

## THE FOCUS THEORY OF HOPE

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*Most epistologists now agree that hope for a specific outcome involves more than just desire plus the presupposition that the outcome is possible. This paper argues that the additional element of hope is a disposition to focus on the desired outcome in a certain way. I first survey the debate about the nature of hope in the recent literature, offer objections to some important competing accounts, and describe and defend the view that hope involves a kind of focus or attention. I then suggest that this account makes sense of the intuitive thought that there are moral and pragmatic norms on hope that go beyond the norms on desires and modal presuppositions. I conclude by considering some key questions.*

**Keywords:** hope, despair, attention, focus, possibility, salience.

### I. INTRODUCTION

We speak of hope in many ways. One of the main ways depicts hope as a propositional attitude towards a desired state or outcome. We say that we

*hope that it will not rain tomorrow,*  
*hope that our friend will recover from his illness,*  
*hope that Earth will not warm more than 2 degrees.*

Hopes like these are *specific*: they are directed towards discrete and often measurable outcomes (did it rain or did it not?). Such hopes are also *episodic*. Sometimes they consist of a single episode:

*There's a runaway trolley—I hope it doesn't collide with that large man!*

The collision occurs or it doesn't, and then our hope is replaced with either horror or relief. But most episodic hopes are grounded in dispositions that manifest repeatedly under various conditions:

*I hope that the students find jobs.*

This hope leads to certain actions when they need practice interviews, and to certain feelings when they have real ones.

Recent work in the now-active field of elpistology<sup>1</sup> has led to near-consensus about one thing: *Specific, episodic hopes* like these are not adequately characterized by the standard belief/desire theory of hope that we find in classical authors like Hobbes. That account (call it ‘the Standard Theory’) says that hope involves a desire for an outcome accompanied by the belief that the outcome is possible.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the rejection of the Standard Theory, however, there is little consensus regarding how to revise or replace it. Here I will argue that we need a third element: In addition to the cognitive and conative elements, hope involves the disposition to *focus on* a desired outcome as one whose possibility is psychologically ‘unswamped’ by the salience of countervailing considerations. The result of adding this *focus* element to the Standard Theory is the ‘Focus Theory’ of hope. There is a counterpart Focus Theory of despair—I will gesture at it here but save a detailed discussion for another time.

I begin by distinguishing the varieties of hope in more detail (Section II) and then go on to describe the Standard Theory (Section III) and a couple of the best-known objections to it (Section IV). In Section V, I look at an important recent effort to salvage the Standard Theory, before introducing the Focus Theory and the notion of ‘swamping’ (Section VI). I wrap up by considering (in Section VII) some questions about the nature and aspect of the focus involved, and how the Focus Theory accounts for some of the unique norms on hope.

## II. SPECIFIC HOPE AND BASAL HOPE

*Specific episodic hope* comes in degrees, and along at least two dimensions: *significance* and *intensity*. Often these two dimensions are correlated: if I invest a great deal of *significance* in some outcome—the survival of my child who has been stricken with a terrible disease, say—then my hope for it will probably be very *intense*. But they can also diverge: I might fervently hope to play a game of snooker with Mark Johnston-Allen someday, and yet openly admit that the whole thing is quite trivial. The fervency or intensity of episodic hope is largely a function of how powerful the desire is—I *really* want to play with Johnston-Allen, and this manifests in a degree of what we might call ‘speratic’<sup>3</sup> feeling’: a phenomenology that is familiar if hard to describe.

At the lowest end of the scale of significance are the banal hopes of daily life (e.g. that it will not rain tomorrow). Towards the top end are the extremely

<sup>1</sup> From Greek ‘*elpis*’. The Greek concept seems to conflate two contemporary concepts—that of *hope* and that of *expectation*. See Cairns (2020) and Chignell (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Hobbes: ‘Appetite with an opinion of attaining is called HOPE’ (1651: I.vi.14). Aquinas: ‘Hope is a movement of appetite aroused by the perception of what is agreeable, future, arduous, and possible of attainment’ (1225–74: I-II, Q 40, A. 1).

<sup>3</sup> From Latin: ‘*spes*’—hope.

significant specific hopes (e.g. that the Earth won't warm by more than 2 degrees). At the apex are the most significant kinds of life-structuring hopes—the hope to have fulfilling relationships, the hope to make a positive difference, the hope to have a meaningful life, and so on. For many people, hopes regarding the afterlife also fit here at the apex: post-mortem bliss or beatitude is one of the central objects of hope in many religious traditions. Specific hope for a very significant and yet extremely *unlikely* outcome is sometimes referred to (following St. Paul) as 'hope against hope'.<sup>4</sup> Such hope always has a high degree of intensity.

Note, further, that the same outcome can be the object of banal, insignificant hope for some people, moderately significant hope for others, and apex-level, life-structuring hope for still others. For example, the sentence

*I hope that it will not rain tomorrow*

uttered by you while planning a picnic expresses a banal hope. Uttered by me when the betrothed at an outdoor wedding, it expresses a quite significant hope. Uttered by residents of the community on the banks of a raging, overflowing river, the sentence expresses a still more significant hope. The significance, again, is partly a function of how invested the hoper is in the outcome. This explains why significant hopes are typically accompanied by intensity of speratic feeling.

Another and very different way in which we speak of hope refers not to an episodic state but to a broad existential stance: an anticipatory openness to or embrace of an indeterminate range of possible futures. Cheshire Calhoun describes such *basal hope* as 'the phenomenological idea of the future' (2018: 74). Basal hope has no specific object, does not involve a disposition to have discrete mental episodes, and is not typically under our control. Authors ranging from Calhoun to the Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel to the Jewish Marxist Ernst Bloch have depicted basal hope as an essential element of finite agency.<sup>5</sup>

It seems possible for some of our most significant life-structuring hopes to start off specific but become so abstract that they 'go basal'—the hope to have a meaningful life or the hope to be happy, for example. So there is some vagueness here about the boundary between significant specific hope and basal hope. Some theorists propose to analyse hope in such a way that their account applies to both specific and basal hope (Milona/Stockdale 2018). In what follows, however, I set aside basal hope and provide a theory of specific episodic hope (hereafter just 'hope'). I leave it open whether a version of the Focus Theory might extend to basal hope as well.

