Forthcoming in *Ergo*

Despair

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Since Case and Deaton (2015) coined the term 'deaths of despair,' there has been significant empirical work and public interest in the topic. Yet social scientists studying this topic lament the absence of a clear theory of despair. Philosophical inquiry into the nature and value of hope has begun to fill this gap, with despair often cited as the opposite of hope. The assumption that hope and despair are opposites has helped to motivate two central tasks in the literature: how a theory of hope can make sense of the difference between hope and despair, and how hope might prevent people from falling into despair. Yet the focus of inquiry has been principally on hope. This paper builds on the existing literature to offer a theory of despair. We argue that despair is a mode of sadness whereby one experiences the loss of reasons to take seriously that which one desires. Our account of despair captures a set of desiderata that any theory of despair should explain, and it offers useful conceptual resources to social scientists studying deaths of despair.

1. Introduction

Economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton (2015) coined the term 'deaths of despair' to capture the rise of deaths resulting from suicide and substance use among lower class white people in the United States. Their 2020 book *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* identifies social and economic conditions contributing to these deaths, including declines in wages, job opportunities, and marriage rates, as well as the opioid crisis and weaknesses of the American healthcare system. Many scholars have pointed out, however, that deaths of despair have been occurring for decades - even centuries - across many different societies (see Murray 2000; Komro 2018). In other words, 'despair' has long been associated with suicidal and other kinds of self-destructive behavior, suggesting that despair itself is a common factor in many kinds of self-inflicted deaths. Yet social scientists such as Lilly Shanahan et al. (2019) observe that the literature on deaths of despair "has neither defined nor empirically assessed its central concept, despair" (854). William Copeland et al. (2020) similarly claim that "despair has not been studied as an independent construct in and of itself" (2). It thus seems that the cross-disciplinary literature would benefit significantly from inquiry into the nature of despair.[1]

[1] Arjumand Siddiqi and Odmaa Sod-Erdene (2021) frame the question in terms of whether there is a 'despair-based mechanism' accounting for these deaths.

We propose that philosophical research on hope, which has started to have an impact on the social sciences, promises to shed light on the nature of despair.[2] Philosophers writing on hope commonly cite despair as hope's opposite, as the state with which we find ourselves when hope is lost (e.g., McGeer 2004; Pettit 2004; Meirav 2009; Milona 2019; Milona and Stockdale 2021; Huber 2021).[3] The assumption that hope and despair are opposites has helped to motivate two central tasks in the literature: how a theory of hope can make sense of the difference between hope and despair, and how hope might prevent people from falling into despair. Yet the focus of inquiry has principally been on hope, with questions of despair playing an auxiliary role.

This paper constructs a systematic theory of despair. We begin with background on the phenomenon of 'deaths of despair' in the empirical literature as well as the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors commonly associated with despair. We then examine existing philosophical literature on hope to establish starting points for analyzing despair, including a list of desiderata for any such theory. We build most directly from our own (2018) perceptual theory of hope, though we suspect that much of what we say can be reconciled with nearby theories (e.g., Martin 2014; Calhoun 2018). Our focus is on developing an account of *despair* rather than systematically teasing out how it fits within various approaches to hope, which are themselves rarely paired with detailed theories of despair.[4]

Put metaphorically, our proposal is that despair 'smothers' or 'extinguishes' hope. In despair, hope's desiderative element is still in place; we *desire* that over which we despair. The trouble is that the despairing agent sees the prospect of the desired object's obtaining in an unfavorable light. We understand this way of seeing as an *emotional* experience, but not one that is *sui generis*. Instead, we conceptualize despair as a mode of sadness. Whereas sadness in general construes something as a loss, despair construes the loss of reasons to *take seriously* (e.g., promote, prepare for) that which one desires. An especially attractive feature of this account is

[2] For example, Tyler VanderWeele, director of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science, makes detailed reference to Michael Milona's recent overview of philosophical work on hope (VanderWeele 2020; Milona 2020a). We take this as a sign that philosophical work on despair could eventually impact research similar to that of Case and Deaton.

[3] One delicate question is how hopelessness relates to despair. We suspect that Ratcliffe (2013: 597) is correct that 'hopelessness' and 'despair' are used mostly synonymously. That said, our theory of despair eventually distinguishes despair that coexists with a conflicting hope and despair that doesn't. So the term 'hopelessness' is arguably especially fitting of the latter.

[4] Insofar as our theory of despair cannot be squared with an analysis of hope, we take this to be a challenge for the latter. For example, we have argued (2021) that a key feature of despair is its passivity, which is difficult to reconcile with Andrew Chignell's (2023) focus theory of hope.

that it sheds light on the vexing question of whether hope and despair toward the same thing can coexist, an issue about which philosophers disagree but which is difficult to answer without a theory of despair.[5] And crucially, by analyzing despair in terms of a widely studied emotion, our theory may offer useful conceptual resources to social scientists studying deaths of despair.

2. Deaths of Despair

Case and Deaton (2015) coined the term 'deaths of despair' in response to the rise of deaths resulting from suicide, drug overdose, alcoholic liver disease, and other forms of self-destructive behavior. The authors primarily focused on deaths of despair among working-class white people in the United States, leading to an analysis unique to this group's social and economic circumstances. They observe that this group tends to have a low quality of life characterized by high rates of physical and mental illness, low wages and unemployment, a low social status, less family stability, declining marriage rates, and declining religion (Case and Deaton 2020).

Importantly, though, deaths of despair are not just a public health crisis for working class white people in the United States. Case and Deaton (2020) acknowledge that the opioid epidemic, an ongoing public health crisis that is exacerbating deaths of despair, has significantly affected Black communities (cf. El-Bassel et al. 2021). Deaths of despair have also been occurring for decades, and disproportionately, among Indigenous communities in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere in the world without significant mainstream media attention or inclusion in relevant research (Komro 2018; Friedman, Hansen, and Gone 2023). And refugees and asylum seekers are at risk across the world. For example, *Human Rights Watch* has reported on suicides and attempted suicides in refugee camps in Lesbos Greece, connecting suicidality to "hopelessness and dangers of life" (Cossé 2017).

