

# Hope: A Solution to the Puzzle of Difficult Action

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**Abstract:** Pursuing difficult long-term goals typically involves encountering substantial evidence of possible future failure. If decisions to pursue such goals are serious only if one believes that one will act as one has decided, then some of our lives' most important decisions seem to require belief against the evidence. This is the puzzle of difficult action, to which I offer a solution. I argue that serious decisions to  $\phi$  do not have to give rise to a belief that one will  $\phi$ , but can instead be accompanied by a hope to  $\phi$ . Hope can motivate and rationalize the various actions that we associate with serious commitment. It can also account for the existence of special pressures to adopt an agential stance toward one's future. Because hope can be cognitively rational when belief is not, there is no problematic tension between the ideal of epistemic rationality and the phenomenon of difficult action.

**Keywords:** hope, belief, intention, weakness of will, willpower, practical rationality

Consider the following two claims:

- (1) The Evidence Claim: It is rational for you to believe that  $p$  only if  $p$  is supported by your evidence.
- (2) The Seriousness Claim: Your decision to  $\phi$  is serious only if you believe that you will  $\phi$ .

Each of these claims seems plausible. The Evidence Claim is a dominant position among early modern and contemporary philosophers alike.<sup>1</sup> Even those who think that there are certain categories of beliefs (such as *a priori* beliefs) whose justification is not determined by the evidence accept evidentialism regarding the vast majority of our beliefs, including beliefs about our own future actions. The Seriousness Claim, on the other hand, seems supported by the concept of a decision as an act of will whereby one

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Shah (2006) for a contemporary defense.

settles the question of whether one will  $\phi$ , as well as by observations on the role of belief in settling questions. It is defended by several contemporary philosophers.<sup>2</sup>

Despite both being attractive, the Evidence and Seriousness Claims stand in tension with each other. If both are true, then either of two problematic consequences follows. Many of our key commitments are difficult, in the sense of involving significant chances of failure and evidence that we may fail. If serious commitment requires belief, then seriously committing to difficult projects involves having beliefs that we will  $\phi$  that are evidentially unsupported and thus epistemically irrational. Holding that we have to choose between the good of commitment to difficult goals and that of epistemic rationality goes against the strong intuition that these two goods, as central aspects of our lives, must not be inherently incompatible. Alternatively, we may conclude from the truth of the Evidence and Seriousness Claims that many of our most central commitments and decisions are not genuine resolutions after all, but only fake, insincere acts of the will. Yet this goes against the compelling view that many such commitments – such as the decision to quit smoking or get rid of other nasty habits – are not only genuine, but life-shaping.

This is the puzzle of difficult action, to which I offer a solution. I will argue that there is no deep tension between the evidentialist standards and the ideal of seriousness, sincerity, or genuineness in one's decisions in cases of difficult action.<sup>3</sup> To salvage evidentialism from the supposed threat of difficult action, I propose that we weaken the Seriousness Claim and accept that we can make serious decisions to do things that are difficult for us without forming corresponding, non-evidentially based beliefs that we will act as we have decided. I argue that having the hope to  $\phi$  as one has decided can motivate many of the actions that are usually associated with the concept of serious commitment. In particular, I argue that hope can play a distinctive role in motivating and rationalizing

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<sup>2</sup> See especially Marušić (2012, 2015); Marušić and Schwenkler (2018); Schwenkler (2022); Marušić and Schwenkler (2022). Philosophers who accept the Seriousness Claim also plausibly include Harman (1976), Velleman (1989), and Setiya (2008).

<sup>3</sup> These expressions are equivalent for my purposes. I say more on what seriousness involves in §2 and §3.

taking the necessary steps toward our difficult goals. Prominent arguments for solving the puzzle of difficult action by rejecting the Evidence Claim focus on an asymmetry between the agential and outsider's perspectives: because the agent is the one who has decided to  $\phi$ , she is supposed to experience unique normative pressures, not shared by outside observers, to take a special stance toward her future and believe that she will  $\phi$  against the evidence.<sup>4</sup> I propose that appealing to hope allows us to better account for the existence of *sui generis* normative pressures, arising for committed agents, to adopt a unique posture toward their future: because of hope's motivating and rationalizing roles, those who have seriously decided to  $\phi$  despite  $\phi$ -ing's difficulty possess special reasons, not had by uncommitted observers, to hope and not believe that they will  $\phi$ .

As a state involving a belief that a desired outcome is possible but not certain, a desire for that outcome, but also an important attentional dimension of focusing on the desired outcome under the aspect of its possibility, hope can help agents 'try something different' and avoid getting pulled down by thoughts of past failures and wasted efforts. Because hope can be cognitively rational when belief is not, there is no problematic tension between the ideal of epistemic rationality and the phenomenon of difficult action. I suggest that especially when confronted with evidence of difficulty and past failures, hoping that one will  $\phi$  as one has decided can be a way of 'taking responsibility for one's agency' (Marušić 2015, 119) – namely, a way of viewing one's success as 'up to one' and determined by one's own actions. In short, hope's connections with motivation and good instrumental reasoning ensure that agents have special reasons to hope – and not believe against the evidence – that they will realize their difficult goals.

To support my 'Hope View' of difficult action, I begin by introducing a case of serious commitment to a difficult goal that does not involve a belief, but a hope (§1). I then introduce what I take to be the main arguments in favour of solving the puzzle that interests me by negating the Evidence Claim and embracing only the Seriousness Claim instead (what I call the 'Belief View' or 'Sartrean-Pragmatist View' of difficult action, for reasons that will emerge). I reject these arguments in turn, in part by drawing on the

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Marušić (2012), 19–20. More on this asymmetry in §4.

case introduced in §1 (see §2 and §3). I then present my Hope View of difficult action in greater detail (§4) and defend it against some key objections (§5).

