Does Hope Require Belief?

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Abstract

This paper interrogates a widely accepted view about the nature of hope. The view is that hoping that *p* involves a belief about the prospects of *p*. It is argued that taking hope to require belief is at odds with some forms of recalcitrant hope and certain ways in which hope patterns similarly to other emotions. The paper concludes by explaining *why* it matters whether hope requires belief.

0. Introduction

According to the standard account of hope, a person, S, counts as hoping that *p* if and only if, and because:

     (1) S desires that *p*
     (2) S believes that *p* has a probability between 0 and 1 of obtaining

Regarding (1), it doesn't seem as if we can hope for what we do not want. But at the same time, hope is not a mere *wish*. A Star Trek fan may wish to engage in intergalactic diplomacy, but they do not hope for this to happen unless they take it to be possible.[1] Despite its intuitive appeal, the standard account is now widely criticized (Bovens 1999; Pettit 2004; Meirav 2009; Martin 2014; *inter alia*). Nowadays, there are nearly as many distinct theories of hope as there are philosophers writing about hope. This disagreement, however, exists against the backdrop of a remarkable consensus. In particular, nearly everyone agrees that belief and desire are *necessary* for hope (see Blöser and Stahl (2017) for additional references).[2] I have myself previously endorsed such a requirement (Milona 2019). Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is to raise

doubts about the necessity of belief. The view that hope requires belief is at odds with some forms of recalcitrant hope and certain ways in which hope patterns similarly to other emotions. I explain at the end why it matters whether hope requires belief.

1. Preliminary Remarks: Recalcitrant Emotions

Hope is regularly classed alongside other emotions (de Sousa 1987; Roberts 1988; Nussbaum 2004; *inter alia*). Yet much of the literature on hope treats it largely in isolation (see Milona and Stockdale 2018 for an exception). Adrienne Martin is explicit about this methodology (2014, p. 24 n. 27). Such an approach is understandable, for as Martin points out, it is arguable that emotions cannot be captured within a single theory. Yet isolating hope risks overlooking insights from the literature on emotions that could help us to better understand hope.

I argue that one key dialectic from that literature suggests that hope does not always require belief. Making this argument requires a bit of setup, however, which is the focus of this section. To begin, consider so-called *judgmentalist* theories of the emotions. Judgmentalists maintain that emotions essentially involve evaluative judgments, or beliefs.[3] So, for instance, fearing that *p* might be thought to essentially involve a belief that *p* is dangerous. Likewise, a person's anger toward S might be thought to essentially involve a belief that S wronged them. Analyzing emotions in terms of an evaluative belief is attractive, insofar as it can explain the way in which our emotions can be appropriate or inappropriate depending on their objects (see Deonna and Teroni 2012, pp. 52-53).

Yet judgmentalism faces a well-known problem arising from the fact that our emotions are often *recalcitrant*. An emotion is recalcitrant when it persists in the face of a conflicting evaluative judgment. For example, a person who fears flying on a plane may not believe that

flying on a plane is dangerous. In the face of such internal conflicts, judgmentalists can maintain their view only by positing contradictory evaluative beliefs. But it seems to many philosophers that recalcitrant emotions do not involve such an extreme form of irrationality (Greenspan 1988; Roberts 1988; D'arms and Jacobson 2003). The trick is to make sense of conflicts between emotion and belief that, as Bennett Helm puts it, "do not verge on incoherence, for they are readily intelligible and happen all too often" (2001, 42). For even if we grant that recalcitrant emotions are irrational, which is a matter of some dispute, they aren't irrational in the manner of believing *p* and believing not-p (or what transparently entails not-*p*). As Hichem Naar (2018, p. 4) observes, the trouble with the judgmentalist theory is that the incoherence it ascribes to recalcitrant emotions is so deeply *counterintuitive*.

This problem of recalcitrance hasn't led philosophers to give up on the idea that emotions involve some kind of evaluation. One popular alternative says that emotions involve perceptual-like, non-doxastic experiences of value (Roberts 1988; Tappolet 2016; *inter alia*). This approach treats recalcitrant emotions on the model of a perceptual illusion. For example, a person confronted with the Müller-Lyer illusion may experience one line as longer than another while still *believing* that they are the same length. Similarly, a person may experience flying on a plane as dangerous (fear) while believing that it is safe. Perceptualism is not the only view according to which emotions involve non-doxastic evaluations, however, and we needn't determine the best theory here (see, for example, Greenspan 1988; Deonna and Teroni 2012).