<sup>4</sup> An outcome whose probability is utterly inscrutable to the subject might also be the object of such hope against hope.

<sup>5</sup> I take Jonathan Lear's (2006) 'radical hope' to be the basal counterpart of specific 'hope-against-hope.' It is hope for some extremely significant future, but under conditions of 'devastation' that make such a future impossible to conceive specifically.

### III. THE STANDARD THEORY

As mentioned earlier, the Standard Theory says that hope has two key elements—a *Cognitive* element and a *Conative* element (Hobbes 1651; Downie 1963; Day 1969).

The *Cognitive* element is a presupposition that the hoped for outcome is *possible*—i.e. that it *could* obtain. Advocates of the Standard Theory typically speak of full-blown belief here (Hobbes calls it an ‘opinion’). But this is too strong: some hopes (especially banal quotidian ones) require merely that the outcome be *epistemically possible* for us, or that we *take for granted* that the outcome is possible, or, weaker still, that we simply *lack certainty that it is impossible*.<sup>6</sup> So it is better to say that the requirement here is a mere ‘presupposition of possibility’.

Hope contrasts with *wish* on this score: we can wish for outcomes that we take to be clearly *impossible*—that I had been born to different parents, that the losing candidate had won, that the virus were made of ice cream, and so on. But we cannot hope for such things.<sup>7</sup> Many people do pin their hopes on miracles, however, even though they take them to be violations of the laws of nature. So the kind of possibility that hope presupposes must be metaphysical rather than physical/causal.<sup>8</sup>

Some Standard Theorists add the condition that we cannot hope for what we take to be certain. I find this dubious: if you ask me whether I hope that the Pythagorean theorem will remain true today, my answer will be ‘Obviously, yes!’ But I am also certain that this will happen and so it would be strange to go around expressing that hope unbidden—it would give people the impression that I take geometrical malfunction to be a genuine concern. The lesson here, in my view, is that we can and do hope for what we take to be certain, but there is a norm against *asserting* that hope in most contexts. I’ve discussed this in more detail elsewhere (Chignell 2013); here, I will just leave the uncertainty clause out of the analysis.

The *Conative* element of hope is simply the desire or ‘attraction’ to the outcome in question.<sup>9</sup> This is different from mere *intention*: suppose that my boss has scheduled a long meeting today, so I get on my bike and head to the office. I clearly intend to go to the office, but only grudgingly: this isn’t genuine hope.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Chignell (2014) as well as Blöser (2019) and Benton (2021) for further discussion of this issue. Blöser argues that since full-blown belief isn’t required for hope, there is no cognitive necessary condition on hope at all. But that’s a *non sequitur* given the availability of these other states.

<sup>7</sup> On hope vs. wish, see Wheatley (1958) and, in a Kantian context, Englert (2017).

<sup>8</sup> See Chignell (2013) for an argument that the precise formulation of the minimal *Cognitive* condition is ‘not being certain that *p* is metaphysically impossible.’ There I claimed it was a condition on rational hope. Now I think it’s a condition on hope *simpliciter*.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Attraction’ is Martin’s preferred term for the conative element; she regards the notion of desire as both too familiar and too contested in the moral psychology literature (2014: 52).

<sup>10</sup> This sort of case causes trouble for views (such as that in Bobier 2017) according to which hope is *required* for practical deliberation. It seems that we can deliberate regarding an action without hoping to perform it. Compare Mueller (2019).

The *Conative* element of hope is also not merely a *preference*. I may have the standing preference that party P wins elections, and so prefer that P wins in Podunk tonight. But I live far from Podunk and haven't given their election much thought; to be honest, I probably won't even feel disappointed to learn that P did not win in Podunk. I may still have a contrastive preference for P-victory in Podunk, but that too isn't genuine hope.

These reflections indicate that hope differs from both intention and preference by necessarily involving a non-contrastive desire for its object. And again, this desire is typically manifested in a degree of phenomenological 'pull' or speratic feeling. That said, there may be latent or sub-conscious specific hopes that lack all occurrent phenomenology, just as there may be latent or sub-conscious desires. Often such hopes manifest later—in pleasure when they are fulfilled, or in disappointment when they are dashed. Thus, Timothy Williamson infers that hope is not a self-transparent (or 'luminous') state:

I believe that I do not hope for a particular result to a match, I am conscious of nothing but indifference; then my disappointment at one outcome reveals my hope for another. When I had that hope, I was in no position to know that I had it. (1995: 535)<sup>11</sup>

The Standard Theory can be stated as a pair of core necessary conditions, where  $p$  is a proposition describing a specific outcome:

- [Standard Theory]:** S hopes that  $p$  only if  
 (*Cognitive*): S presupposes that  $p$  is metaphysically possible  
 and  
 (*Conative*): S desires that  $p$ .

Articulated in this way, the Standard Theory has at least two main theoretical virtues (in addition to a storied past).

First, it is *elegant*: it has just two conditions, and they are intuitive. At the same time, the Standard Theory can allow that particular hopes (or kinds of hope) typically have additional features or are accompanied by additional states and behaviors. If you hope to get out of jail, or hope to fetch some water in a pail, then you *probably* also (a) have certain emotions and feelings regarding the outcome; (b) endorse those feelings and emotions as justifying certain actions; (c) keep your eye out for pathways to the outcome; (d) are *prima facie* inclined to take those pathways when they present themselves; (e) will be resilient or 'gritty' in the face of setbacks with respect to the outcome; and so on. In order to avoid ready counterexamples, the Standard Theory says that these are frequent concomitants or effects of hope, but not essential to it.