Since it appears that certain kinds of suicides involving despair have been a longstanding public health issue across historical periods and cultural contexts, a deeper understanding of despair's nature may be key to understanding deaths of despair as a more general phenomenon in

[5] The standard assumption is that hope and despair over the same thing isn't possible (e.g., Meirav 2009; Martin 2014; *inter alia*). However, Jack Kwong (2020; 2022) argues that hope and despair over the same thing *is* possible; it is only *hopefulness*, as distinct from hope, that rules out despair. We discuss Kwong's proposal in more detail below.

human life.[6] Yet as Lilly Shanahan et al. (2019) observe, despair itself arises in manifold ways. They thus suggest the following taxonomy:

1. *Cognitive Despair*, or "thoughts indicating defeat, hopelessness, guilt, worthlessness, learned helplessness, pessimism, and limited positive expectations for the future" (Shanahan et al. 2019: 855). This form of despair also involves self-reinforcing 'cognitive biases' such as perceiving, interpreting, and remembering other people's actions as antagonistic.
2. *Emotional Despair*, or "feelings of excessive sadness, irritability, hostility, loneliness, anhedonia, and apathy" (855). People with emotional despair are not able to experience pleasure, and their feelings result in interpersonal conflict.
3. *Behavioral Despair,* or "risky, reckless, and unhealthy acts that are self-destructive and reflect limited consideration of the future" (855). People with behavioral despair might engage in activities such as self-harm, reckless driving, criminal activity, and substance use.
4. *Biological despair,* or biological dysregulation or depletion resulting in changes in cortisol, heart rate variability, sleep, appetite, and other physical signs and symptoms.

This taxonomy moves us closer to an account of despair by identifying the thoughts, emotions, feelings, and behaviors typically associated with despair. Despair is often accompanied by negative thoughts (e.g., about other people's intentions), physiological changes (e.g., disruptions to sleep and appetite), other negatively valenced feelings (e.g., guilt and worthlessness), and specific kinds of behaviors (e.g., self-harm). But Shanahan et al.'s (2019) account does not offer a precise *definition* of despair. It is therefore not clear how the thoughts, emotions, feelings, and behaviors they identify concern despair in contrast to other emotions or states. For example, pessimism about an outcome – or the expectation that the outcome is unlikely to come about – is consistent with hope and the absence of despair. A person can be pessimistic, say, about their job prospects, but nevertheless hold out hope that their prospects will improve. Similarly, experiences of sadness, irritability, hostility, loneliness, and an inability

[6] We don't wish to overstate this claim since our project is not empirical. We aim to analyze despair and then propose a hypothesis about the sort of despair operative in (some or many) deaths of despair.

to feel pleasure can all indicate the presence of emotions other than despair, such as grief or anger. And regarding behavioral despair, people can engage in risky, reckless, and unhealthy behaviors for fun (e.g., taking drugs) or out of pressure from peers. Such behaviors do not necessarily mean that a person is in a state of what we would ordinarily call 'despair.' Finally, the physiological changes Shanahan et al. (2019) identify are linked to other emotional experiences and states, too. Pregnancy, for example, often involves changes in sleep and appetite regardless of whether the pregnant person is in despair.

Thus, although Shanahan et al. offer a taxonomy capturing the thoughts, emotions, feelings, and behaviors that tend to accompany despair, they have not provided an account of despair's nature. They have not, in other words, answered the question, "What is despair?" From a philosophical perspective, we suggest that a plausible theory of despair should be able to explain the above manifestations of despair, as well as what we propose (section 3) are four key desiderata emerging from insights in the philosophy of hope.

3. Desiderata for a Theory of Despair

Despair is typically defined in the philosophical literature in contrast to hope, or as the opposite of hope. For example, Trudy Govier argues:

> Despair is hopelessness. To despair is to lose all hope, to be without hope, to be overcome with a sense of futility or defeat, to believe that there is no possibility at all of getting the desired object or outcome. Despairing in a general sense, one has the conviction that everything is wrong and nothing will turn out well. Good outcomes are not even possible. (2011, 247)

As will become clear, we do not agree with the entirety of Govier's statement. However, she rightly notices that despair might either be a result of losing hope, or a mental state one has without ever having hope to begin with. In this way, despair is not properly analyzed as *disappointed* hope, which requires a hope to have existed in the first place (cf. Steinbock 2007: 441). In metaphorical terms, there is a sense in which despair *smothers* hope, potentially even before it arises. A theory of despair should tell us what exactly this amounts to.

A more specific question about the relationship between hope and despair concerns their compatibility. According to a widespread assumption, a good analysis of hope distinguishes hope from despair precisely by including some feature that rules out hoping and despairing over the same thing (Meirav 2009; Martin 2014; Milona and Stockdale 2018; *inter alia*). For example, if a person hopes for good weather tomorrow, they cannot at the same time despair that there will be good weather tomorrow. Similarly, hoping that one's life will improve is inconsistent with despairing that one's life will improve. But while we think that there is an element of truth here, this assumption may oversimplify actual human experiences. Consider Cornel West's remarks:

> Those who have never despaired have neither lived nor loved. Hope is inseparable from despair. Those of us who truly hope make despair a constant companion whom we out-wrestle every day owing to our commitment to justice, love, and hope. It is impossible to look honestly at our catastrophic conditions and not have some despair… (2008: 215)

West takes hope and despair to be intricately connected. The idea that despair is a 'constant companion' of hope would seem to suggest that the two can co-occur (though we would not say that they are inseparable). West's remarks may even indicate something stronger: that people committed to justice choose to actively sustain their despair over 'catastrophic conditions' of injustice *as* they hope to make progress toward justice, perhaps to ensure their hopes remain tempered with realism. This is an interesting and provocative claim that we think is worthwhile to pursue, but we remain focused on the more modest possibility that hope and despair may sometimes co-exist.

Jack Kwong (2020; 2022; 2024) has proposed a theory of hope according to which hope is compatible with despair. In his view, to *hope* is to register a desire for an outcome one sees as possible, where 'registering' amounts to "explicitly and consciously entertaining" the relevant desire (2020: 834; see also 2024: 230). To *despair*, in contrast, is to experience predominantly negative thoughts and feelings about the outcome's chances (2020: 838-840; 2024: 235). If Kwong is right about the nature of hope and despair, then one can experience hope and despair over an outcome simultaneously. For example, a patient who despairs of ever recovering from cancer might be reminded (e.g., by a loved one or a doctor) about the possibility of recovery; and this event might trigger them to consciously register their desire for recovery which they

continue to believe is possible. However, the patient cannot be *hopeful* about recovering, according to Kwong, since to be hopeful is to have predominantly positive thoughts and feelings about the outcome's *chances*. It is thus hopefulness - not hope - that is incompatible with despair.

