends in fact. You regularly enjoy the goods of this friendship, but because of your disbelief you refuse to believe you are really friends. Are you enjoying the good of friendship in a way that constitutes your flourishing?

⁵ We say "in part" because surely someone can enjoy many goods constitutive of flourishing as such when they are bestowed by close others as gifts. For instance, if I promise to bring over a meal to a sick friend but forget, and at the last minute, another friend shows up with a meal I can take to the sick friend, it looks like I enjoy the good of friendship or of hospitality through no effort of my own. Yet plausibly, if such a good in this instance is partly constitutive of my flourishing rather than a stroke of luck, it is because I contribute something by receiving the gift graciously, or perhaps using it properly. Thus, the good is not of my own making entirely, but I can see my enjoyment of it as partly due to my being receptive of the gift that enabled me to feed our sick friend. Thanks to Ryan Davis for the example and discussion that helped us refine our formulation here.

We think you are not, precisely because you do not think you are experiencing a human good as a result of your agency. You are not enjoying the good as a good, not because you fail to believe it is worthwhile, but rather because you do not think the worthwhile thing is achievable for you. The problem in this case, and with the friend who does not want the solidarity she experiences at the march, is that you both fail to recognize you are enjoying what is worthwhile in a human life. And, as we said above, a flourishing person must both have the human goods and enjoy them as a result, at least in part, of what she intentionally does.

So now we can add to our argument the claim that belief in the possibility of achieving a good is needed to progress in the right way towards one's flourishing. That is:

6. Movement towards a good requires that one sees it as possible/attainable for oneself by that movement.

Does this demonstrate that the virtue of hope is a condition on the possibility of moving towards the goods constitutive of flourishing? We think it does. The standard account holds that hope consists merely belief and desire (Milona 2018). What we demonstrated above is that the attitudes required to move towards the goods constitutive of flourishing in the right way are desire to achieve those goods and belief in the possibility of achieving those goods. So given the standard account, such a person has the two attitudes that constitute hopes. Achieving the goods of human flourishing requires consistent and concerted efforts over time to move towards those goods. In other words, it will require the disposition to have those hopeful attitudes towards the goods in the long run—the habit of hope.

We think that even on unorthodox accounts of the attitude of hope, it will turn out that the habit of having that attitude contributes towards one's flourishing in the way we suggest (though we do not think the virtue requires having such a sophisticated cognitive and

affective stance as the unorthodox view proposes). For Martin's revised account of hope, we need merely explain the connection between intentional movement towards goods and what Martin calls the licensing stance. A person with hope will take the possibility of some desired object as reason to formulate plans and take actions to bring about that good. But a mature agent who is in pursuit of the goods constitutive of human flourishing over the long run must treat the possibility of achieving such goods as reasons for action. For without doing so, she will be like a person who is swept up in the crowd marching for democracy and so enjoys the results accidentally, rather than as a result of her own agency. Therefore, the mature agent who intentionally moves towards human goods will have what Martin calls the licensing stance. On the standard view, desires and beliefs are sufficient to motivate rational action towards what one hopes for. On Martin's revised account, these plus the licensing stance are sufficient. In either case, we want to say that if one has what it takes to move towards human goods in the right way, one has the disposition to form attitudes of hope for those goods. Thus, hope is necessary for moving towards goods that will constitute one's flourishing. Hence, the conclusion of our theoretical argument for hope's primacy:

7. Hope—the disposition to envision and desire future goods and see them as possible for oneself through action—is a necessary condition for movement towards the goods of flourishing.

4 What psychology tells us about conditions for hope

We have made a theoretical case for the primacy of acquiring hope on the road to flourishing. In this section we will turn to contemporary psychology to further explore what is needed in ordinary human development for people to acquire hope, and thus to pursue flourishing. The psychological research suggests that trusting caregiving relationships are necessary for

acquiring the kind of beliefs about one's agency and dispositions regarding the future that we have argued are a part of the virtue of hope. It follows that what humans need to begin to become the sorts of people who will flourish is trustworthy caregivers whose responsiveness and consistency promote hope.