Second, the Standard Theory is *ontologically neutral*. In other words, the theory can remain non-committal regarding whether the presupposition of

<sup>11</sup> I don't take a position on the question of whether one can have a hope without *ever* manifesting it—that goes to a deep debate in the dispositions literature that I can't address here.

possibility and the desire are *constituents* of hope, even though many Standard-bearers assume that they are (e.g. Hobbes 1651; Downie 1963). Earlier I said that hope ‘involves’ these elements, just as it ‘involves’ an outcome. But hope also involves having a mind, and it’s not clear that we should construe the latter as a constituent of hope. The Standard Theory can avoid all this by claiming merely that *Cognitive* and *Conative* are *core* necessary conditions on hope—they are always and centrally involved with hope, whether or not they partly or entirely constitute it. This is compatible with hope being a ‘primitive’ state distinct from the subject’s beliefs, emotions, and desires (Segal/Textor 2015; Blöser 2019), or a passion or emotion (Aquinas 1265–74; Walker 2006; Bobier 2019), or even a kind of perception (Milona/Stockdale 2018).

As we will see, these theoretical virtues (though not the storied past) also characterize the Focus Theory of hope that I present below.

#### IV. CHALLENGES TO THE STANDARD THEORY

Two main kinds of challenge to the Standard Theory can be found in the recent literature:

- a. There appear to be *Counterexamples* that show that the Standard Theory is unable to distinguish hope from despair.
- b. There appear to be *Different Norms* governing hope, on the one hand, and the presupposition-desire pair described by *Cognitive* and *Conative*, on the other. This indicates that there is more to hope than the Standard Theory allows.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding challenge (a), consider the now-standard counterexample that was first introduced into world literature by Leo Tolstoy (via Stephen King) and into the hope literature by Luc Bovens:

***Prisoners***: Andy and Red are in the same jail cell. Both believe that escape is unlikely but possible; both desire to escape to the same very high degree. Still, Andy hopes while Red despairs.<sup>13</sup>

We can set aside the details of the film (and in particular the background context involving race and the history of incarceration in America) and stipulate that in *Prisoners*, the *Cognitive* and *Conative* conditions are met *in precisely the same way*

<sup>12</sup> Moellendorf (2006) makes this point, and Martin (2014) elaborates on it.

<sup>13</sup> The canonical statement of the case (which is taken from the movie *Shawshank Redemption* and the 1982 Stephen King story ‘Hope Springs Eternal: Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption’, which is itself inspired by a 1872 Tolstoy story called ‘God Sees the Truth, but Waits’) is in Bovens (1999: 668). Meirav uses the case to sharpen the point against the Standard Theory in his (2009).

by both people. If it still seems plausible that Andy hopes and Red despairs, then the Standard Theory is in trouble.

Regarding the *Different Norms* challenge in (b), consider a different case:

**Born Sadist:** Sadie is an otherwise fairly normal member of the moral community, but she was born with an ineradicable desire occasionally to inflict pain on certain people. She finds that she has this desire with respect to victimizing Vickie, and also sees that it is possible.<sup>14</sup>

Friends of ‘ought-implies-can’ will deny that Sadie has a *direct* duty—right now, in the moment—to banish her desire to hurt Vickie, since that’s not something she can do. They will also deny that Sadie has an *indirect* duty to dismantle her sadistic desire, since by hypothesis this is also something that she cannot do—it’s ineradicable after all. But does she have a duty not to *hope* to hurt Vickie? I think there is an intuitive difference in the norms here. Sadie is not a complete sociopath; although she was born with these ineradicable desires, she’s still sensitive to moral rules. As a result, this sounds like a sensible admonition for us to give her:

**Admonition:** Look, it’s clear that you *can* hurt Vickie, and we know that you can’t help but *want* to do so. All the same, you shouldn’t *hope* to hurt her—that would be wrong.

If *Admonition* is coherent, it shows that some of the norms on hope differ from the norms on the presupposition-desire pairs described by *Cognitive* and *Conative*. It also indicates that hope is (or is at least taken to be) in some way voluntary, even when the presupposition-desire pair is not. And those features suggest that the Standard Theory is in trouble once again.

Some elpistologists take cases like *Born Sadist* to indicate not just that the norms on hope come apart from those on desire, but also that the norms on hope coincide with the norms on desire-*endorsement*. Although Sadie has no duty not to want to hurt Vickie, she ought not to *endorse* that desire, and that is why she has a duty not to hope to hurt Vickie. Such theorists thus take endorsement or rational ‘incorporation’ to be one of the key constituents of hope.<sup>15</sup> But a variation on *Born Sadist* shows that this is too strong: suppose Sadie is aware that she hopes to hurt Vickie and yet does *not* endorse the desire involved. Her hope is thus *recalcitrant*, but it is hope nonetheless. We need an account that makes sense of the different norms, but does not rule out the possibility of recalcitrant hope.<sup>16</sup> The Focus Theory can do this, as we’ll see below.

<sup>14</sup> I first encountered Sadie in a talk delivered by Sharon Street. Here we are considering a version of Sadie who is not just a sadist but a born one.

<sup>15</sup> This sort of Endorsement Theory of hope is suggested by Mollendorf (2006) and, in a much more elaborate way, by Martin (2014), who calls it the ‘Incorporation Theory’.

<sup>16</sup> Bovens (1999) makes this point and Milona (2019) develops it as an explicit critique of the Incorporation Theory of hope found in Martin (2014).