## 1. The Phenomenon of Difficult Action

Consider the variety of projects we may describe as ‘difficult’. At one end of the spectrum, there are projects whose realization depends to some extent on continued motivation and strength of will, but whose success is in fact mostly determined by favourable circumstances and contingencies outside of one’s control falling into place: depending on the details of the case, the project of getting admitted into a prestigious school with a low admittance rate can be thought to fall into this category (as do that of graduating from such a school; see Morton and Paul 2018, 188; Paul 2022, Section 1).<sup>5</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, consider projects whose success is essentially a matter of ongoing motivation and strength of will. On some ways of filling out the cases, the projects of running a marathon, of quitting smoking, and of becoming a vegetarian belong to this second family. In these cases, we have warrant for thinking that the world will cooperate with our efforts and can safely set aside possible worlds in which we fail essentially due to unfavourable external circumstances (in the marathon case, for instance, due to breaking a leg or getting run over by a car; see Marušić 2015, 169). It is cases of this second kind that have been thought to generate a problematic tension between the Evidence Claim and the Seriousness Claim.

Starting from the idea that something is up to us ‘if and only if, in all [the relevant] possible worlds in which we fail to  $\phi$ , we fail because we cease to try to  $\phi$ ’ (Marušić 2012, 20), we may be tempted to think that serious commitment to difficult

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<sup>5</sup> Success in these projects of course also depends on talent, opportunities, and a myriad of other factors. The important point for the present debate (see below) is that some projects are deemed difficult because they involve ‘volitional challenges’ having to do with continued motivation and strength of will in the face of setbacks, while other projects are seen as difficult for other reasons, extrinsic to the agent’s motivation.

goals whose success is ‘up to us’ entails belief.<sup>6</sup> Assume that running a marathon is ‘up to you’ in the sense just defined, such that the only way you would fail to run in the relevant nearby possible worlds is because you would lose the necessary motivation to go on and fail to keep up with your training due to weakness of will. It may then seem that if committing to running entails settling the question of whether to run, then, considering that running is ‘up to you’, settling that question amounts to settling that of whether you will run.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it may appear that those who are seriously committed to running act in many of the same ways as those who believe that they will run. Because ascribing such a belief seems to be a good way of explaining their behaviour, the belief that one will act as one intends may appear necessary to ensure the seriousness of one’s commitments to difficult goals.<sup>8</sup> Since this belief is unsupported by the evidence when  $\phi$ -ing is difficult, we may conclude that we should solve the puzzle of difficult action by rejecting the Evidence Claim.

My aim is to take issue with the lines of argument just sketched and establish the superiority of the Hope View as an alternative way to understand the mental aspect of difficult action. Those who argue that we should solve the puzzle of difficult action by rejecting the Evidence Claim hold that you can reach the belief that you will  $\phi$  directly *via* practical reasoning, and that such a belief should therefore not be appraised in light of the evidentialist standards of ‘theoretical reasoning’ (see Marušić 2012, 2015; Marušić and Schwenkler 2018; Schwenkler 2022; Marušić and Schwenkler 2022). Because it is not subject to the canons of theoretical rationality, but instead to those of practical rationality, the belief that you will  $\phi$  should be seen as rational when held directly in response to the practical considerations supporting your decision, as opposed to held in

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<sup>6</sup> See in particular Marušić (2012, 2015); Marušić and Schwenkler (2018); Schwenkler (2022); Marušić and Schwenkler (2022) for a defense of the Seriousness Claim along the lines to be developed in the rest of this paragraph.

<sup>7</sup> See Marušić (2012, 6; 2015, Section 6.1); Marušić and Schwenkler (2018, Section 2.1); Schwenkler (2022, Section 5).

<sup>8</sup> See Marušić (2012, 6); (2015, 33–35); Marušić and Schwenkler (2018, 316–321); Schwenkler (2022, Section 2).

response to the evidence bearing on whether you will manage to act as you intend. The belief that you will  $\phi$  is thus supposed to be licensed without sufficient prior evidence and rational even if it in fact goes against our evidence. As Marušić (2012, 27) puts it:

The real threat to evidentialism is, I think, neither practically advantageous belief nor religious belief but our view of ourselves as agents who are capable of interesting, difficult action.

On my opponents' view (that I will call for reasons which will soon become plain the 'Sartrean-Pragmatist View' of difficult action), it is not a conceptual truth that belief is responsive to the evidence. Practical reasons can make belief rational when the beliefs in question concern something that is up to us to do.

My opponents argue for their view in part by pointing to an asymmetry between the agent's perspective on whether she will  $\phi$  and that of an outside observer, uncommitted to  $\phi$ -ing (Marušić 2012, 19–20; 2015, 20–21; 123–136). They insist that an agent who has decided to  $\phi$  faces distinctive normative pressures, *qua* agent, to believe that she will  $\phi$ , on pain of being superficial in her resolve, whereas an outside observer who, unlike the agent, has not committed to  $\phi$ -ing, is free to adopt attitudes about what the agent will do based on the evidence. I consider the existence of an asymmetry between the agential and uncommitted perspectives to be Sartrean Pragmatism's important kernel of truth. I agree with Sartrean Pragmatists that deciding to  $\phi$  (when  $\phi$ -ing is difficult and up to us) impacts our reasons for future-directed attitudes. However, as we shall see, I hold that Sartrean Pragmatists have misidentified what the relevant future-directed attitudes are: they are hopes, and not beliefs.

To warm us up to what I call the 'Hope View' of difficult action, consider the following case, which I take to involve a 'serious' or 'sincere' commitment to  $\phi$  (where  $\phi$ -ing is difficult and 'up to us') – a commitment which does not entail a belief that one will  $\phi$  as one intends, but which is instead accompanied by a hope to  $\phi$ . I take my case to spell trouble for the main arguments in support of the Seriousness Claim and against the Evidence Claim, while opening up the conceptual space necessary for thinking about hope's distinctive role in cases of difficult action:

*Betsy's Marathon:* Despite her bad track record with attempts to become athletic, Betsy has decided to run a marathon. She thinks that realizing this project would be a great personal achievement. Even if she sees her chances of success as low, she manages to avoid viewing her current efforts as necessarily wasted. Betsy instead focuses on the *possibility* of realizing her difficult goal. By attending to her project's realization as possible, she is led to identify various paths to achieving it, in order to avoid making the same mistakes as in her previous attempts to become athletic. In particular, she tries out different kinds of running plans, running with a partner, cross-training, and even hiring an expensive running coach. She realizes that considering her bad track record, these methods may not suffice and may only be a waste of time and resources. But Betsy hopes to run a marathon, and it is this hope that keeps her going. When questioned by others about her decisions, she responds: 'I have decided to run a marathon. I am not confident that I will pull it off, but I do not believe that I will fail either. I hope to run. This is why I do all these things.'