Kwong offers an intriguing and elegant explanation of how hope and despair can coexist. But we think his theory leaves out important cases of hoping. These are cases which go beyond registering or consciously noting a desire and yet do not necessarily feature generally positive thoughts about the chances of fulfilling the desire (i.e., hopefulness in Kwong's sense). Suppose, for example, one desires to find a parking spot downtown later this evening and then entertains or notices this desire. Even if one calls this a form of hoping (we are neutral), it is importantly different from the mode of hoping one is in *while* in the midst of searching for a parking space. In the first case, one desires something that is not (yet or at present) *felt* as significant to them. Indeed, one can even imagine quickly registering (in succession) a variety of different desires, including the ones believed to be important in the here-and-now. But this activity of registering one's desires is different from feeling their importance in the way that the person hoping to find a parking spot feels the importance of finding one in the moment. They might not be hopeful about their chances, given the current state of traffic and their past experiences of parking failure. But they're hoping for a parking spot nonetheless, and this is more than just registering that they have a desire to find parking. Our favored theory, which we describe below, is that such hoping is an experience of reasons (Milona and Stockdale 2018).

We are likewise not convinced that despair can be defined in terms of the mostly negative thoughts and feelings about the desire's chances. People who tend to focus on threats to what they desire, and the apparently low chances of success, may find themselves beset by nagging worry and pessimism; but having such a broadly negative orientation needn't involve despair. Similar to emotions such as fear, joy, etc., there is a *feeling of despair* that is distinct from the thoughts and feelings that tend to accompany it. Despair is thus not reducible to a comparative summary of negative versus positive thoughts and feelings.[7] So while we think Kwong is right to question orthodoxy on the question of whether and how hope is compatible with despair, the matter remains open.[8]

[7] The difficulty here is thus similar to the one we raised for Shanahan et al. (2019) above.
[8] While we eventually argue that hope and despair are compatible, we are neutral about whether hopefulness and despair are. Our tentative view is that hopefulness is simply hope without accompanying despair.

As indicated, a theory of despair should help us to understand its distinctive phenomenal character (which may often be accompanied by other thoughts and feelings as well). As we will argue, the feeling of futility constitutive of despair is a feeling that there is no point in aiming for the outcome one desires – either specific desires (in hoping that *p*) or all of one's desires. For example, if an author is in despair about the possibility of publishing a book, they may see no point in continuing to write toward publication.[9] Or if a person is in despair about everything, they may see no point in continuing to do anything at all. Despair thus has negative effects on motivation. As Margaret Urban Walker (2006) writes, "often despair or resignation sets in over the fact that 'nothing can any longer be *done*' even when there is something that could still *happen*" (57).

Despair saps our motivation because it is bound up with a negative orientation toward the possibility of the desired outcome being fulfilled. But Govier's claim that despair involves the *belief* that there is no possibility of obtaining the desired outcome, or the *belief* that good outcomes are not possible, is too strong (Govier 2011: 247). Ariel Meirav (2009) points out that one might despair of an outcome even if one believes that there is a possibility it will obtain.[10] For example, a cat lover might believe it possible for their cat to live until she is 20 years old, but despair that this will occur. They might even strongly desire their cat to live such a long life,[11] and believe it physically possible, while experiencing despair rather than hope. A plausible theory of despair should account for cases in which a person despairs of an outcome while continuing to believe in its possibility.

Another key feature of despair is that it cannot easily be controlled; we cannot, simply by an act of will, choose not to despair. (We also cannot choose to despair, if one ever wanted to choose to experience the emotion, e.g., to better empathize with a friend.) This is most obvious in cases of 'recalcitrant' despair, when we believe our own despair is unwarranted and yet can't seem to overcome it. The medical student who is ranked at the top of their class, and who has supportive family and friends, might believe that they will survive medical school (and thus that despair over surviving medical school is unwarranted). But in contemplating the trials ahead,

[9] There might be other reasons to continue writing. For example, they might forge ahead to fulfill a promise to a dying family member to finish the book. But despair regarding publication still works against the motivation to write.

[10] Perhaps this is what Walker (2006: 57) has in mind in pointing out that "something could still *happen*" to make matters turn out in one's favor.

[11] They also *wish* that she would live forever, though they recognize that this is impossible.

including more years of school followed by residency, they find themselves slipping into despair. Despair is something with which we find ourselves and that we must *work through* (see Milona and Stockdale 2021).

To sum up, then, a theory of despair should explain (at least) four things:

(i) the vexed relationship between hope and despair
(ii) the phenomenal character of despair
(iii) the possibility of despairing over what one believes possible
(iv) our inability to easily control despair.

Once we have a theory of despair that explains these key elements, the hope is that it will illuminate why despair is connected, even if only contingently, with the factors observed by Shanahan et al. (2019; see above).

4. A Theory of Despair

4.1 Building on Existing Theories of Hope

Our theory develops from a critical discussion of existing theories of hope, especially those of Meirav (2009), Martin (2014), and Milona and Stockdale (2018). We begin with Meirav's theory, which emerges from serious consideration of despair. In his view, the difference between hope and despair comes down to how one views relevant *external factors* (2009: 230-231). These are persons or entities apart from the despairing/hoping agent that they view as holding power to affect the fulfillment of their desire (e.g., God, other people, the weather). To hope is to view at least some such external factors as *good* (i.e., as facilitating the fulfillment of one's desire) while to despair is to view them as thoroughly *bad* (i.e., as not facilitating the fulfillment of one's desire).

Meirav's theory of hope has been widely discussed and criticized (Blöser and Stahl 2022), but here we focus on critiques especially relevant to theorizing despair. First, it isn't clear what the attitude of 'viewing' toward the relevant external factors consists of. So the account, as it stands, does not explain the negative phenomenal character of despair. Second, Meirav's view requires that, in despair, one views all relevant external factors as bad. The worry, however, is that this generates a clean separation between hope and despair; one cannot simultaneously hope

that *p* and despair that *p*. Meirav is happy to accept this result, but we have proposed that it risks oversimplifying the vexed relationship between hope and despair.