## V. REVISING THE STANDARD THEORY?

Suppose that these objections to the Standard Theory are sound. There are two main kinds of remedy. The first involves *revising* the two Standard conditions such that they do, together, succeed in handling the objections. The other involves *augmenting* the Standard Theory by adding another element to the list of core necessary conditions.<sup>17</sup> In this section, I'll consider a recent revisionary effort by Michael Milona; in the sequel I'll present my own augmentation effort.

Milona's view—which he explicitly characterizes as a version of the 'Hobbesian' Standard Theory includes an account of the *Cognitive* element that is supposed to help with the challenges above. He articulates the two core necessary conditions this way:

- [Revised Standard Theory]:** S hopes that *p* only if  
 (*Cognitive\**): S's belief that *p* is possible is *in the cognitive base of*  
 (*Conative\**): a hope-constituting desire that *p*.

Here is his gloss:

In other words, a hope-constituting desire that *p* is **directly causally influenced** by a belief that *p* might come (or be) true in such a way that the **desire defeasibly leads the agent to behave and attend as if *p* might come (or be) true**. (2018: 6, my emphasis)

It's a complicated idea, even when glossed. To illustrate it, Milona provides the example of pie-loving Cynthia, who is presently dining at a restaurant and wants a slice of pie. Initially it's just a desire, but then Cynthia is told by an authoritative source that the kitchen is liable to run out of pie this late in the evening. Suddenly, 'what was once an ordinary desire transforms into a hope' (6). This transformation involves not just a new belief about the improbability of pie-acquisition, but an 'affective shift':

The desire for a slice is now such that it motivates her to perform new actions, e.g. to flag the waiter as soon as possible to beat other patrons to what may be the final slice. (*ibid.*)

In other words, the belief that having pie is possible becomes part of the 'cognitive base' of the desire. And that desire counts as 'hope-constituting' because it (defeasibly) leads Cynthia to 'behave and attend' in ways that are responsive to the pie possibility.

The inclusion of a defeasible connection to action and attention gives Milona's Revised Standard Theory (RST) a response to *Born Sadist*. Sadie's

<sup>17</sup> A third remedy would be to abandon the idea that *Conative* and *Cognitive* are core necessary conditions on hope, and look for an entirely different approach that declines to analyse hope at all. See Segal/Textor (2015) and Blöser (2019). I won't explore these alternatives here.



desire to harm Vickie, when influenced by her belief that it is possible, just *is* the hope to harm Vickie, according to RST. Since these desires and beliefs are by hypothesis ineradicable, she has no duty not to hope. But RST can account for the *Different Norms* intuition by saying that Sadie has a duty to prevent the ‘hope-constituting desire’ from leading to certain patterns of action and attention. In other words, Sadie ought to make sure that the defeasible connection is in fact defeated: *that* is what is under her control—indirectly or directly. In effect, then, RST resolves the *Different Norms* challenge by denying that it exists: there are *not* different norms, and the intuitive sense that there are can be explained by the requirement to ‘defeat’ the connection to action and attention. Sadie inevitably hopes to hurt Vickie, but she ought not act or attend as if she might do so.

Although this appears to be a coherent model, it would clearly be preferable to preserve our intuitive conviction that there are different norms expressed in *Admonition*—that is, that there are different norms on presupposition-desire pairs than there are on hope. The Focus theory can do that, as we’ll see below.

A second concern about RST is that it requires a full-blown modal belief to play the causal role specified. But as noted earlier, it’s now controversial in epistemological circles that a full-blown modal *belief* is required for hope. My own view is that what the presupposition in *Cognitive* minimally requires is simply the *absence of certainty that p is metaphysically impossible* (see Chignell 2013). But it’s hard to see how a mere absence of certainty can play the causal role that Milona wants the belief to play in *Cognitive\**—that of ‘directly causally influencing’ a desire. The Focus Theory doesn’t suffer from this problem, as we’ll see below.

Third, there are contexts in which RST renders the wrong verdict. Consider:

**Smoker:** I notice that you have a pack of cigarettes in your pocket at the evening reception, and I know that you’re a fairly generous person and that we’ve smoked together at receptions for years. So I see that it’s possible for me to smoke, and this produces a strong urge to smoke with you. I keep my eye on you at the reception, watching to see whether you are heading outside for a smoke. But I also reflect on my promise to my spouse that I will not come back to the hotel room smelling like cigarettes, and so in the end I resist the desire and try not to follow you when you head for the doors. This time, you smoke outside alone.

In *Smoker*, my awareness that it’s possible for me to smoke with you ‘directly causally influences’ my desire. That desire is then liable to ‘lead me to act and attend as if’ the proposition *I am going to go out and have a smoke* ‘might come (or be) true’. In the end the defeasible connection is defeated: I made a promise *not* to smoke, and my desire to keep my promise wins out in the end. It seems clear, in such a case, that I hope *not* to smoke. But do I *also* hope to smoke? RST says yes, but this is implausible: of course I still *want* to join you for a cigarette, but my hope is directed elsewhere.

In order to avoid this problem, RST could stipulate that only our *top* desire is a hope-constituting one.<sup>18</sup> But in the absence of some sort of endorsement condition, this seems ad hoc—why wouldn't our other modally-informed desires also constitute hopes? The Focus Theory does a much better job with *Smoker*, as we'll see below.

Finally: even if RST can overcome the objections raised so far, it is still too weak. For merely *behaving and attending as if p might come (or be) true* is not sufficient in many cases to distinguish hope from despair. Here we can simply go back to *Prisoners*: suppose Red's top desire is to escape, and this leads him to watch Andy digging behind the toilet month after month—he attends as if the escape might occur. RST says that Red therefore hopes. But that's the wrong verdict: due to his estimation of how unlikely escaping would be, and how risky the effort is, Red despairs of ever doing so. The Focus Theory can handle *Prisoners* easily, as we'll see below.

