

INTRODUCTION

For and Against Hope



Is hope a virtue? Not necessarily. We hope for many things, some of them good, some bad. What we do or don't do about our hopes may also reflect on us, for better or for worse. One might hope for world peace or an end to poverty, and these appear to be worthy if improbable objects. Yet hoping for such things is not a good, or much of a good, in and of itself. Merely passive hope scarcely seems a virtue; it may appear an idle daydream. Hope for the good becomes meritorious when coupled with exertion: "I am hopefully helping, in my small way, to make good things happen." Conversely, hope, passive or active, can be for bad or morally dubious things: "I hope he breaks a leg." Not that all people would find this a bad hope. Hope for revenge may seem perfectly acceptable, and failure to avenge a slight dishonorable or shameful. There are hopes that fewer would condone: for instance, in President Truman's account, the Nazis' "hope to enslave the world."¹ Yet people can and do hope for the success of persecuting regimes, the elimination of foes and foreigners. Envy, hatred, revenge, self-aggrandizement, and injustice are no less salient as motives and objects of hoping than their opposing virtues.

Is hope pleasurable or comforting? Again, not necessarily. It may sometimes be, as reflected in Samuel Johnson's definition of the word in *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755): "Expectation of some good; an

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expectation indulged with pleasure” (definition 1). That expectation typically falls short of certainty. We also desire the things for which we hope.² This desire is itself, arguably, pleasurable. Johnson may be drawing for his definition of hope on Aristotle’s *The Art of Rhetoric*, where desire involves pleasure: “whether we are remembering desires that were satisfied in the past or looking forward to their satisfaction in the future, we do feel a kind of pleasure.”³ Ancient Greek metaphors often present hope (*elpis*) as a sweet and warm feeling.⁴ Emily Dickinson, in one of the best-known poems on hope (“Hope is the thing with feathers”), reifies it as “the little bird / That kept so many warm.” But sometimes hope doesn’t feel like anything at all. Jayne M. Waterworth maintains that hope is not clearly an emotion, as it lacks the “characteristic feelings” associated with other emotions: for example, “cowering in fear.”⁵ Contra Aristotle, Waterworth argues that it is not “necessarily the case that one who hopes should experience any hedonic tone at all” (57). We can go further: hope may not only not involve pleasure but, rather, involve anxiety and pain. As a Google search amply reveals, poets invoke “anxious hope” and “fearful hope.” The protagonist of an Olga Tokarczuk novel reflects: “I still had hope but it was a stupid hope, so painful.”⁶

But my examples so far have treated an agent’s hopes for herself. What about hopes *in* as well as *for* others? As good and generous as such hopes may sound, even they are not necessarily virtuous. Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations* shows how selfish and wrong hopes for others – here, children – can be. Miss Havisham, in revenge for being jilted on her wedding day, raises her adopted heir Estella

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to be an icy femme fatale. Magwitch has afforded Pip the financial (though not the moral) means to be a metropolitan gentleman, but his expressed hope in Pip's gentleman status boils down to wanting to own something better than the fine horses of his social superiors in Australia.⁷ Havisham and Magwitch both produce monsters, though as their hopes in them fail so fades the monstrosity of their creatures. The novel shows that the hopes we have for others can be the opposite of disinterested or beneficial.⁸ They are, emphatically, *our* hopes. The most moral character in Dickens's novel is Pip's older brother-in-law, and surrogate father, Joe Gargery, who has no particular hopes for Pip: toward him he has only love, benevolence, and a sense of duty bound to village life and the rural past. Hope for the future is thus, for Joe, hope in the past: his child with Biddy will be named after his first-fostered child, Pip. It is a narrative moment when, to use Seamus Heaney's phrase, "hope and history rhyme."⁹

Yet even history, or things in the past, can be hoped for. Hopes can address things we hope may have happened but about which we are unaware. "I hope she came through surgery," one can reflect, long after surgery is over. Such hopes can be tinged with anxiety on account of their belatedness. Or they can be merely polite, as in this exchange in *Great Expectations* between Pip, now a gentleman, and the convict Magwitch, his secret (at this stage) benefactor:

"How are you living?" I asked him.

"I've been a sheep-farmer, stock-breeder, other trades besides, away in the new world [Australia]," said he: "many a thousand mile of stormy water off from this."

"I hope you have done well?"

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“I’ve done wonderful well. There’s others went out alonger me as has done well too, but no man has done nigh as well as me. I’m famous for it.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“I hope to hear you say so, my dear boy.”¹⁰

Pip expresses a hope in the past and then gratification that what he desired has come to pass. Magwitch counters with a hope in the future that at first seems unaccountable, hoping to hear what he has already heard. (This mystery will soon be solved: he hopes to hear of Pip’s gladness once Pip learns that he, Magwitch, has been his benefactor.)

