

*For What May the Aesthete Hope?
Focus and Standstill in “The Unhappiest One”
and “Rotation of Crops”*

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The recent (and growing) literature on hope in Kierkegaard’s authorship foregrounds two main ideas:¹

1. Kierkegaard distinguishes between two broad kinds of hope: temporal (or “ordinary,” “mundane”) hope and eternal (or “true,” “Christian”) hope.
2. Kierkegaard thinks we must lose all temporal hope – that is, pass through hopelessness and despair, to gain eternal hope. This process is what he refers to in one place as the “dialectic” of hope.

One of our main goals is to add another Kierkegaardian concept of hope to the list in (1) – namely, *aesthetic hope*. This concept, we argue, is distinct from the other two and emerges from the way A treats hope [*Haab*] and its relation to recollection [*Erindring*] in two key essays from *Either/Or* (1843): “The Unhappiest One” and “Rotation of Crops.” A second main goal is to use the concept of aesthetic hope to illuminate Kierkegaard’s own concept of *eternal hope*, as well as (what we will call) the “speratic² dialectic” referenced in (2). Finally, we try in a few places to connect the Kierkegaardian notions of hope found in *Either/Or* and elsewhere to certain issues in the contemporary literature on hope. In particular, we argue that making intentional focus an essential part of aesthetic hope anticipates one of the main themes in contemporary discussions – namely, that genuine hope has an attentional or “focus” element, in addition to cognitive and conative elements.

Recent efforts to analyze Kierkegaard’s account of hope and to emphasize its centrality for his overarching project tend to neglect the discussions

¹ See, for example, McDonald (2014); Bernier (2015); Sweeney (2016); Fremstedal (2012, 2020); Pedersen (2023).

² Latin: “*spes*” – hope.

of hope in the first part of *Either/Or*.³ In some ways, this makes perfect sense. Despair [*Fortvivlelse*] is clearly a central topic of the book, but the distinctive role of hope (as more than simply the opposite of despair) is not immediately evident – especially not in the sections penned by A. Still, we think that answering the question of what, if anything, the aesthete qua aesthete does or may hope provides insight into who A *is* and the complex philosophy of life that animates him. After laying out Kierkegaard's speratic dialectic and the concept of eternal hope, we will argue that, although A often calls us to abandon hope, in fact he advocates an aestheticized kind of hope – one that is reflective and fully under our control. Ideally, A wants to recruit *aesthetic hope* as a tool or “weapon” against the *summum malum* – that is, boredom. Read together, we will suggest, “Unhappiest” and “Rotation” exemplify A's attempt to place aesthetic hope among his other tools: *recollection* (of the past) and *limitation* or control (over possibility). Aesthetic hope can also be seen as an *inverted* image of the eternal hope that Kierkegaard himself puts forward: It is literally a “hope against hope” by which A makes a focused effort to rid himself of the uncertainty involved in temporal hope but does not (and does not seek to) gain the eternal kind.

The account of aesthetic hope that we provide here also reveals something important about the key transition within the speratic dialectic: the point at which temporal hope is abandoned and everything stops [*Alt standser*]. This is where hyper-reflection or calculation regarding temporal hope ultimately leads to a *standstill* or, perhaps better, a *caesura* – a pause that is supposed to precede a leap into something beyond temporal hope. In the case of aesthetic hope, however, that final movement never comes: The reflective aesthete's ability to control his focus and resist all forms of uncertainty allows his imagination to rest and revel in unceasing *caesura*. Thus, while Kierkegaard points out that the concept of temporal hope is not adequately distinguished from despair (a problematic that animates some contemporary discussions of hope as well), we will argue that aesthetic hope *intentionally* entangles temporal hope and despair, cultivating and celebrating certain controlled forms of each.

It is clear that Kierkegaard himself diverges radically from A in his attitude to hope; indeed, as we have already noted, the kind of hope that Kierkegaard recommends is what comes after the *caesura* – the kind that A seeks to resist. Our exploration of A's relationship to various kinds of

³ See, for example, Fendt (1990); Bernier (2015); Fremstedal (2012, 2020). See also Lippitt (2015, 2020); Helms (2021); Guyatt (2020); Moe Rasmussen (2015); McDonald (2014); Sweeney (2016).

hope will thus afford a better understanding of Kierkegaard's motivations for characterizing eternal hope as the ultimate end of the speratic dialectic.

Kierkegaardian Hope: Hope via Despair

We start with Kierkegaard's own account of hope and its stages. Many commentators have drawn on Kierkegaard's brief sketch of this dialectic, which is found in marginalia to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

The hope Christianity proclaims is against the understanding. But the dialectic of hope goes this way: first the fresh incentive [*Tilskyndelse*] of youth, then the supportive calculation of understanding and then – then everything comes to a standstill [*standser Alt*] – and now for the first time Christian hope is there as possibility.⁴

The speratic dialectic starts with immediate, fresh, unreflective hope, the kind that Kierkegaard connects with youth. He offers an elaboration of this in *Works of Love*: It is especially “easy” for the young to hope, because a child “is still a possibility.”⁵ This hope can be considered a “kind of immediate trust or confidence”⁶ in which we anticipate “without counting the cost.”⁷

In the next step of the dialectic, the understanding takes over: We start to calculate the probability of the objects of our hope, ideally in an effort to “support” and sustain the hope itself. Within the first genus (temporal hope), he then distinguishes two species: “original/immediate” and “reflective/calculated” temporal hope. But, Kierkegaard's note suggests, rather than supporting immediate hope, calculation leads to a standstill or break in the dialectic. Kierkegaard does not explain how this movement takes place, but it seems plausible that calculation makes it clear that our temporal hopes are likely to be disappointed in some way. Indeed, the ultimate and inevitable disappointment of all temporal hope is, according to Kierkegaard, a result of the fact that all humans will die: “In every human being there is a spontaneous, immediate hope, . . . but in death . . . every such hope dies and changes into hopelessness.”⁸ This realization regarding finitude and ultimate dashing of all temporal hopes catches us up, so to speak, and leads to the standstill or *caesura*. This is the boundary

⁴ Kierkegaard (1992b), p. 70. Intriguingly these remarks appear in the margins of the section in which Climacus also discusses *Either/Or* and the characteristics of the aesthete. These notes are estimated to have been written in 1846, either in the manuscript itself or in an early printed volume.

