

# Hope and Knowledge

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## Introduction

Hope is a common attitude. It's as commonplace as attitudes like belief and desire, yet a lot less has been said about it in contemporary analytic philosophy. Much of the discussion of hope that has occurred has been in the field of ethics, but this paper will explore an epistemic aspect of hope, namely hope's relationship to knowledge. It has been taken for granted that people do not hope for things to occur that they know will occur. I will be giving an argument that hope and knowledge are compatible, and I will defend that argument against one primary objection. More specifically, I will argue that there are instances when an agent knows that  $p$  and still hopes that  $p$ .

Section 1 of this paper will discuss the nature of hope. I will only be sketching out the minimum commitments required regarding the nature of hope in order to give my arguments. Section 2 will contain both my positive argument for the compatibility of hope and knowledge and an illustrative case. Section 3 will describe an argument against hope and knowledge being compatible and my response to this argument.

## §1 Nature of Hope

The *simple analysis* of hope (as a propositional attitude) says that some subject  $S$  hopes that  $p$ , if and only if,  $S$  desires that  $p$  and believes that  $p$  being true is possible (where  $p$  is a proposition that describes a certain outcome). The basic idea is that if I hope something is the case, I will desire that it comes about and believe it can come about. For example, if I hope that

the nations of this world will overcome climate change, I must desire that we overcome climate change and believe we have a chance at overcoming climate change.

The *simple analysis* fails for a couple of reasons. The first reason was pointed out by Luce Bovens (1999 p. 674) where he argues that a belief that there is a chance that  $p$  and a desire that  $p$  together are not sufficient for hoping that  $p$ . For example, imagine that I both believe that there is a chance we can overcome climate change and desire that we do so. However, I may feel utterly hopeless with regards to us actually accomplishing it and instead wallow in despair about our eventual doom. The mere recognition that it's possible to overcome climate change and the desire that we overcome climate change do not capture the mysterious factor that makes one *feel* hopeful or something *seem* hopeful.

Recently there has been a lot of literature on the nature and rationality of hope that attempts to add some third factor to hope to explain what is distinctive of hope and deal with counter examples like the one above<sup>1</sup>.

However, what is shared amongst all hope theorists is that the belief aspect of hope is a necessary condition for hope. More specifically, everyone agrees that you must be in a particular cognitive state, an uncertain one. For someone to hope for some outcome, they must be uncertain about whether the outcome will occur. As Martin (2013 p. 8) puts it, for an agent to hope for some outcome they must “assign a probability somewhere between 0 and 1 to it...” Bovens (1999 p. 673) suggests that someone cannot hope for some outcome “unless one has a degree of credence that it will come about which ranges between some threshold value close to 0 that it will come about and some threshold value close to 1 for confidence that it will come about.” Michael Milona and Katie Stockdale (2018 p. 211) follow Martin's view closely, saying hope involves “a belief that the outcome's obtaining is possible but not certain.” Pettit (2004 p. 154)

says that “hoping that something happens may be inconsistent with believing for certain that it will not happen, but equally, it is inconsistent with believing for certain that it will.” Cheshire Calhoun (2018 p. 17) says hope is in part, “a belief that success in a pursuit is possible....” Benton (2019 p. 141) endorses what he calls the Chances License Hope principle which says, "If there is a chance for one that  $p$ , and a chance for one that  $\sim p$ , then one may hope that  $p$ ."

## §2 Hope and Knowledge

In the hope literature, our authors like to talk about cases with slim chances and hazy futures. Much attention is spent here by these authors because they wish to justify these hopes based on slim chances. I want to discuss the cases that sit at the other edge of the spectrum, where the agent is not certain, but very confident in the obtaining of the hoped-for outcome. First, we will look at the argument and then a motivating case:

- 1.) Suppose some subject  $S$  knows that  $p$  and believes/realizes/understands there is a chance that  $\sim p$  (*fallibility*).
- 2.) For any agent, if an agent believes/realizes/understands that there is a chance that  $\sim p$ , then they are licensed to hope that  $p$  (*uncertainty licenses hope*).
- 3.) So,  $S$  knows that  $p$  and is licensed to hope that  $p$ . (1,2)

Premise 1 is meant to be intuitive enough given a fallibilist conception of justification (and thus knowledge). If an agent can know something, despite their justifying evidence granting less than certainty, then I think that it is compatible with their being aware of the level of justification they possess.

Premise 2 follows from every hope theorist's conception of hope we have considered in this paper (see section 1).

What is clear is that this argument hinges on premise 1, and how intuitive you find it that someone can both know something while being uncertain. Personally, I take myself to know many things despite being uncertain about them. I know that the president is Joe Biden, that my wife is at work, that I have hands, without being certain that the president wasn't just killed, that my wife hasn't left work for an emergency, or that I am not a brain-in-vat. What is also clear is that the sort of hope I am focusing on is pretty weak and marginal. I am focusing on cases where the chances are lopsided toward the hoped-for outcome. It is a case where there is a good chance for  $S$  that  $p$  (good enough for knowledge in the right circumstances) but a smaller chance for  $\sim p$  such that  $S$  can permissibly hope that  $p$ .