Let me highlight what I take to be the key features of my case (to which I come back in what follows):

- Betsy has decided to run a marathon, not to simply try to run, or to take only some steps toward running. She does not merely desire or wish to run either. Running is her will and, as such, poses problems for her practical reasoning to solve.
- Considering her tainted track record and akratic tendencies regarding exercise, Betsy does not believe that she will run the marathon, nor believe that she will not run. Holding neither of these beliefs appears epistemically rational.
- Betsy's hope helps her identify the means to her difficult end and motivates her to take these means, which would otherwise often appear to be vain sacrifices or wasted efforts. Betsy's hope does not remove her tendency to be too quick to revise her exercise resolutions when in the presence of temptation. But it helps to counteract this tendency by allowing her to identify possible paths to realizing her

goal considering her weakness of will, and allowing her to move along those paths.

I take this example to feature core aspects of difficult action whose realization is ‘up to us’. I will expand on hope’s role in promoting good means-end reasoning in cases of difficult action in §4, where I argue that agents in Betsy’s position have special reasons to hope. For now, I want to insist on the first and second features of my case. My opponent who thinks that we should solve the puzzle of difficult action by rejecting the Evidence Claim and embracing only the Seriousness Claim instead is committed to viewing Betsy as ‘insincere’ or ‘not serious’ in her resolve – that is, if she has even resolved at all. I think this should strike us as implausible. We should instead use Betsy’s case to undermine the main arguments in favour of the Seriousness Claim, as I will now show.

## **2. Settling Whether to $\phi$ Does Not Entail Settling Whether One Will $\phi$**

### ***2.1. Sartrean Pragmatism and the Argument From Intentions’ Function***

One of the key arguments in favour of solving the puzzle of difficult action by embracing only the Seriousness Claim and rejecting the Evidence Claim can be reconstructed as follows (Marušić 2012, 6; 2015, Section 6.1; Marušić and Schwenkler 2018, Section 2.1; Schwenkler 2022, Section 5):

P1: Decisions and intentions that are genuine or ‘serious’ have the function of ending deliberation by answering the question of whether to  $\phi$  in the affirmative.

P2: When  $\phi$ -ing is up to you, affirmatively answering the question of whether to  $\phi$  also settles the question of whether you will  $\phi$ .

P3: In a large category of cases of difficult action (including that of running a marathon, quitting smoking, and becoming a vegetarian),  $\phi$ -ing is up to you.



Conclusion: In a large category of cases of difficult action, seriously deciding and intending to  $\phi$  entails believing that you will  $\phi$ .<sup>9</sup>

P1 is supported by an influential account of the function of intentions and decisions, on which intentions serve to facilitate intrapersonal and interpersonal coordination over time by embodying one's answer to the question of what to do (Bratman 1987). P2 and P3 appeal to the technical notion of something being 'up to you' introduced earlier. According to defenders of the Seriousness Claim,  $\phi$ -ing is up to us 'if and only if we will not fail to  $\phi$  as long as we try to  $\phi$  and continue trying.' (Marušić 2015, 167). Defenders of the Seriousness Claim hold that when  $\phi$ -ing is up to us, by answering the question of whether to  $\phi$  in the affirmative in deciding to  $\phi$  and forming an intention to  $\phi$ , we *ipso facto* get an affirmative answer to the question of whether we will  $\phi$ .

The idea behind P2 is that when something is up to us, we are in a position to determine how matters will unfold. In deciding what to do, we can settle what will happen, thereby acknowledging the fact that whether we will  $\phi$  is ultimately in our hands. To make this idea more precise, consider two people who realize that they have overwhelming reason to quit smoking, but who are also aware of their bad track records at stubbing out this habit.<sup>10</sup> Looking at the evidence, one forms a 'theoretical' belief (namely, an evidence-responsive belief, see Marušić 2015, Chapter 6) that he may well fail and, despite the weighty practical reasons in favour of quitting, uses this belief to justify putting off the decision to quit. In contrast, the other person *decides* to quit smoking. She makes this decision in light of her practical reasons supporting quitting as the best course of action, and thus settles in advance what she will do in the face of temptation. According to defenders of the Seriousness Claim, because quitting smoking is 'up to her' (so that the only epistemically salient barrier to her success is the weakness of her will), in settling what to do, the second person settles what will happen. P2 tells us

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<sup>9</sup> Put differently: When  $\phi$ -ing is difficult and up to you (as is true in many cases of difficult action), believing that you will  $\phi$  is necessary for having seriously decided and for seriously intending to  $\phi$ .

<sup>10</sup> This case is adapted from Marušić (2015, 5–7).

that someone who takes herself to have settled the question of what to do but who, at the same time, believes that it is unlikely that she will act as she has decided, has not genuinely closed that question after all. Her divided stance is not firm. She is not in a position to plan ‘as if’ she will  $\phi$ , nor in a position to plan as if she will not  $\phi$ . She could be exploited in a series of bets that would leave her worse off no matter the outcome (Marušić 2015, 56–58).

The argument’s conclusion is that seriously deciding to  $\phi$  (when  $\phi$ -ing is difficult and up to you) requires believing that you will  $\phi$ . This belief is thought to be reached *via* practical reasoning (namely, reasoning about what to do): one considers the reasons in favour of  $\phi$ -ing, decides to  $\phi$ , and – when one’s decision is serious or genuine – thereby believes that one will  $\phi$ . Those who defend the Seriousness Claim and reject the Evidence Claim hold that to believe that  $p$  is essentially a state of taking  $p$  to be true, but add that there are two ways of taking  $p$  to be true (Marušić 2015, Section 6.2): one can take  $p$  to be true with the aim of ‘reflecting the truth’, and thus form a ‘theoretical belief’ held based on evidence about what one will do, or one can take  $p$  to be true with the aim of *creating* the truth, and thus form a ‘practical belief’ that one will act as one intends. Such a belief is rationalized by the practical considerations supporting one’s decision. Practical beliefs that we will  $\phi$  are supposed to aim to fit the world by transforming it. They are supposed to aim at a truth that we can create by  $\phi$ -ing for the practical reasons behind our decision to  $\phi$ .