⁵ WL, 250/SKS 9, 250.

⁶ Fremstedal (2012), p. 52.

⁷ Bernier (2015), p. 110.

⁸ FSE, 82/SKS 13, 103.

state in the dialectic between temporal hope (in its immediate and reflective forms) and eternal hope. Kierkegaard seems to suggest that the individual must move *through* this standstill (and the hopelessness that it represents) in order for true, eternal hope to become a possibility.

Kierkegaard offers a further definition of eternal hope in an oft-cited passage from *Works of Love*: “To relate oneself awaitingly” [*Forventende*] is to *hope*, which for that very reason cannot be any [merely] temporal awaiting but is an eternal hope.”⁹ A page later, “To hope is to await [*forvente*] the possibility of the good, but the possibility of the good is the eternal.”¹⁰ Here it is important to notice that eternal hope is operative within the sphere of temporal existence. Whatever the eternal is in itself, in the context of our daily lives, the eternal appears to us as future and true possibility, one that remains when all temporal possibilities have been disappointed. Moreover, the manner of this eternal hope appears differently in eternity and temporality, even if the content is the same. In eternity the task is simply “to hope all things,” but in temporality the task is to “hope always.”¹¹ Eternal hope in this life is therefore “composed of the eternal and the temporal” – it is also not an attitude of mere waiting or repose but involves the ongoing task of positively “at every moment always hoping all things.”¹²

By making the eternal the object of true hope, and by distinguishing such hope from both species of merely temporal hope, Kierkegaard anticipates recent challenges to what has become known as the “Standard Theory” of hope that we find in authors such as Aquinas and Hobbes. According to the Standard Theory put forward by these two Thomases, a subject *S* hopes that *p* if and only if (1) *S* desires that *p* and (2) *S* presupposes (in a sense that would need to be specified) that *p* is possible but uncertain.¹⁴ Kierkegaard’s account of temporal hope tracks this definition nicely, as it involves both desiring an outcome and an “awaiting” awareness of possibility, combined with uncertainty about the outcome. But as many contemporary theorists have pointed out, the Standard Theory is not obviously able to distinguish between hope and despair. This is because there are cases in which two people with the same

⁹ This is a modification of the standard translation because we think that the English word “expectation” lacks the sense of uncertainty and yearning that Kierkegaard includes in his conception of hope.

¹⁰ WL, 249/SKS 9, 249. ¹¹ WL, 250/SKS 9, 250. ¹² WL, 249/SKS 9, 249. ¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See Downie (1963) and Day (1969). Michael Milona (2019) is a more recent defender of the Standard Theory.

desire and the same estimate of the probability of the desired but uncertain outcome seem to differ with respect to whether they hope or despair.¹⁵

Consider the example of two cancer patients, Alan and Bess, who have the same diagnosis and the same estimation of their chances of recovery. Although they both *desire* to recover, Bess engages her desire and probability estimate in a different way, focusing on them and even taking them as reasons to be as healthy as possible, go in for cutting-edge treatments, and the like. Alan, by contrast, does not focus on the desired outcome in the same way, nor does he take his desire and probability estimate as reasons for acting as Bess does. It seems natural to say that Bess hopes, whereas Alan despairs. But the Standard Theory fails to tell us why.¹⁶

Kierkegaard likewise suggests that the combination of desire and the presumption of possibility (but without certainty) that characterizes temporal hope could just as well constitute despair. Indeed, he calls into question whether temporal hope (the referent of our everyday use of the word “hope”) can properly be considered hope at all:

In ordinary speech we often call something hope that is not hope at all but wish [*Ønske*], longing [*Længsel*], longingful awaiting [*længselsfuld Forventning*] now of one thing, now of another, in short, an awaiting relation to the possibility of *multiplicity*. When hope is understood in that way, . . . hope actually means only awaiting [*Forventning*].¹⁷

Here what we ordinarily *call* hope is characterized in a way that is compatible with it also being despair – it is an awaiting and a desiring (“wishing,” “longing”), but somehow in its multiplicity it fails to sustain itself as hope. Again, for Kierkegaard, true hope is for one thing – the eternal – which is somehow at the same time “all things.” It is thus a kind of hope *against* hope because according to “purely natural [temporal] hope there was no more hope.”¹⁸

The central idea of the speratic dialectic, then, is that the individual who wants to hope truly first has to stop hoping temporally: This happens when she calculates the inevitability of disappointment and the ultimate hopelessness of temporal existence. As one commentator puts it: “Authentic hope becomes a possibility in the clearing of mundane [*i.e.*,

¹⁵ Compare Bovens (1999) and Meirav (2009) for the much-discussed *Shawshank Redemption* counterexample to the Standard Theory.

¹⁶ This is Adrienne Martin’s *Cancer Patients* example (2014). For further discussion and criticism of the Standard Theory, see, for example, Bovens (1999), Meirav (2009), and Chignell (2023).

