

From the Concept of Hope to the Principle of Hope

Nicholas H. Smith

Abstract

The chapter begins by contrasting two approaches to the analysis of hope, one which takes its departure from a view broadly shared by Hobbes, Locke and Hume, another which fits better with Aquinas's definition of hope. The former relies heavily on a sharp distinction between the cognitive and conative aspects of hope. It is argued that while this approach provides a valuable source of insights, its focus is too narrow and it rests on a problematic rationalist psychology. The chapter then discusses the phenomenology of hope with particular reference to the contrast between the lived experience of expectation and anticipation. This leads to a discussion of the value of hope. My thesis here is that when philosophers reflect on hope, they bring along background, tacit assumptions regarding its worth, which I attempt to make explicit. Finally the chapter identifies a second kind of philosophical reflection on hope, which is concerned not so much with the logic or value of hope as with hope understood as a 'principle.'

Key Words: Hope, philosophical analysis, phenomenology, desire, belief, probability, anticipation, Richard Rorty, Ernst Bloch.

1. Introduction

When we look at the relatively small but growing philosophical literature on hope two distinct sets of concerns emerge. On the one hand, there are philosophers who thematise hope as a more or less self-contained topic of philosophical analysis. Among them, analytical philosophers have sought to map out the conceptual content or logical structure of hope, while phenomenologists have attempted to describe hope as a concrete feature of lived experience. The common goal of this kind of reflection on hope is to advance upon the pre-philosophical, common sense understanding we have of hope. I shall make a few suggestions of my own in this regard in the first half of the chapter. The aim of the exercise at this point is simply to obtain a better grasp of the concept of hope and a more clairvoyant perspective on the phenomena of hope. We want a clearer grasp of the subject matter - hope - without at this stage attaching any special philosophical significance to the subject matter itself. We can undertake to improve our understanding of hope without expecting it to be especially consequential for our understanding of other things.

While philosophical analyses of hope are primarily descriptive in intent (they are focused on what hope is, on what the concept of hope actually means), and while they typically insist on a strict separation of descriptive and normative considerations (the question of what hope is should not be confused with the question of whether we ought to hope or not), nevertheless they just as typically serve as a basis for normative claims about the value of hope. This is hardly surprising since the value of hope is by no means self-evident, especially in the context of Western cultural and philosophical traditions. When we reflect on hope, we unavoidably bring along background, tacit assumptions regarding its worth. After dealing with a number of issues arising from the analysis of hope, I attempt to make explicit some of these assumptions, particularly those I believe lie behind the negative evaluation of hope implicit in much western philosophical culture.

Finally, I turn to the second kind of reflection that characterises the philosophical literature on hope: namely, that which takes its departure from an intuition regarding the special philosophical significance of hope. The idea now is that hope is not just one phenomenon among others but a kind of *Ur*-phenomenon, that is, something with an ‘originary’ significance which provides a key for the understanding other things. Hope for philosophers who take this view is not just a contingent object of analysis but something akin to a *principle*. It has significance for the very activity of philosophising and in this sense possesses *metaphilosophical* significance. The great thematisers of hope – Ernst Bloch and Gabriel Marcel for instance - do not just offer analyses of hope (though they do that too). They also view hope as a principle of philosophy. Their reflections *on* hope are at the same time philosophies *of* hope. But the hope principle can take philosophy in different directions, as I indicate in my conclusion.

2. Defining Hope: Hobbes, Locke and Hume vs. Aquinas

First of all, what does ‘hope’ mean? Well, if we are puzzled by the meaning of a word, a sensible thing to do is to look it up in a dictionary. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines hope as ‘expectation of something desired, a feeling of expectation and desire combined.’ At first sight this summarises the various definitions of hope proposed by the great dead philosophers. Thus Aquinas defined hope as ‘a movement of appetite aroused by the perception of what is agreeable, future, arduous, and possible of attainment.’¹ Hobbes boiled hope down to ‘appetite, with an opinion of attaining’, contrasted with despair, which is appetite ‘without such opinion’.² According to Locke, ‘hope is that pleasure of the mind, which everyone finds in himself upon the thought of a probably future enjoyment of a thing which is apt to delight him’,³ a view refined but essentially endorsed in Hume’s definition of hope as the mixture of pleasure and pain that arises from the imagination of some pleasant but ‘only probable’ future event.⁴

On closer inspection, however, the philosophers' definitions of hope invite us to think about hope in ways, which do not fit equally well with the dictionary definition. If Hobbes, Locke and Hume are right, hope is directed at something one has 'an opinion of attaining' or which one imagines will 'probably' occur. It thus involves 'expectation', as the dictionary says. On the other hand, Aquinas understands hope as involving the 'perception' (rather than 'opinion') of something, which is merely 'possible' of attainment. The connection with expectation here is less obvious (for reasons I will return to later) and there is no explicit reference to the probability of some desired outcome, just a perception of a possible future, which is agreeable in some respect. The Aquinas definition doesn't directly contradict the Hobbes-Locke-Hume definition but it does suggest a different strategy for explaining the meaning of hope. Whereas the Hobbes-Locke-Hume formulation invites us to focus on estimations of probability more or less explicit in beliefs or opinions concerning the satisfaction of a desire, the Aquinas formulation invites us to focus on the mere possibility of some agreeable future, which is moreover 'arduous' of attainment.