Those who embrace the Seriousness Claim and reject the Evidence Claim (the ‘Sartrean Pragmatists’, as I describe their position below) hold that we can use evidence of our bad track record (or evidence regarding a relevant comparison group with a statistically bad track record) when deciding whether to commit in the first place, as well as when deciding which means to take (Marušić 2015, 129–136). But they insist that we should not use evidence that we may well not  $\phi$  to form our view of whether we will follow through after having already decided to  $\phi$ . Once we have decided to  $\phi$ , we should believe that we will  $\phi$  directly based on the practical considerations supporting our decision. What is more, using evidence that one may not  $\phi$  as an excuse not to decide to  $\phi$  in the first place is, according to Berislav Marušić, a form of ‘bad faith’ (2015, 119) – a

way of avoiding taking responsibility for our agency and not settling matters that are up to us when we could. This is the avowedly Sartrean inspiration for the view.<sup>11</sup>

The Sartrean-Pragmatist View is ‘pragmatist’ due to its rejection of the Evidence Claim.<sup>12</sup> Sartrean Pragmatists argue that practical reasons can make belief rational when the beliefs concern something that is up to us to do. Contrary to ‘classic pragmatists’ (for instance, James 1896/1979), Sartrean Pragmatists reject the thesis that one’s practical reasons *to believe something* can make it rational to believe it. On the Sartrean-Pragmatist View, one has practical reasons *to decide to  $\phi$* , and seriously or genuinely deciding to  $\phi$  entails believing that one will  $\phi$  in response to the practical reasons supporting one’s decision to  $\phi$ . Because practical beliefs are not formed out of a desire to believe something (or a realization that it is advantageous for one to believe it), the Sartrean-Pragmatist View, unlike classic pragmatist views, aims to eschew any commitment to doxastic voluntarism (defined as the thesis that we can believe at will; see Marušić 2015, 141–142).

## ***2.2. Commitment Without Belief***

Betsy’s case is meant to put pressure on the idea that answering the question of whether to  $\phi$  in the affirmative necessarily entails having a positive answer to the question of whether one will  $\phi$ . Betsy has decided to  $\phi$  even if she does not believe that she will  $\phi$ . She has closed the question of whether to  $\phi$ , and thus formed an intention to  $\phi$ , without closing the question of what she will do. Betsy’s uncertainty as to whether she will act as she plans comes from considering her akratic tendencies. Yet being clear-eyed about these tendencies does not prevent her from deciding what to do.

In fact, it is plausible to see Betsy and similarly placed agents as having genuinely decided to  $\phi$  (as opposed to still considering whether to  $\phi$  or as merely desiring or

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<sup>11</sup> More on this aspect of the view in §5. Marušić (2015) explicitly draws on Sartre (1943/1956).

<sup>12</sup> In his (2012), Marušić describes his view as ‘pragmatist’ (while being careful to distinguish it from ‘classic pragmatism’, see below). In his (2015), he describes it as ‘Sartrean’, in order to distinguish it more clearly from classic pragmatism. I think that using both labels at once does full justice to the view.

wishing to  $\phi$ ) because the state they are in engages norms of practical reasoning. Betsy's decision to run the marathon seems governed by the norm of Means-End Coherence (Bratman 1987, Chapter 3), which forbids her from planning to  $\phi$  without, at key junctures, intending to employ means that are sufficient for  $\phi$ -ing. Betsy's commitment is rationally incompatible with failing to register for the race and, as the case is described and considering her akratic tendencies, with failing to cross-train, run with a partner, etc. If Betsy does not take these often-costly steps, she will fail to run the marathon. Betsy's decision to run also seems governed by the norm of Consistency (Bratman 1987, Chapter 3), which prohibits her from making plans that are inconsistent with one another, and with her beliefs. For instance, Betsy would be practically irrational if she decided to participate in a bike race happening on the very same day. If Betsy had simply decided to 'try' to run the marathon in the sense of only taking some of the steps necessary to achieve that goal, and not decided to run simpliciter, we could not rationally criticize her for simultaneously pursuing other options incompatible with succeeding to run and waiting to see how things turn out.<sup>13</sup> Because the norms of practical reasoning that apply to Betsy's mental state are those that govern plan-like states, it is plausible to see her as having genuinely settled the question of what to do, even if she does not believe that she will do what she has decided to. On the picture that I propose, even if intending to  $\phi$  does not entail believing that one will  $\phi$ , settling the question of whether to  $\phi$  plausibly entails some related doxastic constraints such as: not believing that one cannot  $\phi$ , not believing that one will not  $\phi$ , believing that one can  $\phi$ , or believing that one might  $\phi$  (Bratman 1987, Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2). Betsy seems to meet these constraints: she does not believe that she will  $\phi$ , nor believes that she will not  $\phi$ , and seems epistemically rational to hold neither of these beliefs.

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<sup>13</sup> Betsy's case is similar to Sarah Paul's (2022, 550–552) case of Sonia (heavily inspired from Sonia Sotomayor's 2013 autobiography), except that the challenges that Betsy faces are 'internal' and have to do with her own weakness of will, instead of being 'external' and related to outside circumstances. Running the marathon is 'up to Betsy' who, contrary to Sonia, has warrant for thinking that the 'world will cooperate with her efforts' (see Marušić 2015, 169). Both agents have decided to  $\phi$  without believing that they will  $\phi$ .

