

Defining Optimisms

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Abstract To be optimistic, it is standardly assumed, is to have positive expectations. I here argue that this definition is correct but captures only one variety of optimism – here called factual optimism. It leaves out two other important varieties of optimism. The first – focal optimism – corresponds to the idea of seeing the glass half full. The second – axiological optimism – consists in the view that good is stronger than bad. Those three varieties of optimism are irreducible to each other and do not belong to a common kind. I define each of these and then characterize their respective correctness conditions.

To Ronnie, polyoptimist

Research on optimism focuses on three kinds of questions. First, *are we optimistic?* It is argued, for instance that while people tend to be optimistic about their own life or that of their close relatives (local optimism), they tend to be more pessimistic when it comes to the state of the world (global pessimism). Second, *ought we be optimistic?* Here, empirical evidence suggests that we tend to be too optimistic about ourselves – ‘local overoptimism’ –, and too pessimistic about the world – ‘global overpessimism’ (see Shepperd & al., 2013 for useful conceptual distinctions among the various kinds of optimistic biases). Thus, we tend to underestimate the odds of getting divorced or of having a cancer, or to overestimate our future income or life expectancy (Sharot, 2011; Kahneman, 2011). On the other hand, we tend to exhibit a pessimistic bias when it comes to the state of the world, by underestimating for instance the drop of global poverty since the Industrial Revolution and over the last decades (Roser & Nagdy, 2014; Ipsos, 2017). Philosophers, for their part, have typically tackled the issue of whether one ought to be optimistic by wondering whether we live in the best possible world. Leibniz is the most famous defender of such a metaphysical optimism, that was also endorsed by Brentano (see Dewalque, 2019 for discussion), who was also resolutely optimistic about philosophy (Brentano, 1895). The third question studied is: *is it beneficial to be optimistic?* Optimism, it is often claimed, is beneficial overall: it goes along with higher levels of well-being, better health, better coping strategies or better social skills (Carver & al. 2010; Mens & al. 2016; Duckworth, 2016; see Bortolotti & Antrobus, 2015 and Bortolotti, 2018 for discussion).

I shall focus on a fourth question: *what is optimism?* Though the question of the nature of optimism is in a sense prior to those of its existence, correctness and benefits, it is rarely

explicitly raised.¹ The main reason for this is probably that the nature of optimism is thought to be clear enough. To be optimistic, it is standardly assumed, is to have positive expectations.² I here argue that this definition is correct but captures only one variety of optimism – here called factual optimism. It leaves out two other important varieties of optimism. The first – focal optimism – corresponds to the idea of seeing the glass half full. The second – axiological optimism – consists in the conviction that good is stronger than bad. Those three varieties of optimism are irreducible to each other and do not belong to a common kind, or so I shall argue.

The three varieties of optimism are introduced in section 1. Factual optimism is defined in section 2. Focal optimism is defined in section 3. The correctness conditions for factual optimism are spelled out in section 4. The correctness conditions for focal optimism are specified in section 5, which lead to the formulation of axiological optimism, defined in section 6. Section 7 contrasts optimism and hope based on these results.

1. Varieties of optimism

One should distinguish from the start optimistic characters from optimistic attitudes. ‘Ronnie is optimistic’ may mean, depending on the context, that he is of an optimistic character, or that he entertains optimistic attitudes. The two are compatible but do not entail each other. Julie may be of a pessimistic character but entertain optimistic attitudes: she may feel optimistic about the cake she has just put in the oven. Paul, on the other hand, may be of an optimistic temperament but be pessimistic about the cake (he saw that Julie forgot the yeast). I shall speak of *personal optimism* in the first case and of *attitudinal optimism* in the second case. Personal optimism is a character trait of persons; it is typically expressed through the monadic predicate ‘is optimistic’. Attitudinal optimism corresponds to a set of attitudes; it is

¹ Here are three exceptions. Siciński (1972) distinguishes various ways in which optimism is “ambiguous” and offers a detailed (and quite indigestible) taxonomy of optimisms that focusses on the temporal aspects of optimism. Siciński, however, does not notice the key distinction between factual and focal optimism to be introduced below. Boden (1966) spots the distinction but immediately discards focal optimism on the ground that it cannot be justified and is unphilosophical. Third, Tatarkiewicz (1976) discusses optimism and pessimism in detail in his chapter XXI entitled “The Attainability of Happiness”. His focus is however narrower as he is interested in the kind of optimism that considers happiness to be attainable, which is one version of what I shall call factual optimism.

² Sometimes optimism is restricted to having positive expectation about one’s own future, “Optimists are people who expect good things to happen to them” (Carver & al. 2010).

typically expressed by the dyadic predicate ‘x is optimistic about y’ or by the prenective ‘x is optimistic that p’.³

The threefold distinction I want to elaborate on pertains to attitudinal optimism. I shall argue that they are three strongly distinct varieties of attitudinal optimism: *factual optimism*, *focal optimism*, and *axiological optimism*. *Factual optimism* corresponds to positive expectations. *Focal optimism* corresponds the attitude of focusing on the positive aspects of things. *Axiological optimism*, finally, corresponds to the idea that good is stronger than bad (see Fig. 1).

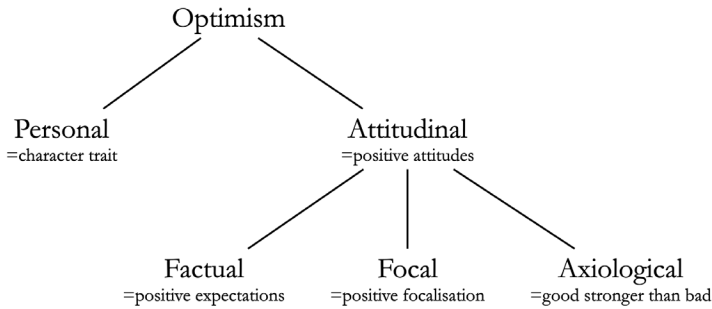


Figure 1

2. Factual optimism

2.1 Factual optimism defined

Factual optimism is the most studied form of optimism to the point that it is often assumed to be the only one. One can be optimistic about one’s chances of getting a job, about the future of one’s country, about the world economic outlook, about one’s philosophy department, about once’s friend recovery, about the wine to be opened, etc. I shall here assume, for simplicity, that ‘x is optimistic about y’ always has a ‘x is optimistic that p’ paraphrase, where p is about x. For instance, ‘to be optimistic about one’s chances of getting the job’ can be rephrased as ‘to be optimistic that one will get the job’; ‘to be optimistic about the future of one’s country’ can be rephrased as ‘to be optimistic that the future of one’s country will be brighter’, etc.

³ The distinction between personal and attitudinal optimisms may not be exhaustive: optimistic moods should perhaps be added to the picture.

What do all such cases have in common in virtue of which they are cases of factual optimism? The standard answer is that in all such cases, something good is expected to happen. One might thus say that *to be optimistic is to expect of something good that it will happen*.