The most fully developed analysis of hope that takes its departure from the Hobbes-Locke-Hume formulation is Joseph Patrick Day's. According to Day, the central insight captured in this view is that hope has both a *conative* and a *cognitive* aspect: conative insofar as hope always involves desire for something, cognitive insofar as hope also involves some estimation of probability. Day agrees that, from a psychological point of view, hope involves a feeling of pleasure (arising from the idea of proximity to some good), if one always mixed to some extent with pain (arising from the awareness that the good hoped for, the satisfaction of the desire, is still out of reach). This point is central to both Hume's and Spinoza's analysis of hope and Day takes it on board. But it does not follow, Day argues, that we should *identify* hope with such a feeling or 'passion', as Hume and Spinoza mistakenly did. For this would amount to a version of the metonymic fallacy, substituting a part for the whole, in this case losing sight of the cognitive significance of hope, which hope understood simply as a passion (even a mixed or compound one) cannot have.

To avoid that, Day proposes a shift from the psychological to the logical level of analysis. This involves grafting the psychological ingredients of hope identified by Hobbes-Locke-Hume onto a more fundamental analysis of the conceptual content of hope, as determined by the propositions that are logically equivalent to certain basic locutions containing the word hope. The conative *and* the cognitive aspects of hope can be expressed together, for example, by analysing the basic locution 'A hopes that B' as entailing both 'A desires that B' (the conative aspect) *and* 'A believes that the probability of B is greater than zero (not impossible) but less than one (not actual or absolutely certain)' (the cognitive aspect). Day maintains that a congruent

analysis holds for fear, which on his account (again following Hume and Spinoza) forms a continuum with hope. Thus the locution ‘A fears that B’ entails and is entailed by ‘A desires that not-B but believes that the probability of B is greater than zero and less than one.’ This means that, *logically* speaking, hope always has at least a trace of fear, and vice versa. Both hope and fear, on this account, involve entertaining a proposition, however implicitly or even unconsciously, regarding the probability of some desired state of affairs. They are propositional attitudes (more or less justified forms of cognition) which, being bound up with desire, also possess conative significance.⁵

3. Degrees of Hope

At first glance this approach looks unduly rationalistic. While it seems uncontroversial to claim that hope has a conative aspect, that hoping involves desiring at some level, does hope really have the cognitive significance Day ascribes to it? Do we really entertain estimations of probability when we hope? Isn’t hope more spontaneous and less a matter of rationality and calculation than this? Certainly there is a view, now quite widespread in the literature on hope, that hope should be separated from reason, calculation and considerations of probability altogether. Some go as far as to say that hope is ‘really hope’ only when this is the case. Those who espouse this view are often orientated by the idea that we ‘hope against hope’, which they interpret to mean that hope in spite of the evidence, in spite of probabilities and in spite of reason, actually brings us to the ‘essence’ of hope.⁶

But at least three reasons count against such a peremptory dismissal of what I have called the ‘Hobbes-Locke-Hume’ approach to the analysis of hope. First, an acceptable analysis of hope has to be able to make sense of the fact that hope is by and large a matter of ‘more or less.’ We think of hope as going up and down, as increasing and decreasing, and the analysis we favour should provide some kind of explanation of what we mean when we express this thought. One way in which we do express it in ordinary language is by reference to the fervour of a hope. To say that ‘A fervently hopes that B’ expresses the thought that A is ‘passionate’ about B or ‘cares’ for it a lot or has a strong desire for it. The fervour or enthusiasm of a hope can wax and wane, rise or dip, and in this respect the hope itself can be said to be a matter of degree. Considered in their *conative* aspect, we could say, hopes vary in their *intensity*. But is this the only dimension of variation? If hope were just a matter of desire, or if its analysis remained exclusively at the conative level, this is what we would expect. This is because, as Day points out, possibility does not admit of degrees. There is no ‘more or less’ corresponding to the possibility that B as there is for the desire that B. The hoper might have an idea or ‘perception’, as Aquinas put it, that B is ‘possible of attainment’, but

this feature of the hope is not going to explain how hope comes in degrees. So the explanation of the various degrees of hope is stuck at the conative level.

By contrast, analysing hope as having a cognitive dimension in virtue of it involving estimations of probability opens up a second axis of variation. It enables us to make sense of variations in hope that depend on *how likely* the hoped for thing is reckoned to be. And this does seem to map on to another kind of contrast made in ordinary language, namely between 'high' hope and 'faint' hope. Admittedly the expression 'high hope' does not always carry this meaning - it sometimes refers to the ambitiousness of a hope - but it often conveys the idea that the chances are reckoned to be good that the hoped for object will be attained. The relevant point is that chances, likelihoods, probabilities come in degrees - they can improve or deteriorate - and these can be tracked by subjective beliefs that in turn affect amounts of hope. The person with a high hope that B considers it 'more than likely' that B will occur, or less colloquially, that the likelihood of B is considerably greater than not B. Perhaps more to the point, awareness of *greater* likelihood *heightens* a hope. Conversely, a faint hope involves a belief that the probability of some desired outcome is low; or as we also say, hopes are 'dented' by 'setbacks' that diminish chances of success. When we use the expression 'some hope' Z will happen, we mean that it is unlikely to take place, however desirable it is. So just as hopes vary conatively (in their degree of fervour or intensity), we can also now say that they vary in their cognitive aspect (according to the estimation of probability involved, or, so to speak, in their degree of magnitude). This way of analysing hope seems to be confirmed by the fact that the two axes of variation are at least in many cases independent. Thus one can have a fervent but faint hope for something one has a strong desire for but considers unlikely to happen, and one can have a high but mild hope for something one believes to have a good probability but about which one is not very passionate. It is also true, of course, that the cognitive and conative axes of variation can follow each other: one can come to want (and hope for) something more the more probable it becomes, or believe it less likely (and hope for it less) as desire for it diminishes. A congruent analysis can be given of fear, which seems to provide further confirmation of the appropriateness of this kind of approach.