The argument from intention's function outlined earlier claims that those who intend to  $\phi$  without believing that they will  $\phi$  are incoherent: they are not in a position to act 'as if' they will  $\phi$ , nor in a position to act as if they will not  $\phi$ . If they waffle between assuming their failure and assuming their success, agents who have decided to  $\phi$  without believing that they will  $\phi$  could be Dutched-booked (namely, be lured into a series of bets in which they will lose no matter the outcome; see Marušić 2015, 56). I think we should reject this description of the situation of those engaged in difficult pursuits whose realization is 'up to them'. Agents in Betsy's circumstances can simultaneously and rationally plan for different possible and mutually incompatible futures: their preferred state of the world in which they  $\phi$ , but also for the eventuality of their failure. Those in Betsy's position can decide to  $\phi$  and, considering their uncertainty as to whether they will manage to do what they intend, also form conditional intentions (Bratman 1987; Ferrero 2009) of the form ' $\psi$  if I do not  $\phi$ ' (where  $\psi$ -ing and  $\phi$ -ing are mutually exclusive). By forming (alongside their primary plans) such conditional intentions with their primary plan's failure as an antecedent, agents can simultaneously plan for the future they desire the most and in which they succeed, and for alternative states of the world where their akratic tendencies win out and they have to start over again (or even abandon the pursuit altogether). Betsy, for instance, can rationally decide to run the marathon and plan accordingly, while also making conditional, contingency plans for the possible state of the world in which she fails: she might, for instance, decide to set aside some money for next year's race already, in case her plans for this year's do not come through. In order to be practically rational, the pursuit of such a contingency plan should not undermine her main goal and leave a sufficiently good version of her main plan open: if Betsy saves so much for next year's race that she becomes unable to afford the running coach she planned to use this year, she would then be practically irrational.<sup>14</sup> Still, because there seem to be many ways for agents like Betsy to rationally plan for their success while bearing in mind the possibility of her failure by making some of their plans conditional,

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<sup>14</sup> See Paul (2022) for a full defense of the practical rationality of having a 'Plan B'. Paul also draws on the notion of conditional intention. I discuss the key differences between Paul's cases and mine in note 12.

we should not conclude that deciding to  $\varphi$  without believing that one will  $\varphi$  necessarily leads to practical incoherence.

Furthermore, as we will see more in-depth shortly, it is unclear whether agents who have genuinely committed to  $\varphi$ -ing (despite this action's difficulty as something up to them) should be portrayed as ever acting 'as if' they will  $\varphi$ , as defences of the argument from intentions' function seem to assume. We will see that those who, like Betsy, are genuinely committed to  $\varphi$ -ing while hoping to  $\varphi$  possess some behavioural and linguistic dispositions that differ from those of their believing counterparts acting 'as if' they will  $\varphi$ , while also behaving in the ways we expect seriously committed agents to act. In fact, as will become apparent, avoiding assuming one's future success in one's practical reasoning and remaining hopeful instead can help seriously committed agents stay practically rational.

### **3. Acting Like Someone Seriously Committed to $\varphi$ -Ing Does Not Entail Believing That One Will $\Phi$**

I have so far used *Betsy's Marathon* to undermine support for the Seriousness Claim and bring into view the idea of a genuine practical commitment to  $\varphi$  that does not entail a corresponding belief that one will  $\varphi$ . Yet my opponent marshals more arguments for the Seriousness Claim: one focusing on belief's characteristic effects, and another centring on an asymmetry between the agential stance toward one's future and that of an observer. Appealing to the possibility of commitment without belief does not suffice to defuse these arguments. Their rejection requires getting clearer on the concept of seriousness and the set of actions that are often associated with serious commitment. It also requires identifying the role of hope in motivating and rationalizing those actions.

Sartrean Pragmatists insist that belief's characteristic effects include 'planning for  $p$ , asserting  $p$ , and acting as if  $p$ ' (Marušić 2012, 6; 2015, 33–35; Marušić and Schwenkler 2018, 316–321; Schwenkler 2022, Section 2). They then note that those who have decided to  $\varphi$  in cases of difficult action typically manifest the behavioural dispositions associated with the belief that they will  $\varphi$  (Marušić 2012, 6):

When someone decides to do something and her decision is serious, she will be prepared to engage in belief-exhibiting behavior, and to the extent that she doesn't do so, she reveals a lack of seriousness [in her decision].

According to Sartrean Pragmatists, one's decision is worthy of that name only insofar as one 'plans as if one will do as one has decided'. Such planning is supposed to involve taking preliminary steps, taking the necessary means, and avoiding having plans and beliefs that are inconsistent with the realization of one's resolution. In addition to having these dispositions, those who have seriously decided to  $\phi$  in cases of difficult action are, according to Sartrean Pragmatists, also ready to assert that they will  $\phi$  when asked. Attributing to these agents the belief that they will  $\phi$  as they have decided seems to best explain their planning, behavioural, and linguistic dispositions.

I hold that the argument just sketched misconstrues the just-mentioned dispositions that seriously committed agents in fact have. A first indication that agents in Betsy's position do not typically plan 'as if' they will succeed is the fact that, as we saw earlier, they seem able to rationally make conditional plans that take into account the possibility of their failure. But in addition, it appears that those who have decided to  $\phi$  while suspending judgment as to whether they will  $\phi$  are usually not ready to assert that they will  $\phi$ : Betsy expresses her intention to  $\phi$  by saying, 'I have decided to  $\phi$ ', and not by saying 'I will  $\phi$ '. We should recognize that even if sentences such as 'I am going to  $\phi$ ' and 'I will  $\phi$ ' are natural ways of expressing one's intentions, they are not the only ways. In fact, we may think that expressing one's intention by uttering 'I intend to  $\phi$ ' or 'I have decided to  $\phi$ ' is often a means of signalling that one lacks the belief that one will indeed  $\phi$ . The sentence 'I will  $\phi$ ', when uttered by someone in Betsy's position, may even seem to violate something like Grice's Maxim of Quantity (Grice 1975, 45–46; see Levy 2018): one is in a position to utter the more informative 'I intend to  $\phi$ , but I suspect I might not make it – it's going to be very hard.' – an utterance which would circumvent any confusion over whether one is expressing belief or intention. As Donald Davidson (1980, 91) once noted, attending to linguistic practice does not suffice to establish that intention entails belief.