What, then, does judgmentalism's decline have to do with whether hopes involve beliefs about the probability of the hoped-for outcome? I turn now to this connection.

2. A Parallel

Hopes can also be recalcitrant. Some recalcitrant hopes involve hoping for something that we believe to be bad. For instance, Luc Bovens describes someone who attends a car race and finds themselves hoping to see a violent crash, even though they believe a crash would be terrible (1999, p. 679). In other cases, though, recalcitrant hopes are rooted in an insensitivity to considered beliefs about the probability of what we hope for. This can happen in two ways: (i) a person hopes too little (by their own lights) for something they believe to be good and reasonably probable, or (ii) a person hopes too much (by their own lights) for something that, while good, they believe to be extremely unlikely. I suspect that hopes of type (i) and (ii) are the most common types of recalcitrant hope. But however common such forms of recalcitrance happen to be, their mere possibility generates a difficulty for the view that hope requires belief, a problem that is structurally analogous to the problem for judgmentalism.

It will be helpful to work with a pair of examples, illustrating both (i) and (ii) respectively:

Championship Quest	Jasmine hopes for her favorite team to finally win the championship. They haven't won in her lifetime, but they have a decent team this year. The odds-makers have put the team's chances at 5-to-1. She believes that these odds are accurate, but she nevertheless feels as if it almost certainly won't happen. Jasmine reports that she *should* feel better about her team's chances, hoping more fervently for victory.
Lucky 8s	As an amusing diversion, Jasmine often purchases one-dollar scratch-off tickets after work on Friday. But this Friday she splurges, buying one of the larger, more expensive tickets called "Lucky 8s." She has had good luck historically with the number eight, and she also knows that the odds of winning large sums from a more expensive ticket are higher. She feels as if she very well might win big. Of course, she also knows that the chances of recouping even the money she spent to buy the ticket are low, and the chances of winning a huge amount of money are remarkably low. She tells herself that she should feel worse about her chances and hope less

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fervently to win big (perhaps leading her not to buy the ticket after all).

If we were to ask her, Jasmine would say that she believes that she has much better odds of fulfilling her desire in Championship Quest than she does in Lucky 8s. This comparative belief is rooted in her reasonable assessment of the odds. Yet she *feels* as if she is more likely to win a significant prize from the lottery ticket than her favorite team is to win the championship; but she herself believes that she shouldn't feel this way and that the intensity of her hopes should change accordingly.

Here, then, is the parallel with judgmentalism's problem in emotion theory. Consider a person who fears flying on a plane even while believing that it is safe compared to other forms of travel that they do not fear. The judgmentalist is forced to attribute an implausibly jarring irrationality to this person: they believe that flying on a plane is dangerous and also that it is not dangerous. A similar issue arises for those who take hope to involve a belief about the probability of the hoped-for outcome. In Championship Quest, for instance, Jasmine would need to believe both that her team has a decent chance of winning (5-to-1 odds) and also that their odds are much worse than this. And in Lucky 8s, Jasmine would need to believe that she has trivial odds of winning a sizeable amount of money and also believe that she has decent odds of winning a sizeable amount of money. But this doesn't match what such experiences seem to be like. Experiences such as Jasmine's aren't naturally described as cases of extreme rationality, namely of believing that p while also believing that not-p, or what one knows entails not-p (see below for speculation about what might be happening in these cases).

The central argument can be summarized as follows:

(P1)   If recalcitrance is a problem for judgmentalism about emotion and if Championship Quest and Lucky 8s are possible, then we have strong reason to believe that *some* hopes are not constituted by a belief about the probability of the hoped-for outcome.

(P2)   Recalcitrance is a problem for judgmentalism.

(P3)   Championship Quest and Lucky 8s are possible.

(C)   We have strong reason to believe that some hopes are not constituted by a belief about the probability of the hoped-for outcome.