A successful philosophical analysis of hope will not only give us a clearer view of the elements of hope, it will also enable us to make more fine-grained discriminations between hope and similar concepts. A second reason counting in favour of the Hobbes-Locke-Hume approach is that it does provide a schema for interpreting phenomena related to hope. Day makes a number of plausible suggestions in this regard. The idea that hope and fear form a continuum helps make sense of how hope can merge into fear, or flip into it, as beliefs about probability change more or less radically. For

example, my hope of becoming an indispensable employee of a corporation can merge into fear of being made redundant as my beliefs slowly change about the likelihood of long-term continuous employment. Or fear of failing an exam can suddenly mutate into hope of success when I realise see that the likelihood of failure is very low (I open the exam paper, full of fear, and see that the questions are on the topics I revised). Day makes the observation that as a general rule, the difference between the locutions 'A hopes that B' and 'A is hopeful that B' can plausibly be interpreted as residing in the estimation of probability involved, where the latter (not the former) implies that the desired object is reckoned to be more likely than not. The disposition to be hopeful (or fearful), which is obviously variable, can then be distinguished both from occurrent (momentary) hopefulness and from the more general (more or less invariable) human disposition to hope (or fear). As Day insists, the disposition to be hopeful is related to optimism but must also be distinguished from it, as the latter, while a form of hopefulness rather than hope, is nevertheless an extreme form of it: hopefulness that *everything* turns out for *the best*. There is much more to be said about these and related distinctions; and more, I should say, than can be fitted into Day's formulae for the basic locutions.⁷ But at least Day's analysis gives us something to get going on.

A third consideration counting in favour of Day's analysis is that it provides a framework for evaluating hope and 'family related' phenomena. That is to say, it gives an account of what we might call the 'pathologies of hope', that is, the ways in which 'hope', 'hopefulness', 'optimism' and so forth can go wrong, degenerate, be unacceptable, or fall short of some standard of appropriateness. As we would expect, it distinguishes two axes of evaluation. On the one hand, a hope may be unacceptable in its conative dimension, that is, on account of the nature of the desire involved. For example, a hope aimed at the gratuitous infliction of cruelty or humiliation is malicious and for that reason objectionable. On the other hand, hopes and hopefulness can be criticised for being unrealistic or vain; that is, for being unreasonable. Such hopes fall short in their cognitive aspect. And at least in many cases, standing behind an unrealistic hope is a false or deluded belief about probability. Such false beliefs or poor estimations of probability make the hope unreasonable. For example, if I live five miles from a train station, and leave my house five minutes before the train I hope to catch is due to depart; there is something wrong with my hope. The probability that I will get to the station on time is, alas, very low, and that fact tells me a lot about what's wrong with my hope. But I might allow myself to believe the probability is higher because I really want to catch that train. Hopes, hopefulness and optimism are vulnerable to forms of 'wantfulness' as Day puts it, where the sheer desire for something to occur, or for things to turn out well, or for everything to turn out for the best, actually creates the belief that

it is all likely to turn out the desired way, irrespective of the evidence. And really bad hopes may be objectionable on the two axes of evaluation at once. Perhaps a hope for a long life in which I never grow old is objectionable in this way - a vain hope in both senses of the word.

4. Hope, Belief and Desire

At the same time, the focus on belief and desire which shapes the whole Hobbes-Locke-Hume approach to the analysis of hope is not always appropriate, and it can lead to a narrow and distorted understanding of hope. The approach works best when the desire in terms of which a hope is analysed is relatively simple and belief involves a clear-cut estimation of probability. It explains perfectly well why the gambler's hope that he will throw a six is lower but more fervent than his hope that the die will land even: he knows that the probability is less but he wants it more because the winnings will be higher. The analysis can then be extended to contexts of hope where probabilities are less easy to determine, estimate or judge, by loosening up the meaning of probability and belief. Day allows, for instance, that the beliefs involved in a hope can be half-formed, opaque, or even unconscious. The problem however is that the psychology (or 'philosophy of mind') of the Hobbes-Locke-Hume view is ill-equipped to explain (never mind describe) this level of psychic life, and must be so long as this level is regarded as secondary to, or a departure from, a more basic cognitive model. Day naturally wants to avoid the implication that the estimations of probability involved in hope are reflective, conscious deliberations or calculations. But it is hard, given his empiricist premises, to see what else might be going on other than a mechanistic association of ideas within a kind of magnetic field whose poles are pleasure and pain.