Even if these issues can be overcome, certain familiar objections raised for Meirav's theory of hope can be adapted to target his theory of despair. For example, Milona (2019: 713) points out that an employee might hope to be courageous enough to blow the whistle on his boss's illegal business dealings at an upcoming meeting with the district manager. The employee doesn't view any external factors as relevant. By the same token, the employee might *despair* that he will be courageous enough to blow the whistle despite viewing himself as the only factor determining whether he does. Milona's observation helps to make sense of cases where we experience despair entirely because of an internal struggle, or at least what we perceive to be nothing more than this. Despair is commonly a result of giving up *on oneself* – and notice that this is true even if we 'view' all of the external factors affecting the desired outcome as good. For example, a person who has a substance addiction might have supportive family and friends, and access to excellent treatment, which they view as good external factors at work in helping them to overcome their addiction. But if the person gives up on themselves entirely, they might nevertheless despair of their ability to get well.[12]

Adrienne M. Martin (2014) gives us an alternative theory of hope and despair. She illustrates her theory with the example of two terminal cancer patients who are participants in an early-phase clinical research trial of an experimental drug. One patient, Bess, is strongly hopeful about the possibility of the drug being a miracle cure. Martin suggests that Bess might remark:

> *I know the truth is that I almost certainly won't be cured by this drug… but, you know what? A tiny chance is better than no chance! That 1 percent is my lifeline, and I'm going to hang on to it.* (Martin 2014: 23)

Bess sees the one percent chance of a miracle cure as something that might in fact come about, in contrast to a despairing patient – Martin calls him Alan – who does not see the possibility of a miracle cure as something that might really obtain. (Alan is motivated to participate in the trial to benefit future patients.) And notice that Alan's despair is consistent with him believing that finding a miracle cure is physically possible. But despite believing a cure to be possible, Martin

[12] This parallels Martin's (2014: 19-20) objection to Meirav's theory of hope.

argues that people who despair of a desired outcome do not *see* the possibility of the desired outcome obtaining (whatever the probability) as licensing treating their desire, and the desirable features of the outcome, as sufficient reason to engage in forms of thinking, planning, imagining, fantasizing, and acting in accordance with their desire. In other words, when people despair of an outcome, they see the probability as "making it illegitimate and unjustifiable to dedicate any thoughts whatsoever to the outcome" (Martin 2014: 29).

We interpret the 'seeing-as' component of hope Martin identifies *perceptually* (Milona and Stockdale 2018). As we have argued, hope patterns in perceptual-like ways with respect to belief, similar to other emotions.[13] For example, in visual perception, it is possible to experience (through sight) a stick in water as bent while at the same time believing that it is not. Similarly, it is possible to experience (through the emotion of fear) something as dangerous while at the same time believing that it is not (e.g., a harmless spider). Hope, on a perceptual theory, is like this too. But what distinguishes hope from other emotional experiences is its normative content.[14] According to our proposal, to hope is to experience in a perceptual or perceptual-like fashion the possibility of a desired object's obtaining as *encouraging* – as giving us reasons to act (e.g., by pursuing what we hope for, or preparing ourselves for its eventuation).[15]

It is thus plausible to theorize hope in terms of the popular perceptual theory of emotion (e.g., Roberts 2013; Tappolet 2016; *inter alia*). Perceptual theories characterize emotions by way of an analogy with sensory perceptual (e.g., visual, auditory) experiences, and then distinguish emotion types (e.g., fear, anger) by their purportedly constitutive normative representations (e.g., fear as an emotional experience of danger, anger as an emotional experience of offense).[16] That said, perceptual theories are not the only approach to emotions that defines each emotion in terms of a distinctive normative experience, and one may prefer to translate our analysis into some such alternative framework.[17] One might also disagree with our view (as well as Martin's)

[13] On the value of thinking of hope in terms of emotion, see also Vazard (forthcoming).
[14] We use 'normative' broadly as inclusive of evaluative notions such as goodness, badness, etc.
[15] We part ways with Martin in arguing that hope does not necessarily involve standing ready to justify one's hopeful thoughts, feelings, and activities (Milona and Stockdale 2018). Our worry is that Martin's view cannot accommodate recalcitrant hopes: hopes that conflict with an agent's judgment (e.g., the hope that an enviable friend suffers, and judgment that one is not at all justified in the hopeful activities associated with this hope).
[16] Perceptualists differ in whether they take emotions to be literally perceptual states or merely perceptual-like (see Tappolet 2016: 30). We are neutral on this question.
[17] For a prominent example of a non-perceptual characterization of emotions as normative experiences (i.e., experiences that must be characterized in terms of a normative property), see Deonna and Teroni's (2012) attitudinalism. Attitudinalists treat emotions as normative experiences at the level of attitude rather than content.

that hope is oriented to reasons, preferring instead to take hope to concern some other normative property (e.g., goodness). But we frame our approach to despair against the reason-centered and perceptualist backdrop.[18] Put roughly, we defend the following proposal: in despairing, one perceives the possibility of the desired object's obtaining in a distinctively unfavorable light, one which, to put it metaphorically, smothers a relevant existing or potential hope. We now explain what this amounts to and how it captures key desiderata outlined above.

4.2 Despair and Sadness

We argue that the core features of despair, outlined in section 3, can be explained by taking despair to be a form of sadness. While Shanehan et al. (2019) see "feelings of excessive sadness" (855) as part of emotional despair, further examination of the nature of sadness as an emotion suggests that despair just is a distinct form of sadness.

Sadness is typically characterized as an emotional experience oriented toward *loss* and paradigmatically, if not essentially, a personal loss (Nussbaum 2004; Prinz 2007: 61-62; Ekman 2007: 22-23; Deonna and Teroni 2012: 5; *inter alia*).[19] Paired with the idea that emotions are perceptual (or perceptual-like) experiences, this suggests more precisely that sadness is a perceptual experience of loss. A loss isn't the mere absence of something, since something's absence might be seen as good (e.g., an absence of student grade complaints), or, alternatively, as not mattering. Sometimes, the absence of something might not matter even if it would have been good, such as when one is not offered a good job but receives a superior offer that renders the rejection insignificant. One might not, in this context, be sad about the job rejection. This indicates that seeing something as a loss is a layered evaluation. When we are sad about something, we see its absence in a negative light precisely because we see *it*, as distinguished from its absence, in a positive light, at least compared to the way things turned out.

That sadness includes positively evaluating what is lost, often in its own right but at least comparatively, illustrates an important point: while sadness is an *overall* negative emotion (cf. Deonna and Teroni 2012: 14), it is not *unqualifiedly* negative. This doesn't mean that the

[18] Other scholars have illustrated how our perceptual theory of hope helps to make sense of applied ethical issues. For example, see Jeremy Snyder (2020) who takes up the theory to address the phenomenon of exploiting hope in the context of unproven medical interventions. See also Kenneth Shockley (2022) who defends our theory of hope in the face of environmental instability.

[19] For a general discussion of sadness in psychology, see Webb and Pizzagalli (2016).

positive evaluation will involve any positive *feeling*; it may be no more than a belief that feeds negative affect. But cases of *grief*, especially, illustrate that this isn't always so. (We do not think that grief is the only sort of sadness that illustrates the point.) Grief is a form of sadness that we experience in response to the loss of a loved one when they pass away (cf. Solomon 2004; Cholbi 2017). And the positive evaluation in grief - our love for the deceased - may be *experienced* (cf. Ekman 2007: 85). In contemplating a lost loved one, there may be an element of 'sweetness' to the reminiscing. These sweet thoughts (e.g., of lazy afternoon walks with the dogs or jovial Sunday dinners) are not merely co-occurrent with grief; they are part of what contributes to, and makes intelligible, the experience of loss. So while we won't insist that there is always a positive affect nested within sadness's evaluation of loss, there sometimes is; and the variable phenomenal character of sadness will be important to what we ultimately argue about despair.

