

Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope

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Editor

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Chapter 4

Enlightenment Views of Hope

Claudia Blöser

Abstract This chapter discusses accounts of hope found in the works of important Enlightenment thinkers: René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Baruch de Spinoza, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. The paper’s guiding questions are: Where are discussions of hope located within these thinkers’ works? Do the authors provide an account of what hope is? Do they ascribe a certain function to hope? Most authors of the Enlightenment, with the exception of Kant, write about hope in the context of a general account of the passions. Their characterization of hope closely resembles the “standard definition” of hope in contemporary debates. According to this definition, hope consists of a desire and a belief in the possibility, but not the certainty, of the desired outcome. It turns out, however, that Descartes, Hobbes, and Hume advocate a stronger evidential condition for hope than is common today: According to their view, we do not hope for what we take to be merely possible, no matter how unlikely it is; we hope for what we take to be more likely. Kant’s account differs from the other ones in important respects: He does not treat hope as an affect and he does not require a probability estimate, but grounds hope in faith.

4.1 Introduction

Considered as an historical period, the Enlightenment began around the middle of the seventeenth century and concluded near the end of the eighteenth century with the French Revolution. Considered as an intellectual movement with certain unifying ideas, one famous characterization is that offered by Immanuel Kant in his Essay “An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?” (1784). Kant defines enlightenment as “the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority”, where minority is characterized as the “inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another” (8:35; Kant 1996a). This characterization already provides a hint as to the defining features of the Enlightenment that emphasized human reason and understanding, fought against prejudice and authority, and

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promoted the belief that progress towards greater freedom is possible. The intellectual climate of the Enlightenment, with its aspirations for intellectual progress and improvement through the use of reason, seems to be fertile ground for hope.

In this contribution, I will present accounts of hope found in the works of important Enlightenment thinkers: René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Baruch de Spinoza, David Hume and Immanuel Kant. The paper's guiding questions are: Where are discussions of hope located within these thinkers' philosophical works? Do the authors provide an account of what hope is? Do they ascribe a certain function or value to hope?

Most authors of the Enlightenment, with the exception of Kant, write about hope in the context of a general account of the passions. As has already been observed (see Martin 2013, p. 11), the characterization of hope found in these early modern texts closely resembles the "standard definition" of hope in contemporary debates. According to this definition, a person P hopes that X iff P desires X and believes X to be possible but not certain. It is apt to say that early modern accounts offer precursors of this definition, but as I will point out, they also differ in important respects.

4.2 René Descartes

Descartes discusses hope in his last published writing, "The Passions of the Soul" (1649).¹ The text is divided into three parts: In the first, Descartes describes the nature and function of the passions in general; in the second, he explains the six "fundamental" passions (wonderment, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness (§69)), before describing the "particular passions" in the third part. Hope is mainly treated among the particular passions in Part Three, although it is also mentioned in Part Two (§58) because of its role in producing desire.

In the background of Descartes's theory of the passions is the substance dualism that he argues for in the *Meditations*: the view that body and soul (or mind) are two distinct substances. The *Passions of the Soul* begins with a description of the functioning of the body. By providing a mechanistic account of all bodily functions, Descartes distances himself from Aristotle, who regarded the soul as necessary for explaining bodily organic functions. On Descartes's view, the soul is solely responsible for "thoughts, of which there are two main kinds: the actions of the soul and its passions" (§17). In his definition of the passions, Descartes characterizes them as "those perceptions, sensations, or emotions of the soul which we refer particularly to it, and which are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits" (§27). Moving or "animal spirits" (§7), for Descartes, are "bodies, and their only properties are that they are very small and fast-moving", constantly distributed throughout the body, conveyed into nerves and muscles, and setting the body in

¹I use the following translation (Descartes 2015).

motion (§10). The “moving spirits” play an important role when it comes to the difficult question of how body and soul communicate. The precise way in which Descartes imagined the interaction between body and soul in the “little gland” (§30) is not our topic here; suffice it to say that it secures the possibility of the passions’ leading to bodily actions. This is, according to Descartes, the main function of the passions in general: They lead to volitions (§40), and these volitions (via the “little gland”) cause movements.

The process of passions causing volitions, however, is not a mechanistic one that happens with necessity. Descartes holds that “the will is so free of its own nature that it can never be compelled” (§41). Volitions are free and under our direct control, while passions can be changed only “indirectly” (§41). The way to influence the passions is “by the representation of things that are habitually associated with the passions we want to have” (§45). In other words, by focusing on certain “reasons, objects, or examples” (*ibid.*) rather than others, we can arouse certain passions in us.