Factual optimism (first try): S is optimistic that p iff (i) S believes that p will be the case; (ii) it would be good that p.

This proposal fails, however. Suppose that Jordan expects that universities will expand over the next decade, and suppose, furthermore, that this is a good thing. This is neither sufficient nor necessary for Jordan to be optimistic about the future of universities. This is not sufficient for Jordan may think that universities are bad, e.g. because he believes that they promote ideologies detrimental to civilization. If so, although what he expects is good, he is not optimistic about it, but pessimistic. Such a definition also fails to provide necessary condition for optimism. If Jordan were to expect that universities will decline, he would take this to be a good thing, and therefore be optimistic, while expecting something actually bad (per hypothesis). The upshot is that what matters when defining optimism is not whether what one expects is in fact good, but whether one holds it to be good.

This second attempt fixes that problem: *to be optimistic is to think of what is going to happen that it is good*:

Factual optimism (second try): S is optimistic that p iff (i) p will be the case; (ii) S believes that it would be good that p.

The definition now requires that the optimist views the object of her optimism as good. But by fixing the previous problem, we have introduced a new one. Sarah wishes that humanity dies out by 2050 for she thinks that it endangers the ecosphere. Suppose, furthermore, that Sarah also believes that this extinction will not happen – to her regret. Suppose, finally that, contrary to what Sarah believes, humans will go extinct by 2050. In such case, although Sarah thinks of what is going to happen, that it is good, she is not optimistic for she does not think that what is going to happen is going to happen. This shows that what matters when defining optimism is not whether what will happen is held to be good, but whether what one thinks will happen is held to be good.

These considerations together suggest that factual optimism consists of two beliefs (or cognate attitudes). *To be optimistic about p is (i) to believe that p will be the case, and (ii), to believe that it is good that p*.

Factual optimism (third try): S is optimistic that p iff (i) S believes that p will be the case. (ii) S believes that it would be good that p.

Otherwise put: to be optimistic is to believe, of what one think is going to happen, that it is good. For example, a person who believes that poverty is likely to decrease and believes that it is good that it will decrease is optimistic about poverty. For this, two beliefs (or cognate attitudes) are needed. The first, non-evaluative, is about the future evolution of poverty; the second, evaluative, assigns a positive value to its decrease. To believe that poverty will decline without thinking that this is good, or to believe that a decline in poverty would be a good thing, without thinking that it will happen, is not to be optimistic about poverty.

That proposal is better than the two former ones, but share a common defect with them: all three proposals assume that factual optimism is a about the future. It is, however, possible to be optimistic about the past or the present. If Paul thinks that he has succeeded in his exam, he is optimistic about some past event. If Julie thinks that her cat, which disappeared, is still alive, she is optimistic that her cat is alive. Likewise for Bob who thinks that his grandfather did not suffer in his last days. Optimism, we saw, is standardly defined in terms of positive expectation. While this definition may seem to entail that optimism is about the future, as expectations are often assumed to be kinds of forecast, this assumption should be resisted. Expectations, like optimism, may be about the past or the present. Paul expects that Mary is now back, Anne expects to have won the lottery. What make such cases cases of optimism, I submit, is that they bear on states of affairs which are probable.

Factual optimism (fourth try): S is optimistic that p =df

(i) S believes (judges/thinks/feels...) that it is probable that p.

(ii) S believes (judges/thinks/feels...) that it would be good that p.

There is a last problem with that definition which concerns the degree of probably and goodness required to be factually optimistic. Paul thinks that it would be good that he does not die during the next month, and also thinks that he has only 70% of surviving for he knows has cancer. The reason why it would be odd to consider Paul an optimist about his chance of surviving is that although he considers his survival to be probable, his survival is not *probable enough*. Maria expects the movie she's going to see to be just acceptable. Maria is not optimistic for all that for 'acceptable' is not *good enough*. What must be required is that, in the eyes of the person, p is probable enough and good enough (whether or not that is actually the case):

Factual optimism (last try): S is optimistic that p =df

(i) S believes (judges/thinks/feels...) that it is probable enough that p.

(ii) S believes (judges/thinks/feels...) that it would be good enough that p.

Let me comment briefly on that final definition. First, the attitudes constitutive of factual optimism are all *propositional*. Objectual attitudes – such as seeing a tree or admiring Margaret – which do not ascribe any property —being probable or being good – are excluded. By ‘propositional’ I mean here having a content where a predicate is ascribed to some subject (x believes that y is F) or where some connective is applied to a sentence (x believes that it is good that p). This definition leaves open that some propositional attitudes might be non-conceptual attitudes.

Second, the attitudes constitutive of optimism are *cognitive* attitudes, in contrast to, e.g., *conative* or *affective* attitudes. Cognitive attitudes include judgements, affirmations, assertions, beliefs, perceptions, rememberings, predictions, intuitions, feelings that, etc. Such attitudes, as it is sometimes put, are ‘truth-seeking’ or ‘aim at truth’. I take this to mean that such attitudes are correct in virtue of their (content) being true or veridical. This excludes attitudes that lack correctness conditions, such as, arguably, loving, assuming, imagining, dreaming, knowing, Brentano’s presentation or Frege’s grasps; as well as attitudes that have correctness conditions, but are not correct in virtue of being true, such as, arguably, interrogations, intentions, desires, wishes. Thus, desiring, wishing, supposing, dreaming that the future will be brighter is not being factually optimistic. On the other hand, feeling that something is going to be the case and judging that it is good; or judging that something will happen and feeling that it would be good are instances of factual optimism.

The reason for speaking of *factual* optimism and pessimism should now be clear: such optimism consists of two beliefs (or cognate attitudes) and can therefore be overturned by the facts in two ways: if the non-evaluative belief is false or if the evaluative belief is false. As a corollary, the factual optimist and the factual pessimist are in factual disagreement with each other. What pits them against each other may be either a non-evaluative disagreement about what is probable enough *or* an evaluative disagreement about whether what is probable is good enough. The optimist who thinks that illiteracy will decrease and the pessimist who thinks that it will increase have, typically, a non-evaluative disagreement, but they agree that illiteracy is bad. The optimist who thinks that immigration is increasing, and that this is good; and the pessimist who thinks that immigration is increasing, and that this is bad, are in evaluative disagreement, but they agree on the non-evaluative facts.

Wrapping up, factual optimism is defined in terms of two cognitive and propositional attitudes, one evaluative, the other non-evaluative. For the sake of simplicity, I will speak in what follows only of beliefs but in principle all cognitive/truth-seeking attitudes can be constitutive of factual optimism: feeling that one has passed a test, being convinced that a negotiation was successful, being confident that one's country will win the war, etc.