Sadness tends to arise because we construe the loss as significant in the *present* - regardless of when the loss originated. This connection with the here and now is obvious when sadness is about current events, such as many people's sadness about ongoing environmental devastation across the world. But the same is typically true of sadness oriented to past events. Sadness that one didn't receive a job offer, or about the one who "got away," reflects the enduring significance of what is lost. By contrast, sadness over a high school breakup can be expected to fade as one ceases to care about having broken up; it no longer seems to matter *now*, even as one acknowledges the breakup was unfortunate at the time. It may even be that sadness *necessarily* construes a loss as having present significance.[20] But whether this is true of sadness in general, it does seem to be a feature of despair. Whether one is in despair over a future, present or past event, the person in despair evaluates the event as somehow significant to their life right now. One might be in despair about being able to afford rent in the future, or having ongoing chronic pain that has been resistant to treatment, or about a friend's having not made the train on time.[21] We propose that understanding despair as a mode of sadness unites these experiences of despair: in all of these cases, something appears to the agent as *lost*.

[20] The proposal that sadness always construes a loss as mattering in the present is more flexible than first appears. For example, one may reflect on a past (or even fictional) event empathetically such that one imaginatively shifts what counts as the 'present.' This could happen in the high school breakup case, for even if I don't care about the breakup now, I might experience sadness through mentally reenacting the past events.

[21] Past-oriented despair parallels the now standard view that we can have past-oriented hopes (see Martin 2014: 67). Notably, as Cathy Mason (2021: 523-526) argues, the fact that hope can be oriented to the past (or for things we

4.3 What Despair Is

We analyze despair as an emotional experience of the *loss of reasons* to *take seriously* the possibility of a desired outcome. We use 'taking seriously' as a helpful shorthand; what it amounts to is flexible depending on the case. Such taking seriously will often just be an experience of the loss of reasons to *promote* a desired outcome. It may also be a loss of reasons either to *prepare for* the fulfillment of a desire or to *seek out* whether one's desire is satisfied. These latter possibilities are especially relevant when an agent despairs of what they lack control over or is in the past. We might gloss the preceding cases as, equivalently, an experience of the *defeat* of reasons to take seriously what one desires, noting, too, that psychologists occasionally gloss the normative dimension of sadness in terms of defeat (Webb and Pizzagalli 2016: 859). This, we suspect, is what Shanehan et al. (2019) aimed to capture in recognizing that despair (or what they call 'cognitive despair') involves thoughts of defeat (855).

Such an experience of loss/defeat can take different forms. Consider, for instance, a case in which one despairs that they will ever raise children with their partner. They may experience the reasons to have children as defeated by their reasons to do something else that they understand to be incompatible with having children (e.g., to care for their ailing parents). Or it may be that they experience reasons to have children as undermined by other considerations (e.g., financial concerns centering around childcare and medical expenses). In some cases, one may even experience reasons as entirely obliterated. For example, if a potential parent hopes to have *biological* children of their own, but learns they are physically incapable, they may experience the *total* defeat of reasons to have biological children. Whatever the circumstances, the person in despair sees no point in pursuing a family any longer.[22]

Despair requires more than just any experience of lost/defeated reasons to take seriously what one desires. We emphasize two key points. The first is that the experience of the loss of reasons must pair with a belief or feeling that what one is in despair over will not occur (or has not occurred). In this sense, despair opposes the epistemic dimension of hope, inasmuch as the person hoping believes or feels as though what one is hoping for might in fact occur (or has occurred). To illustrate, suppose an athlete who hopes that their team wins the championship suffers a serious injury and is unable to participate. In this case, the athlete experiences the loss

have no control over) does not entail that hope lacks essential connections with motivation. Hope may incline one to prepare for or seek out the truth of what one hopes for (see also Milona and Stockdale 2018: 216n14).

[22] We say 'in despair' to allow that a person can have other mental states that conflict with their despair (see below).

of reasons to promote that their team wins, yet it doesn't seem as if they thereby despair that their team wins. The athlete might still feel motivated to watch the game on TV, cheering from afar. If, however, they see their own participation as integral to victory, they may believe or feel that their team won't win, and thus experience the lost/defeated reasons characteristic of despair. In this way, despair delivers an answer to hope's stance of possibility, asserting that what hope does or would represent as possible will not (or has not) come to pass.

Our reference to 'belief or feeling' bears emphasis. Here we mean to refer to different modes of assessment that can feature in emotional experience (despair included). For example, a person in the grip of fear can feel as if the plane that they are on will crash despite believing that they are safe. Similarly, a person may believe that they are unlikely to win at roulette, but because they've bet on their lucky number, they feel as if they will. Or alternatively, a person whose favorite sports team has consistently lost may feel as if the team will lose this year, even if they believe their team is in fact likely to win the championship this time around.[23]

The second major clarificatory point is this: despairing over something isn't just an experience of the loss of *some* reasons to take its prospect seriously; the loss of reasons is experienced as *decisive* in the sense that despair rationalizes (makes intelligible) giving up on *p*. In this way, despair purports to offer a kind of summary evaluation of the reasons one has to promote *p*, such that the despairing agent finds that "there is just no point…." Here's an example to illustrate the need for this requirement. If one is currently despairing over the prospects of achieving a certain job, but then a new reason to pursue the job emerges, this might resolve their despair even though the reasons that were previously defeated still are.

Our approach to despair can ultimately be summarized as follows:

> *Despairing*: A mode of sadness whereby one experiences certain considerations as decisively defeating one's reasons to take seriously a desired outcome that one believes or feels will not occur.