Besides, if we see agents in situations like Betsy's as believing that they will succeed and as assuming their future success as a premise for further practical reasoning, we struggle to make sense of their disposition for 'strategic choice', defined as the decision to avoid temptation altogether instead of trying to resist it (Gauthier 1997; Holton 2009, Chapter 6). Like Ulysses who ties himself to the mast and has his sailors put wax in their ears, agents confronted with their own weakness of will often choose to strategically limit their options or raise the cost of succumbing. (This may for instance involve the use of self-control applications.) Assuming for the sake of argument that 'practical belief' is possible, I submit that agents who believe in their future success in response to the practical considerations supporting their commitment will often fail to engage in strategic choice when they should. Consider a case where one attributes great value to facing temptation head-on: I have decided to quit drinking coffee, but I see something attractive in the asceticism of keeping my fancy espresso machine and confronting temptation every morning. Or consider a case where strategic choice becomes especially costly: making a long detour to avoid the café would be best to ensure that I maintain my resolution to quit caffeine, but at the same time, I am in a hurry to get to the department. I submit that in both of these sorts of cases, the Sartrean-Pragmatist View can portray me as justified in preferring to forfeit strategic choice, even if it would seem obvious from an outsider's perspective that such choice remains the best option for me. The Sartrean-Pragmatist View proposes that I weigh the fact that strategic choice is especially effective to achieve my goal considering my akratic tendencies against its costs (Marušić 2015, 131–133). But because I already believe that I will succeed at my goal, it does not take much to tip the balance of practical considerations against strategic choice. Even when it is plain that I should avoid confronting temptation altogether, the Sartrean-Pragmatist View seems to warrant me in viewing strategic choice as an unnecessary cost.

Go back to Betsy's case. We may think that, for Betsy, hiring an expensive running coach is a form of strategic choice: Betsy is willing to pay a premium and stack the deck against herself to ensure that she will get up for training, and won't be confronted with the attractions of her warm bed. Betsy is also ready to perform many actions that someone who merely desires to run would not be ready to undertake: she is



willing to try out different kinds of running plans, to try running with a partner, to cross-train, etc. Strictly speaking, someone could be seriously committed to running without being willing to take these costly steps. For as we saw in §2, we can consider one's decision to  $\varphi$  to be serious as long as one has settled the question of whether to  $\varphi$  and, in cases of difficult action where one is confronted with significant evidence of possible future failure, settling the question of whether to  $\varphi$  need not entail settling the question of whether one will  $\varphi$ . The problem is that the Sartrean Pragmatist View appear to often equivocate between the seriousness of a decision as being a matter of having settled a practical question in one's mind, and the seriousness of a decision as being a matter of taking steps that are in line with one's goals. The hope to  $\varphi$  as one has decided is not necessary for seriousness in the former sense, but it is a great aid to seriousness in the second sense, as we will now see. The result is that committed agents have special reasons to adopt a distinctive stance toward their future, as Sartrean Pragmatists thought when insisting on the asymmetry between the agential and observer's stance.

#### **4. The Hope View of Difficult Action**

We already saw that Sartrean Pragmatists argue for their view in part by pointing to an asymmetry between the agent's perspective on whether she will  $\varphi$  and that of an outside observer, uncommitted to  $\varphi$ -ing (Marušić 2012, 19–20; 2015, 20–21; 123–136). According to Sartrean Pragmatists, an agent who has decided to  $\varphi$  faces distinctive normative pressures, *qua* agent, to believe that she will  $\varphi$ , on pain of being superficial in her resolve. By contrast, an outside observer who, unlike the agent, has not committed to  $\varphi$ -ing, is free to adopt attitudes about what the agent will do based on the evidence. I consider the existence of an asymmetry between the agential and outsiders' perspectives to be Sartrean Pragmatism's important kernel of truth and will now set out to explain how the Hope View of difficult action can account for it.

I propose that what I will call 'substantial hope' allows agents in Betsy's position to identify and take suitable means to their difficult ends, especially considering their bad track records at acting in line with their intentions. Agents in Betsy's position have distinctive reasons to hope that they will  $\varphi$  because such hope is an aid to good instrumental reasoning in their situation. I propose that hope's role in contexts of difficult

action is distinct from that of willpower (defined as the capacity to avoid revising one's resolutions too quickly when directly confronted with temptation; see Holton 2009). By involving an attentional focus on the *possibility* of success, hope can help agents generate multiple paths toward their goals, including strategic choice (namely, the avoidance of temptation altogether) as an often necessary – even if costly – means to their ends.

Substantial (as opposed to 'prosaic' or 'mundane') hope is a variety of hope endowed with a unique motivational influence, distinct from that of desire. To use Elizabeth Jackson's (2021, 43) turn of phrase, it is 'the kind of hope that we build our lives around', which can provide us with the motivation to go on in times of trial, in the face of setbacks, and despite evidence that what we desire is highly unlikely. Using a series of compelling cases, Luc Bovens (1999), Adrienne Martin (2013), and others<sup>15</sup> have argued that because two agents sharing a belief that the outcome that they desire is possible and an equally strong desire for that outcome can nonetheless differ in their motivation to realize it, we should reject the 'standard' or 'orthodox' definition of hope (see Hobbes 1651/1994) as the combination of a belief that an outcome is possible and a desire for that outcome. We should instead accept that hope involves a 'third element', and identify an additional aspect of hope to account for its distinctive motivational power and influence on rational action. To pin down the state that agents in Betsy's position have special, agent-relative reasons to be in, I suggest that we start from the 'Attention View' of substantial hope (see Rioux 2022; Chignell 2023; Vazard 2023 for discussion), on which hope involves a particular attentional dimension. Not only does the Attention View of substantial hope enjoy independent support from the philosophy of emotion and the claim that emotions involve 'patterns of salience' (de Sousa 1987): it can also account for the kind of 'agential' control that we often have over hope (see Chignell 2023, 59–61), for the distinction between hope's motivational power and desire's, and for the connection between hope and risk-inclination (see Rioux 2022, Section 6). Most

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<sup>15</sup> See Rioux 2021 for an overview.

importantly for our purposes, the Attention View seems able to capture hope's contribution to instrumental reasoning in cases of difficult action.<sup>16</sup>