The approach also neglects the way in which hoping involves taking a *stance*. Adoption of a stance of hope can involve not so much commitment to a belief about probability (however inarticulate, unreflective or unconscious) as acknowledgement that such a commitment would be out of place. We hope not only when we are uncertain about the future, but when we have next to no idea about what the future will bring. Acknowledgement of our ignorance of likelihoods, of our vulnerability to sheer contingency, rather than a particular assessment of the contingencies, gives certain hopes their specific shape. At a loss to how things will turn out, one plunges in, in the hope that something good will come of it. Estimates of probability might be out of place because we don't know enough; our understanding is too limited, to judge one way or another. Or they may be out of place because we have no clear understanding of what would count as a fulfilment of the hope. This is no small matter as it is in just such circumstances that use of the word 'hope' can be most apposite. If, say, I am considering marriage, I might adopt a stance of hope, yet be unable to envisage the future state of affairs in which

I could say that the object of the hope had been realised. It is completely intelligible in that context for me to tell someone ‘I hope I’ve made the right decision’ even if I’m at a loss to say what would *make* it right. The moments on which lives turn, their hinge points as it were, are times of hope and fear if any are. Estimates of probability in such contexts of hope are both unreasonable and beside the point. Admittedly, it follows that hopes of this kind cannot be raised or lowered as the chances of success are reckoned to be increased or diminished. We have to conceive the vicissitudes of such hopes in different terms.

The distinction between the conative and cognitive dimensions of hope is must also be treated with great caution. According to the Hobbes-Locke-Hume view, the distinction maps onto a psychological distinction between desire and belief (broadly understood), and it finds its way into the dictionary definition of hope as expectation (belief that x is probable) combined with desire. It can seem natural then to suppose that this provides the right framework for understanding the phenomenology of hope, that is, for describing how hope is experienced. But this step soon leads to problems.

5. The Phenomenology of Hope

The analysis of hope given by Jayne Waterworth helps us to see what these problems are. She draws a sharp distinction between expectation and anticipation and argues that only the latter is part of the phenomenology of hope.⁸ There are two aspects to expectation, which are also reflected in its etymology: ‘looking out for’ and ‘awaiting.’ If I put the kettle on and go back into the study, after a few minutes I ‘look out for’ the sound of the whistle and ‘await’ it. I expect the kettle to boil. If I order a taxi for a certain time and know the service to be reliable, I look out for it and await its arrival close to the appointed time. Given what I know (or reasonably believe on the basis of experience, testimony, etc) about the taxi service I expect it. I am relatively certain it will come and so can just wait. I would not expect the arrival of the taxi if I had serious doubts about the reliability of the service, that is, if I had a low estimation of the probability of a timely arrival. I may still ‘look out for’ for the taxi but would not ‘await’ it as I would if I expected it. To give another example, if I allow myself to be refused a vacant seat on the grounds that the person sitting next to it is ‘expecting someone’, I assume that the seat is *as good as* occupied, that it is *about to be* filled. A different nuance, which is perhaps even more telling in its own way, is conveyed when we say that a pregnant woman is ‘expecting.’ For the meaning carried here is that a natural process is underway which can now be left to run its own course. Though the outcome of course is far from inevitable, nature has now taken over. In general, then, we can say that we expect things we regard as very likely to happen, and this assurance allows the subject who experiences expectation to take a certain distance from its environment, to stand back and wait for

events to take their course, so to speak, while looking out for the expected outcome.

The experience of expectation can now be contrasted with that of anticipation. Whereas the etymological roots of expectation lie in the idea of 'looking out for' and 'awaiting', those of anticipation lie in 'seizing or taking possession beforehand', and the protensive engagement of the self in its environment implied in the latter meaning provides a key to the phenomenological difference between them. For the 'seizing in advance' that marks anticipation involves a projection of one's *self* into the future such that one is united with some objective. The anticipating subject lacks the assurance about outcomes that the expecting subject possesses. When I anticipate something, the future appears uncertain and, in a way that contrasts with expectation, *down to me*. Whereas the subject who expects stands back, observes, and waits, the subject who anticipates is from the beginning saturated, so to speak, with a *readiness for action*. Anticipation thus involves an active 'taking up' of a stance and a projective preparedness that reflects the subject's immersion in and engagement with the environment. This structure of anticipation has been analysed extensively and in considerable detail by psychologists and philosophers. But let me give a simple homely example just to illustrate the main point. If I go to bed at night expecting my husband to snore, I lie there awake 'looking out for' and 'awaiting' it. But I can change this expectation to anticipation if I take a plan to the bedroom, say to lever him up on his side when the breathing gets heavy. The expecting and the anticipating subject both lie there sleepless in the dark, but their connection to the proximate future, and on that account their way of being in the present, is quite different.

Once the contrast between the experience of expectation and anticipation is spelled out in this way, it seems clear that it is the latter that belongs to the phenomenology of hope. Insofar as we are able to speak in general terms about 'the experience of hope', it is more accurate to describe it as an anticipation of something, in the sense of seizing it in advance and projectively uniting ourselves with an objective of which we are uncertain (and perhaps even unconscious), than to say it is an expectation of something in the sense of 'looking out for' some specified event and awaiting its occurrence. The ease with which we use the expression 'hopeful anticipation', in contrast to the awkwardness of 'hopeful expectation', reinforces this point. Waterworth is thus right to say that the OED definition of hope is misleading. She correctly points out that the experience of hope is characterised by a felt uncertainty about the future, which is alien to the experience of expectation. Admittedly, Day's analysis does not contradict Waterworth's here, as he too stresses the aspect of uncertainty involved in hope (without linking it to the experience of anticipation as such). But there is more to this uncertainty than either analysis manages to bring out. This is

the quality of doubt that belongs at least in many cases to the phenomenology of hope. The person who hopes typically has a certain kind of doubt, which we could provisionally characterise as *suspense*. When we hope, the future infiltrates the present with an indeterminacy that leaves us *presently* in suspense. This is the phenomenological counterpart to the feature of hope I touched on before, that rather than being cognisant of the weight of probability favouring one outcome rather than another, or lending itself to belief rather than disbelief, the hoper may be forced to suspend the cognitive commitments normally tied to belief. This does not leave the ‘conative’ aspect of hope untouched, for it inflects the actual experience of the hoper as a subject with future-oriented concerns.