Like in other forms of sadness, the person in despair desires something and thus sees it in a positive light. If a person despairs that they will receive a given job offer, for instance, aspects of

[23] See Milona (2022) for detailed discussion of such belief/feeling conflicts. He argues that we can illuminate more precisely what is going on in these cases through Tamar Gendler's notion of aliefs (Gendler 2008).

that job must be taken as attractive (e.g., that it is a position of leadership). On our favored approach, the agent takes these aspects to be attractive insofar as they take them to be reasons for pursuing that particular job, ones that they ultimately experience as defeated in their despair. But the sense in which agents 'take' considerations to be reasons can vary. It may be that the agent simply believes certain considerations to be reasons. But they may also *experience* those considerations as reasons. In this latter case, even as one despairs, they continue to feel an attraction or pull toward the object of their despair.[24]

The possibility that despair can involve this kind of affective pull toward the desired outcome helps to explain the vexed relationship between hope and despair. (We referred to this in section 3 as desideratum (i) of a theory of despair.) To recap, many philosophers have suggested that one cannot hope and despair at the same time (Meirav 2009; Martin 2014; Milona and Stockdale 2018; *inter alia*; cf. Kwong 2020; 2022). Yet in everyday contexts, people speak of *wrestling* or *struggling* with hope and despair, which is suggestive of the possibility of both somehow co-occurring (West 2008: 215). On our approach, despair is an emotion which, put metaphorically, *smothers* hope. It may do so to such an extent that one no longer experiences the reasons in question as having any significance at all (so one *does not* hope), or it may do so even as one continues to experience the reasons as more than simply lost (so one *does* hope). In the latter case, we agree that it would be misleading to say, in ordinary discourse and without qualification, that one at the same time 'hopes.' This is because hope is hostage to the very thing fundamentally opposed to it, namely despair.

A complementary way of making sense of the perplexing relation between hope and despair adapts an insight from Luc Bovens's (2021) *Coping*. According to Bovens, a person might intelligibly speak of *part of* themselves as hoping. He has in mind cases in which a person is ashamed, or otherwise rejects, one of their hopes. For example, a person overwhelmed with caregiving duties to an ailing parent may find themselves hoping for their parent to finally die so they can be free. Saying that part of them has this hope may more accurately reflect the fact that this hope is something about which they are ashamed. In other words, to say that the agent hopes their parent dies would be misleading, even though (according to Bovens and us) it is strictly speaking true, since the hope is part of a broader experience of shame; and the agent identifies

[24] Here we are assuming that any experiences with normative content would be emotional or affective (cf. Hutton 2022). But if one allows for non-emotional normative experiences, that would further complexify the possible manifestations of despair.

more with the shame than the hope. In similar fashion, we suggest that a person overcome with despair over finding love may still hope to find love, signaling the status of their hope by saying things like, "I despair of ever finding love but a *part of me* cannot help but hope." It may also be that the relative strengths of their hope and despair waffle, and that whether it is appropriate to say that the agent has hope or is in despair depends on which experience is prominent. Talk of *part of* them as hoping or despairing can also signal that there is still internal tension with which they are struggling.

In addition to explaining the vexed relationship between hope and despair, we noted several other desiderata. A theory of despair should explain (ii) the phenomenal character of despair; (iii) the possibility of despairing despite believing possible; and (iv) our inability to easily control despair. Regarding (ii), our approach explains the negative phenomenology of despair by appealing to an *experience* of the decisive loss of reasons to promote the desired end. This isn't a peculiar or *sui generis* kind of experience, but rather an emotional one. Specifically, it is a mode of sadness. The perceptual theory of emotions supplies an even clearer grasp of what this experience involves. Just as perceiving something as red is very different from believing it red, experiencing a loss of reasons is very different from believing one has lost reasons.[25]

Our account also offers an attractive explanation of despair's relationship with beliefs about the future (iii). Despair is compatible with believing that the relevant desired outcome is possible, since despair only requires a belief or feeling that what one despairs over will not occur. Consider, for example, a person despairing that they will find a compatible partner, for they see themselves as particularly difficult to be with. They acknowledge the bare possibility of finding someone, yet they despair because they believe that they won't.[26] Despair can also arise on the basis of feelings and in total conflict with belief (cf. Milona 2022; Gendler 2008). One might despair over ever being happy again following a breakup while at the same time believing that one is actually likely to be happy again someday, if all they know about human beings'

[25] As noted above, readers who prefer a non-perceptual approach to emotional normative experience are free to substitute their favored approach. However, if one denies that emotions are essentially normative experiences, the phenomenal character of despair would require some alternative explanation (e.g., in terms of feelings of bodily changes or a non-representational feeling). In our view, one cannot make sense of emotional experience, or the distinctions between (certain) emotion types, without an appeal to normative/evaluative notions that characterize the experience.

[26] One might think that it is irrational for the person to have this pair of beliefs. Perhaps they should only believe that it is unlikely that they will find a compatible partner. Our concern, however, is with the psychological possibility of believing both contents, which we see no reason to doubt.

ability to recover from breakups is true. This person is caught in the grip of despair, feeling as though there is no point in even trying to find post-breakup happiness even while believing that they likely someday will.

Turn finally to the difficulty of controlling despair (iv). Here it is helpful to think about recalcitrant despair. These are cases in which our despair conflicts with our *beliefs* about what we have reason to do. Despite such beliefs, and (in many cases) despite our attempts to overcome despair, we often just *find ourselves* in despair. Our account easily explains why it is that, just as one can be sad about something (e.g., not getting a job offer) even while believing that they've suffered no loss (e.g., because they believe they would have been miserable), one can despair (e.g., that they won't get a job) even while believing that they have reason to keep trying (e.g., because they have been so close and eventually an offer will come). We don't *decide* whether to despair or not; as an emotion, and a form of sadness in particular, despair is something that sweeps over us, and can only be controlled through indirect means.

Thus, despair is a form of sadness that arises when, in light of an agent's circumstances, they fail to take seriously the possibility that something they desire will (or has) occurred. They might continue to believe that a desired outcome is possible, but the despairing agent still feels as though there is no point pursuing or anticipating its occurrence. In despair, they experience as defeated whatever reasons they had for engaging in activities that are constitutive of hope (i.e., activities that involve taking the possibility of a desired outcome occurring seriously). We now turn to how this experience of loss can have devastating consequences in people's lives: how despair may contribute to the kinds of self-destructive thoughts, feelings, and actions that are associated with 'deaths of despair.'

5. Despair and Meaning in Life

The term 'deaths of despair' is not equivalent to 'suicide.' It aims to capture a core emotional experience that seems to be at the heart of a certain class of suicides and other self-inflicted deaths. We see the project of understanding deaths of despair as necessarily interdisciplinary, one requiring empirical work that takes seriously testimony of people's lived experiences. But our hope is that philosophical work can progress this research further, providing the conceptual resources we need to make sense of a complex public health crisis affecting people from diverse backgrounds and societies. That said, we do not aim to speak *for* people who

have died 'deaths of despair,' or for people who are struggling with despair in their lives. People's lived experiences of despair will be different depending on who they are, what their despair is about, and their social and cultural locations. But we contend that our theory of despair, combined with philosophical insights on meaning in life, provides a lens through which we might begin to investigate the despair central to deaths of despair.