There are many varieties of factual optimism depending on the content and modes of the non-evaluative and evaluative cognitive attitudes. For instance, the content of the non-evaluative state may concern features of one's own situation (local optimism), or of the world (global optimism). The *contents* of the evaluative attitudes allow us to distinguish *pro tanto* from *pro toto* factual optimisms: Julie may think that climate warming can be settled by technological progress (*pro tanto* optimism about climate warming), but nonetheless believe that climate will warm because of growing hostility against technological progress (*pro toto* pessimism about climate warming). I will not seek here to map these different varieties of factual optimism further; suffice it to say that the proposed definition allows for ample variations within the category of factual optimism. Before turning to focal optimism, let me address three objections.

2.2 Objections and answers

Objection 1: 'You define factual optimism in terms of evaluative beliefs. But having such beliefs is not necessary. A person who thinks that the weather will be nice tomorrow and is *happy* about it, is optimistic without holding any evaluative beliefs. Having a positive emotion, or pro-attitude, about what one expects is enough to be optimistic.'

Answer. If pro-attitudes presuppose positive evaluations – if liking x presupposes finding x good –, evaluative beliefs (or cognate attitudes) are necessary for factual optimism. Those who reject that view, however, can retain the spirit of proposed definition, by replacing evaluative beliefs with their favourite psychological ersatz: positive emotions, desires, pro-attitudes, etc.

Objection 2: 'You define factual optimism in terms of beliefs about probabilities. But having such probabilistic beliefs is not necessary. A person strongly convinced that the weather will be nice, or a person who gives high credence to the fact that it will not rain, may be optimistic about the weather, without holding beliefs about probabilities. Being confident that good things will happen is enough to be optimistic.'

Answer. The former objection proposed to replace presentations of values by pro-attitude, the present objection proposes to replace presentation of probabilities by credences. The answer is the same, *mutatis mutandis*: *being confident that p will happen*, requires *having a presentation of p as being probable*. Should that claim be rejected, the spirit of proposed definition can be kept by replacing evaluative beliefs with some psychological ersatz: conviction, confidence, credence, etc. One challenge for upholders of these attitudinal moves, however, is to make room for the intuition that the factual optimist and the factual optimist are in disagreement about the facts.

Objection 3: ‘You define factual optimism in terms of monadic values, but most forms of optimism involve comparative values. Whoever thinks that things are getting better does not necessarily attribute positive values to them. For instance, one can think that things are simply getting less bad. Or one might reject monadic values altogether and accept only comparative ones. Assigning positive monadic values is not essential to optimism.’

Answer. Here are two reasons not to define optimism in terms of expecting things to get *better*. First, one may expect things to improve while being pessimistic: if one expects things to improve but assess that improvement as being too slow, insufficient, not as good as the one that could have been achieved, etc. Second and symmetrically, one may expect things to worsen and nonetheless be optimistic: for instance, if one considers a deterioration to be slower or lesser than the one could have been the case. Thus, what seems to matter for optimism is not whether things improve or not, but whether one thinks that it is good enough that they evolve as they do.

3. Focal optimism

3.1 Focal optimism defined

Can one be optimistic about something without evaluating it positively and considering it probable? I argue in this section that there is a familiar though un-theorized form of optimism – focal optimism – which does not consist in such positive expectations. Focal optimism is the phenomenon we have in mind when we speak of seeing the glass half full. The glass example is one among many: a professor can focus more on the virtues than on the shortcomings of the essays he is grading; an art amateur may focus on the best paintings of the exposition; a patriot may focus on the best aspects of his country; a political thinker may focus on the public virtues of humans; etc. Factual optimism, we saw, consists of having certain evaluative and non-evaluative beliefs (or cognate attitudes). Focal optimism, on the other hand, consists of a tendency to take things on the bright side, to *focus* on their positive

aspects. Believing that things will go well (factual optimism) and focusing on their bright side (focal optimism) are two attitudes which, although superficially similar, are essentially distinct.

Indeed, seeing the glass as half full does not consist of beliefs about the amount of wine contained in the glass and its value. Were it the case, the focal optimist who sees the glass half full and the pessimist who sees the glass half empty would disagree either on the content of the glass or on its evaluation. But they do not. Both agree that the glass is half full of wine, half empty of wine. It would be a wild misinterpretation of the case to claim that the focal optimist believes that the glass is full, while the focal pessimist believes that the glass is empty. Furthermore, the focal optimist and the focal pessimist agree on their evaluation of the facts: both agree that it is good that the glass is half full, and bad that it is half empty. It would be an equally wild misinterpretation of the situation to claim that the focal optimist values positively not just the full half, but also the empty one (and that the focal pessimist disvalues not just the empty half, but also the full one).

Could it be that the focal optimist and the focal pessimist disagree instead on the *degree* of their evaluation: the focal optimist would ascribe a higher degree of goodness of the wine than the degree of badness he ascribes to its absence – while the pessimist would on the contrary ascribe a higher degree of badness to its absence? This is not what the difference consists in either. Both can agree, for instance that wine has the highest possible degree of goodness, while its absence has the highest possible degree of badness. And yet, the focal optimist will still focus on the wine and the focal pessimist on its absence. Could it be, finally, that the focal optimist ascribes a *higher* value to the wine, while the pessimist ascribes to it a value of lower height?⁴ That is not either what their difference consists in: each of them, in the glass example, ascribes the same kind of value of the wine and in absence: the presence of wine is hedonically or aesthetically good, its absence is hedonically or aesthetically bad.

What sets apart the focal optimist from the focal pessimist is not factual disagreement. To be a focal optimist is neither to see the glass as full nor to evaluate positively the wine as well as its absence, nor to ascribe a higher degree of goodness to the wine than the degree of badness one ascribes to its absence. Otherwise put, our focal pessimist and focal optimist agree (i) that the glass is half full of wine, half empty of wine; (ii) that nothing is better than wine, and that nothing is worse than lack of wine; (iii) and that the wine and its absence having the same

⁴ Heights (or ranks) of values relate types of values—hedonic, aesthetic, epistemic...—contrary to degrees of values, which characterize determinate values of a type. “Justice is more important than elegance” is a statement about the relative heights of justice and elegance, while “Paul is more elegant than George” concerns the relative degrees of elegance of Paul and George.

kind of (dis) value and disvalue (say, hedonic value). The disagreement between the focal optimist and the focal pessimist, if it one, is not about what they hold to be true of the glass, but about the attitude they adopt towards that glass. The focal optimist *focuses* on the full part of the glass. This suggests the following simple definition of focal optimism:

Focal optimism (simple): S is focally optimistic about x =df

- (i) S believes (judges/thinks/feels ...) that there is as much goodness as badness in x.
- (ii) S focuses more on x's good aspects than on x's bad aspects.

This definition is too restrictive, however. Cases where one thinks that x's positive aspect(s) exactly compensate(s) x's negative aspect(s) are rare. How should we characterize focal optimism when the glass is two-third full? Besides, there are cases in which only good aspects (or only bad ones) are present. In such cases the distinction between focal optimism and focal pessimism still makes sense. For instance, focusing on the better aspects of a desperate situation (of which all aspects appear negative) is being a focal optimist with respect to that situation. To accommodate such cases, I propose the following generalized definition:

Focal optimism (generalized): S is focally optimistic about x =df

- (i) S ascribes different values to different aspects of x.
- (ii) S focuses more, relatively, on x's better aspects than on x's worse aspects.