The substitution of anticipation for expectation for the purpose of better describing the experience of hope (the hoping subject) therefore also casts a different light on the practical purport of hope (the hoping agent). On the Hobbes-Locke-Hume view, the ultimate ground of practical purport is desire or ‘appetite,’ which is in principle separable from the agent’s cognitive orientation. But once we accept that hope involves anticipation rather than expectation, we are led to consider hope first as something we do, as an active orientation, a stance we take up and not just a feeling to be suffered or enjoyed; and second, as an integrated *expression* of desire rather than a contingent combination of desires and independently determinable opinions, beliefs or expectations.

Of course phenomenologists have been making points like this against empiricist and rationalist psychology for a long time. They insist that the human subject must be considered as a totality, as an indivisible ‘being in the world,’ as an embodied being at grips with and concerned by the world. Only in this way can we give accurate descriptions of the varieties of human experience and a plausible account of their origins and development. Phenomenology thus provides a quite different agenda to the analysis of hope than that provided by the logical analysis of the concept under empiricist premises. For the phenomenologist, the goal of such an analysis must be to describe in a manner as faithful to the phenomena as possible the lived experience of hope. And this would mean attending to hope, as it is concretely manifest in the embodied experience of living subjects. It would require fine-grained descriptions of the varieties of the hoping stance; that is, of a pre-reflective structure of experience which is prior to, and conditional of, the representation of things through conceptually contentful beliefs, opinions, expectations, and so forth. But this project should not be thought of as *replacing* the logical analysis of hope, which properly understood serves different purposes. Just as the phenomenological critique of representationalism in philosophy is not directed at the capacity for representation as such, but the priority given to it in the explanation of knowledge and meaning, so a phenomenological critique of the Hobbes-

Locke-Hume analysis of hope should be directed not at the role played by cognition in hope, but at the sharp separation it imposes between the cognitive and the conative dimension. As we have seen from our consideration of Day's analysis of hope, there are real insights to be gained from this approach, regarding the meaning of basic locutions involving hope, the explanation of degrees of hope, and the relations between hope, hopefulness, optimism etc. But these insights must be salvaged from the dualistic empiricist psychology that underpins that Hobbes-Locke-Hume approach to hope.

6. Back to Aquinas

And what about the Aquinas view? There is something going for this too. Day criticises Aquinas's definition of hope for failing to make sense of degrees of hope, which the Hobbes-Locke-Hume view, with its emphasis on subjective probability, is able to do. But we also saw that there are contexts of hope in which estimations of probability are either inappropriate or beside the point, in which a mere sense of the openness of the future, of possibility, is what we require. Aquinas's definition fits such contexts much better than Hobbes-Locke-Hume (and for that matter the OED) definition.

We have only touched indirectly on the second distinctive feature of Aquinas's definition of hope, that it is aroused by the perception of something agreeable but 'arduous' of attainment. This aspect of Aquinas's definition has been criticised for unduly restricting the scope of hope, as if goals attainable without arduousness cannot also fall within it. This objection is consistent with a widely held view that just about anything can be an object of ordinary, everyday hope. People hope for trivial things (say, for a flavour of ice cream) as well as lofty things (say, for world peace), but they are all just as much hopes for that. This suggests that it is as futile characterising ordinary hope in terms of its object as it is pointless characterising desire that way. The analysis of hope reveals a certain subjective relation to the object of hope (that it is welcome/agreeable, anticipated/expected, uncertain/probable), but has little of interest to say (according to this view) about *what* it is we ordinarily hope for. The problem with Aquinas's 'arduous' clause, it can then be argued, is that Aquinas really has something other than mundane hope in mind. And Aquinas's apparent exclusion of many ordinary hopes in his definition has indeed been explained by his overriding concern with Christian religious hope, and the effort that must be exerted to attain the goal of that hope: life after death in heaven.

However, I do not think we need seek an ulterior motive to make sense of Aquinas's proposal. For we do not normally say that we hope for *anything* we happen to desire and of which we are uncertain or anticipate in some way. In most contexts, an avowal of hope signifies not just the expression of desire for something uncertain, but an *investment* of desire,

which projects the self into an uncertain future. In saying, ‘I hope,’ as distinct from ‘I want’ or ‘I wish,’ I signal that something has a particular significance for me, even if it might seem quite trivial taken out of context. And it is this investment of desire which Aquinas’s point about ardour brings into the picture. Aquinas’s definition reminds us that hopes *characteristically* need to be *worked on*. And this means that they characteristically have a *history*. This history is of course nothing other than the history of the person who hopes, and the hopes of a person, precisely in virtue of the ‘arduousness’ and so temporality of their attainment, enable the person to track that history. A person’s hopes provide crucial reference points in relation to which the direction of a life can be gauged: they press upon us, as it were, biographical narratives of success and failure, of victory and defeat. These enable us to make some sense of our lives.⁹ For this reason hopes may provide a key to our past as well as our future.

