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1000wordphilosophy.com/2018/08/12/hope/

Hope

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Category: Ethics
Word Count: 994

Hope is ubiquitous: family members express hope that we find love and happiness, politicians call for hope in response to tragedies, and optimists urge people to keep their hopes up. We also tell ourselves to maintain hope, to find it, or in darker moments, to give it up. We hope for frivolous things, too.

But what *is* hope? Can hope be rational or irrational? Is hope valuable? Is it ever dangerous?

This essay reviews recent important answers to these questions with the goal of better understanding hope.[1]

1. What is Hope?

The typical starting point for analyzing hope is that it involves a *desire* for an outcome and a *belief* that the outcome's occurring is at least *possible*. The sense of possibility isn't merely *physical* possibility, for we can hope that, say, God perform some miracle that violates the law of gravity. Philosophers tend to think that a person can hope for anything they believe is possible (no matter how low the odds), though it is a separate question whether a hope is rational or not, and to what degree.[2]

But the belief-desire account of hope appears insufficient: we might desire an outcome, and believe that the outcome is possible, yet have absolutely no hope that it will happen![3] A prisoner facing execution may *desire* a pardon, believe that a pardon is *possible*, yet be altogether hopeless that he will be pardoned.[4]

Hope, then, requires more than a desire for something and belief in its possibility. What else?

Luc Bovens argues that hope also requires positive conscious thoughts or "mental imaging" about the desired outcome: basically, fantasizing about the desired outcome occurring.[5] The prisoner facing execution thus hopes for a pardon *only if* he has pleasant thoughts or imaginations about being pardoned. If hope involves, beyond belief and desire, pleasant thoughts about the outcome occurring, we might be able to distinguish being *hopeful* for something from being *hopeless* about it: hope involves pleasant thoughts whereas hopelessness involves unpleasant ones.

Adrienne M. Martin questions whether Bovens's view adequately distinguishes hope from hopelessness. She argues that a prisoner who is *hopeless* about the possibility of an overturned conviction may still desire the outcome, believe it possible, and fantasize about being pardoned.[6] To distinguish hope from hopelessness, Martin defends an "incorporation analysis" of hope:[7] the inmate *incorporates* his desire into his plans, believing that he has reasons to plan and act (e.g., with his lawyer) about the prospects of freedom.

But does hope really require that hopeful people believe that they have reasons to feel, act, and plan in accordance with their desire, as Martin's view requires? Michael Milona and Katie Stockdale argue that it does not.[8] We sometimes wholly reject our hopes (e.g., to return to a previous bad romantic relationship), believing that that we have *no reason* for what we hope for. Rejecting a hope, or believing that we should not have that hope, does not mean that this hope is *any less of a hope*, contrary to what the incorporation analysis suggests: hopes we wish we didn't have are hopes nevertheless.

Milona and Stockdale develop the idea that hope is akin not to a judgment, but rather, to a *perceptual experience*. Just as perceivers often judge their perceptions to be misguided (e.g., at magic shows), so too may hopers judge their hopes are misguided. Hope then involves, beyond belief and desire, a perceptual-like experience of reasons to pursue the desired outcome, or to prepare themselves for its possible occurrence. So, in hoping we may experience reasons to, say, return to an ex partner without believing such reasons exist.

In sum, there continue to be significant debates about the nature of hope, most notably what needs to be added to hope (if anything) beyond mere belief and desire.

2. The Rationality and Value of Hope

Hope is generally thought to be *epistemically* rational if one's belief about the possibility (or in some cases,

the specific likelihood) of the outcome is correct in light of the available evidence.[9]

Hope may be *practically* rational in a variety of ways as well. Hope is thought to contribute to well-being, motivate the achievement of goals, and inspire courageous action, among other things.[10]

Beyond epistemic and practical rationality, some hopes may even be rational because they are constitutive of who we are (e.g., a member of a certain religion), and to lose such fundamental hopes would be to lose part of our identity.[11]

3. The Dangers of Hope

Hope is not without risks.

Thwarted hopes can result in strong feelings of disappointment. Hope may also be a source of wishful thinking, leading people to see the world as tilting in their favor despite the evidence.[12] For example, hope that the problems of climate change will be effectively addressed might lead someone not to bother with climate change activism or to take any personal responsibility to work to mitigate it.

Hope can also be exploited, such as when politicians take advantage of the hopes of people in positions of powerlessness. For example, people who desperately hope for greater economic security may be influenced to accept policies that primarily serve the politician's own ends rather than the people's.

These and other dangers of hope might lead us to explore alternative emotions to hope. Stockdale argues that in the face of persistent injustices, *bitterness* (i.e., anger without hope) might be a justified emotional response.[13] The relevance of hope to politics and society has also inspired investigation of whether hope is a democratic or political virtue[14] and whether a form of radical hope is needed in the face of cultural devastation and other severe hardships.[15]

4. Conclusion

In a world where our needs and desires are so often met with uncertainty, hope tends to emerge. Philosophy has much to contribute to understanding this phenomenon, and the potential value and risks of hope to all aspects of our lives: personally, socially, morally, intellectually, religiously, politically and more.

Notes

[1] Only recently have philosophers given the topic sustained attention. Some discussions of hope are found in the philosophy of religion (see Augustine, c. 420 [1999]), in existentialist writings (see Marcel, 2010), and in bioethics (see, e.g., Simpson (2004); Murdoch and Scott (2010); McMillan, Walker, and Hope (2014)).

[2] See Chignell (2014) for a discussion of Immanuel Kant's defense of the rationality of hoping for miracles, divine grace, and a truly ethical society.

[3] Despair has long been considered to be the attitude which is the opposite of hope. This view traces back to St. Thomas Aquinas who argues that despair is the contrary to hope insofar as it implies "withdrawal" from the desired object while hope implies "approach" (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.40.4).

[4] The claim that the standard account fails to distinguish hope from hopelessness (or in his terms, despair) is due to Ariel Meirav (2009).

[5] Bovens (1999).

[6] Martin (2013, 18-19).

[7] Moellendorf (2006) defends a similar theory.

[8] Milona and Stockdale (2018).

[9] Martin (2013, 37).

[10] See Bovens (1999) and Kadlac (2015).

[11] Blöser and Stahl (2017).

[12] Bovens (1999).

[13] Stockdale (2017).

[14] See Moellendorf (2006) and Mittleman (2009).

[15] Lear (2006).

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