¹⁷ WL, 250/SKS 9, 250 (translation modified). “Wish” is often distinguished in the contemporary literature (and by Kant) as a state of desire aimed at what is taken to be impossible or at the very least a lost cause. See Wheatley (1957) and, for the Kantian tradition, Englert (2017).

¹⁸ FSE, 82/SKS 13, 103.

temporal] hope.”¹⁹ And so, again, eternal hope is hope *against* (temporal) hope. But it is also in some sense a higher version of it. This is reflected in a later journal entry from 1846 in which Kierkegaard revisits the dialectic:

In the world of nature, the imitation [*det Eftergjorte*] is what is least significant: imitation diamonds are worthless. In the world of spirit it is the reverse. There is an original hope, the hope of youth: this is not what is highest; rather, the hope of faith is what is highest. And the whole essential world of the spirit is precisely the world of imitation, and yet much more splendid [*herligere*].²⁰

Here we start again with an original youthful hope, but this is just a stage along the way. Eternal hope (the hope of faith) is in some sense an “imitation” of original temporal hope and yet is also higher or “more splendid.” In Danish, the word translated as “imitation” is “*eftergjøre*,” which simply means “doing after.” So “imitation” is perhaps a poor translation: The idea is that eternal hope must come *after* temporal hope and requires going through (and giving up) all temporal hope, that is, despairing. There is still an element of “imitation,” however, in that eternal hope involves desire for what is taken to be possible; it is just that its object only *becomes* possible (phenomenologically and/or epistemically) once our temporal hope is disappointed and abandoned.²¹

It would seem plausible, tempting even, to view these stages in Kierkegaard’s dialectic of hope as mapping onto his general existential stages in *Either/Or*: from *aesthetic* to *ethical* to *religious*. Thus, it has been suggested that the first step of youthful hope might be exemplified in the perspective of the *unreflective* aesthete such as Don Giovanni, and that the second stage of calculated understanding corresponds to the perspective of the *reflective* aesthete.²² On this view, temporal hope *is* a kind of aesthetic hope. However, in the next section, we argue that aesthetic hope is importantly distinct from both forms of temporal hope (immediate and reflective), as well as from eternal hope.

Aesthetic Hope

A is certainly no Don Giovanni – something of which he is painfully aware – for he has lost the capacity for aesthetic immediacy. Indeed, he

¹⁹ Bernier (2015), p. 110. Similarly, Fremstedal (2020), writes: “Christian hope is only possible as a response to human despair.”

²⁰ KJN 4, 76/SKS 20, 77.

²¹ With this, Kierkegaard may also be drawing attention to the inverse dialectic of the religious life view, where the positive shows up in the negative, where what is lowest is highest, and the last becomes first (CUP 1, 432/SKS 7, 428). See also Walsh (1980).

²² Fremstedal (2012), p. 52.

lacks not only immediacy but also originality: As A himself admits, his kind of hope is just a simulacrum of original, immediate hope. In “Diapsalmata,” A declares that he is capable of describing “hope so vividly that every hoping individual will recognize my description as his own; and yet it is forgery, for even as I am describing it I am thinking of recollection [*Erindring*].”²³ This is another indication that, for Kierkegaard, temporal hope is not ultimately distinct from despair (one characteristic activity of which is reflective recollection).

But A does not remain at the stage of calculated reflective hope either: rather, in “The Unhappiest One” and “Rotation of Crops,” we find that A’s goal is to banish both uncertainty and disappointment. A effectively uses reflection to move beyond temporal hope, which is essentially uncertain and thus vulnerable to disappointment, while still resisting the movement into eternal hope, which lies outside of human control. In other words, A’s *aesthetic hope* aims to be timeless or atemporal, without becoming eternal; he achieves this by resisting uncertainty and intentionally entangling himself in key elements of both hope and despair.

Hope and Recollection in “The Unhappiest One”

“The Unhappiest One” is the second of three lectures that A addresses to the Συμπαρανεκρωμενοι [*Symparanekromenoi*], the Fellowship of the Dying. These are the people, who, like himself, live aphoristically and believe only in unhappiness. In the first of these lectures, “Silhouettes,” A explains that the fellowship holds to a “doctrine of the downfall of everything.”²⁴ He therefore reminds his fellow dying members of their decision to dissolve their society and obliterate themselves; for as long as it exists, the Fellowship makes a mockery of its only doctrine and undermines itself.

Curiously, A characterizes the attitude of the Fellowship as one of *hopeful* anticipation for its own oblivion: “Should we rejoice over this and not rather be sad and take pleasure only in the *hope* that life’s confusion will soon split us up, that the storms of life will soon carry us off!”²⁵ Neither fully dead nor fully alive, the members of the Συμπαρανεκρωμενοι are at a standstill: Like the gerundive form of their name, the Fellowship may appear to exemplify an activity, but the activity has no impetus – it moves nowhere. A concludes the first lecture this way:

²³ EO I, 36/SKS 2, 45. ²⁴ EO I, 167/SKS 2, 165.

²⁵ EO I, 167–168/SKS 2, 166 (emphasis ours).

would that the vortex, which is the world's core principle . . . [erupt] with the last terrible shriek that more surely than the trumpet of doom announces the downfall of everything. . . The night, however, is being victorious, the day is shortening, and *hope* is growing! . . . I greet you, dark night, I greet you as the victor, and this is my comfort, for in eternal oblivion you shorten everything, day and time and life.²⁶

In the first address to the Συμπαρανεκρωμενοι, then, A foregrounds hope – and yet this hope is distorted: it is a hope for the downfall and obliteration of all things.