## VI. INTRODUCING FOCUS

There is more to say about the Standard Theory and various other efforts to revise or augment it.<sup>19</sup> Here, however, I will simply move on to develop my own augmentation.

The key element of hope that is missing from the Standard Theory, in my view, is this: in addition to the presupposition that a desired outcome is metaphysically possible, hope involves a disposition to *focus on* or *attend to* that outcome in a specific way. To use a scholastic-sounding phrase: a subject hopes for a desired outcome when she is disposed to focus on it *under a certain aspect*. The aspect here is modal: the subject is disposed to focus on a desired outcome under *the aspect of unswamped possibility*. 'Unswamped' in this context is a psychological notion rather than an epistemic or logical one: the possibility of an outcome is unswamped for a subject as long as no countervailing considerations—for example that it *ought not happen*, or is *very unlikely* to happen, or involves *extreme risk*—tend to be more psychologically salient for her than its possibility. I'll say more about swamping and salience below.

The addition of this third element immediately resolves *Prisoners*: Andy desires to be free and believes it's just barely possible. But he is also disposed to attend to the imagined escape *as possible*. Red desires freedom to the same degree, and takes it to be possible in just the same way. But he is disposed to

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to two anonymous referees for suggesting this amendment to RST.

<sup>19</sup> There by now are many 'third condition' proposals in the literature, including Bovens (1999), Pettit (2004), Mollendorf (2006), Meirav (2009), Martin (2014), Kwong (2019), Palmqvist (2020), and Rioux (2022). For the sake of space I have had to set aside critical engagement with most of them here, just in an effort to get the Focus Theory on the table.

focus on the outcome in a different way—under the aspect of its *improbability*. We hear this difference in the way they intone the same proposition:

**Andy:** ‘It’s just a one-in-a-million chance, but *IT’S POSSIBLE!*’

**Red:** ‘It’s possible, but it’s *JUST A ONE-IN-A-MILLION CHANCE!*’<sup>20</sup>

For Andy, the possibility of escape is unswamped; for Red, the possibility of escape is swamped by its improbability.

Note that the modal aspect of a subject’s focus on a desired outcome need not be static or fixed in order for him to count as having hope or despair with respect to it. Inevitably, both Andy and Red fluctuate in their focus (everyone has good days and bad days). But the kind of attention that they are *disposed* to pay under ordinary circumstances reveals that Andy hopes to escape, whereas Red despairs.

Taking ‘O’ to be the outcome described in  $p$ , then, we can now add the third core condition on hope:

**[Focus Theory]:** S hopes that  $p$  only if

(**Cognitive**): S presupposes that  $p$  is metaphysically possible,

(**Conative**): S desires that  $p$ , and

(**Focus**): S is disposed to focus on O under the aspect of unswamped possibility.

Some further clarifications:

**I. ‘Disposed to’:** first, as just noted, the dispositional formulation accommodates the fact that our occurrent focus comes and goes. Jill still hopes that she will succeed in fetching a pail of water during her walk with Jack this afternoon, even if she is not *presently* focused on that outcome at all.

The disposition in question is also not exceptionless: there might be times when a subject is focused on the relevant outcome, but under a different aspect. Suppose Jill momentarily focuses on water-fetching under the aspect of its *improbability* (perhaps she is thinking about the big hill they will have to climb, and how heavy the pail will be, and how uncooperative Jack is in such situations). As long as she is *disposed* across ordinary circumstances to focus on the outcome under the aspect of unswamped possibility, then *Focus* is satisfied and Jill has hope.

A limit case of this would be a subject who is disposed to focus under the aspect of possibility even if, in fact, he *almost always* focuses on it under a different aspect. Pops hopes that his kids will live to be at least eighty years old, and his psychological dispositions are such that he is likely to focus on that outcome under the aspect of unswamped possibility. In fact, however,

<sup>20</sup> This way of putting the point is inspired by Martin’s discussion of *Prisoners* (see 2014: 15ff), as well as Meirav’s lottery case (2009: 222–4). Palmqvist, by contrast, suggests that such a state could not count as hope because the chances are too low and thus the outcome is not a ‘live possibility’. He thus adjusts the chances to one-in-twenty (2021: 11n). But I can’t see what motivates this; surely we can and do hope for outcomes that we take to be less probable than one-in-twenty.

Pops almost never brings it to mind, and when he does it is usually because of some threat to his kids' future (posed by climate change, for example). So, *in fact* Pops almost always focuses on the desired outcome under the aspect of improbability or precarity. Still, he is *disposed* to focus on it as an unswamped possibility; thus Pops hopes.<sup>21</sup>

Conversely, we can at times engage in the mental activity that is characteristic of hope—namely, focusing on an outcome under the aspect of unswamped possibility—but still not hope for it, given the state of our dispositions. The English language doesn't have another good term for the characteristic speratic mental activity, so I propose to simply call it 'hoping'. *Hoping* is what Red does when he gets talking to Andy some days: for a fleeing moment, he does what Andy and other hopers do—he focuses on the outcome in such a way that countervailing considerations are no longer most salient for him. So Red is indeed *hoping* at those moments, but his dispositions reveal that he doesn't *hope*. That's because Red is more inclined, across ordinary circumstances, to focus on the outcome under the aspect of improbability or risk.<sup>22</sup>

**II. 'Unswamped possibility':** Recall that 'swamping' in this context is not a logical or epistemic relation but rather a psychological one: the possibility of an outcome is swamped for a subject when she is disposed to regard a countervailing consideration as more salient than its possibility. So when a possibility is swamped, that is not because the subject comes to view the outcome as metaphysically *impossible*. More generally:

**Swamping:** The possibility of an outcome *O* is *swamped* for *S* iff it tends to be less salient in the aspect of *S*'s focus than a countervailing consideration regarding *O*.