To sum up the most important elements of this overall picture for an understanding of hope, we can note that first, *qua* passion, the *function* of hope is to dispose us to certain kinds of action (via causing volitions) and second, that it is possible to gain control over when we hope by focusing on certain reasons, objects, and examples. Turning to the question of what hope is, Descartes characterizes hope alongside its counterpart, fear:

Of hope and fear. Hope is a disposition of the soul to persuade itself that what it desires will come to pass, which is caused by a particular movement of the spirit, namely, by that of mingled joy and desire. And fear is another disposition of the soul, which persuades it that the thing will not come to pass. And it is to be noted that, although these two passions are contrary, one may nonetheless have them both together, that is, when one considers different reasons at the same time, some of which cause one to judge that the fulfillment of one’s desires is a straightforward matter, while others make it seem difficult. (Descartes 2015, p. 264, §165)

Comparing this definition with the standard definition of hope mentioned in the introduction, there are interesting similarities, but also differences. There is agreement that the object of hope is also an object of desire. As to the cognitive aspect of hope, Descartes’s view differs from more contemporary ones insofar as he holds that hope involves the view that the fulfillment of one’s desire “is a straightforward matter” or the “idea that it [the desire] is likely” to be satisfied (§58). In contemporary definitions, hope requires only a belief in the *possibility* of the object, even if it is very unlikely. “Hope against hope”, i.e. strong hope in the face of extremely slim odds, is even considered a central case of hope to be explained (Martin 2013, p. 5). Descartes seems to exclude cases of “hope against hope” because on his view, hope involves a probability estimate according to which the object is likely. We will see that Hobbes and Hume have a similar view.

Descartes’s characterization of the doxastic attitude of the hoping person releases him from the need to search for further conditions in order to distinguish hope from fear and despair. Contemporary authors have refined the standard account on the basis of the argument that the standard view that hope amounts to desire plus belief in possibility cannot distinguish hope from despair, since despair can involve these

two elements as well (see e.g. Meirav 2009). For Descartes, however, despair represents the desired object “as impossible” (§166). The two attitudes that presuppose uncertainty are thus hope and fear. Descartes holds that one can have hope and fear “both together”, whereas many other theorists assume that one can have them only in succession (see e.g. Day 1969, p. 91). In fact, Descartes seems to have a quick succession in mind as well, for it is difficult to imagine how one can consider “different reasons at the same time”. We can plausibly interpret Descartes as claiming that hope and fear are two aspects of the emotional experience of a person who is uncertain about whether a desired object will materialize. In line with this, Descartes claims that when either hope or fear is entirely absent, the state of the person changes: When fear is overcome, the state of the person is not one of hope but one of “complacency or confidence” (§166); when there is no longer room for hope, fear becomes despair (*ibid.*). Thus, the *possibility* of fear is necessary for hope, and vice versa, even though the difference with regard to the judgment of probability means that *experiencing* fear is not necessary for hope.

Even though Descartes does not say much about the specific function of hope, as is the case for all passions in general, its main role consists in its being a disposition to act. More precisely, hope seems to acquire its specific usefulness in *difficult* action. This becomes apparent when Descartes describes hope as a (minimal) condition for boldness:

[A]lthough the object of boldness is difficulty, the usual effects of which are fear or even despair [...] we do need to hope, or even to be certain, that the goal we have in view will be attained, if we are to tackle the difficulties in our path with vigour. (§173)

If hope is a condition for boldness, we can assume that Descartes’s advice on how to arouse boldness is also relevant to arousing hope (or even certainty). Descartes says that

to arouse boldness in oneself, and banish terror, it is not enough to will to do so: we must instead set ourselves to consider the reasons, objects, or examples that will persuade us that the danger is not all that great; [...] that we can look forward to the glory and joy of the victory [...] and so on and so forth. (§45)

This passage provides hints to answering the question whether hope is under our control. Can we decide to hope? Descartes seems to suggest an indirect way how to influence hope. We cannot bring hope about directly, simply by deciding to do so. Rather, we can decide to focus on reasons or examples that point to the fact that a desired end is indeed likely to come to pass. Paying attention to such reasons and examples is an instrument to arouse hope, though it is no guarantee: Whether we end up hoping is at least contingent on which reasons and examples we discover.

4.3 Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes investigates the passions with the aim of providing a basis for his political theory. The *Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (1640) and *Leviathan* (1651) begin with an account of human nature, where the passions form an important part. While it is generally acknowledged that *fear* plays a central role in Hobbes's political thinking (see e.g. Blits 1989), especially in his depiction of the state of nature that motivates the social contract, Hobbes's views on hope are less prominent and must be pieced together from various remarks. Perhaps surprisingly, it becomes apparent that hope has an important role to play in Hobbes's view of philosophy in general, his philosophy of action, and his social contract argument.

Like Descartes, Hobbes presents a theory of the passions against the background of an encompassing account of human nature. Whereas Descartes's theory is based on substance dualism, where his account of how body and soul interact is unconvincing to most, Hobbes's philosophy is monistic in the sense that it does not make reference to an immaterial soul. In both the *Elements* and the *Leviathan*, Hobbes tries to understand the passions, along with all other workings of the human mind, as motions. Two consequences of this picture are worth mentioning: First, the monistic view results in a theory of the will and of deliberation in which the passions in general, and hope in particular, play a central role. I will discuss this point in further detail below. Second, Hobbes claims not only that passions are motions but, more generally, that human life is in constant forward motion: "appetite is the beginning of [...] motion toward something which pleaseth us" (*Elements*, 7.5),² and once an appetite is fulfilled, the next one propels us to fulfillment. Hobbes rejects the existence of an "utmost end" (*Elements*, 7.6) and instead holds that "there can be no contentment but in proceeding" and that "felicity, therefore (by which we mean continual delight), consisteth not in having prospered, but in prospering" (*Elements*, 7.7). Hobbes (at least in the *Elements*) intimately connects this endless striving for the fulfillment of one's desires with the endless striving for power and superiority over others. On this picture, future-directed appetites, and therefore hope, are foundational aspects of human life.