In the second address to the Fellowship, “The Unhappiest One,” A continues his discussion (and distortion) of hope. The fact that A is looking to turn things upside down is anticipated in the juxtaposition of the title and subtitle of this essay: “The Unhappiest One: An Inspired [*begeistret*] Address to the Συμπαρανεκρωμενοι.”²⁷ The Hongs translate “*begeistret*” as “inspired,” presumably to capture the connotation of “*geist*” (spirit) contained in the Danish. “*Begeistring*” refers to imbuing or animating something lifeless with spiritual abilities. In its more mundane usage, however, “*begeistret*” simply connotes excitement, delight, or enthusiasm. Thus, the title is a playful contrast of diabolical moods: an exuberant address regarding unhappiness. A is also surely calling attention to the futile absurdity of making an enlivening speech to a Fellowship of the Dying.²⁸

Where A's first lecture to the Συμπαρανεκρωμενοι ended by inverting theological hope for eternal life into the aesthetic hope for eternal oblivion, the second lecture explains this distortion through an ominous pastiche of the resurrection of Christ. A turns this doctrine, the very cornerstone of Christian faith, on its head, as he conjures up the “mournful grave in the unhappy West” as a mirror image to that “sacred sepulchre in the happy East.”²⁹ Just as Christ's followers sought him at the grave on Easter Sunday, the Συμπαρανεκρωμενοι gather before the empty grave inscribed with the epitaph “The Unhappiest One.” And this grave too is empty – not because of resurrection but because he simply never died:

And look, the grave was empty! Has he perhaps risen from the dead; does he perhaps want to mock the poet's words: “In the grave there is peace, Its

²⁶ EO 1, 168/SKS 2, 166 (emphasis added). ²⁷ EO 1, 217/SKS 2, 212 (translation modified).

²⁸ As Kierkegaard will point out in an upbuilding discourse published the year after *Either/Or*, “despair, too, is an enthusiasm [*Fortvivelse er jo ogsaa en Begeistring*]” (EUD, 201/SKS 5, 203) Similarly, A's despair might be described as exuberance, in part because it is not adequately distinguished from hope.

²⁹ EO 1, 220/SKS 2, 213–214.

silent occupant does not know sorrow.” Did he find no rest, not even in the grave; is he perhaps still fitfully wandering the earth? . . . Or has he still not been found – he, the unhappiest one . . . whom sorrow keeps alive and sorrows follow to the grave.³⁰

It is the mystery surrounding this grave, rather than an angelic revelation or postresurrection reappearance, that compels the Fellowship to become “crusaders” seeking for the unhappiest of human beings who could be worthy of such an epitaph.³¹ But what characteristics would such an individual have?

Building upon Hegel’s account of the unhappy consciousness as a consciousness divided within and alienated to itself,³² A starts by defining the unhappy person as someone who is absent or distant to themselves. In one way or another, this individual has their being, ideals, consciousness, and nature outside of themselves; they lack self-presence. According to A, being absent to oneself can occur in two modes or temporal directions: One can be self-absent by being located entirely in the past, or one can be self-absent by being located entirely in the future. These two modes of self-absence are in turn mapped onto the “recollecting individual” and “hoping individual,” respectively. Recollection and hope are thus *both* unhappy, despairing states in which the subject is absent to themselves by orienting their being to the past or future, rather than to the present.

It is worth noting that A deems recollection *distinctively* unhappy because it is stuck in a past that has already happened and thus cannot come to be. Hope is less unhappy since its focus, the future, has at least the possibility of becoming present – the hoping individual is less distant from herself than is the recollecting individual. It is for this reason that A insists that the hoping individual will never be *as* unhappy – in as much pain or disappointment – as the recollecting individual, so “the unhappiest one will always have to be sought among recollection’s unhappy individualities.”³³ For the Fellowship’s purpose of finding the unhappiest one, then, it seems like recollection is “better” than hope. And yet, as A continues, the distinction between hope and recollection starts to blur.

First A allows that there is paradoxically a way of being “present in hope or in recollection”³⁴ so that these states can each be a source of some self-present happiness. He points out that someone who hopes for eternal life, for example, may seem unhappy because she has renounced the present. But she can still be present to herself *in the hope itself*. Thus, in search of

³⁰ EO 1, 219/SKS 2, 213.

³¹ Ibid.

³² See Hegel (1977).

³³ EO 1, 225/SKS 2, 218.

³⁴ EO 1, 223/SKS 2, 216.

the unhappiest state, A combines these two forms of unhappy individuality in a way that entirely shuts out the possibility for self-presence: The unhappiest one hopes for something located in the past and recollects something located in the future. Such a person continually hopes for that which, being in the past, should merely be recollected, and so his hope will certainly go unfulfilled – although, since the unfulfillment is certain, his hope cannot really be disappointed. Conversely, the unhappiest one continually recollects what should be hoped for: He has already experienced the future in thought and so remembers what is to come instead of hoping for it. This, too, banishes uncertainty and the possibility of disappointment. “Thus what he is hoping for lies behind him; what he recollects lies ahead of him. His life is not backwards but is turned the wrong way in two directions.”³⁵

By offering this paradoxical account of what constitutes maximal unhappiness, A himself seems to have abandoned the perspective of temporality. As others have pointed out, hoping for the past and recollecting the future amounts to the attempt to take up an almost divine perspective: “a standpoint outside of time, in ‘nowhen.’”³⁶ This position is so paradoxical for finite consciousness that it has been questioned whether we should even take A seriously.³⁷ And A himself admits that it can sound like insanity. At bottom, however, it is not so much madness as meaninglessness: This person has lost any way of making coherent, temporal sense of life:

He is not present to himself in the moment, nor is he present to himself in the future... [H]e has... no past he can long for, because his past has not yet come, no future he can hope for, because his future is already past... He cannot grow old, for he has never been young; he cannot become young, for he has already grown old; in a sense he cannot die, for indeed he has not lived; in a sense he cannot live, for indeed he is already dead... [H]e has no present time, no future, no past... [H]e does not have time for anything, not because his time is filled with something else, but because he has no time at all.³⁸

We find an echo of this diagnosis of maximal unhappiness in the letters of Judge William, or B, to A in the second part of *Either/Or*. B explicitly remarks that A will agree with him that people are separated into two overarching categories: those who live in hope and those who live in recollection. But either way of living, says B, is an indication of temporal

³⁵ EO I, 225/SKS 2, 219. ³⁶ Stokes (2010), p. 490. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 489.