7. The Value of Hope and the Self-Image of Philosophy

Analyses of the concept of hope are often done with a view to providing some rational basis for a distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ hope, between hopes we are entitled to, or even ought to have, and those we can in some sense be criticised for having. I mentioned before how unrealistic or irrational beliefs about probability can inform futile hopes. There is a sense in which such hopes are deluded, and delusions are things we ought to avoid. Hopes can also be objectionable on account of the quality of the will (or desires) that inform them. It seems clear that some hopes are more worth having, are of more value, than others, and it seems natural then to enquire about the standard or standards that enable us to pick out the better or worse ones.

Day’s distinction between the cognitive and conative dimensions of hope provides a useful framework for formulating these standards more precisely. But rather than take up that problem, I want to address a broader issue about receptivity to the value of hope in general (not just the reasonableness or virtuousness of this or that hope). For it seems to me that our understanding of hope has suffered from what we might call a ‘prejudice of philosophers,’ by which I mean a self-image of philosophy which by no means lends itself to neutrality or impartiality in the evaluation of hope. When philosophers reflect on hope, they typically bring with them a set of background assumptions about the worth of hope that are built into a widespread image of what it is to be a philosopher. This is not of course to suggest that all philosophers share this self-image or that they have the same background assumptions. But I do want to propose that receptivity to the value of hope is impaired by a widespread philosophical standpoint, which is more shaped than those who adopt it would like to admit by cultural values that are in certain respects inimical or at least unfavourable to hope.

It is after all central to the classical conception of philosophy to replace hope with knowledge. And even if we are no longer really convinced by the classical conception, we still consider hope to be of little worth from a cognitive point of view. Given the priority philosophy gives to the cognitive point of view, hope is bound to look second rate to it. We often say that we hope when we are uncertain, hesitant, or lacking conviction about something. Indeed, in certain contexts - for example when writing or mounting an argument - the phrase 'I hope' often serves as a euphemism for 'I'm not really convinced' or 'I don't really know.' Hopes lack the justification that self-respecting philosophers demand of their convictions and beliefs. Hope, from this point of view, is a sign of failure. It is something the philosopher is quietly ashamed about. The philosopher shouldn't have to rely on hope; he should be able to do better than that. He philosophises with a view to leaving hope behind. This is what his proper vocation, the pursuit of knowledge, requires (more about the gender assumptions behind this self-image in a moment).

But if philosophers are inclined to a dim view of hope on account of the poor grade knowledge it contains, there are other, broadly speaking 'moral' features of hope that the philosopher might also find distasteful.¹⁰ Hope and hopefulness are after all often associated with a naïve and superficial optimism which fits awkwardly with the self-image of the serious philosopher. From the point of view of the philosopher, whose arduously attained freedom from illusion is such a cherished source of pride, hope can seem a lowly and demeaning source of comfort. Hope and hopefulness, from this perspective, are regressive dispositions that allow fantasy to predominate over reality. They might be good for women and children, but they are unedifying and undignified for the philosopher. The association between hope, moral weakness, and femininity has incidentally been frequently remarked upon. The misogynistic moral of the Pandora tale speaks for itself.¹¹

There is also an influential strand of philosophical thought that criticises hope and hopefulness on account of their consequences (and not just on account of their inherent indignity). By prolonging attachment to desires that cannot be satisfied, hope generates frustration, resentment, and a proneness to disappointment that can easily result in reactive violence and destruction. This is the reason for the Stoics' negative evaluation of the hopeful disposition in ancient times, and it stands behind Nietzsche's indictment that 'hope is the worst of all evils.'¹² The value of hope has also been questioned on the grounds that it deals with an unsatisfactory present not by practically engaging with it, but by projecting an imaginary future in which satisfaction is miraculously secured. In other words, it encourages passivity and perpetuates servility. It compensates for present dissatisfactions without changing anything.

But the most significant reason for the philosopher's inward distrust and low estimation of hope is its association with religion. Hope is of course one of the three theological virtues and generally hope figures prominently in the Christian lexicon. One is much more likely to find a book with 'hope' in the title in a Christian bookshop than an academic or philosophy one. Hope and prayer often go together, not least because they are both expressions of the subject's limited power (limited in her or his capacity to bring about the hoped for or prayed for thing, and so dependent on some other power - other people, God or luck - for its realisation). And then of course there is the Hope of hopes: the religious hope for life after death.¹³ Given the close association between hope and religion, and given the dissociation between the religious and philosophical points of view in modern secular culture, it makes sense for philosophers (or those attached to the dominant secular self-image of what a philosopher is) to be cautious in their estimation of the value of hope.

If we place a high value on knowledge (on having justified true beliefs), and if we identify with the modern enlightenment standpoint as *opposed* to the standpoint of religion - two important features of the self-image of the philosopher - we are already likely to have an unfavourable 'pre-judgement' about the value of hope. This does not mean that we must place a low value on knowledge or be religious in order to have a more favourable evaluation of hope. I am certainly not suggesting that hope is only at home in the religious worldview or that our understanding of hope is inseparably bound up with religious ideas and ideals. There can be hope without religion. My point is rather that philosophical reflection on hope does not start from scratch, but is shaped perhaps unconsciously by deeply entrenched cultural values. We need to make these explicit, and once we do, our reflections on the meaning and value of hope can be more open, constructive and honest.