People who have died 'deaths of despairs' through suicide, drug overdoses, alcoholic liver disease, or another self-inflicted means appear in large part to have given up on *living*. We see this 'giving up' either through self-destructive behavior unintentionally leading to death, or through intentionally self-inflicted deaths. Our hypothesis is that the kind of despair at the heart of deaths of despair is connected to a person's sense of their own life's meaning.[27] Despair can threaten one's sense of meaning in at least two ways: (1) when the principal object of despair is partly constitutive of what a person takes to be the source of their life's meaningfulness, or (2) when the principal object of despair is a precondition for finding, constructing, or pursuing a sense of meaning in life. In both cases, despair is experienced as a defeat of reasons to *live*. People who have this kind of despair might still experience reasons to *exist* – to continue living in the minimal sense of going through the motions of daily life (cf. Ratcliffe 2013: 602). But they experience a decisive loss of reasons to live in the 'full sense' - that is, in accordance with their conceptions of what gives meaning to their lives.

By 'meaning,' we refer to agents' *own* conception of what makes their life meaningful. We acknowledge that talk of meaning can be difficult to pin down. But given that deaths of despair are understood as a partly socio-political phenomenon, we emphasize an account with an explicitly social dimension that illuminates how people often approach their life's meaning. In particular, we follow Cheshire Calhoun (2018) who argues that people live meaningful lives to the extent that they spend their time on ends they have reason to value. There are, in Calhoun's view, a plurality of reasons for valuing ends that agents set, including both public and personal reasons. Public reasons, or reasons for anyone, are "part of a common pool of reasons that can be drawn on to justify the demand that others agree with us in our judgments of value" (33). To borrow Calhoun's (2018) example, a person who adopts 'dressage riding' as an end can justify their choice of activities by appealing to good exercise, opportunities to socialize, and the dedication, skill, and focused attention required as reasons to value dressage riding. Although the

[27] We say more below about how we understand 'meaning' (see the discussion of 'normative outlooks').

authors of this article have no interest in setting this end for themselves, we appreciate that dressage riding is a meaningful activity for others because they, too, live in societies whose 'collective thinking' about what counts as a good reason includes the reasons in favor of dressage riding that Calhoun cites.

Calhoun's insight that there are public reasons for valuing ends we set helps explain why not just any project can contribute meaning to a person's life, such as watching every television show ever made or making America's Most Wanted list. People who set these ends will have a hard time justifying (to themselves and others) what is worth valuing about watching every TV show ever made or being a fugitive. These ends are incompatible with what we (i.e., people who are members of a community) have reason to value. In contrast, the doctor and social activist can appeal to public reasons for valuing their respective paths: the value of giving back to one's community, saving lives, and making the world a better place. (We say more about the advantage of including such reasons in assessing the meaningfulness of lives below.)

There are also personal reasons unique to people *as individuals* for valuing ends, such as the symbolic meaning of a project to their life, its connection to their past experiences, and what suits their personalities or natural talents (Calhoun 2018: 35). The doctor and social activist will have personal reasons for pursuing their chosen careers over others (e.g., a fascination with the human body in the doctor's case). In adopting certain ends (over others), agents construct a concrete *normative outlook* - a specific conception of what gives meaning to their lives. Agents' normative outlooks typically include multiple life projects (e.g., career, family, activism, and leisure activities), as well as a way of ranking their values - structuring their time and guiding action in accordance with what is most significant in their lives (Calhoun 2018). A point to emphasize here is that having such projects requires, at least ordinarily, *hopes* for one's life. In other words, the valuing that comprises a paradigmatic normative outlook either partly consists in, or entails, having certain hopes.[28]

How might a normative outlook conception of meaningful living help us to understand life-threatening experiences of despair? Let's start with a case in which a person despairs over something constitutive of their sense of meaning in life. Take, for instance, the familiar example of a philosophy job market candidate who despairs of being offered a tenure-track position and

[28] We say 'paradigmatic' to allow for an agent who sustains their normative outlook (and the projects it entails) through belief alone, or at least without any hope. We aren't sure this is possible, though, and take no ultimate stand on the matter.

who has dedicated over a decade to this goal. Being a professional philosopher may well be the most important aspect of this person's identity (cf. Blöser and Stahl 2017). And despite the fact that their loved ones do not at all understand how they could find reading Kant enjoyable, the job candidate's family nevertheless see a career in philosophy as a worthwhile end for them to set. There are, in other words, public reasons to set the end of becoming a professional philosopher: the value of teaching important skills, supporting young people as they find their way in the world, and so on.

For someone who sees a career in philosophy as constitutive of a meaningful life for them (i.e. those who have personal reasons for valuing a career in philosophy), job market despair can threaten their sense of meaning in life. This is not to say that the person's life is doomed, or that people who invest in a career that does not pan out are necessarily at risk of self-destructive thinking and behavior. People whose normative outlooks include other meaning-constitutive hopes will likely continue to find their lives worthwhile in the midst of their job market despair. Loving relationships, passion for arts or sports, and so on can each contribute to many people's conceptions of what makes their lives meaningful.

We contend that when an agent recognizes other reasons for living as sufficiently strong, their *overall* sense of meaning in life is not threatened. Because they see themselves as having other reasons to live in the full sense (e.g., to build a family, give back to one's community, etc.), their normative outlook functions as a source of resilience for them. People may also exhibit the capacity to *hope well*, in Victoria McGeer's (2004) terms, which involves forming new hopes or restructuring existing ones when the world proves resistant to some specific hoped-for end being realized. One way in which people can hope well is by having a flexible normative outlook (cf. Milona 2020b: 646-649). For example, the would-be professional philosopher might see that some of the reasons they have for pursuing professional philosophy are reasons for pursuing *other* projects - ones that also involve contributing in a robust and public way to ongoing political discourse and action (and arguably more so, in the case of many careers). It can be difficult to keep these considerations in view, though easier with the support of others who can help to redirect our hopes. As McGeer (2004) emphasizes, hoping well is a *social* phenomenon - one that takes place in community with others who support one another in maintaining and restructuring their hopes. When the world leads us to despair, it is often other people who remind us of the meaningfulness of our lives and ultimately pull us through.