The novel premises here are P1 and P3. In the previous section, I briefly sketched some of the arguments in favor of P2. Readers seeking a more detailed account of the argument for P2 should see the citations above, especially Naar (2018).[4]

3. Familiar Patterns

According to the present proposal, while some hopes may involve beliefs about the probability of what is hoped for, others do not. In this section, I explain why this result should not be surprising, once we notice important similarities between hope and emotions such as fear. I then tentatively explore the position that hope without belief can be conceptualized in terms of Tamar Gendler's notion of an alief (Gendler 2008a).

Hope and fear typically come together as a package. When we fear that *p*, we typically also hope that not-*p*. And similarly, when we hope that *p*, we also typically fear that not-*p*. For instance, in Championship Quest, Jasmine hopes that her team will win, at least to an extent, but also fears that they won't. In fact, if Jasmine told us she had *no* fear that they might lose, we might doubt whether she hopes at all.

Hope and fear also share another feature, namely that they both involve elements of subjective uncertainty. We can only fear what we suspect *may* happen, or what *may have* happened. If something bad *has* happened, it no longer makes sense to say that we fear it. For

instance, if my grandfather is gravely sick, I can fear that he will die soon. But if my grandfather has already passed, and if I fully accept that he has passed, then I can only grieve his death. But just as with hope, experiences of fear can apparently come apart from our beliefs about the probability of what we fear. Here is an illustration:

> *Flat Tire* Jacob is on a road trip to visit his parents. As he drives over an uneven section of highway, he fears that the bumpiness of the ride is due to a flat tire. On his last two trips, after all, he ended up getting a flat. Although he can see that the section of road is uneven, and fully believes that this explains the bumpiness, he can't shake the feeling that he may well have a flat; this feeling fans his fear.

When it comes to emotions that involve subjective uncertainty (e.g., hope, fear, anxiety), we can easily generate cases like Flat Tire, Championship Quest, and Lucky 8s, which indicate that beliefs about the probability of outcomes can diverge from more primitive feelings about future probabilities (more on these below). The explanation for this in Flat Tire is familiar: even though Jacob has inconsistent representations of the likely cause of the bumpy ride, the psychological tension here doesn't seem to be the sort of jarring and near unintelligible irrationality involved in maintaining (occurrent) contradictory beliefs. After all, in Flat Tire, Jacob is simply beset with the feeling that he likely has a flat and is unable to extinguish this feeling in light of the evidence.[5] And as we have seen, hope can likewise involve a sense of future prospects that we are passive in the face of and for which agents do not appear rationally criticizable (or, at least, not rationally criticizable in the manner of belief).

If there can be hopes without beliefs, as I have argued that there can be, then we face an obvious question, one which is analogous to a central question about the emotions. As noted above, philosophers working on emotions are interested in how emotions can involve evaluations that are not evaluative judgments or beliefs (for different views, see Greenspan

1988; Deonna and Teroni 2012; Tappolet 2016). Similarly, there is an underexplored question about the nature of the non-doxastic probability assignment involved in hope.

How, then, should we conceive of a probability assignment that is not belief? Here, I sketch one direction in which we might go, keeping in mind that there may not be a univocal answer to this question and that different hopes may involve different forms of subjective uncertainty (cf. Levy 2016, pp. 8-9). To begin, consider Tamar Gendler's (2008a) notion of an *alief*. A person walking across the Grand Canyon Skywalk may believe that they are entirely safe, but the glass bridge and massive drop leads them to feel and behave in ways that are discordant with their belief. An alief is paradigmatically composed of three elements:

> (a) the representation of some object or concept or situation or circumstance, perhaps propositionally, perhaps non-propositionally, perhaps conceptually, perhaps non-conceptually; (b) the experience of some affective or emotional state; (c) the readying of some motor routine. (2008a, p. 643)

According to Gendler, the components of alief are "associatively linked," meaning that they are systematically coactivated when certain conditions are met. For this reason, aliefs are more fruitfully described as a unit rather than as simply the cooccurrence of the different elements in (a)-(c). In the skywalk case, the agent believes that the bridge is safe but alieves that it is not. As Gendler (2008b, p. 553) points out, dispositions to alieve may be rooted in evolutionary history (e.g., alieving that the Skywalk is dangerous), or may be rooted in habits and cultural priming (e.g., alieving that drinking from a bedpan is disgusting, even if it is known to be clean).