The question of the value of hope, of whether it is a good or a bad thing and in what circumstances and in what ways, can be posed by drawing a distinction between 'true' and 'false' hope, or between hope that is 'genuine' and 'inauthentic' hope. If we want to defend the goodness or worth of hope we can do this by calling apparently bad hope 'false' or 'inauthentic' - that is, not 'real' hope. This may seem unwarranted: as I asked before, who is to say that hope to have a particular flavour of ice-cream is any less hope than hope for world peace? But we saw that, on reflection, it does make sense to invoke such distinctions, and this implies that we are indeed dealing here with a normative concept. As a normative concept, hope would contain a standard in relation to which the worth or significance of actual particular instances of hope could be assessed. The articulation of the normative content of a concept is one of the chief tasks of philosophy: it shows how we are able to criticise nominal instances of, say, democracy or art, by making explicit norms that are implicit in our pre-reflective understanding of democracy or

art. And we do not need a philosopher to tell us that what passes, as love is not necessarily true or genuine love, though there may be something in common between them. Perhaps something similar can be said of hope. In that case, there would be a normative content to the concept of hope, which would allow us meaningfully to distinguish real hope from its impostors.

The philosophers who have reflected most deeply and influentially on hope, and whose names are most closely associated with the philosophy of hope, understood hope as a normative concept. Furthermore, they gleaned from the normative content of hope something of deeper significance, which - borrowing Bloch's expression - we can call the 'principle' of hope.

8. The Principle of Hope

'The principle of hope' is of course the title of Bloch's masterpiece. I will say a little bit about Bloch below, but only in the context of a broader question I want to raise about what meaning the 'hope principle' might have for us today. In what sense might hope have the status of a principle for philosophy?

One possible answer, which I admit I'm attracted to, is the idea that contrary the self-image of philosophy discussed in the previous section, hope for a better world is somehow inescapably presupposed in the very act of authentic critical reflection. Why bother thinking critically or philosophically at all if, at some level, one did not have anticipation that things could be better? A thought like this, it is worth mentioning, is expressed at the beginning of some of the great works of twentieth-century philosophy. The famous opening line of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* - 'Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed'¹⁴ - is of course hardly an expression of hope, but it does elicit in a paradoxical way the hopeful moment (despite disappointment) from which philosophy springs. Levinas' citation of the phrase 'the true life is absent' at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*,¹⁵ itself hardly an optimistic work, also performs, as it were, the emergence of philosophy out of an antecedent hope for a better world. And arguably even the most mundane philosophising, whether it is doing Philosophy 101 or Philosophy in the Pub, has a similar origin, insofar as it would not get off the ground without some hopeful impulse towards some however darkly anticipated 'better to come.'

The origins of philosophy and literature in the utopian impulse is of course a central theme in Bloch's thought. But before turning briefly to that, I would like to mention a contemporary philosopher who has explicitly sought to reverse the priority between hope and knowledge, which is such a central feature of established philosophy. In a number of his more recent writings, Richard Rorty has called for an alternative culture in which the promotion of social hope, not the pursuit of knowledge, is the goal of philosophical enquiry.¹⁶ Pragmatism, Rorty argues, provides the right kind of framework

for showing what philosophy in the service of social hope would look like and why - on philosophical grounds - we should prefer it. Rorty is not the only pragmatist to have urged a transformation of philosophy along these lines (and perhaps he is not the most convincing), but he is unique among contemporary philosophers in attempting systematically to bring together the critique of foundationalism, scepticism about the Enlightenment project and a retrieval of the orienting function of social hope. His work represents one interpretation of what the 'principle of hope' might mean today.

One problem with this kind of interpretation of the principle of hope, however, is that it is primarily an attack on traditional philosophy's (Rorty calls it 'Platonism's') *failure* to provide a justification for social hope. Rorty's argument is that traditional philosophical justifications, with their appeals to human nature, reason, linguistic intersubjectivity and so forth, no longer carry conviction. But this doesn't seem to leave philosophy with much else to contribute other than issue reminders of its own limits and the dangers of metaphysical illusion. Rorty offers no *positive* program for how a principle of hope can be integrated into philosophy. Rather, we are simply invited to leave philosophy, and the habit of looking for foundational justifications, behind. And this can seem like an overly meek response, a kind of defeatism which leaves the philosopher with nothing substantial to do.

Rorty's interpretation of the hope principle thus stands in sharp contrast to Bloch's. It is an exceedingly difficult matter to determine the exact ways in which the 'principle of hope' shapes Bloch's philosophy, but we can confidently say that it plays an organisational role at a number of different levels.¹⁷ First, Bloch treats hope as a cosmological principle. The striving, yearning, and anticipation of something 'not yet' that characterises human hope is also a fundamental feature not just of non-human life, but of the universe itself. This yearning and striving is the key to understanding not just human nature but nature as such. The hope principle is thus not confined to human beings; it is at large in the cosmos understood as a dynamic, open process. In this respect, as has often been remarked; Bloch's philosophy resembles Schelling's.¹⁸ But in human hope, we also feel these fundamental forces singularised in us. Moreover, in the experience of hope we first encounter our *selves* as beings in process, as beings whose self-definition must be imposed from within, as it were, in the context of a whole life. This idea, that the individual's fundamental relation to self is mediated by an anticipation of the 'not yet,' leads Bloch to treat hope not only as a cosmological and anthropological principle, but as an existential principle. Furthermore, this existential-cosmological principle also finds expression in history. The hope principle thus requires the adoption of a certain stance towards history which responds both to its openness (the reality of the 'not yet') and its 'real' and not merely 'formal' possibilities.¹⁹ In Bloch's view,

this takes the hope principle to the level of the philosophy of history which it only fully attains in historical materialism.