The Attention View of substantial hope claims that those who hope in the substantial sense that a particular state of the world will materialize tend to concentrate their attention on the possibility and goodness of that outcome being realized. No other considerations (such as the outcome's perceived improbability, riskiness, harmfulness, precarity, or impermissibility; see Chignell 2023, 55) 'swamp' the desired outcome's possibility for them – that is, no other considerations detract and prevent them from viewing the desired outcome as possible. On the Attention View of hope, we can thus say that Betsy hopes (in the substantial sense) that she will run the marathon if she is disposed to attend to her success in this difficult project under the aspect of its 'undefeated' or 'unswamped' possibility. If Betsy's attention is instead monopolized by countervailing considerations (such as her low chances of realizing her goal considering her tainted track record), then she cannot be said to hope to run the marathon. Betsy has the substantial hope to run if, in the broad set of circumstances in which she reliably finds herself, were she to focus on that outcome, she would attend to it under the aspect just mentioned. Betsy does not believe that her odds of success are higher than they actually are, nor is she deceived about her challenges. She simply directs her attention in a particular, hopeful way.

Like other emotions, Betsy's hope helps her engage with aspects of her situation that are relevant to her, considering her desires, goals, and concerns, with the aim of promoting her interests (see de Sousa 1987). By involving a focus on her desired outcome as possible and good, Betsy's hope signals that the promising possible scenario of running the marathon merits deploying the cognitive resources necessary to form a detailed mental picture of its realization conditions. A good outcome attended to as

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<sup>16</sup> Other views of substantial hope (such as Bovens' 1999 account on which hope involves 'mental imaging') may also be able to capture hope's role in cases such as Betsy's. My primary goal is not to argue for the superiority of the Attention View over alternatives, but instead to show that hope plays a previously underacknowledged role in cases of difficult action – a role that should be captured by any satisfying theory of its nature.

*possible* is further processed in order to evaluate the context, requirements, and consequences implied by the scenario in which it materializes. The deployment of cognitive resources triggered by hope as involving an attentional aspect may take diverse forms, from the generation of vivid representations of the hoped-for outcome's realization, to cognitive activities aimed at gaining additional information on the possible conditions of its concrete realization (Vazard 2023). I suggest that the function of hope in triggering the deployment of cognitive resources to generate paths to one's desired outcome is especially manifest in contexts of difficult action. When one has failed in the past and used bad methods to achieve one's ends (for instance, by constantly confronting temptation head-on instead of often avoiding it altogether), one is in especially great need to recruit one's capacity to generate alternative scenarios and means. I propose that one can do this by focusing on one's desired outcome under the aspect of its undefeated possibility. Instead of dwelling on their previous failures and ineffective past strategies, by attending to what they desire as *possible*, those who hope can strive to find new ways to make it happen. Hope's capacity to help us identify and take steps toward our goals seems especially crucial when we have embraced difficult ends, since these ends typically involve great sacrifices, risks, and costly means (such as strategic choice) that are often hard to identify and enact.<sup>17</sup>

I propose that because of hope's role in promoting good instrumental reasoning in cases of difficult action, agents in such situations typically have reasons to have hope for their future success (when understood in the substantial sense, as just defined). Due to its constitutive attentional focus, hope can help agents like Betsy identify new paths to their goals, and move along those paths.<sup>18</sup> By appealing to hope, we can do justice to the

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<sup>17</sup> Many accept a connection between hope and risk-inclination (Bovens 1999; Rottenstreich and Hsee 2001). Rioux (2022, Section 6) argues that we can use the Attention View to explain why those who hope tend to be risk-inclined in Lara Buchak's (2013) sense.

<sup>18</sup> To be sure, the connection here is understood as contingent: there may sometimes be breakdowns between hope's attentional focus, on the one hand, and the deployment of cognitive resources to generate paths to one's desired outcome and risk-inclination, on the other. But because such breakdowns should be the exception rather than the rule, we can

asymmetry presented by Sartrean Pragmatists as an argument for their view: as an agent, Betsy should adopt an attitude toward her future that disinterested observers do not have similar reasons to take up. Betsy is the one who has committed to  $\phi$ -ing, and, therefore the one who is under the requirement to take the means to her difficult end. Because uncommitted others do not have to find new paths to *her* goal, they do not share her strong reasons to have substantial hope (even if they may have *some* reason to hope for her success, especially in the mundane sense). The Hope View can thus capture the asymmetry between the agent's perspective and that of outside observers.

The Hope View can also salvage the Evidence Claim. This is because agents can have reasons to hope for their future success even when the belief that they will succeed is unsupported by the evidence and thus epistemically irrational. Substantial hope as I have just defined it is widely considered to be rationally incompatible with knowledge: there plausibly exists wide-scope, synchronic norms of rationality prohibiting one from [knowing that not- $p$  and hoping that  $p$ ], as well as from [knowing that  $p$  and hoping that  $p$ ] (Benton 2021; Fritz 2021). Accepting these requirements on cognitively rational hope should lead us to hold that one's agent-relative reasons to hope are defeated when one knows that one will fail at one's difficult venture or knows that one will succeed: even if hope can help us identify and take suitable means to our difficult ends, we should not have cognitively irrational hopes that are in tension with what we know.<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, the agents in our central cases of difficult action are not in this predicament: as we saw, their evidence neither supports the belief that they will succeed, nor the belief that they will fail. Because they should suspend judgment on whether they will  $\phi$ , there are no problematic tensions between what they hope for and what they know.<sup>20</sup> And because the

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take the agents in our cases to have special reasons to hope. I thank an anonymous referee for inviting me to insist on this point.

<sup>19</sup> We should instead recognize that those who have 'knowledge-level' epistemic justification for the belief that they will not  $\phi$  should never have intended to  $\phi$  in the first place (Bratman 1987, Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2).