**Countervailing (or 'swamping') consideration:** a consideration, typically based in an apparent feature of *O*, that distracts or detracts from the thought that (a) *O* will obtain or (b) it would be a good thing (for *S* or some other subject) for *O* to obtain.

Leading candidates for swamping considerations include *O*'s perceived improbability, riskiness, harmfulness, precarity, or impermissibility. I can *believe* that *O* is improbable or impermissible and still hope for it, obviously—that happens all the time. But if, in the very aspect of my dispositional focus on *O*,

<sup>21</sup> As noted above, I stay neutral here on the question whether he can still count as having hope if he *never* manifests the disposition. Thanks to Ryan Darr and an anonymous referee for a discussion of this case.

<sup>22</sup> I don't offer an account here of how to analyse the notion of the dispositions involved, but it's natural to think of exceptional dispositions in terms of conditionals combined with probabilities. Something like this: *If S* focuses on *O*, then *S* is *likely* to focus on it under the aspect of unswamped possibility. The tricky part is how to determine which worlds to consider when evaluating the antecedent. Thanks to Daniel Rubio for discussion here.

the improbability or impermissibility of *O* is more salient than its possibility, then I do not satisfy *Focus* and I do not hope for *O*.

These two components of the Focus Theory—the dispositional quality of the focus together with the ‘unswamped’ salience of the outcome’s possibility—allow it to resolve tricky cases like *Smoker*. Addicts often need to recognize that and when satisfying their craving is possible—this is what they learn in the various ‘Anonymous’ groups. So we can allow that our smoker is indeed disposed to focus on smoking at the reception as possible. However, he is also disposed to see its prohibited character as its most salient feature. So when the disposition is manifested, he focuses on smoking under the aspect: possible-but-*PROHIBITED*. In other words, the salience of the outcome’s possibility is swamped: yes, I *want* to smoke and it seems *possible* to do so with my colleague, but it also much more saliently seems prohibited and bad. So I do not hope to smoke.<sup>23</sup>

The Focus Theory can also account for *recalcitrant* hopes. Luc Bovens (1999: 679) describes the case of someone at a Formula 1 race who is horrified to find himself moving up to sit near the sharp bend in the track—clearly in the hopes of witnessing a fiery crash. One thing we might say here is that the subject does not really hope but is just momentarily *hoping*, and is then aghast to find himself hoping in that way. But suppose we allow that he genuinely hopes, and just wishes that he didn’t. Then the hope is recalcitrant.

In such cases, the Focus Theory can say that the subject’s dispositions are such that the bad-making features of the outcome do *not* swamp its possibility. He knows that the outcome is likely to be very bad for the driver, and may even focus on it as bad-but-*POSSIBLE*. Still, the possibility of the fiery crash is the most salient feature for him and so it remains unswamped; thus he hopes to witness a fiery crash at the racetrack.

All this is compatible with him *wishing* at a higher-order level that the bad-making features *were* more salient, and even with trying to adjust the aspect of his focus so that they do become more salient. In such a case, the subject wants the possibility of a deadly crash to be psychologically swamped for him by its badness: he wants it to seem possible-but-*BAD* rather than bad-but-*POSSIBLE*. And so his hope is recalcitrant. Because the Focus Theory does not require the agent to endorse the desire or the aspect of the focus, it can account for recalcitrant hope in this satisfying way.

A final point about swamping: it occurs only when *countervailing* considerations are more salient in the subject’s dispositional focus than the outcome’s possibility. If a consideration that works *in favor* of the thought that *O will obtain* or *would be a good thing if it obtains* is the most salient aspect of the subject’s focus,

<sup>23</sup> Thanks to Gabriel Citron and an anonymous referee for helpful questions about this aspect of the case.

then the possibility remains unswamped. For example, when I focus on the outcome *<Me, Not Smoking>* as *possible-and-COMMENDABLE*, its commendableness is more salient to me than its possibility. But the possibility remains unswamped, and so I hope not to smoke.

We saw earlier that the Focus Theory shares with the Standard Theory the virtue of elegance: it does not incorporate much into the analysis of hope *simpliciter*. But it can likewise allow that the occurrent manifestation of hope (i.e. *hoping*) often involves or leads to further states: images, fantasies, associations, and so on. Hope also further disposes us in a wide range of circumstances to *act* in various ways (assert, act as if, look for pathways, take pathways when they open up, be resilient or gritty, take various risks), to *feel* in various ways (anticipate joy, fear disappointment), and even to *evaluate* in various ways (to endorse the presupposition-desire pair as reason to act and feel in certain ways). Because these neighboring states and dispositions are so common, elpistologists have been tempted to include one or more of them in the analysis of hope *simpliciter*. This has led to endless conceptual trouble, typically in the form of counterexamples. It is a crucial tenet of the Focus Theory that these further dispositions are *not* necessary for hope, but rather common concomitants of it.

That said, the Focus Theory is not *as* simple as the Standard Theory: it has three rather than two core necessary conditions. A friend of the Standard Theory might try to exploit this by arguing that the *Conative* condition can simply absorb the *Focus* condition. If desire can have a modal focus built into it, then the Standard-bearer can say that hopers simply *desire an outcome under the aspect of unswamped possibility*.

This would yield a better version of the Standard Theory, one that is close to RST,<sup>24</sup> but at the cost of building a lot into the concept of desire. There would also be questions about whether it is the *same* desire that persists when we shift between not focusing on an outcome at all to focusing on an outcome as possible, or as improbable, or as impossible. Can the *same* desire constitute different patterns of salience over time, and thus constitute hope, despair, expectation, and wish? I'm not sure that's coherent. An alternative would be to proliferate desires: one desire involves no modal content, another is the perception of an outcome as possible, another is the perception of it as impossible, another is the perception of it as probable, and so on. That too seems to work against the elegance of the Standard Theory.