4.1 Relevant psychological constructs: future orientation and self efficacy

Recall that a person cannot enjoy properly the goods constitutive of flourishing without exercising her agency to bring about those goods. The construct studied in contemporary psychology regarding a person's beliefs about their own agency in bringing about goods is self-efficacy. According to Bandura, "Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives," (1994). Self-efficacy encourages an approach rather than an avoidance orientation to stressors. For example, a youth with high academic self-efficacy may approach a math test by studying or seeking tutoring, whereas a youth with low academic self-efficacy may avoid a math test by trying not to think about it. Hope partly consists in a disposition to believe that certain difficult goods are *achievable*, where achievement differs from passive receipt of some good in that the former results from something one does in the world. From the psychological definition of self-efficacy, then, it should be clear that self-efficacy is a constituent of the virtue of hope.

Hope, in its robust form, also involves a disposition to believe in certain future good possibilities. The analog in psychology is beliefs about one's future. Future orientation is conceptualized as part of identity development, and it involves envisioning multiple domains of one's future self's functioning and well-being, including educational status, career, health, family situation, financial sufficiency, and major life benchmarks (e.g., Johnson et al. 2014). For example, a positive future orientation is a person's beliefs that there will be good and

worthwhile events or situations in their future, such as a desirable career, healthy family relationships, home ownership, and physical health.

We cannot take for granted this aspect of hope as something people have by nature and that does not need to be fostered. For one thing, the goods constitutive of human flourishing on the traditional virtue ethical view are difficult to achieve. This does not take any psychological or sociological science to discover, but instead attention to mundane facts of life. People paying attention to the evidence around them will probably conclude that it is uncertain that they will end up flourishing. (Kant takes this to be so obvious that he hangs his argument for the practical postulate of God's existence on it.) And contemporary virtue ethicists tacitly acknowledge this uncertainty of future goods when they say things like "virtue is the only reliable bet for eudaimonia here and now," something that will not guarantee flourishing but serves as a kind of optimal regimen that will make it more likely (Hursthouse 1999, 176). Since we do not live in a utopia, a disposition to form positive beliefs about the future will need to be fostered.

Synthesizing the above, the disposition to form positive beliefs about the future and self-efficacy are both components of the virtue of hope.

1. Positive beliefs about the future and self-efficacy are components of the virtue of hope.

Given what we argued earlier about hope's role in pursuing goods constitutive of flourishing, we can infer:

2. Positive beliefs about the future and self-efficacy are necessary conditions for the pursuit of goods constitutive of flourishing.

Psychologists take it to be well established that both positive beliefs about the future and self-efficacy are important for wellbeing. A large body of research has found that greater

future orientation is associated with lower risky behaviors such as risky sex, drug use, and aggressive behaviors, and with better outcomes such as higher achieved education, better careers, and better health status (Johnson et al. 2014). The body of research on self-efficacy is incredibly large, based heavily on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, and has been consistently linked to a range of positive outcomes. For example, self-efficacy is associated with overall life satisfaction, academic achievement, work performance, and physical health behaviors, including physical activity, healthy food intake, and smoking cessation (Huang 2016, Stajkovic and Luthans 1998, Holden et al. 1990, Gwaltney et al. 2009, Holden 1992, Ashford et al. 2010, Azizli et al. 2015).

4.2 Trusting relationships and the psychological constituents of the virtue of hope

Psychological research has also established that there are necessary conditions to develop strong self-efficacy and positive future orientation. Specifically, attachment theory posits that early relationships with at least one caregiver is needed for any human development and functioning, and that without an attachment relationship, physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development are severely impaired (Ainsworth 1979). Even when an attachment relationship exists, the quality of the relationship can vary widely and impacts development throughout the lifespan. The quality of the early attachment relationship forms the foundation for attachment styles, or patterns in which a person interacts with others. Secure attachment styles are developed when caregivers are adequately responsive to children's needs and distress and provide a base from which children can safely explore the world. Secure attachment, in turn, predicts self-efficacy and an internal locus of control (one's sense of agency to change one's circumstances), a concept very similar to self-efficacy.