³⁸ EO I, 226/SKS 2, 219–220.

dislocation. B argues, in a Hegelian mode, that only the psychological present consists in the *unity* of hope and recollection. So the “healthy individual” in the present lives simultaneously in hope and recollection and “only thereby does his life gain true and substantive continuity.”³⁹ On the one hand, this person has future-directed hopes and therefore has no desire to go backward in time. On the other, he uses recollection not as a way to flee from the present but rather as a way to embrace, heighten, and accentuate the present and his current existence within it. B invokes a different musical metaphor here, speaking not of *caesura* but rather of placing “a sharp on the note of the moment.”⁴⁰

B thus suggests (and A would agree) that the inverted relationship to hope and recollection found in aesthetic hope constitutes maximal unhappiness: The aestheticized unity of hope and recollection does not heal the misrelation to time but consummates it. Put another way: the inversion of the temporal directions of hope and recollection entangles the two in a way that leads not to continuity or the healthy relation that B describes but rather to opposition and temporal breakdown, and thus to a standstill or *caesura* that never ends. In effect, the unhappiest one binds or entangles himself in relationship to time such that all genuine temporal continuity is lost.

Perhaps because he is now unfettered from time, the unhappiest one appears to the *Συμπαρανερωμενοι* with a disarming suddenness. A hails him as “the unhappy lover of recollection, confused in his recollection by the light of hope, frustrated in his hope by the ghost of recollection.”⁴¹ This individual personifies the entanglement of temporal directions to such a degree that he has managed to undermine A’s earlier judgment that recollection is a more distinctive category of unhappiness because of its relation to the past. For here we have someone who hopes in recollection! He is a contradiction – a participant in “diabolical dialectic,” in B’s words – one who binds himself ever further to achieve standstill, rather than allowing his consciousness the kind of outward movement that would track the genuine passing of time. In effect, he has nowhere, or nowhen, to go – he is a self-wrought inversion of eternal hope:

He is exhausted, and yet how full of energy; his eyes do not seem to have shed, but to have drunk, many tears, and yet they flame with a fire that could consume the whole world, but not a splinter of sorrow in his own breast; he is bowed down, and yet his youth portends a long life; his lips smile at the world, which does not understand him.⁴²

³⁹ EO 2, 142/SKS 3, 140.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ EO 1, 229/SKS 2, 222.

⁴² Ibid.

In claiming that this inverted messiah figure cannot be understood, A foreshadows Kierkegaard's famous depiction of Christ as the absolute paradox. The stone has been rolled away from the grave: not to free the risen Christ who heralds eternal life for all, but because it is ready for the unhappiest one, this apostle of sorrow, to enter.⁴³ It has been suggested that A uses such "language of atonement" to portray his "only remaining hope" – that of finding his own misery interesting.⁴⁴ This can be considered a form of atonement because a kind of salvific happiness is achieved through the suffering of being unhappy. However, the aesthetic hope revealed in A's inversions seems to go further than this. For A it is not that one *becomes* happy (or saved) by *being* unhappy – it is that these states become indistinguishable.

At the end of the essay, A observes how "language breaks down, and thought is confused." He then seizes the opportunity to correct his conclusions: Instead of calling this person the unhappiest, we "ought to say 'the happiest' . . . for who indeed is the happiest but the unhappiest and who the unhappiest but the happiest, and what is life but madness, and faith but foolishness, and hope but a staving off of the evil day [*Galgenfrist*]." ⁴⁵ By re-characterizing hope as '*Galgenfrist*' – the postponement of something inevitable, or literally, the time until one is to be hanged at the gallows – A's exuberant address makes it into an attitude that is essentially about limitation, standstill, and finitude rather than possibility, progress, and the eternal. This is a full inversion of Kierkegaard's concept of hope in *Works of Love*: A relates himself hopefully not to the possibility of a good future but to the necessity of the recollected past. By becoming completely self-absent, the aesthete can cultivate the kind of hope that avoids all uncertainty and is thus invulnerable to disappointment. In this way, A offers us a kind of hope that is against the three other kinds: immediate-temporal, reflective-temporal, and eternal.

The question that remains, however, is what would it look like to hope aesthetically? In the next section, we argue that our account of aesthetic hope as hoping in the past (and thereby against temporal or eternal hope) in order to achieve standstill or atemporal certainty offers a different framework for reading the famous "Rotation of Crops" essay. On our reading, A employs aesthetic hope in the latter essay as a way to *avoid* rather than become subject to boredom.

⁴³ EO 1, 230/SKS 2, 222.

⁴⁴ Hare (1995), p. 103. Cf. Stern (1995) and McCarthy (2008).

⁴⁵ EO 1, 230/SKS 2, 223.