By a 'good' or 'better aspect of x', I do not mean a value of x. I mean, rather, a value-making property: a (typically) non-axiological feature of x in virtue of which x is pro tanto good or better. The focal optimist focuses on the wine, not on its goodness. There may be situations in which axiological properties themselves are what the focal optimist focuses on, but this is not generally so. We rarely focus on values; we typically focus on what is valuable.

3.2 *Focusing*

I have claimed that focusing on the bright side is not to be analysed in terms of evaluative beliefs although it presupposes such beliefs. What then does *focusing* consist in? Focusing on an aspect may also be redescribed as *emphasizing*, *underlining*, *accentuating*, *bringing out* that aspect. Focusing is not a belief nor any cognate cognitive attitude – as defined above as attitudes we can and ought to be true or veridical. Having different foci is not having different beliefs. Three features at least distinguish focusing from believing.

First, focusing is an essentially contrastive notion. He who emphasizes everything, emphasizes nothing. By contrast, the idea that one might believe, perceive or represent

everything in a situation is not incompatible with the nature of belief, perception, or representation.

Second, focusing presupposes believing (or some cognate state) but not the reverse. To focus on some positive aspect of an object, it is necessary to believe (or represent) that this object has that aspect as well as other ones. He who sees only the positive aspect of things is not focusing on their bright side but is simply blind to their dark side.

Third, focusing on something is more active than entertaining a belief about it: focusing, contrary to believing, is something one may do – intentionally or not.

3.3 Attentional and decisional foci

There are at least two ways to focus on the bright side of things, without changing one's beliefs about them.

Attentional focus. The first is to *focus one's attention more on the positive than on the negative*. In the case where we think that there is as much positive as negative – the glass half filled – to focus one's attention on the positive means giving a greater amount of attention to the positive. But suppose the glass is two-thirds full. Giving a greater amount of attention to the positive (whatever our preferred account of amounts of attention), in such a case, is not sufficient to be a focal optimist. What makes one a focal optimist is that the ratio of the attention dedicated to the positive to the attention dedicated to the negative is greater than the ratio of the positive to the negative, as one sees it. If the glass is $\frac{2}{3}$ full, the focal optimist will allocate more than $\frac{2}{3}$ of their attention to the wine. To focus on the positive is to give to it a greater proportion of our attention than its relative weight in our overall assessment of the situation.

Decisional focus. The second type of focus pertains to decisions. Focal optimists ascribe greater weight to the positive aspects of things than to their negative aspects in their decision. I said that focal optimism is, so far, un-theorized. This not quite true. Leonid Hurwicz (1951, 1952) introduced in decision theory the idea of an optimism-pessimism index. Hurwicz's work is not intended to elucidate the nature of optimism but to help deal with decisions under ignorance (where the agent does not assign any probability to states of the world which affect the outcome of his action). Hurwicz's proposal is nonetheless tacitly based on the concept focal optimism, or so I shall argue.

Julie wonders if she should take her umbrella. She doesn't know the likelihood of it raining (decision under ignorance). Her umbrella is bulky, so if it does not rain, she would rather not take it. However, if it rains, the discomfort caused by the bulkiness of the umbrella will be more than compensated by the fact that she would remain dry. On the whole, Julie considers that the best scenario is the one where the weather is nice and she has no umbrella (4), followed by the

one where the weather is nice and she has her umbrella (3), followed by the one where it rains and she has her umbrella (2), the worst situation being the one where it rains and she does not have her umbrella (1). The decision matrix for this standard problem is as follows:⁵

States of the world→	Sun	Rain
Options↓		
Umbrella	3	2
No umbrella	4	1

Since Julie does not know the probability of it raining, she cannot make a calculation to maximize her utility; moreover, no option dominates the other (that is, none yield better outcomes in any state of the world: if it rains it is better to take the umbrella, but it is better not to take it if it does not rain). To decide whether to take her umbrella, Julie can then reason in two main ways. The first ("maximin", Wald, 1950) is to seek to avoid the worst outcome. Under that approach, Julie should consider, for each action, the utility that it would have in the worst case and should then choose the option whose lowest utility is the least bad. The best of the worst outcomes is at the top right of the table. As a result, Julie takes her umbrella. But Julie may also seek not to compromise her chances of getting the best possible outcome. In this case, rather than choosing the action whose worst outcome is the least bad, she chooses the action whose highest outcome is the best (a rule called 'maximax'). The best of the best outcomes is here the box at the bottom left. As a result, Julie does not take her umbrella.

We end up in the unfortunate situation of having two decisions rules yielding incompatible answers. How to determine according to which decision rule to act, maximin or maximax? Hurwicz (1951, 1952) proposes to assign to each agent a certain degree of optimism (inversely proportional to his degree of pessimism), represented by a coefficient. The more pessimistic the agent, the more appropriate it will be for him to choose the maximin rule, while the more optimistic the agent, the more appropriate it will be for him to act according to the maximax rule.

Hurwicz's optimism-pessimism index, I maintain, must be understood in terms of focal optimism/pessimism and cannot be understood in terms of factual optimism/pessimism. A factual optimist would either be someone who considers that the good weather is more likely than bad weather (which is excluded by hypothesis) or someone who reassigns more positive value to the positive outcomes (but by hypothesis, Julie's preferences are fixed). In other words,

⁵ A decision table or matrix is a way of representing a decision problem in the form of a table where each row corresponds to one action course considered, and each column corresponds to one of the possible states of the world affecting the outcome of the action. What appears in the boxes is the utility of the outcome of the action in question for each state of the world.

bringing in factual optimism here would amount to change the problem – either by introducing probabilities for states of the world or by changing the value assigned to the outcomes. For Hurwicz’s proposal to be problem-solving rather than problem-changing, as it is meant to be, it is therefore necessary that optimists and pessimists have exactly the same beliefs about the probability of the weather (here: none) and evaluate in exactly the same way the different possible outcomes of their actions (Peterson, 2009:48-49). Hurwicz’s optimism is therefore not factual optimism. The only way to make sense of his solution is to resort to focal optimism: the optimist is neither the one who sees the probabilities of good outcomes as higher, nor the one who positively reassesses the value of their outcomes, but the one who focuses more on the positive outcomes to decide what to do.