Insecure attachment styles, in contrast, are typically developed when children do not receive adequate caregiving from at least one primary caregiver, such as through neglect or maltreatment (Di Pentema et al. 2019, Bender and Ingram 2018). Most children who receive

adequate caregiving learn that their needs are responded to when they act in the world (e.g., a baby who cries is likely to be soothed, have their diaper changed, or fed), which builds a sense of agency. Eventually, this builds the capacity for children and adolescents to envision a better world and to act towards it. In contrast, children who do not receive adequate caregiving may not learn this (e.g., a baby who cries is ignored, yelled at, or shaken; their world does not change, or gets worse, when they act in it) (Egeland and Sroufe 1981).

We might wonder whether positive relationships in adulthood could play the same functional role as that of trusting relationships with caregivers in infancy, childhood, or adolescence. Indeed, this is precisely what some forms of adult therapy aim to achieve—the formation of attachments and changing of patterns that will enable development of traits needed to flourish. But for such caregiving from trustworthy others to result in successful change, it needs to coincide with critical windows of development. The ability to cultivate the the cognitive and emotional skills constitutive of hope is time-sensitive in this respect. Therefore, even if some children and adolescents who experience neglect can acquire hope later in life due to trusting relationships with caring others, the empirical evidence still supports the claim that humans, generally, need such relationships early in life.

All of this points to:

3. Humans need adequate caregiver relationships to develop the disposition to form positive future beliefs and self-efficacy.

If we want to know how people, especially in childhood or adolescence, become the sorts of people who pursue and may achieve the goods constitutive of flourishing, here we have one answer: through trusting relationships with caregivers. Caregivers who reinforce to a child the idea that what they choose to do in the world can have an effect, even a good effect, foster a disposition to believe they can achieve goods like those constitutive of flourishing by dint

of their agency. And such caregivers also enable them to see certain futures as possible for them. Without any relationships of adequate caregiving, such dispositions do not come online. Other evidence suggests that youth who experience early maltreatment are more likely to have aggression and conduct problems, likely through moral disengagement that may arise from deficits in the development of empathy, perspective-taking, and guilt (Metcalf et al. 2020, Fang et al. 2020. Docherty et al. 2018).

Given premises 1 and 3:

4. Adequate caregiver relationships are necessary for acquiring the virtue of hope.

Finally, we can conclude:

5. Adequate caregiver relationships are necessary for the pursuit of one's flourishing.

In the previous section we made a case for hope's primacy in the process of pursuing flourishing. What the psychological data show, in addition, then, is that a person cannot acquire hope, and so cannot get going in the pursuit of flourishing, without caregivers who invite trust and foster one's sense of agency.

5 Hope As a Virtue in Children

For someone familiar with both the philosophical literature on hope and on virtue and its development, the conclusion above should be striking. Hope plays an enabling role in getting onto the road to virtue and flourishing in the first instance. Hope thus has a dual function: it is a virtue and it is an enabler of the development of other moral virtues. That means hope will come online early in the process of moral development, and we should expect it to appear in childhood and adolescence insofar as children and adolescents are making progress towards acquiring virtues. So why have philosophers in the western anglophone traditions been reluctant to ascribe virtuous hope to children? And can contemporary accounts be made to

accommodate the conclusion for which we have argued without losing their integrity? We take up both questions in this last section.