In the end, then, I think the Focus Theory has the advantage here: it can say that there is typically just one persistent desire accompanied by a *distinct* disposition to focus on the outcome. It's the focus, not the desire, that comes

<sup>24</sup> See Milona/Stockdale (2018) for an elaboration of how desire can be 'perceptual' in this sort of way.

and goes, or fluctuates in aspect. We already know that attention does this. What the *Focus* condition adds in terms of surface-level complexity, then, is made up for by this kind of explanatory elegance. (I'll note some further advantages of keeping the focus element distinct in the next section.)

A related point: although the Focus Theory says that the *Cognitive*, *Conative*, and *Focus* elements are distinct, it also acknowledges that they interact in various ways. If Jill's desire for an outcome is very strong, that will typically lead her to focus on it. If she is disposed to focus under the aspect of unswamped possibility, then she hopes for it—in this case intensely, fervently hopes. If she is disposed to focus on it under the aspect of improbability, then she despairs of it—in this case, fervently despairs (extremely intense despair could plausibly be called *desperation*). Other things equal, the more improbable we take an outcome to be, the less likely we are to hope for it—the improbability easily swamps the possibility. But other things are not always equal: sometimes we hope against hope for things that we take to be extremely unlikely—just barely possible—by fixing our focus in a way that sidelines the long odds. Often this happens when and because the desire is very strong.

Conversely, if we focus on a good outcome under the aspect of possibility, that can generate or intensify desire for it, thereby 'awakening hope' (or making our existing hope more intense). Because fervent hopes are more likely to lead to action, this is one of the ways in which intentionally guiding our focus can sustain our practical resolve.<sup>25</sup>

As stated, *Focus* is a synchronic condition: it is part of an account of what it is for S to hope that *p* at a specific time *t*. But there is a diachronic corollary. S counts as having hope that *p* over  $t_1$ – $t_n$  only if S's dispositions over that interval remain such that S is predominantly disposed to focus on O under the aspect of unswamped possibility. When ascribing such diachronic hope to people, we often speak of them *being hopeful that p*.<sup>26</sup> *Hopefulness*, in turn, is the trait of being hopeful with respect to various desired outcomes across many different contexts. In some but not all traditions, hopefulness regarding permissible outcomes is commended as a virtue.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Rioux (2022) for an account of the connections between what she calls 'substantial practical hope' and 'gritty' action ('substantial practical hope' is a concept that Rioux adapts from McGeer (2004) and Calhoun (2018)).

<sup>26</sup> In English, there's no clear counterpart for despair here: 'despairful' is not a word. But the state of despairing that *p* over time surely obtains. The same thing can be said, *mutatis mutandi*, for 'despairfulness.'

<sup>27</sup> On the moral value of certain kinds of attention and attention-patterns, see Weil 1986. On whether hope is a virtue, see Walker (2006), Lamb (2016), Bobier (2018), Pinsent (2020), and Snow (2020).

## VII. FOCUS, NORMATIVITY, AND THE WILL

In this section, I briefly address a few questions that naturally arise regarding the Focus Theory. There is more to be said about each question, but this is at least a start.

### VII.1 *What is the mental focus in question?*

Here it is hard to do more than simply rattle off close synonyms: ‘selective attention’, ‘concentration’, ‘responding to salience’, and so on. But in this we are in good company: William James, too, took the notion of ‘attention’ as basic and obvious.

Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration of consciousness, is of its essence.<sup>28</sup>

James implies here that focalized attention is *sometimes* under the direct control of the will—the mind ‘takes possession’ of an object or thought. We shouldn’t conclude from this, however, that focus is always voluntary: again, sometimes we want something so badly that it *commands* and *occupies* our attention. But even when our focus is compelled by desire in this way, its *aspect* may still be up to us.

### VII.2 *What is the aspect in question?*

It is common to distinguish between a perceptual state *simpliciter* (such as *seeing*), and a perceptual state that takes its object under a sortal aspect (*seeing as a pail*, say) or an evaluative aspect (*seeing as valuable*). Focus Theorists needn’t claim that hope is a perceptual state—that’s just one of the ontological options that is compatible with the analysis. But the focus involved in hope is like sortal perception in taking its object ‘under an aspect’. In this case, as we have seen, the aspect is modal: a hoping subject is disposed to focus on the desired outcome as *possible*—or, more precisely, *as probable to a non-zero degree*.<sup>29</sup> The aspect is not merely a function of the *Cognitive* modal presupposition, however, since the subject can presuppose that an outcome is metaphysically possible and yet still despair of it. Instead, speratic focus itself has an adverbial aspect under which it presents an outcome: *as* one whose possibility is more salient than any countervailing considerations.

<sup>28</sup> James (1891: 403–4). Compare Bradley (1886). For a comprehensive discussion, see Watzl (2017).

<sup>29</sup> Note: the focus is not on the probability estimate; rather, it is on the outcome *as probable to some non-zero degree*, rather than *as improbable*.



### VII.3 *What accounts for the aspect?*

We have seen that the focus involved in hope is often guided by our desire for the object. We have also noted that the desire is sometimes so strong that it *commands* our attention, or even *compels* us to regard the outcome under a certain modal aspect. For example: I *really* want the student to get the job for which she is interviewing today, and so cannot help but focus on the fact that she just might.