Now for the case. Imagine a prisoner who believes there is a chance they can be pardoned and desires to be pardoned but remains hopeless that they will be pardoned. Also, suppose the prisoner is innocent and does end up being pardoned. In their despair, the prisoner fantasizes about how bad it will be being innocent and yet remaining in prison, how much of their life they will miss, how their child is having a birthday soon, etc..

When the prisoner meets with their attorney, who tells them that some evidence has been found that may pardon them, the prisoner becomes hopeful. As they keep meeting their attorney they may learn more and more about their case and come to realize that the chance of their being pardoned is increasing. Because of this realization, they may begin to believe they will be pardoned. If this belief becomes justified further for the agent to the point that they are all but certain they will be pardoned, then (assuming they meet the other conditions for knowledge) they may come to know they will be pardoned. We can imagine that the prisoner makes plans as if they will get out (e.g. says goodbye to the guards, makes arrangements for a car ride home, etc.).

But however confident they feel, they are aware that there is a chance they won't be pardoned (premise 1 of the argument).

Imagine the attorney tells them the day before their case, "To me, this case is open and shut. I think you will be back with your family soon, but there is always a chance the judge won't pardon you because...[fill in some details of the case]. So let's rehearse what you're going to say one more time." Due to what their attorney says, they are aware there is a chance they won't be pardoned (as stated above). This licenses them to hope they will be pardoned when considering the chance they won't be pardoned (premise 2 of the argument). Thus, the prisoner both hopes and knows that they will be pardoned.

Though this prisoner case might feel specially built to suit the needs of my argument, I think this phenomenon is common. Recently I overheard a friend of mine say, "I hope I pass my dissertation defense, even though I know I will." My wife the other day said, "the keys are on the table at home. At least, I hope they are."<sup>2</sup> Why then do some believe hope and knowledge are incompatible? Because there are in fact many instances of knowledge that are incompatible with rationally hoping.

### §3 The Incompatibility of Hope and Knowledge

The reason many take it for granted that hope and knowledge are incompatible is that many of our everyday knowledge claims (especially those based on immediate perception) just seem obviously incompatible with hope. If I were to walk into my wife's office and see her sitting there, it would seem impossible for me to hope she is sitting there, because I am certain she is currently sitting in front of me. Hence, the common-sense idea that no one hopes for what they already know. This idea is reflected in the literature by earlier theorists like J.P. Day (1969)

and R. S. Downie (1963) as well as our contemporary theorists like Martin (Benton 2019, p. 140).

I would agree that not all cases of knowledge are compatible with hope for a psychologically normal person. This is why I have only argued for the limited conclusion that there is a particular instance of knowledge compatible with hope, but not that all cases of knowledge are compatible with hope.

Some disagree, however. Mathew Benton (2019 p. 135) argues that hope is incompatible with knowledge. Put more precisely, Benton (2019 p. 135) says that if someone were to hope that *p*, then they wouldn't know that *p*. Benton (2019 p. 135) thinks hope is sufficient for lacking knowledge because, “when one comes to know that what one hoped for obtains, one’s attitude changes from hope to satisfaction, or even joy, at learning that one’s hope was fulfilled” and their hopes are “dashed” when they learn the outcome hasn’t obtained.

I don't disagree with Benton on this point. Once the prisoner hears the judge declare they are pardoned the prisoner does change their attitude from hope to something else (presumably joy). This, however, does not establish that the hope they previously had is sufficient for their lacking knowledge. Benton’s primary argument for hope and knowledge being inconsistent is linguistic. I have reconstructed Benton's argument as the following:

- A. Linguistic data about how we employ the concepts of hope and knowledge reveal how we reason with such concepts. (2019 p. 136)
- B. A range of linguistic data provides grounds for regarding hope as incompatible with knowledge. (2019 pp.136-138).
- C. Therefore, hope and knowledge are incompatible.

Benton offers no defense of premise A but says that (2019 p.136) "Our language offers a window into the rules for how we may deploy the concepts of hope and knowledge, and thus these data reveal not only how we speak about these notions, but how we reason with them...." I will not challenge this premise, however. Instead, I will challenge premise B.

Benton's evidence for premise B is a series of cases and utterances he has us consider. In the first case, you are to imagine you have a colleague named Tim and you are out to lunch with Tim when you receive information that there is a dangerous emergency situation back at work. You begin discussing the location of several co-workers including your mutual friend, Janice, whom you both know sometimes works from home. Tim says, "I hope that Janice is at home." which Benton labels as utterance **(1)**. Benton (2019 p. 137) says we learn later that Tim "knew all along that Janice was in fact at home." We are meant to regard Tim as having said something misleading or perhaps insincere when he earlier expressed his hope. As Benton says (2019 p.137) "if Tim knew that Janice was at home, why would he say that he *hopes* that she is? If he knew, Tim arguably claimed something false by asserting **(1)**." Benton (2019 pp. 137-138) claims that "these reactions strongly suggest that hope that *p* is incompatible, in some strong sense, with knowing whether *p* (that is, with either knowing that *p*, or with knowing that  $\sim p$ )."