5.1 Accommodating children's hope

First, the primacy of hope in virtue development fits with an observation Christopher Bobier makes about the attitude of hope: namely, that it is involved in all practical deliberation in that hope “sets the ends of practical deliberation” (2015, 496-7). Only a person who hopes to do something or achieve some end deliberates about how to do it. This seems more or less correct about the attitude of hope. It helps to explain the connections we drew above between intentional exercises of a person's agency and the enjoyment of human goods constitutive of flourishing. To move towards achieving the good of friendship, I have to act deliberately. I have to take friendship as my end and decide on ways to bring it about—clearing my schedule to spend the afternoon on my friend's porch, or taking time to help her with home repairs. Or I have to have democracy as a goal and take steps to promote it—like joining a march to the capitol to demand expanding voting rights. In both cases I have to see the goods as worthwhile—that is, as goods—and achievable by what I am doing. Otherwise I am either like the passive recipient of democracy caught up in the crowd or like the neighbor who does not consider the possibility that what she has is a friendship.

In this connection, consider accounts that aim to add to the standard theory of hope as constituted by belief and desire a third element, such as mental imaging or focus. While the way philosophers have articulated such a condition can make it seem like good hope is out of reach for children, we might relax the condition while maintaining the spirit of the views. Perhaps mental imaging is more like imagining. Infants can be said to desire, though they lack cognitive apparatus to represent in any fine-grained or concrete detail much of what it is they want. If we think of the objects involved in mental imaging or focus as akin to the objects of desires, this loosens up the cognitive demands on hoping and makes it more

accessible to children. We might also renege on the requirement of epistemic rationality to hope well and instead relocate problems Bovens attributes to hope-constituting beliefs insufficiently grounded in reality to the domain of intellectual virtue.

McGeer's account of hope seems closest to ours, but one might worry that as we have described the virtue of hope in children, it might still be deployed in ways that are bad, irrational, or not morally praiseworthy in her view. McGeer describes two ways hope can fail to be a benefit: when it is wishful—so fanciful that it is not grounded in realities about how one will attain the hoped-for end—or willful—unreflective about the value of ends for which one strives or means one uses to attain them. If children and adolescents do not have the cognitive apparatus required to think realistically enough about how they will achieve future goods for which they hope, or they are unable to reflect on the value of those goods or normative constraints on how to pursue them, their hope might not deserve the title of a virtue.

Here we want to say that the normative problems with willful and wishful hope may be chalked up to failures of practical wisdom, or not instances of the virtue of hope as we have defined it. First notice that a person can have the virtue of hope without having the excellence perfective of good deliberation. I might organize a march that does not result in political officials expanding enfranchisement because I forgot to call the media, and the small contingent at the march was not sufficient to pressure the officials. I might make various attempts to befriend my neighbor without any reciprocal engagement because I say and do things that I think are friendly but which she finds invasive or off-putting. In such cases, I can repeatedly *attempt* to achieve human goods without *actually* achieving them because of my lack of practical wisdom. It may be true that hope is *most* beneficial when it is coupled with developmentally appropriate forms of practical wisdom.

Further, virtuous hope differs from willful hope in other ways related to self-efficacy. McGeer says the willful hoper's "fragility in their sense of self" coupled with an agility in means-ends reasoning can lead them to disregard others and reject genuine interdependency with others. So here, it looks like the agent has something akin to practical wisdom (or cleverness), but lacks hope as we describe it since they do not see themselves as fully capable of bringing about or contributing to the bringing about of goods they aim at. Instead, the agent is driven by "self-protective dread" of not achieving what they want.

Another seemingly vicious form of hope, wishful hope, might seem inevitable for children and adolescents. Wishful hope seems to go wrong because the person who so hopes does not have an understanding of what it will take to achieve her ends or goals, and presumably, this characterizes many children and young adolescents. A child might dream of becoming a famous American football player without realizing that this requires going to college, since one can only be drafted into the NFL from the NCAA. The child does not appreciate the steps that need to be taken to achieve the goods for which he hopes. But why attribute this failure to hope *per se*? We might find such hope admirable in a young child even absent realization or understanding of what it will take to achieve that goal. In an adolescent who is flunking out of classes, we may think there is a failure of practical wisdom in not connecting the consequences of flunking to the dream of playing in the NFL. But what has gone wrong is not that the adolescent's disposition of hope, but rather that the hope is not housed in a psychology that attenuates and directs the goals hoped for with age-appropriate practical wisdom. If an adolescent learns from their mistakes, their exercise of hope still sets them up for developing virtues and flourishing. This further shows that their hope is not the problem; instead, it is an intellectual virtue like practical wisdom – or its absence.