Evidently, the passion of hoping is complicated in its morality, affect, even temporality. Hope depends for its moral status and hedonic tone (if any) on a variety of contexts, including the particularities of what is hoped for, the likelihood of attaining what is desired, and how an agent acts or does not act on her hopes. Why, then, is *hope* apt to sound like a simple and immediate *good* to many people? If hope appears an unqualified good to you, independent of any specific context, it is likely for one of two reasons:

1. You belong to or have been influenced by one of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), in which faith-based hope counts as a virtue.
2. You are a political liberal who hopes for greater justice, conceive of it as you may – and the fuzzier your conception, the better hope may sound. Starting with supporters of the French Revolution, and extending through Barack Obama’s 2008 “Hope” poster, *hope* has served as shorthand for progressive politics.

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Because hope's positive connotations are now prevalent in the West, I start my literary history with the classical counterpoint, in which hope is at best problematic, something in need of regulation and restraint if not extirpation. I later turn to Judeo-Christianity, and then European and American Romanticism, and offer a preliminary sketch – to be filled in by subsequent chapters – of the reasons why hope features as a good thing in these overlapping but distinct contexts, religious and political. Since the rise of Christianity, hope has been a double-edged concept: on one hand, it is a worldly passion or emotion, and its contrary is either fear or despair.¹¹ As an emotion (or an emotion-like motive), hope was widely criticized in classical antiquity through the Renaissance and Enlightenment as an illusion and presumption, a distraction from the present moment, the occasion for irrational and self-destructive thinking. On the other hand, within Christianity hope of a specific kind is one of three theological virtues, and its opposite, despair, is the unforgivable sin. As a theological virtue – the anticipation of sharing eternally in the glory of God – hope is always a good thing in Christian cultures, and more generally in the Abrahamic faiths.

In this Introduction, as in the book it forecasts, I first establish the classical case against hope. I then examine the theological case for hope, and the ongoing tensions between these two competing frames of reference. After attending to the Enlightenment transformation of hope, along with the other passions, into a morally neutral, motivational psychology, I focus on the grander claims made on its behalf during and after the French Revolution. Hope becomes in the Romantic era a new,

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semi-secularized virtue: the hope for more life, a better or perfected condition of the individual, the nation, or of the species, in time or eternity. This new and indeterminate hope often directs us toward a receding horizon, be it imaginative, ethical, or political. Romantic-era authors direct us beyond clear conceptualization: for example, Friedrich Schiller’s “we were born for something better”; William Wordsworth’s “something evermore about to be”; Percy Shelley’s hope for “arts, though unimagined, yet to be.” Turning to the twentieth century, I address the attenuation of hope in literary Modernism before and after Auschwitz, including Kafka’s tragicomic narratives of “vanishingly small, almost non-existent hope,” and the impatience with hopeful waiting expressed in post-Harlem Renaissance writing. I conclude with Samuel Beckett’s tragicomedy, *Waiting for Godot*, and its futile but enabling hope for the Messiah who does not come.

As surprising as it may seem to us today, for thousands of years many if not most writers viewed hope with suspicion or outright disapproval. Personal hopes, claimed sages from Mesopotamia to China, Socrates to the Stoics, typically involve unworthy or impious objects and thus, whether fulfilled or unfulfilled, end in disappointment if not disaster. Vain human hopes or wishes – hope and wish, we will see, are closely linked concepts¹² – include those for riches, reputation, remembrance, or significant worldly improvement. It may be acceptable in difficult situations to endorse good outcomes, but it is better not to hope, taking hope to have emotional force.

The case against hope sometimes derives from one of two conservative assumptions: first, that we should not desire what the gods have not given us; or, second,

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what history shows to be impossible. The first of these is prominent in one of Pindar's odes from the fifth century BCE, which revisits the myth of the healer Asklepios, who seeks to bring a man back from the dead. Pindar condemns "hunting impossibilities on the wings of ineffectual hopes."¹³ Asklepios' hope is impious, impossible, and punished as such. But even without the gods, history teaches humility through its repetitive and all-effacing force. All things pass, and all things recur. The crooked cannot be made straight. Nothing satisfies for long and nothing will be remembered. The historical case against hopes or wishes appears strongly in Ecclesiastes, an outlying book of the Hebrew Bible:

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.