3.4 *Final and instrumental focal optimisms*

On top of the distinction between attentional and decisional focal optimism, a second and orthogonal distinction between varieties of focal optimism is this. Julie and Paul are jointly grading an essay. They agree on its qualities and flaws, but in her comments, Julie focuses on the flaws, while Paul stresses the qualities of the essay. This may be due, first, to the fact that Julie’s, given her mood or her character, can’t help focusing on the shortcomings on the essays, while Paul, for similar reasons, is spontaneously drawn by their virtues. But Julie and Paul’s difference of focus may also be deliberate. Julie may insist on the downsides of the essay because she thinks this is the best way to help the student to improve. Paul, on the other hand, may underline the qualities of the essay to encourage the student. One may speak of *final* focal optimism (and pessimism) in the first case, and of *instrumental* focal optimism (and pessimism) in the latter case. Instrumental focal pessimism is common in political theory, as is reflected in Hume’s famous recommendation:

It is, therefore, a just *political* maxim, *that every man must be supposed a knave*: Though at the same time, it appears somewhat strange that a maxim should be true in *politics*, which is false in *fact*. (Hume, 1742, Of the Independency of Parliament, reprinted in Hume, 1987, italics original)

When seeking to draw the contours of a just, efficient, and stable form of government, Hume thought, one should start from the assumption that men are vicious. Hume and the many political thinkers who adopt this focal pessimism about human nature⁶ typically believe that

⁶ Such as Adam Smith, who Hayek sums up as follows:

Smith’s chief concern was not so much with what man might occasionally achieve when he was at his best but that he should have as little opportunity as possible to do harm when he was at his worst. It would scarcely be too much to claim that the main merit of the individualism which he and his contemporaries advocated is that it is a system under which bad men can do least harm. (Hayek, 1949, 11)

men are also endowed with generosity, benevolence, and other social virtues. But when it comes to political theorizing, they argue, these virtues should be ignored for prudential reason: one should focus on the dark side of men.

4. Correctness conditions for factual optimism

There are, therefore, two strongly distinct varieties of optimism: factual optimism – analysable in terms of sets of beliefs (or cognate attitudes); and focal optimism – that consists in focusing more on the positive aspects of a situation. When is each form of optimism correct or fitting?⁷ The conditions of correction for factual optimism are easy to specify. They boil down to the conditions of correction of the beliefs (or cognate attitudes) that constitute factual optimism. Under the assumption that it is correct to believe that p if and only if p is true, factual optimism is correct if and only if the contents of the beliefs that constitute it are true. For example, it is correct to be factually optimistic about Trump’s chance to be reelected in 2024 if and only if (i) it is true that Trump has significant chances of being reelected and (ii) it is true that Trump’s reelection would be a good thing. If at least one of these conditions is missing, it is incorrect to maintain such a factual optimism.

It is correct to be factually optimistic that p iff:

- (i) *it is probable enough but uncertain that p ;*
- (ii) *it would be good enough that p .*

5. Correctness conditions for focal optimism

5.1 Correctness conditions for simple focal optimism

The correctness conditions for focal optimism, on the other hand, are more difficult to specify. When is it appropriate to focus on the bright side of things? At first glance, the answer appears to be: *never*. Indeed, if the glass contains the same amount of wine as of lack of wine, and if the wine is as good as its absence is bad, why focus more on the wine than on its absence? As it seems, the only reasonable attitude is to focus just as much on the wine as on its absence. Focal optimism runs the risk of being incorrect by nature.

One way to restore the normative status of focal optimism would be to argue that focal optimism is correct if and only if its consequences are valuable. As mentioned in the introduction, a large body of empirical evidence suggests that optimism is often beneficial to our health, well-being, grit, etc. Unfortunately, the literature on this topic tends to collapse factual and focal optimism so that it is hard to assess whether it is *focal* optimism that is indeed beneficial. But this

⁷ I here assume that *correctness* (or appropriateness, or fittingness) of an attitude has to do with some form of conformity/fittingness to the world (de Sousa, 2002; Mulligan, 2007; Tappolet, 2011).

empirical question needs not occupy us anyway. Indeed, the proposal that focal optimism is correct iff it is beneficial, conflates correctness with beneficialness. Correct attitudes may but need not be beneficial. Beliefs, desires, emotions, etc., can be correct or incorrect irrespective of their instrumental (dis)value. The challenge is therefore to find out under what conditions it is appropriate to focus on the bright side of things, *regardless of the possible beneficial effects of this positive focus*.

Simple focal optimism, to recall, is this:

Focal optimism (simple): S is focally optimistic about x =df

- (iii) S believes (judges/thinks/feels ...) that there is as much goodness as badness in x.
- (iv) S focuses more on x's good aspects than on x's bad aspects.

Simple focal optimism is correct, I maintain, iff good is stronger than bad. More precisely:

If x's bad and good aspects have the same absolute value, it is correct to focus on x's good aspects more than on x's bad aspects iff the goodness of x's good aspects is stronger than the badness of x's bad aspects.

For example, it is appropriate to focus more on the beautiful than on the ugly aspects of a landscape if and only if beauty is stronger/weights more than ugliness.

5.2. Stronger

What does it mean, however, to claim that good is stronger or weighs more than bad? Let us first make clear what 'stronger' does not mean:

- (i) *Stronger is not better.* To say that good is stronger than bad does not mean that good is better than bad. Following the proposal above, focal *pessimism* is correct if and only if bad is stronger than good. But it is trivially false that bad is better than good, so if 'stronger' were to be equated to 'better', focal pessimism would be incorrect by nature.
- (ii) *Stronger is not greater.* One could propose that good is stronger than bad if and only if the degree of goodness in x is, in absolute value, greater than the degree of badness in x, in absolute value. But this would be of no help either in finding correctness conditions for focal optimism. For in our example, wine's goodness has, *ex hypothesis*, the same degree, in absolute value, than lack of wine's badness. The problem is precisely to understand how it could be correct to focus on the good although goodness and badness are in equal amount.
- (iii) *Stronger is not higher.* If the strength of a value was the same as its height, it would be of no help in solving our present worry either, as the values that focal optimism

brings to the fore and relegates to the background are of a same height. In our example both have been assumed to be hedonic value of a same kind. As seen above, *being of a higher rank* is a relation between types of values. *Being stronger*, by contrast, must be a relation between degrees of values of a same kind (here positive and negative degrees).

The weight of a value is therefore neither its degree, nor the absolute value of its degree, nor its height in the hierarchy of values. Value weight comparisons concern values of a same type, but (in the simple case) of different polarities: good/bad, graceful/ungraceful, beautiful/ugly, sacred/profane, courageous/coward, just/unjust, pleasant/unpleasant, etc. How can we then make sense of the idea that one of the two poles is heavier or stronger than the other?

One first proposal comes from psychological studies on the ‘negativity bias’, described as the view that bad is stronger than good. Baumeister & al. (2001) proposes that bad things have larger and more lasting effects than good things (see Corns, 2018 for useful critical discussion). However, we are here after some intrinsic rather than instrumental way in which good can be stronger bad (or, for that matter, bad stronger than good).