5.2 Debunking beliefs about hope's optionality

Before closing, we want to respond to another kind of objection, namely that hope has not been considered a real virtue with respect to earthly life in the history of philosophy. Why do we not accept its status as a proto-virtue, a proto-virtuous emotion, or an infused virtue (e.g. Jimenez 2020, Roberts 1984, Sreenivasan 2009)?

There are fine arguments for the ascendent view. And yet we think there is a plausible story about why hope has not been counted a virtue in the western anglophone tradition but it does not justify that view.⁶ The western variety of virtue ethics has come out of a largely rationalist strand of western philosophy that prizes the perfection certain cognitive capacities as demonstrated by contemplation and reasoning. The assumption that this particular set of cognitive capacities and form of deployment of them is what is “the most divine thing in us” is commonly voiced by philosophers who enjoy a kind of over-privilege in virtue of their education, class, socioeconomic status, or gender. (By over-privilege, we mean advantages and resources that go well beyond moderate and what are enjoyed by most people around the globe and throughout history.) These views have come under fire for promoting values and goods to which an ascendent class has special access (Stockdale 2021, Tessman 2005, Slote 2000, MacIntyre 2017). Such philosophers worry that virtue ethics, and views of hope as a virtue or beneficial, has been distorted by limited perspective and over-privilege.

It is conceivable that the combination of social, political, and economic capital, along with isolation from routine interaction with people of different age, education, and capital, would distort the views of philosophers like Aristotle (son of the physician of Philip of Macedon, himself a tutor of Alexander the Great). In particular, their social situations could

⁶ We zero in on this tradition because we have been assuming a eudaimonist framework. We should also note that there are other debunking stories to be told here. As one reviewer points out, it may be that most of the discussions of hope as a virtue in western theology were rather philosophically weak, and hence philosophers did not until the last few decades pick up hope as possibly a virtue. Milona (2020) points out that there may be something we now refer to under a different description than “hope” that is nonetheless a moral virtue. It might also be that something like magnanimity is composed of hope, though additional elements of Aristotelian magnanimity may be unrelated to hope and even problematic. Thanks for Gideon Jeffrey for raising this last possibility.

affect their vision of flourishing, keeping them from recognizing goods they were not in fact enjoying that others do enjoy, ways they failed to acquire virtues such as justice, or the difficulty of achieving goods for wide swaths of the human population. So we think that the absence of hope from traditional lists of the virtues in western European and American philosophy *is not itself* a knockdown argument against the view that hope is such a virtue, and all we need to show this is that there is an alternative explanation available.

6 Conclusion

Our aim in this paper has been to connect contemporary psychological research on future orientation, self-efficacy, and caregiving with philosophical reflection on the virtue of hope. We have argued that hope is a virtue that children and adolescents can acquire, and we generally have to acquire it in the context of trusting relationships with caregivers to pursue other virtues and their own flourishing.

We came to this conclusion by way of a theoretically supported claim and an empirically supported claim. The theoretically supported claim is that hope—the disposition to envision and desire future goods and see them as possible for oneself through action—is a necessary condition for movement towards the goods that make a person flourish. This makes it a virtue that must come online early in moral development and thus enjoys a kind of primacy in human flourishing. The empirically supported claim is that such hope requires future orientation and self-efficacy of the sort that we need trustworthy caregivers early on to develop. If both claims are true, then trusting relationships in childhood and adolescence during critical developmental windows are necessary for the pursuit of flourishing, since they are generally necessary to cultivate hope.

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