I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem ... I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered. (1:9–15)

The wishes we have, from generation to generation, are for objects that are distributed not according to merit and justice but rather "time and chance" (9:11), and, if attained, bring no enduring satisfaction: such are power, wealth, palaces, aesthetic delights, long life, and wisdom itself (1:18). The characteristic advice of Ecclesiastes is to work or apply oneself, not with an eye to ultimate

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accomplishment, but rather to be able to enjoy the simple pleasures of the present, “to eat, and to drink and to be merry” within a family setting (8:15).¹⁴

Hope appears symptomatic of human ignorance and impotence across Greek literature. Even Homer’s Odysseus, the avatar of effort and expectation, foresight and craft, who succeeds in returning home from war after twenty years away, errs under the sway of hope. He stays his men in the Cyclops’ den for the exciting guest-gift he imagines might come his way. The Cyclops, lacking all sense of hospitality, promptly eats two of Odysseus’ men (*Odyssey*, Book 9). In Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, Pandora’s jar scatters a host of evils (prominently, labor and sickness), preserving hope alone. Is hope another evil, perhaps the greatest of evils – or the last remaining good, an antidote to evils – or, somehow, both? Pandora and her jar are Zeus’s way of redressing the stolen gift of fire Prometheus bestows on mankind, and in Greek thought Prometheus remains another ambiguous figure. In Aeschylus’s drama *Prometheus Bound*, the Titan gives mankind “blind hope,” a hope that blinds them, in particular, to their future deaths: is this a blessing or curse? What of the deliberations of cities or peoples who must make life-or-death decisions without foresight? In the Melian Dialogue of Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War* (Book 5), the people of Melos place their hope for deliverance from Athenian might in the gods, in justice, and in their allied neighbors – and meet with terrible devastation.

The vanity of most or all hopes is commonplace in the Stoic and Epicurean philosophical traditions and the Latin poetry they inspired. The Stoic Seneca, in his more temperate moods, recommends, “let us restrict the range

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of hope” in order to avoid disappointment and anger.¹⁵ Less moderately, he advises against hope entirely: “cease to hope ... and you will cease to fear.”¹⁶ Boethius concurs in *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Book 1, poem 7, lines 27–31): “Fly from hope and sorrow. The mind is clouded, bridled and bound, where these things reign.”¹⁷ For Horace, in Ode 1.11, the uncertainty and brevity of life preclude “long hopes” (*spem longam*), and so he famously counsels, “seize the day, trusting the future as little as possible” (“carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero”).¹⁸ These quotations remain commonplaces through the Renaissance and eighteenth century; *carpe diem* is one of the few Latin tags widely known today.

Two generic exceptions to the classical case against hope would seem to be (1) the golden-age scenarios of Greek and Roman literature, recursions to a just natural state where property and labor will either vanish or become less divisive and less strenuous; and (2) the Greek-language novels of the Roman era, which reward, after many arduous trials, the reunion hopes of two virtuous lovers, who then live happily ever after. Both cases, however, are fanciful, self-consciously literary creations. Of the five complete Greek novels (including, most famously, the *Aethiopika* and *Daphnis and Chloe*), Laurel Fulkerson notes that in any case only the central lovers have their hopes fulfilled, while ancillary characters (other suitors, parents) are left frustrated.¹⁹ In poems of golden age recovery, including parts of Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (lines 109–20, 213–37) and Virgil’s fourth *Eclogue*, exhortations to greater justice in the present are only clothed in representations of the past. Virgil’s new golden age dialectically preserves the most refined luxury of his day – for example, sheep will

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spontaneously change their fleeces to purple and saffron (42–45) – in a way that is the more appealing for being more flamboyantly impossible. If hope is desire for the possible, then neither the early novel nor the golden age recursion reflects it.

The classical case against hope may be divided into five main points:

1. Hope is fundamentally deceptive, based on an uncertain future that rarely arrives as we imagine it. It wrongly sets imagination over the testimony of eyes and ears.
2. Hope is morally corrosive because most things that most people hope for are or tend to be unworthy, unsatisfying, impious, and harmful, including riches, unstinting sensual pleasure, fame, beauty, glory, and long (or endless) life. The *loci classici* for this theme in the West are Ecclesiastes and Juvenal's tenth Satire (the latter has spirited English translations by Henry Vaughan, John Dryden, and Samuel Johnson), though it underwrites as well the satiric aspect of utopian fiction from More to Huxley. The ephemerality or illusive nature of most or all human hopes and wishes also features prominently in classical Indian (Brahman, Hindu, Buddhist) and Chinese (Confucian, neo-Confucian) philosophies.
3. Considered as a passion, hope is, like all the passions (love, fear, anger, etc.), something in relation to which we are passive. We have either no control or insufficient control over it. Therefore, in hoping we compromise or lose our rational agency.
4. As a corollary to point 3, susceptibility to hope – which may seem a better emotion than others – makes us