Hurka (2010) comes closer to a solution. Hurka’s initial proposal (which gets refined afterwards) is that hedonic badness is stronger than hedonic goodness iff ‘For any intensity n , a pain of intensity n is more evil than a pleasure of intensity n is good.’ Contrary to Baumeister approach, Hurka’s proposal gives us a non-instrumental definition of the strength of a degree of value. One limit of Hurka’s line of approach, though, is that its application is limited to cases where the value-making properties are scalar magnitudes, such as pleasure and pain. However, in many cases where no clear underlying scalar magnitude is to be found, the idea that the positive value weighs more than the negative still makes sense. Consider, for instance, the claim that the positive value of knowledge weighs more than the negative value of ignorance, or the claim that beauty is stronger than ugliness. As Hurka recognizes, such claims do not make sense under his proposal, since there is no clear underlying scalar magnitude analogous to pain or pleasure, on which we could rely to compare positive and negative values. Not all value-making properties come in degrees, so any definition of axiological strength in terms of degree of value-making properties is limited in scope.

Hartmann (1932, vol. 2, 465–468) sketches a more encompassing way of understanding axiological strength without appealing to value-making properties. When we represent the scale of values, from the worst to the best, we naturally place the point of indifference – neither good nor bad, but neutral – in the *middle*. This, Hartmann insightfully notices, is actually a substantial assumption: perhaps the structure of the value scales is such that the best is further from indifference than the worst, or that the worst is further from indifference than the best. In the

first case, the good weighs more than the bad; in the second case, the bad weighs more than the good. While Hurka appeals to the intensities of the value-making properties to define the value asymmetries, Hartmann stays at the level of values and defines such asymmetries without appealing to any value-making properties. Hartmann’s proposal can be illustrated thus:

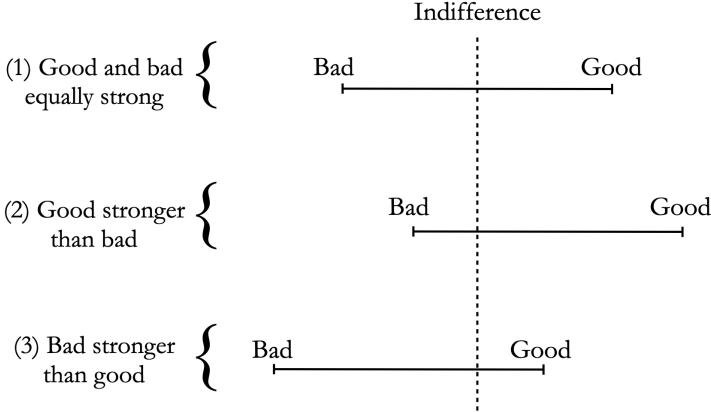


Figure 2: Good as strong as/stronger/weaker than bad

The proposal, therefore, is that focal optimism is correct if the value scale is as in (2); focal pessimism is correct if the value scale is as in (3); what one might call ‘afocalism’ is correct if the value scale is as in (1).

Hartmann’s proposal is, however, open to two interpretations. On the first one, call it the extensive interpretation, ‘Good is stronger than bad’ means that there are more degrees of goodness than there are degrees of badness. On the intensive interpretation, by contrast, ‘Good is stronger than bad’ means that the degrees of goodness are stronger or more intense than the degrees of badness, see Fig. 3.

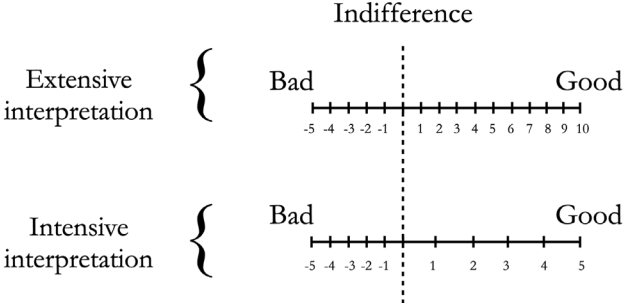


Figure 3: Two interpretations of Hartmann’s proposal

For Hartmann’s proposal to provide correctness condition for focal optimism, the intensive interpretation must be retained. For suppose we endorse the extensive interpretation: we would have to say that the focal optimist is correct to focus on the wine iff the goodness of the wine is of a higher degree than its badness. But we have excluded that answer on the ground that the simple focal optimist and the simple focal pessimist, precisely, agree that the wine and its absence are equally good and bad. So, in accordance with the intensive reading, we have to say that ‘Good is stronger than bad’ means, not that degrees of goodness are more numerous, but that degrees of goodness are stronger/weightier/more intense than degrees of badness.

5.3 Correctness conditions for generalized focal optimism

There is, admittedly, something perplexing in the idea that different degrees of a same continuum might be more or less intense. Before trying to shed light on this idea, let us see how it helps formulate correctness conditions for generalized focal optimism, to recall:

Focal optimism (generalized): S is focally optimistic about x =df

- (i) S ascribes different values to different aspects of x.
- (ii) S focuses more, relatively, on x’s better aspects than on x’s worse aspects.

The idea that good is stronger than bad here is ill suited, for this definition drops, and for good reasons, any reference to goodness and badness. The solution, I propose, is to move from ‘good is stronger than bad’ to ‘better is stronger than worse’. Refined focal optimism is correct iff better is stronger than worse: the better the degrees, the stronger:

It is correct to focus more, relatively, on x’s better aspects than on x’s worse aspects iff the value of x’s better aspects is stronger than the value of x’s worse aspects.

What does that proposal mean exactly though? Brentano (1976) introduces the idea that continua can accelerate or decelerate. The speed of variation of continua, which Brentano calls their ‘teleosis’, can change along the continuum (see Massin, 2018 for presentation). For instance, the colour continua moving from white to black may move at a constant speed but can also change speed:



Figure 4 : continuum of constant speed



Figure 5: decelerating continuum



Figure 6 : accelerating continuum



Figure 7: continuum accelerating then decelerating in the middle

I suggest applying Brentano’s idea to axiological continua. The idea can be represented as in Fig. 8. In (1), which corresponds to the correctness conditions for refined focal optimism, the rate of variation of the axiological continuum increase as one move towards the best, meaning that the better the degree, the stronger. Otherwise put, gaining a degree of goodness constitutes a bigger change than gaining a degree of badness. By contrast, in (2), which corresponds to the correctness conditions for refined focal pessimism, the rate of variation decreases as one moves towards the best: the stronger the degree, the weaker. Gaining a degree of goodness constitutes a lower change than gaining a degree of badness.

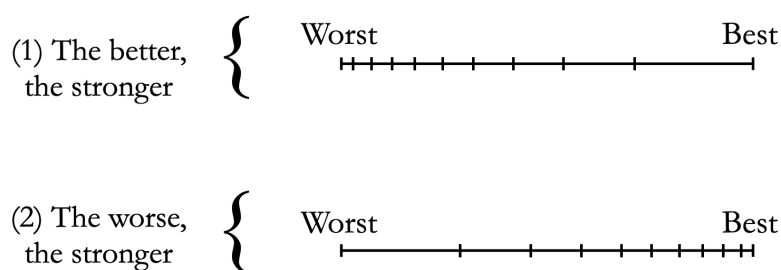


Figure 8 : decelerating/accelerating axiological continua

Aesthetic values provide perhaps a plausible example of (1). Each new degree of beauty is more intense than each former one. As Michelangelo sculpt his Pieta, he adds degrees of beauty to the marble. The idea is that the first degrees of beauty he adds to the marble are of little weight and the more he advances, the more the degrees of beauty added become significant, weighty, intense or strong.