Hope in "Rotation of Crops"

A's stated aim in "Rotation" is to combat the inevitability of boredom. In his retelling of Genesis 1–11, A suggests that boredom has served as the underlying impetus for all creation: The universe was a result of the boredom of the gods; Eve a result of the boredom of Adam; sin a result of the fact that Adam, Eve, and Cain and Abel were bored; and the Tower of Babel an artifact of humanity's intense boredom. Boredom is thereby "the root of all evil."⁴⁶ But why is boredom so bad, according to A?

Boredom is bad, first, because although it may appear sedate, it induces movement – those who are bored are repulsed and motivated to bring about change; this goes against A's desire for a controlled, reflective standstill. Second, boredom is a reminder of our lack of certainty and control in the face of temporality. As one reader explains, having to wait or being bored "reveals my embeddedness in a temporality I did not posit."⁴⁷ Boredom thus reveals not just our temporal finitude but also the fact that time and the events within it are mostly outside our control. But as we have seen, A's hope is to exist in "suspended time, a quasi-eternity, or an eternity prior to any temporality."⁴⁸ That is, A uses his reflective calculation and self-manipulation to bind himself to the atemporal standstill: He wants to remain and revel in a *caesura* that never moves on to the rest of the piece.

This indicates that when he advocates the method of crop rotation, A cannot be calling for real change or progression. We also see this in the opposition he sets up between boredom and idleness: A rejects the received wisdom that idleness, not boredom, is the root of all evil, and declares that anyone who *lacks* idleness has not "raised himself to the human level" – for tireless action and instinctive constant motion is the mark of brutish spiritlessness.⁴⁹ By advocating the rotation of crops, then, A is not championing "the boundless infinity of change" but rather a kind of idleness. Indeed, he repudiates genuine change as vulgar and inartistic – as invoking a spurious infinity in which one continually changes the extensive dimensions, such as one's location and surroundings. Or, as A puts it: "One indulges in the fanatical [*svarmerisk*] hope of an endless journey from star to star."⁵⁰ Instead, aesthetic crop rotation is not about changing the soil but about changing out the crops and the way they are planted. This

⁴⁶ EO 1, 289/SKS 2, 279. ⁴⁷ Stokes (2010), p. 496.

⁴⁸ This is how David Kangas describes it; see (2007), p. 44. ⁴⁹ EO 1, 289/SKS 2, 279.

⁵⁰ EO 1, 291/SKS 2, 281.

description of a fanatical kind of hope sets it up in opposition to aesthetic hoping and, in addition, offers a further illustration of A's hope in a standstill. A true aesthete never moves forward or onto new ground: This is what makes the rotation a "principle of limitation" rather than progression.

In "The Unhappiest One," as we saw, A achieved standstill through placing the objects of aesthetic hope in the past, as well as through hoping for the standstill itself. In "Rotation," A focuses on recollection and forgetting, arguing that they can rid us of all temporal hopes:

it is in these two currents that all life moves, and therefore it is a matter of having them properly under one's control. Not until hope has been thrown overboard does one begin to live artistically; as long as a person hopes, he cannot limit himself. It is indeed beautiful to see a person put out to sea with the fair wind of hope; one may utilize the chance to let oneself be towed along, but one ought never have it on board one's craft, least of all as a pilot, for it is an untrustworthy shipmaster. For this reason, too, hope was one of Prometheus's dubious gifts; instead of giving human beings foreknowledge of the immortals, he gave them hope.⁵¹

Here temporal hope is contrasted negatively with the way in which controlled forgetting and recollecting avoids uncertainty. So whereas both aesthetic hope and aesthetic recollection are described as unhappy states in "The Unhappiest One," recollection is characterized positively in "Rotation" as an art that an aesthete cultivates. A even calls this art a "secret weapon" against boredom, and declares that "there is no weapon as dangerous as the art of being able to recollect."⁵² For A, living in recollection "is the most perfect life imaginable," more "richly satisfying" than reality itself, because it has the kind of certainty that reality can never have.⁵³ A is precisely placing his hope in recollection as a way to achieve an aesthetic perfection or salvation. Temporal hope, on the other hand, is rejected as in tension with the aesthetic life.

In a draft of this short essay, Kierkegaard makes the following note in the margin: "Recollection is in every way to be preferred to hope; in recollection a person is sure."⁵⁴ Here we see clearly the idea that recollection allows for the kind of certainty that nonaesthetic (i.e., temporal and eternal) hope lacks and that A craves in order to control the way in which he relates to the world. Because contingent reality offers no guarantees and is therefore likely to disappoint, A seeks a way to disconnect his

⁵¹ EO 1, 292–293/SKS 2, 282.

⁵² EO 1, 293/SKS 2, 283.

⁵³ EO 1, 32/SKS 2, 41.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard (1987a), p. 548.

contentment from outcomes beyond his control. Being aware of how he relates to life, what he enjoys, and what he finds pleasant and unpleasant – avoiding indiscriminate and extreme versions of either – allows him to savor a controlled experience, forget it at some level, and then recollect it again in a different guise, all in an effort to remain unattached and uninvested in life and its outcomes. A's vision is for his life to have no more meaning than it is possible to forget at any point, and yet to have so much meaning that it can be remembered at any moment. Thus, for A, the desired state of oblivion involves both forgetting and preserving, and when these two arts are perfectly mastered, one has found the Archimedean point with which the whole world can be lifted, and “play shuttlecock with all of existence.”⁵⁵

It is crucial for A that all genuine hope be abandoned or lost. Such hope involves vulnerability, as well as a certain degree of emotional investment and care. As others have noted, abandoning (temporal) hope allows A to loosen his natural “demands on actuality,” no longer be “teleologically invested in what [he] experiences,”⁵⁶ and instead imbue life with aesthetic value and opportunity through his own masterful control and limitation of how he relates to his existence. In A's own words, limitation is “the sole saving principle in the world,”⁵⁷ for it is by limiting yourself and your focus that you avoid the evils of disappointment and boredom.