In other cases, however, I may have a weak desire for an outcome, or no desire at all, and yet still manage to focus on the outcome as possible. Perhaps I callously don't care who gets the job, and would prefer to be focused on other things, but am grudgingly keeping my promise to a colleague to send the student 'good karma' during the interview today. Maintaining such modal focus in the absence of desire for the outcome is quite difficult. But the fact that we sometimes have such control indicates once again that the focus required for hope need not be or even be based in a first-order desire. Rather, the disposition to focus is distinct.

A third kind of case is mixed: sometimes our focalized attention is commanded by a strong desire, but its *aspect* remains under our control. In such circumstances, we lack control over *whether* to focus on a desired outcome, but still have control over *how* we do so. Sadie may not be able to avoid focusing on the prospect of victimizing Vickie, but she may still be able to control *how* she focuses on it. That leads to the next point.

### VII.4 *Are there moral norms on hope?*

The fact that speratic focus (or at least its aspect) is sometimes under direct control is key to resolving the *Different Norms* challenge. In *Born Sadist* it is stipulated that Sadie's desires are ineradicable: she was born a sadist and will always be one—that's unfortunate, but not her fault. Still, as *Admonition* illustrates, it is intuitively plausible that Sadie still has a duty not to hope to hurt Vickie. We saw that RST employs the distinction between hope (conceived as *Cognitive\** plus *Conative\**) and the attention and action patterns characteristic of hope to explain away the intuition. On RST, Sadie has no duty not to hope to hurt Vickie, but rather a duty not to attend or act as if she might hurt Vickie. In other words, the 'defeasible' connection between her hope-constituting desire and these further states of attention and action should be defeated.

The Focus Theory, by contrast, can preserve our intuitive sense that Sadie has a duty not to hope to hurt Vickie. It does so by emphasizing the connection between a direct duty to control our *hoping* (occurrent patterns of attention) and the indirect duty, over time, to modify our impermissible *hopes*. What Sadie is *disposed* to focus on, and how, may not be under her direct control. But she may still be able to control whether she *presently, occurrently* focuses on the

opportunity to hurt Vickie. Or, if she can't help but presently focus on it, then she may be able to control the aspect of her occurrent focus.

More generally, because hope involves a distinct disposition to focus in a certain way (*Focus*), we may be able to change that disposition over time, even if we can't change the modal presupposition (*Cognitive*) or the desire (*Conative*). A commonplace way to change or dismantle a disposition is to exert mindful, sustained control over its manifestations—to try to block the disposition from manifesting. So in *Born Sadist*, Sadie (indirectly) ought to change her hope by (directly) exercising control over her *hoping*—the occurrent, actual patterns of attention. She ought to stop occurrently focusing on the possibility of victimizing Vickie, or at the very least focus on it primarily under the aspect of impermissibility.

In short, unlike the Standard Theory, the Focus Theory explains how we can have indirect duties to dismantle hopes for morally impermissible outcomes, even if the relevant modal presuppositions and desires are completely entrenched. It does so by emphasizing that in many cases we directly control our *hoping*—that is, we directly control the attentional and salience patterns that manifest our hopes—and thereby exercise a degree of indirect control over the hopes themselves. In a phrase: if you mindfully control your hoping, you can slowly change your hopes.

### VII.5 *Are there pragmatic norms on hope?*

The discussion so far has been about moral norms, but an analogous point can be made about pragmatic norms. We might presuppose that some permissible  $p$  is just barely possible and desire  $p$  to be true. But typically it would be foolish to hope in an intense or all-consuming way for the outcome described in  $p$ . The Focus Theory explains why: it is foolish to let a massively unlikely outcome (winning the lottery, say, or making it safely down the double black diamond slope) occupy a great deal of your attention under the aspect of its possibility. That's not because  $p$  is impossible; it's because focusing on such an outcome as possible makes you liable to ignore more likely outcomes, or take unreasonable risks, or fail to take precautions. An all-consuming hope to win the lottery will occupy your attention and influence your actions in ways that are liable to lead to poverty. A fervent hope to make it down the expert slope when you are just a beginner is liable to lead to paralysis (or worse).

Note that I am not suggesting that it is *always* foolish to focus on massively unlikely outcomes in a hopeful way; sometimes there is good reason to do so. Very ill patients might get great pragmatic benefit from cultivating ongoing, fervent hope against hope to survive. But when there isn't such reason—when the hope is pragmatically irrational—it is often precisely because of the way the outcome consumes our attention under the aspect of unswamped possibility.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Cases like *Prisoners* and *Smoker* depict situations in which people satisfy both the *Cognitive* and the *Conative* conditions on hope, but still do not hope—precisely because they do not satisfy *Focus*. So, the Focus Theory can handle the *Counterexamples* challenge to the Standard Theory.

The Focus Theory handles the *Different Norms* challenge raised by *Born Sadist* by highlighting additional rational constraints on our patterns of mental focus, over and above the norms on presupposition and desire. Again, even if Sadie can't help but desire to hurt Vickie when she spies the opportunity, she may still have an indirect duty *not* to hope to do so, and that's because she shouldn't attend to that outcome under the aspect of unswamped possibility.

Finally, the Focus Theory can remain neutral on ontological questions about what hope is *constituted* by, and say simply that hope always satisfies the *Cognitive*, *Conative*, and *Focus* conditions. The disposition described in *Focus* is often manifested when the desired outcome becomes salient by being perceived, imagined, mentioned, associated with, and so on. Such hope may further dispose us to act in various ways (assert, pretend, look for pathways, take pathways when they open up, be resilient, take various risks), to reason in various ways (i.e. take the presupposition, desire, or occurrent focus to *justify* various other states and actions), and to feel in various ways (anticipate joy, fear disappointment, feel nervous or 'on edge', etc.).<sup>30</sup> But according to the Focus Theory, none of these additional dispositions, actions, thoughts, or feelings is necessary for hope.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Note that these feelings would be over and above any desiderative 'speratic feeling' involved in the *Conative* element itself.

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