6. Axiological Optimism

6.1 Axiological optimism defined

The view that focal optimism is correct iff good is stronger than bad discloses a third kind of optimism. Suppose that Julie *believes* that good is stronger than bad, while Paul *believes* that bad is stronger than good. There seems to be a sense in which Julie is optimistic, while Paul is pessimistic. Yet Julie’s optimism here is neither an instance of factual optimism, nor an instance

of focal optimism. Factual optimism consists of two beliefs, but Julie has here only one belief. Factual optimism, furthermore, is directed towards the past, the present or the future, but the content of Julie's belief is a-temporal: it bears on the value realm, irrespective of whether these values are or will be exemplified. Factual optimism, finally, ascribes some positive value to an object (or fact) but Julie's belief does not ascribe any value: it is about values themselves, not about what is valuable; it uses value names, instead of value predicates. The thesis that the good weighs more than the bad bears on values, but does not predicate any value.

Neither is Julie's belief that good is stronger than bad an instance of focal optimism. Focal optimism is not a belief (but presupposes beliefs) as we saw. Julie may entertain the belief that good is stronger than bad, without focusing more on the good than on the bad. Julie may lack, for instance, any capacity of attentional or decisional focus. So, we have here a third kind of optimism, which we can define thus:

Axiological optimism: S is an axiological optimist =df S believes (judges/thinks/feels that...) that the higher the degree of a value, the stronger.

Axiological optimism can be relativized to certain domain of evaluation. Hume is an axiological pessimist when it comes to political theorizing. Axiological optimism can also be relativized to different kinds of values. Paul is an axiological optimist about sartorial values if he thinks that elegance is stronger than inelegance. Bob is an axiological optimist about personal values, if he thinks that higher degree of personal goodness are stronger than lower degrees. Julie is an axiological optimist about epistemic values if she thinks that the value of knowledge is stronger than the disvalue of ignorance. Mary is an axiological optimist about religious values, if she thinks that the sacred is stronger than the profane, etc.

6.2 *Axiological and focal optimisms*

How are axiological optimism and focal optimism related? I propose that while good being stronger than bad makes focal optimism correct, good *seeming* stronger than bad, if true, makes focal optimism *justified*. That is, axiological optimism, if it is true, justifies focal optimism. For instance, it is correct to focus more on the better aesthetic values exemplified around us than on the worse ones iff beauty weighs more than ugliness; one is *justified* in doing so iff beauty is and seems to weigh more than ugliness. The relation between focal and axiological optimism is analogous, I submit, to the relation between emotions and attitudes with evaluative content. One's fear of the lion is correct iff the lion is dangerous and is justified iff the lion is and appears dangerous. Second, and relatedly, in the same way that evaluative beliefs/seemings/perceptions ... provide reasons for emotions (a familiar claim

among upholders of reactive theories of emotions, see Mulligan, 2009, Moritz, 2019, Massin, 2021), brightness seeming stronger than darkness gives reason to focus on the bright side of things. Axiological optimism provides reasons for focal optimism.

Axiological optimism and axiological pessimism are only some possibilities among many others. For instance, axiological extremism, as one may call it, is the view that the closer we get to the extreme of an axiological continuum, the stronger are the axiological degrees. Axiological moderatism, by contrast, is the view that the axiological continuum (of a kind) is stronger for the intermediary degree than for the extreme ones. Italian focus on extreme degrees of value is justified iff axiological extremism is true; Swiss focus on middle degrees of value is justified iff axiological moderatism is true.

One subtle form of axiological optimism is due to Hartmann (1932, vol. 2, pp. 464 sqq. — Hartmann does not label his proposal ‘optimism’). Hartmann combines the above-mentioned distinction between different heights of values with axiological optimism in an ingenious way:

In the case of the higher values the whole scale lies more above, in the case of the lower more below the indifference-point. (Hartmann 1932, vol. 2, p. 468)

The higher a type of value is, the farther the indifference point will be from the highest degree of positive value (see Fig. 9).

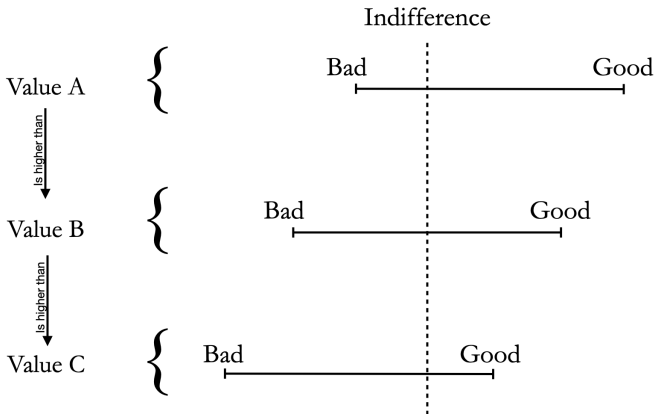


Figure 9 : Hartmann's refined axiological optimism

Hartmann gives the following illustrations in support of his proposal:

Dishonesty (stealing, for example) is criminal; honesty, on the other hand, attains only to the height of what is merely approved, that is, it almost coincides with the indifference-point, rising above it only to the lowest degree. Lying is dishonourable,

but not criminal; but sincerity deserves a far more positive recognition. An unloving disposition is by no means dishonourable, still it is morally of no value, while neighbourly love compels respect. An incapacity to feel implicit trust is only a certain weakness, but implicit trust is something worthy of esteem. Indifference to the destiny and future of mankind can scarcely be called a vice, it is simply evidence of a lack of moral greatness; universal love, on the other hand, because of the vastness of the self-subjection involved in it, is something directly heroic and merits admiration. Finally, the absence of the virtue which dispenses spiritual values is manifestly no moral delinquency, but its presence influences others like a kind of moral perfection. (Hartmann, 1932, vol. 2, p. 467)

Hartmann defends a distinctive kind of axiological optimism (whether is right to endorse it does not occupy us here), which concerns not just one value kind, but the structure of the entire value realm. Hartmann’s proposal is phrased in terms of positive vs negative values, but we now know how to generalize such a proposal to any axiological continuum – not just polarized ones. Exquisitely refined axiological optimism is the view that the higher a value is in the hierarchy of values, the stronger are its better degrees.