A's invocation of Prometheus's dubious gift in the above passage from “Rotation” is also instructive here. For many ancient philosophers, hope is regarded as largely negative. By giving them blind hope (*elpis*), Prometheus deprived humans of any foreknowledge of their final limit: death. This sounds like the immediate or original species of temporal hope that Kierkegaard associates most closely with youth. Blindly hoping without a sober consciousness of their own death, young people develop a future-oriented perspective in which the possibilities appear limitless. This often proceeds well into middle age, and so most humans, despite their ultimately hopeless situation, keep on living. At best, then, hope appears as an ambiguous attitude. At worst, it is deception and just another divine curse; this was Nietzsche's reading of the story:

Zeus did not wish man, however much he might be tormented by the other evils, to fling away his life, but to go on letting himself be tormented again and again. Therefore he gives Man hope, – in reality it is the worst of all evils, because it prolongs the torments of Man.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ EO I, 294/SKS 2, 283. ⁵⁶ Schönbaumsfeld (2019a), p. 664. ⁵⁷ EO I, 292/SKS 2, 281.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche (1996), p. 58. See also Coyne (2022), pp. 111–113 for a discussion of the convergence of hope and despair in Nietzsche, which bears some resemblance to aesthetic hope.

Aesthetic hope thus involves the attempt to keep hope alive, since it has a certain positive and entertaining aspect, while at the same time fending off the “torment” of the uncertainty of temporal hope. It does this via a paradoxical effort to place hope in a carefully curated cycle of reflective experiences and moods: enjoying them, forgetting them, hoping for them, enjoying them again under a different guise, and so on. In this way, A attempts to resolve the ancient ambiguity (and proleptically answer Nietzsche’s complaint) by making the ideal kind of hope aesthetically positive and immune to disappointment.

This explains why, in the passage from “Rotation” quoted above, A does not recommend a wholesale rejection or abandonment of all hope. Rather, the passage imitates the structure of Kierkegaard’s own speratic dialectic: A uses calculation to go beyond temporal hope and make room for a different kind. Thus, after advocating that we throw hope overboard, A goes on to describe the beauty of seeing someone being put out on the water by the “fair” winds of hope and utilizing these for her own purposes. The emphasis here is on the *aesthetic* value and use of a certain kind of hope: The way A describes it, this hope both pushes and pulls, so it is not a hope that can or should guide life but leaves the hoping person passive. Rather it is hope in the ultimate limitation of movement – a hope that keeps the individual at sea. Here we have a spatial rather than temporal metaphor for the aesthetic orientation. The seafarer’s hope does not lead anywhere but rather holds her fast. The hope is not oriented toward possibilities, but hopes in its own limitation – it is, again, a hope against *both* temporal and eternal hope.

But it is also, and perhaps most fundamentally, a hope against boredom. Within the standstill, it becomes possible to fixate creatively on something “accidental” or arbitrary and treat it as though it is “absorbing” or even worthy of “absolute admiration.”⁵⁹ Thus, even the boring philosopher’s lecture is interesting when we intensely focus our hopes on whether the bead of sweat will make it all the way down his nose before the lecture’s end. If it does, we can celebrate a meaningless outcome as though it were a great triumph; if it doesn’t, we haven’t lost anything and can just focus in hope on something else. Aesthetic hope is limited in this way and thus puts us in control: always focused on “something accidental” or trivial that is momentarily made into “the absolute,”⁶⁰ and yet soon forgotten. From Kierkegaard’s point of view, such aesthetic hope is really (or also) a kind of despair. After these two essays, we leave the aesthete entangled in his own

⁵⁹ EO I, 300/SKS 2, 288. ⁶⁰ EO I, 299/SKS 2, 288.

efforts to control and avoid uncertainty – engaged in a kind of hoping that is ultimately the unhappiest kind of despair: a hope against hope itself.

The Focus of Aesthetic Hope

These remarks about the role of intentional focus in A's approach to life, and the way in which it figures into aesthetic hope, cohere with a way of thinking about hope that has been developed in the recent literature. "Focus" theorists argue that the element missing from the Standard Theory, the one that truly distinguishes hope from despair, is a certain kind of dispositional mental attention or focus.⁶¹ The main idea is that a subject who hopes is disposed to attend to the outcome in a certain way – or (in a more scholastic phrase) under a certain "aspect." That is, in addition to presupposing that a desired outcome is possible (a condition that is compatible with despair), the hoping subject is disposed to *focus* on that outcome such that its possibility is not psychologically "swamped" by countervailing considerations (such as that it is unlikely, or prohibited, or risky, or makes her vulnerable to disappointment). So in Adrienne Martin's *Cancer Patients* case described above, Bess not only believes that she can recover and desires to do so; she is also disposed to focus on her recovery *under the aspect of unswamped possibility*. Yes, she's aware that it's unlikely and precarious, but she is disposed to sideline those swamping considerations most of the time, and instead focus on her recovery as possible. Alan, by contrast, is disposed to focus on his recovery *under the aspect of improbability*. He still thinks recovery is possible, of course, and he desires it as much as Bess does. But he is unable to keep its possibility in the forefront of his focus – it is "swamped" by countervailing considerations; thus, Alan despairs.