Benton (2019 p. 138) also wishes to point to a series of utterances that express the explicit conjunction of hope and knowledge to "consider how bad the following sound":

- (3)** I know that John is in his office, but I hope that he is not.
- (4)** I hope that John is in his office, but I know that he is not.
- (5)** I hope that John is in his office, and/but I know that he is.

First, let's consider the case of Tim and Janice, and then we will turn to utterances **(3)-(5)**. At first glance, it is natural to agree with Benton's intuitions regarding Tim's utterance. However,

I think this is only due to the case's underspecification. Benton does not specify how Tim is supposed to know Janice is at home and because of this, I think we intuitively judge that it is in some sort of conclusive way (e.g. he saw her at home via a video call). Instead, consider a case where Tim knew Janice was at home because he didn't see her at work before lunch and he remembered her saying she would be working from home for a few days last week. Does it seem insincere of Tim to express hope she is home? It does not seem so to me. Imagine that, after discovering Tim knew she was at home you ask him why he said **(1)**, Tim may turn to you and say "I thought there was a chance that I was mistaken about which day she was coming in and that I might have just missed her at work this morning. I am very glad I was right though." Tim, as described, would be licensed to hope by Benton's own principle.

Let's take the other utterances in turn. Utterances **(3)** and **(4)** are sort of the reverse of each other, and I think both are pretty strange. However, I can still hear an appropriate utterance of both. In fact, Benton (2019 p. 139) recognizes this in a footnote saying, "Some may be able to hear...**(3)** as (somewhat) felicitous. But such an interpretation appears to track only the desire aspect of hope, and thus such claims would be better put in terms of a mere wish..." I recognize that this may be true, that people use the word "hope" in place of "wish" or "desire". However, I think an interpretation that confers genuine hope is possible as well if we specify the situation. Take our example of you and your officemate Tim. Imagine that, upon hearing about the dangerous situation at work, you start listing people you think are at the office and mention John. Tim might say, "I know that John is in his office, but I hope he is not. It's possible he took lunch early today."<sup>3</sup> This further elaboration about John possibly being out to lunch once again shows that Tim's utterance would be appropriate since the chance that John is out to lunch licenses Tim's hope.<sup>4</sup>



I find it quite strange that Benton uses the word "but" for (3) and (4). The word "but" has a sort of contrastive implication, which is why I believe (3) sounds more plausible — since the speaker is contrasting their knowledge with their hope of the opposite outcome. If we replace it with "and" instead, I find the sentence certainly sounds much more awkward. For example, "I know that John is in his office and I hope that he is not," or for utterance (4) "I hope that John is in his office and I know that he is not." For each of these utterances, it is hard for me to hear a genuine pronouncement of both hope and knowledge.

For utterance (5) Benton provides the "and" and "but", and my judgment on how it sounds with the use of "and" is the same as it was for (3) and (4). When it is conjoined with "but" my diagnosis is the same as it was for (3) and (4). Imagine our prisoner earlier from my argument in section 2. The prisoner might appropriately say, "I know that I will be pardoned tomorrow, but (at the same time) I hope I am pardoned tomorrow". To my ear, this does not sound strange, especially with the parenthetical addition. I also do not take it to be merely an expression of desire. I think the prisoner as I described them would be hopeful until they hear the judge pardon them.

I have attempted to show that not all of the utterances Benton has produced indicate the incompatibility of hope and knowledge while others do. Thus, since Benton does not give us a range of utterances that show hope and knowledge are *always* incompatible, premise B is false and his conclusion does not follow. Instead, if we were to change premise B to say the following: a range of linguistic data provides grounds for regarding hope as *sometimes* incompatible with knowledge, then what follows is that hope and knowledge are sometimes incompatible. To which I agree.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

1. For example, Adrienne Martin (2013), Milona and Stockdale (2018), Luc Bovens (1999), Ariel Meirav (2009), etc..
2. For utterances like my wife's, we would have to assume knowledge is the norm of assertion or that people often assert  $p$  as a way of expressing knowledge that  $p$ .
3. Or put the other way for (4) "I hope that John is not in his office, but I know he is. However, I still hope because he may have taken lunch early today".
4. Recall the Chances License Hope principle that is endorsed by Benton from section 1.1
5. I would like to acknowledge my fellow graduate students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who listened to these ideas and helped me flesh them out. I would particularly like to thank Zach Wrublewski and Janelle Gormley. Most of all I need to acknowledge the following faculty: Joseph Mendola, John Brunero, Quinn White, and Aaron Bronfman. All of them helped me greatly in refining this paper.

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