Gendler's notion of an alief can help us begin to understand what is happening in cases such as Championship Quest and Lucky 8s. While the non-doxastic probability assignment is not itself an alief, it is naturally treated as *part* of an alief. In Lucky 8s, for instance, Jasmine has happened to have good fortune with the number eight, which triggers a persistent non-doxastic

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representation that she has a good chance to win big. This representation is bound up with desire, generating hope, which in this case, appears to satisfy the criteria for an alief (insofar as the occurrent desire is affective and motivational). By contrast, in Championship Quest, a history of losing leads Jasmine to represent that her team very likely won't win, even though she believes they have a relatively good chance. Such non-doxastic representations are rooted in how things have tended to be, while beliefs are more swiftly revisable in response to incoming evidence (see Gendler 2008b, 253; Helton 2018). Such alief-constituting representations are linked to affect and motivation in ways that are useful in helping us to navigate the world quickly, but can be frustratingly resistant to modification when off-track.

In appealing to Gendler's notion of an alief, no new restrictions are thereby imposed on the content of the uncertainty dimension of hope.[6] A hoper may represent the hoped-for outcome as merely possible; or they may represent the outcome probabilistically. For instance, in Lucky 8s, Jasmine sees herself as having a good chance to win big, even if she isn't attaching a precise probability to her chances. The specifics of the content of these non-doxastic representations will plausibly depend on upon the relevant history of the hoper. For example, if Jasmine has always won when purchasing similar tickets in the past, her hope may be rooted in a more confident assessment than if her track record is only slightly better than the odds predict.

4. Why Does It Matter?

Whether the uncertainty in hope is that of belief matters for several reasons. First, and most obviously, hope is an important but elusive phenomenon. Recent theories have tended to build on the standard model by *adding* additional requirements (Bovens 1999; Pettit 2004; Meirav

2009; Martin 2014; *inter alia*). But perhaps the standard account identifies a feature as necessary – belief – which is not ultimately required.

Second, the present proposal can help us to better understand the political significance of hope. A central question in political theorizing about hope is as follows: "Why and how does it matter, from a perspective of (democratic) politics, that citizens have or adopt certain hopes" (Blöser, Huber, and Moellendorf 2020, p. 4). One natural answer is that hope can motivate us to achieve difficult but valuable political projects. The losing of hope can likewise undermine our motivation (cf. Stockdale 2019). But what explains hope's special connection with motivation? According to the present view, hope often involves non-doxastic probability assessments that come packaged with affect and motivation in a way that beliefs do not. This insight affirms and deepens our understanding of the political power of certain forms of hope.

Third, the present proposal may help us to understand the distinctiveness of hope relative to faith. Like hope, faith has a desiderative element: we only have faith that p if we desire that p. Faith likewise has an epistemic dimension. But in distinction from hope, faith requires a greater measure of confidence than hope. As Elizabeth Jackson has pointed out, though, this can make it seem as if hope is the "younger sibling" of faith. The worry is that hope is what we are left with when we aren't confident enough to maintain our faith (see section 3.2 of Jackson forthcoming). In an effort to capture the distinctiveness of hope, Jackson argues that hope has a stronger desiderative dimension. The present proposal suggests a distinction in the epistemic dimension, too: whereas faith arguably involves a belief of some sort (see Mugg 2016), hoping need not involve a belief at all.[7]

Lastly, whether hope involves a belief may matter for whether there is a moral *virtue* of hope. Consider, for instance, the standard view on which the attitude of hope is composed of a

belief and a desire (perhaps ultimately among other things). According to Chris Bobier, however, it is implausible that there is a single virtue governing both dimensions of hope. In particular, we can easily imagine agents who are disposed to desire what is good but not to make accurate probability assessments, and vice-versa. According to Bobier, this is a problem for those (e.g., Kadlac 2015) who defend the existence of a moral virtue of hope:

> Since there are two ways passionate hope can fail to be virtuous, this suggests that the passion of hope needs to be virtuously regulated along two separate dimensions. We need to be disposed to accurately identify what is possible and to what degree, and we need to be disposed to desire the right sort of objects to the right degree...Calling a disposition 'the virtue of hope' misleadingly suggests that there is one virtuous disposition that regulates our passion of hope, which is not the case. (2018, p. 228)

Bobier may be right that the standard view of hope (and theories which build on it) doesn't leave room for a virtue of hope. But if certain hopes involve a non-doxastic mode of uncertainty, then this changes the dialect. After all, many other emotions involve similar non-doxastic assessments of future prospects, and yet appear to be regulated by some distinctive moral virtue. For example, courage appears to regulate fear in dangerous situations (cf. Bobier 2018, 230). So perhaps there is a virtue of hope that governs hoping well in some other type of situation. The present proposal lays the groundwork for a more detailed exploration of this possibility, one which I pursue elsewhere (Milona 2020).[8]

5. Conclusion

In sum, philosophers of hope have correctly identified hope as involving uncertainty. But we should not assume that this uncertainty takes the form of a belief, unless we are prepared to commit to the following: (1) recalcitrance is not a problem for judgmentalist theories of the emotions, and (2) other emotions which look to future possibilities, including fear and anxiety,

also involve beliefs about the probability of outcomes. But neither (1) or (2) is attractive. I have briefly sketched a picture of how we might begin to conceive of hope without beliefs, but my central aim has more modestly been to call this orthodoxy about hope into question.

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Notes

[1] Philosophers describe the content of the supposed hope-constituting belief differently. For example, Martin (2014, 4; 7) sometimes describes it as a belief that what is hoped for is possible but not certain, and, at other times, as a probability assignment between 0 and 1. In general, hope theorists seem to think that this belief can take different forms. See section 3 for relevant discussion.

[2] Chignell (2014) briefly discusses whether hope requires belief in the context of a broader discussion of Kant. According to him, although a person who hopes that *p* needn't believe that *p* is possible, he must "believe that p is possible if he were to form a belief on the matter" (102). As will become clear, I don't think that even this much is required. The arguments I offer against the belief requirement are also different and more extensive. More recently, Blöser (2019, 209) has argued that there is a belief *constraint* on hope, according to which hope is incompatible with the belief that the object of one's hope is impossible. By contrast, the argument of this paper leads to the conclusion that hope *is* compatible with any such beliefs.

[3] Judgmentalists describe their theory using both terms (Naar 2018). For the purposes of this paper, I conceive of judgments as the act of forming a belief.

[4] A related objection to judgmentalism is that it struggles to make sense of animal emotions (see Tappolet 2016, p. 13). And insofar as animals are capable of emotions such as fear, it seems plausible they are capable of hoping, too (see Maier and Seligman (2016) on a "hope circuit" in rats). So if judgmentalism falters with animal emotions, and if animals are also capable of hope, then the thesis that hope necessarily involves a belief seems to falter, as well.

[5] Grace Helton (2018) has recently argued that a person believes that *p* only if they are able to revise their belief in response to new evidence.

[6] This is not to say that aliefs might not constrain the *type* of content. Gendler herself is neutral about the nature of the representational content of aliefs (2008a, 643). Laura Danón (2020), however, has recently argued that aliefs have what she calls "semi-structured propositional contents," which help to explain why aliefs are distinct from beliefs. Semi-structured propositional content that *a is F* has the following as a central feature: the agent automatically attributes F-ness (e.g., dangerousness) to *a* (e.g., the Grand Canyon Skywalk), whenever they perceive *a*. By contrast, with ordinary propositional content, an agent is able to fully separate the conceptual units. Thus one may continue to alieve that *a is F* even while believing otherwise. Although I find Danón's position promising, fully unpacking and evaluating its merits is beyond the scope of this paper.

[7] Thanks to a reviewer for helpful feedback on this point.

[8] I argue that the virtue of hope is a virtue of planning, one closely related to the notion of "having one's priorities straight" (Milona 2020). This proposal is compatible with the attitude of hope (in contrast with the virtue) also playing a role in other virtues such as courage (cf. Gravlee 2000).

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