It is important to note that hope and despair are dispositions on this account – there will naturally be times when someone who hopes that, for instance, his children will have a good life still focuses on that outcome as deeply improbable (given climate change, etc.). But that's not his overall disposition: Across a wide range of circumstances, when that outcome is brought to mind he is more likely to focus on it such that its possibility is *unswamped* by these other things. The person who despairs, by contrast, is disposed across a wide range of circumstances to focus on the desired outcome under some other aspect (improbability, precariousness, etc.), one that swamps its possibility for him. So the Focus Theory can allow for

⁶¹ Chignell (2023). For others in this general camp, see Rioux (2021) and Bovens (1999).

temporary fluctuations in our focus or its aspect, while still providing an account of the distinction between hope and despair.

The Focus Theory also allows that these speratic dispositions can be cultivated over time – we can, at times, control what we focus on, or at least control the aspect under which we focus. It may be that Bess consciously *decides* to attend to her recovery *as* possible, and to sideline, as much as she can, the countervailing considerations that push Alan into despair. Such control won't always be available, especially when the outcome is extremely significant or the countervailing considerations are extremely salient. But with respect to some outcomes, anyway, we may be able to bracket those considerations and hold the outcome before the mind in such a way that its possibility is unswamped. This is true even if our desires and probability estimates are not under our control. The fact that our focus (or its aspect) is sometimes under control provides the basis for various pragmatic and moral norms on hope.⁶² And, again, ongoing exercise of control over patterns of salience like this can, over time, shape the underlying disposition. When the outcomes are morally permissible, and the attention paid to them does not distract from other important tasks and goals, the resulting habit or character trait counts as a virtue (a virtue we might call *hopefulness*).

The Focus Theory provides a general account of the difference between hope, despair, and related states like expectation and wish, as well as of the norms and virtues in the region. But we think it may also offer a useful way of thinking about the sort of hope that A recommends.⁶³ This is because aesthetic hope ideally involves the subject's focus or attention being *totally* controlled. The aesthete has already developed the capacity for recollection and forgetting into an art (or a weapon) against boredom, and in the two essays discussed above A advocates something similar with respect to hope. He does this by training himself to regard various outcomes as possible, and then rotating through them – first in the mode of hope, then despair, then forgetting, then hope again, and so on. In principle, almost any outcome can be regarded in this way, at least by the hyper-controlled aesthete: even an *impossible* outcome such as the past being different than it was. Aesthetic hope thus involves taking the focus element of hope to the extreme: Even if our desires and beliefs are not under our control, our focus (or at least its aspect) may be, and the aesthete has such highly

⁶² Again, see Chignell (2022 and 2023) for more on all this.

⁶³ This may offer an example of A's philosophical ingenuity, which is perhaps often overlooked. See Lübecke (1989) and Kemp (2016).

developed powers of reflection and attention that for him (ideally) it always is.

The great advantage of being able to control speratic focus in this way is that it allows A to rid himself of the uncertainty that the Standard Theory takes to be one of hope's essential features, the feature that Nietzsche and many of the ancients lament. Just as Bess has trained herself to focus on recovery *as* possible, rather than *as* improbable, A has (allegedly) trained himself to focus on almost *any* outcome as possible – even outcomes that are certain. If what A is doing is still a case of genuine hope, then it is effectively a counterexample to the Standard Theory's assumption that hope requires uncertainty about the outcome. Here the Standard Theorist might reply that the case of A gives us reason to be somewhat suspicious *not* of the Focus Theory *per se* but of the further claim that the object of hope can be something that the subject takes to be certain. For, while we might allow that there is an internal logic to A's creative abstractions in pursuit of total control, there is also something intuitively and undeniably absurd about aesthetic hope: For all of A's hyper-reflectiveness and conceptual sophistication, aesthetic "hope" can appear to be simply a collapse into despair. And so perhaps aesthetic hope serves to illustrate the emptiness of a certain kind of life, which despite its cleverness offers only an illusion of control. This fits with Kierkegaard's own claim that only eternal hope is "true": In this lifetime, it has an unchanging object ("all things") but is not entirely under our control (hence Kierkegaard's doctrine of grace) and thus necessarily involves uncertainty. It is only in the (never-completed) process of "becoming" a person of faith that eternal hope starts to look like genuine expectation or confident awaiting. But the minute we become certain of the outcome, someone might think, it is no longer genuine hope.⁶⁴

Conclusion

When read together, "The Unhappiest One" and "Rotation of Crops" reveal A's sustained treatment of and reflections on hope. A's aesthetic hope emerges as distinct from temporal hope as well as from eternal hope. The aesthetic approach eschews temporality and thus insinuates that temporal hope is not a valuable kind of hope. A's aesthetic hope, by contrast,

⁶⁴ It is controversial, though, whether hope has to preclude certainty. It seems possible that a subject can hope for something that she is certain of, even if she would not normally express that hope. See Chignell 2023.

advertises itself as a kind of hope that cannot be disappointed. As such, aesthetic hope demonstrates clear awareness of the inevitable limits of any form of purely temporal hope – whether spontaneous or calculated.

But aesthetic hope is also distinct from Kierkegaard's true, eternal Christian hope. In inverting aesthetic hope and making it timeless, A is not seeking eternity but rather seeking to leave any form of temporality behind by remaining in the standstill. Aesthetic hope is similar to eternal hope in the sense that it seeks to make itself immune to disappointment. However, it differs because it attempts to subsume disappointment and despair into itself, rather than break or go beyond them. More simply, aesthetic hope is distinct from eternal hope insofar as it is a symptom and expression of despair. Aesthetic hope is thereby neither temporal nor eternal hope but rather self-consciously entangled in the standstill of Kierkegaard's dialectic. The aesthete's account of what he may hope thus emphasizes the limits, for Kierkegaard, of a merely philosophical (as opposed to explicitly theological) conception of hope.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ We are grateful to the editors of this volume for their feedback on an earlier draft.