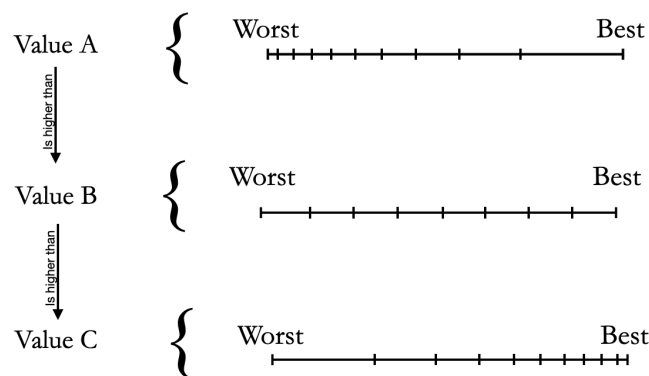


Figure 10: Exquisitely refined axiological optimism

7. Optimism and Hope

7.1 Hope and factual optimism

Contrary to the definition of optimism, the definition of hope has been amply discussed (see Rioux, 2021 and Bloeser and Stahl, 2022, for recent overviews). What distinguishes, to begin with, hope from factual optimism? Factual optimism and hope are similar in that both are directed at what one sees as possible episodes. If Paul believes that his computer cannot be

repaired, he can neither be optimistic nor be hopeful about its reparation. Besides, hope, like optimism, has been claimed to be a source of grit (Rioux, forthcoming). There are, I suggest, three essential differences between hope and factual optimism.

First, hope requires its objects to be regarded as uncertain, which is not the case of optimism. If Bob is 100% certain that he got the position, there is no more room for him to hope, but he may still be optimistic that he got it. Admittedly, there is some oddity in claiming that one is certain and optimistic that *p*. But this oddity, I submit, has to do with pragmatics: when we say of a person that she is optimistic that *p*, a common implicature that she is uncertain about *p*. In the case of hope, by contrast, the oddity goes deeper. It has to do with the very meaning of hope. It is not just that one would not say that Mary hopes for what she takes to be certain; it is, more importantly, that one could not meaningfully say it.⁸

Second, contrary to hope, factual optimism requires its object to be regarded not just as possible, but also as probable. That is, one may hope for something which one considers unlikely, but one cannot be optimistic about it. Judith may hope that the weather will be nice, while being pessimistic that it will. Paul may strongly hope that he will win the lottery, while being pessimistic about it, because he considers it to be very unlikely. Factual pessimists typically hope to be wrong. That would be contradictory if the objects of hope were regarded as probable.

Wrapping up, the formal objects of hope (i.e. what can be hoped for) is what is seen as possible, probable or improbable, uncertain and good; the formal objects of factual optimism is what is seen as possible, probable, certain or uncertain, and good. Assuming for simplicity that ‘probable’ corresponds to probability above 0.5 (but see comments above about probable “enough”), the objects of focal optimism must be seen as having a probability $P(A)$ such that $0.5 < P(A) \leq 1$. The objects of hope must be seen as having a probability $P(B)$ such that $0 < P(B) < 1$. Impossibility precludes both optimism and hope. Certainty precludes only hope. Improbability precludes only optimism.

There is, I submit, a third difference between factual optimism and hope, which does not pertain to the formal objects of these attitudes, but to these attitudes themselves. Hope is or involved a pro-attitude. Some equate hope with a conative or desire-involving attitude (Day, 1969), others equate hope with an affective or emotions-like attitude (Tappolet, 2016, 25-26). (The latter option allows distinguishing hope from wish straightforwardly). Factual optimism,

⁸ At least in the strict sense of “hoping”; some looser sense, according to which, e.g. “hoping” is used to mean “looking forward” may license such uses.

on the other hand, is a purely cognitive, belief-like, state which is not essentially positively valenced. True, both hope and optimism require positive valuations of their objects, but only hope essentially has, on top of that, a positive valence (those who think that for an attitude to be positive just is to represent a positive value, as perceptual theorists of emotion, will reject the present distinction). Optimistic attitudes may, but need not, have such a valence. The analyst who issues optimistic economic forecast is not necessarily thrilled about the future. By contrast, the supporters that are optimistic about their team before the final, display a hot affectively coloured form of optimism.

	Factual optimism	Hope
Objects	Seen as possible	
	Seen as good	
	Seen as probable	Seen as probable or improbable
	Seen as certain or uncertain	Seen as uncertain
Valence	Not essentially positive	Essentially positive

7.2 Hope and focal optimism

Meirav (2009) convincingly argues that the formal object of hope identified above are also formal objects of despair. He offers in support examples in which two persons, one hopeful, the other hopeless, ascribe the same degree of (im)probability to a positive event, yet one hopes while the other despairs. For instance, Bob and Elsa both believe to the same degree that it is very unlikely that they will be rescued from their island before the end of the day. Both desire to the same degree to be rescued. Yet Elsa strongly hopes that they will be rescued, while Bob despairs of this. This, Meirav claims, invalidate the standard view that hoping that p consists of desiring that p and believing that p is probable. I agree. Meirav’s cases display a striking similarity with the contrast drawn above between the focal optimism and pessimist, which both values a situation in exactly the same way. In both cases, despite complete agreement about the assessment of the situation, difference stances are taken towards it.

I want to suggest that the above account of focal optimism may help shed light on the nature of hope. The tentative proposal is that hope and despair, like focal optimism and pessimism, are a matter of *focus*.⁹ The hopeful and the hopeless persons are in factual agreement, but

⁹ That hope involves an element of focus has recently been suggested by Calhoun (2018), Rioux (2021) and Chignell (forthcoming). Calhoun and Rioux argue that hope involves focusing on the goodness of an outcome rather than on its improbability. Chignell argues that hope involves focusing on a desired object “under the

focuses on difference aspects of the situations. Which ones? While focal optimism and focal pessimism target values, hope and despair, I suggest, target probabilities. Thus, while the focal optimist focuses on the valuable aspects of probable or improbable things, the hopeful person focuses on the probable aspect of valuable things. Bob and Elsa assess the probability of being rescued today to be of, say, 0,001. But while hopeful Elsa focuses on the 1/1000 chances of being rescued, despaired Bob focuses on the 999/1000 chances of not being rescued. Hope is then correct, if the analogy with focal optimism goes through, iff the probability of good things is stronger than their improbability, or if the improbability of bad things is stronger than their probability—where “stronger” probability does not mean “higher” probability. This proposal may seem to equate hope with a variety of focal optimism, but it does not: hope focuses on the probability of good things, in contrast to their improbability which is left in the background; focal optimism focuses on the goodness of things, by contrast to their badness, which is left in the background. To make the distinction clear, suppose there is one chance over two to get a half-full glass of wine:

The hopeful focal optimist: ‘I have one chance over two to get a half-full glass’.

The despaired focal optimist: ‘I have one chance over two not to get a half-full glass’.

The hopeful focal pessimist: ‘I have one chance over two to get a half-empty glass’.

The despaired focal pessimist: ‘I have one chance over two not to get a half-empty glass.’¹⁰

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aspect of unswamped possibility”, by which he means that the possibility of the desired object remains salient in spite of considerations pointing to its unlikeliness. My proposal is close Chignell’s but not quite the same: I maintain that hope involves focusing more, relatively, on the probability than on the improbability of a good event (in the same way than focal optimism involves focusing more, relatively, on the better aspects than on the worse aspects of some object).

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