But if the problem with Rorty's version of the hope principle was that it was too modest, we now seem to be faced with the opposite problem: the demands on a philosophy informed by the principle of hope as Bloch presents it seem simply overwhelming. It is hard enough today defending (even making sense of) Bloch's principle at any one of these levels of argument (the cosmological, existential and historical) never mind all three of them combined together.

Of course the mere difficulty of a task is no reason not to undertake it. But perhaps we can take up Bloch's challenge without taking on board his whole metaphysical agenda. Perhaps we can steer a middle course between Rorty's parsimony and Bloch's extravagance. One way of doing this would be to renew the project of philosophical anthropology around the question of the role of hope in human self-realisation. That might also position us better to understand the full moral consequences of hope deprivation, a social pathology that is emerging as one of the defining features of our times.²⁰

Notes

¹ Cited by J P Day, *Hope. A Philosophical Inquiry*, Acta Philosophica Fennica, vol. 51, Helsinki, 1991 p. 27. See T Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, William Benton, Chicago, 1971, especially I-II, q. 40, and II-II, qs. 17-18.

² T Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C B Macpherson, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, Pt I, ch 6, p. 123.

³ J Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Nidditch, Clarendon, Oxford, 1975, Bk II, Ch XX, p. 231.

⁴ D Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, 2nd edition, ed. P. Nidditch, Oxford University Press, Oxford, Bk II, Pt, III, sect. IX, p. 440. Spinoza defined hope in a similar way as the feeling of 'an inconstant joy' aroused by 'the image of a future or past thing whose outcome we doubt'. B de Spinoza, *The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. E. Curley, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 165.

⁵ See Day, op cit, p. 61.

⁶ As Isabelle Strengers put it in an interview: 'If we follow probability there is no hope', in M Zournazi ed., *Hope – New Philosophies for Social Change*, Pluto Press, Annandale, 2002, p. 245.

⁷ Amongst the further subtleties to attend to is the paradox wonderfully observed by Jonathan Rée, that it is hard to conceive of a more pessimistic outlook than that of the optimist who holds that this is the best of all possible worlds. After all, this implies that nothing could have turned out any better.

See J Rée, 'Trust me I'm a pessimist', blog posted 13th October 2006, BBC 3, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/freethinkinguk>>.

⁸ See J Waterworth, *A Philosophical Analysis of Hope*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, p. 8ff.

⁹ See A MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition, Duckworth, London, 1984.

¹⁰ See also my 'Hope and Critical Theory', *Critical Horizons*, vol. 6, no. 1, December 2005, pp. 46-49, for a slightly more elaborated and differently pitched version of the reflections I present in the following paragraphs.

¹¹ For discussion of the Pandora story (and many other matters I touch on in this chapter), see J J Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, Martinus Nijhof, Dordrecht, 1987.

¹² F Nietzsche, *Human all too Human*, vol. 1, trans. R J Holland, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 45.

¹³ I do not mean suggest that religious hope must take this form. In fact, perhaps the object of religious hope is better said to be meaning after death, or better still, meaning beyond life. I try to make sense of the idea of religious hope and its relation to social hope in N. H. Smith, 'Rorty on Religion and Hope,' *Inquiry*, vol. 48, no. 1, February 2005, pp. 76-98. Religious hope is a central theme for Marcel, Pieper and Bloch. The key sources are Pieper, *Hope and History*, trans. R and L Winston, Herder and Herder, London, 1969; G Marcel, *Homo Viator. Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. E Crawford, Victor Gollancz, London, 1951; and E Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. N Plaice, S Plaice and P Knight, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986. See also the informative discussion of Pieper in relation to Marcel, Bloch and others in B Schumacher, *A Philosophy of Hope: Josef Pieper and the Contemporary Debate on Hope*, trans. D G Schindler, Fordham University Press, New York, 2003.

¹⁴ T W Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E B Ashton, Routledge, London, 1973, p. 3.

¹⁵ E Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A Lingis, University of Duquesne Press, Pittsburgh, 1969, p. 33.

¹⁶ See for example R Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1999.

¹⁷ My interpretation of Bloch here is heavily indebted to Henrich Fink-Eitel. See H Fink-Eitel, 'Das rote Zimmer. Fragen nach dem Prinzip der Philosophie von Ernst Bloch,' *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, vol. 95, 1988, pp. 320-37.

¹⁸ See for example Jürgen Habermas's classic essay on Bloch, 'A Marxist Schelling,' in J Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. F Lawrence, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1983, pp. 61-78

¹⁹ See Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol 1., pp. 224ff.

²⁰ As suggested by Ghassan Hage in G Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism – searching for hope in a shrinking society*, Pluto Press, Annandale, 2003.

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Nicholas H. Smith is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Macquarie University, Sydney.