<sup>20</sup> Like Milona (2019), I hold that we can rationally hope for outcomes that are up to us. Cases like Betsy's and other examples of hopes for outcomes that are up to us (see Milona 2019,

agents in our core cases plausibly meet the other key condition for hope’s cognitive rationality in that the outcome they desire is genuinely good (Milona and Stockdale 2018), their reasons for hope will typically be undefeated. Agents who have embraced difficult goals can exert control over their attention and, over time, influence their attentional dispositions (see Chignell 2023, 59–61). They can thus respond to their reasons for hope, and adopt an agentially distinctive but cognitively rational stance on their future.

## 5. Hope and Bad Faith

Sartrean Pragmatists insist that when  $\phi$ -ing is ‘up to us’ (in the sense that ‘we will not fail to  $\phi$  as long as we try to  $\phi$  and continue trying’; see Marušić 2015, 167), we should aim to settle the question of what we will do by looking at our practical reasons to  $\phi$ , instead of seeking to *predict* what we will do by looking at our evidence. Taking evidence that you very well may fail as the basis for forming a corresponding belief and as an excuse not to decide in the first place is described by Sartrean Pragmatists as an instance of ‘bad faith’ (see Sartre 1943/1956, Part 1, Chapter 2): someone who, after having considered evidence of his bad track record, does not decide to  $\phi$  even when  $\phi$ -ing is still possible and clearly the best thing to do is like Sartre’s gambler, ‘who thinks that the fact that he’s always abandoned resolutions to stop gambling before shows that he will gamble again, because he is, after all, a gambler’ (Marušić 2015, 120). Put in Sartre’s terms, such an agent identifies with his ‘facticity’. He thinks that he is a gambler in the way an inkwell is an inkwell—that he is an object rather than free (Sartre 1943/1956, 102). Sartrean Pragmatists may attempt to extend this criticism to Betsy, who hopes that she will  $\phi$ . Hoping that you will  $\phi$  when you could instead believe against the evidence that you will  $\phi$  based on the practical reasons supporting your decision could seem to be a way of identifying with your ‘facticity’ – a way of taking an ‘objectifying’ or ‘alienating’ stance instead of an agential posture toward what you will do.

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713) are counterexamples to Meirav’s (2009) analysis of hope as always involving a ‘resignative desire’ (namely, a desire for something that lies at least partly outside of our control). See also §5 on Sartrean bad faith.

We can now see why this criticism misses the mark. As discussed in §2, in cases of difficult action, genuinely settling the question of what to do is perfectly compatible with forming evidentially-based beliefs about what one will do and one's chances of success. The state that Betsy and similarly placed agents are in displays the hallmarks of intention in generating pressures for coherence and means-end consistency, even if it does not entail a belief in future success. Moreover, by hoping to  $\phi$ , agents in Betsy's position can identify and take new means to their ends, thereby increasing their chances of overcoming their akratic tendencies and ultimately managing to do what they have set out to. Hope can be a way of 'taking responsibility for one's agency' (Marušić 2015, 119) because it can promote good means-end reasoning. By contrast (and as we saw in §3), believing in our future success against the evidence seems liable to distort our instrumental reasoning, and susceptible of preventing us from engaging in strategic choice when we should. It seems that this sort of attitude – and not hope – should give rise to worries about 'bad faith'. Sartre famously stated that one can fall into bad faith by 'treating oneself as an object', and identifying with one's facticity. But he also added that one can be in bad faith by identifying with one's 'transcendence' (Sartre 1943/1956, Part 1, Chapter 2) and seeing oneself as a pure will, completely unconditioned by outside circumstances and one's personal history. Using the categories endorsed by Sartrean Pragmatists, I submit that believing that we will succeed against the evidence in cases such as Betsy's is akin to falling into this second kind of bad faith.

We may still wonder if there are cases of difficult action slightly different from *Betsy's Marathon* in which agents experience special pressures to commit in a way that involves believing that they will  $\phi$ . Consider the case of someone who, in light of the risks to his family's health, his own, and the financial costs, has tried quitting smoking many times already. One day, he falls asleep with a cigarette in his mouth and endangers his children by almost setting the house on fire. Shaken by this experience, he resolves to quit – this time for good.<sup>21</sup> We may worry that if the agent in this case tells his partner that he *hopes* to quit, he or she may rightly regard his commitment as inadequate. Don't

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<sup>21</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for urging me to consider this kind of case.

the high stakes of the situation require the agent to come up with an affirmative answer to the question of whether he *will* quit, and not only to that of whether to quit?

Considering the high interpersonal stakes of this scenario, we should say that the agent has defeasible moral reasons to promise that he will quit and hence believe that he will. However, because morally permissible promises are sincere promises requiring the rational, evidentially based belief that one will do as promised (see Scanlon 1990; Friedrich and Southwood 2011), we should also say that the agent's moral reasons to promise in this case are in fact defeated. It is morally wrong to promise that one will  $\phi$  when one is not in a position to rationally believe that one will  $\phi$  (considering evidence of one's bad track-record), because promises to  $\phi$  are invitations to rely on one to  $\phi$ . Inviting someone else to rely on us to do something that we are not confident we will do imposes a risk on them, may cause them harm, and is therefore morally unacceptable (Brinkerhoff 2021). Since he is not in a position to make a sincere promise, the agent in the case just described should instead express his commitment by saying something like 'I have decided to quit smoking once and for all. This will be very difficult for me, but I really hope to pull it off. I understand the consequences my smoking has on you and the children'. Expressing one's commitment in this way does not seem inadequate, but morally responsible. Moreover, because of hope's impact on instrumental reasoning, by hoping that he will  $\phi$ , the agent may (in the long run) end up with evidence sufficient to justify a belief that he will  $\phi$  after all. He will then be able to rationally believe and thus sincerely promise that he will  $\phi$  – but only after having experienced self-doubt and hope.

I suggest that to understand the nature of commitment in cases of difficult action, we keep separate the questions of whether to commit 'interpersonally' by making promises and 'intrapersonally' by making resolutions. I have argued that agents engaged in difficult projects such as quitting smoking, running a marathon, or becoming a vegetarian have special, agent-relative reasons to hope that they will  $\phi$ . By making what we may call 'hopeful resolutions' to act as we have decided, we can assume a distinctively agential posture toward our future, while remaining sensitive to evidence of our difficulties and challenges.



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