But not all of us have the social support and resources we need to redirect our hopes in this way, and there are cases in which an agent's normative outlook cannot withstand the impact of despair. Consider, for example, a single mother suffering from substance addiction who has lost custody of her children.[29] She had hoped to be a good mother and has always considered her relationship with her children the most important thing in her life. But like many people with a history of trauma and a lack of access to effective mental health treatment, she has coped with her pain with alcohol; and, as a result, the court granted custody to her former partner. She is *devastated*, but throws herself into work as a way of coping with - and finding meaning in - the life she is now living. Even when the most significant reason we have for living our lives is threatened or lost, other meaning-constitutive hopes function as a source of resilience for us. But if motherhood is *everything* to her, the meaning-constitutive hope to contribute to climate justice may itself be tainted by the mother's despair. That is, she might begin to see her reasons for pursuing her research as defeated by despair over her relationship with her children. She might think, for example, "what's the point of being a prominent climate scientist if I don't have my kids…?" Or, if the mother's other meaning-constitutive hopes are themselves threatened (e.g., she has become disillusioned with her research program, with not much else going on in her life), the mother's despair is more likely to threaten her sense of meaning in life.[30]

Thus theorizing instances of despair in the context of agents' normative outlooks on the whole, or their own conception of what gives meaning to their lives, may help us to understand why some people's despair over even particular losses - such as the loss of reasons to pursue a relationship with one's children - are experienced as a *loss of reasons to live*.[31] Or perhaps more accurately, why the loss of reasons to pursue a relationship with one's children *motivates* a felt experience of a loss of reasons to live. In other cases, the principal object of despair seems to be a *precondition* for finding, constructing, or pursuing a sense of meaning in life. Some people despair over their social and economic circumstances more generally, such as when those who

[29] While our example is hypothetical, Stockdale (forthcoming) discusses a harrowing case in which an Anishinaabe mother's children were unjustly seized and which would eventually result in her suicide.

[30] It's notable, in this case, that the woman's hope to be a good mother is formed within, and shaped by, social norms and expectations about what it means to be a good mother. For example, in societies that are hard on women and especially mothers, being a good mother may be seen as incompatible with suffering from a substance addiction. Calhoun's account nicely captures the ways in which constructing a normative outlook is necessarily a socially engaged practice - one that participates in the social norms of one's own community, for better or worse.

[31] As Calhoun (2018) suggests, "there are, for some people, a single pursuit whose success is the very condition of their being willing to go on in life at all" (77).

are suffering from poverty, unemployment, housing insecurity, and a lack of access to healthcare find themselves in despair. Having enough money to buy necessities, or to keep one's apartment, or to access essential healthcare do not *constitute* people's normative outlooks. They are, instead, often practically necessary for having and maintaining one.[32] Despair thus not only leads people to experience a decisive loss of reasons to take seriously certain meaning-constitutive desires, but to experience a loss of reasons to find (new) sources of meaning in one's life. Put differently, hope for meaning itself can become smothered or extinguished.

To take a real-world case, consider Camilo Montoya-Galvez's (2021) reporting on migrant children in Fort Bliss detention facility near El Paso Texas. He found that many children were suffering from despair and self-harm, with 29 youth on a suicide watchlist. Attorney Carlos Holguín visited Fort Bliss and spoke with children there and observed them at "their breaking points." He explained: "I saw that in the faces of virtually every kid I interviewed in Fort Bliss: A sense of despair and isolation." One 17-year-old girl from Guatemala suffering from anxiety, insomnia, and increased blood pressure explained: "I used to be able to cope with my anxiety and breathe through it, but now I feel like I've given up… I feel like I'll never get out of here." Although we don't have any way of knowing about this girl's specific hopes and dreams for her life, the very possibility of pursuing meaning-constitutive hopes and dreams likely depends upon her getting out of the detention facility.[33] Thus in order for her to even have a chance at constructing or re-constructing a normative outlook, her desire for freedom must be realized.[34]

In cases like these ones, despair is intricately connected to agents' social and political conditions; oppression, violence, terror, and experiences of trauma can lead to or exacerbate despair. In earlier work, Calhoun (2007) argues that certain 'frames of agency' must be in place for agents to continue taking an interest in leading their own lives, and to to be secured against depression and despair. They include having a sense that one's life has meaning, but also

[32] Our theory of despair may lend support to Anthony Reeves's (2023) defense of institutions' responsibility to guard against what he calls 'social despair' (i.e., social conditions that make despair rational).

[33] Of course, some people living in such conditions do have a sense of meaning in life, sometimes even more so than those of us who live privileged, comfortable lives. For example, the older sibling who finds meaning in caring for, and keeping safe, their younger sibling safe under conditions of political violence might feel as though their life is replete with meaning in a way that the lost, middle-class teenager does not. We are not making a general claim about every person's experiences.

[34] The threat to agents' ability to construct a normative outlook, or to find a sense of purpose or meaning in life, is plausibly part of what makes the most severely oppressive conditions *dehumanizing* - dislocation, homelessness, and incarceration, for example. As Walker (2006) argues, the devastation of hope itself is one of the most 'morally abhorrent' features of grave wrongs (44).

confidence in the efficacy of instrumental reasoning and in one's relative security from profound misfortune and harm (Calhoun 2007, 198). When one or more of these frames of agency are absent, agents can become depressed or demoralized; and they may fail to see any reasons to reflect, deliberate, and act altogether. They might, in other words, lose the ability to *function as an agent*. As Katie Stockdale (2021) argues, inasmuch as hope involves exercising agency in some way (e.g., in thought, feeling, and behavior), losing the ability to function as an agent means losing the capacity for hope. We think that even the most serious cases of despair are compatible with having the capacity for hope, which we see as a hopeful sign for people who find themselves in despair. But there is more to say about the relationship between despair as an emotional experience and a loss of the capacity for hope.

We have argued that despair is a distinct mode of sadness through which agents experience a defeat of reasons to live; and, as we have seen, the social, economic, and political conditions of our lives often facilitate those very reasons. Our theory of despair thus complements social scientists' observation that deaths of despair are a *public* health crisis, one that is a result of ongoing systemic injustices. Our theory also illustrates the importance of philosophical analysis to the interdisciplinary project of understanding the phenomenon of deaths of despair. Since questions about meaning in life are fundamentally philosophical in nature, we can't fully understand the kind of despair that manifests as a total loss of reasons to live without addressing them.

6. Conclusion

We have argued that despair is best conceptualized as a mode of sadness through which agents experience a decisive loss of reasons to pursue a desired end that they believe or feel will not occur. This approach captures key features of despair, including its phenomenology, passivity, and compatibility with relevant modal beliefs. It likewise leads to an attractive understanding of the vexed relationship between hope and despair, an issue central to current debates about the nature of hope. Our project has also been concerned with offering a *general* account of despair, one suited to capture not only minor cases of despair but also more tragic ones. It thus speaks to the sort of despair involved in 'deaths of despair.' Our hypothesis is that the core of such despair is an experience of a decisive loss of reasons to *live* in accordance with one's own conception of what gives meaning and value to one's life.

Acknowledgments

For valuable feedback on this paper, we thank the editor and anonymous referees. We also thank Jack Kwong for helpful discussion.

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