In the *Elements*, Hobbes characterizes hope as "expectation of good to come", whereas fear is "the expectation of evil" (*Elements*, 9.8). Hobbes explains that what we expect depends on "causes": "some that make us expect good, and some that make us expect evil" (*ibid.*). When the person is uncertain about what to expect, such that these causes are "alternately working in our minds", the "whole passion" is called hope if the "causes that make us expect good, be greater than those that make us expect evil" (*Elements*, 9.8). Despair is "absolute privation of hope" (*Elements*, 9.8). Hobbes seems to think that believing in the mere possibility of the object does not suffice for hope; rather, he characterizes hope as being connected to (or even as a kind of) *expectation*, where one must believe that the causes of the realization of the object are "greater" than the causes of the object's not obtaining. In the *Leviathan*,

²I use the following translation (Hobbes 1969).

hope is characterized as an “[a]ppetite with an opinion of attaining” (*Leviathan*, VI (Hobbes 1991, p. 41)). Considering the context in which the definition appears, it becomes clear that “opinion of attaining” means “opinion men have of the *likelihood* of attaining what they desire” (*ibid.*, my emphasis). Thus, when we hope for something, we think that there is some likelihood (based on our experience and knowledge of causes) that it will occur. To be sure, this might mean ‘likelihood, however small’, which would be in accord with the modern standard view that hope involves mere possibility. However, Hobbes seems to hold—as he does clearly in the *Elements*—that hope comes with a kind of expectation, which is relatively free of doubt. This is supported by the fact that he defines confidence as “constant hope” (*ibid.*).

As to the relation between hope and other passions, Hobbes, like Descartes, describes hope as an aspect of courage (*Leviathan*, VI (Hobbes 1991, p. 41)). In the *Elements*, Hobbes characterizes *trust* as “a passion proceeding from belief of him from whom we expect or hope for good, so free from doubt that upon the same we pursue no other ways” (*Elements*, 9.9). Hope is thus constitutive of trust. In other words, if the ground of hope is a person, and if we rely on this person without reservation in our action-guiding plans, then this is the interpersonal attitude of trust.

Further, Hobbes describes hope as being crucial to intellectual endeavors, or the search for knowledge:

And this hope and expectation of future knowledge from anything that happeneth new and strange, is that passion which we commonly call admiration; and the same considered as appetite, is called curiosity, which is appetite of knowledge. (*Elements*, 9.18)

Admiration and curiosity motivate the search for the causes of the newly discovered events and thereby drive the search for knowledge. The hope for knowledge that is incited by new experiences is, as Hobbes emphasizes, the origin of all philosophy (*Elements*, 9.18). On this basis, it is apt to say that Hobbes points towards an understanding of hope as an “epistemic emotion”, a category that has gained attention in contemporary debates (see Michaelian and Arango-Munoz 2014).

Hope is not only relevant to agency in the theoretical realm, according to Hobbes, but also integral to—and even necessary for—practical deliberation as well. For Hobbes, deliberation consists in alternating appetites and fears, where “the last appetite, as also the last fear, is called will (*viz.*) the last appetite will to do; the last fear will not to do, or will to omit” (*Elements*, 12.2, see also *Leviathan*, VI (Hobbes 1991, p. 44)). Hope is also a *necessary* condition of deliberation, as Hobbes goes on to explain in the *Elements*:

Deliberation therefore requireth in the action deliberated two conditions: one, that it be future; the other, that there be hope of doing it, or possibility of not doing it. For appetite and fear are expectations of the future; and there is no expectation of good without hope; nor of evil without possibility. Of necessities therefore there is no deliberation. (*Elements*, 12.2)

With the last sentence, Hobbes seems to be saying that if an event will necessarily happen according to the laws of nature, there is no point in deliberating about whether to bring it about. This is plausible. It is more difficult to assess the general claim that we necessarily need hope in order to deliberate. This claim is treated as an

open question in the contemporary debate (for a defense of this view, see (Bobier 2017); for a criticism, see (Mueller 2019)). It has been argued that one can deliberate about how to attain a goal (say, secure a piece of cake), even though one does not hope but merely desires (Mueller 2019). This example seems to presuppose that one can desire something without viewing its fulfillment as uncertain, and hence without hoping for it. Note that this is not the case with Hobbes's account, where desiring something while taking it for granted that one will get it (as long as it is not a natural necessity) is a paradigmatic case of hoping, insofar as hoping involves an "opining of attaining" the thing. If one understands Hobbes as saying that one can only hope for things that one regards as likely, however, this seems to be an overly strong condition for deliberation, since one can deliberate about trying something that is unlikely to be successful.

In political contexts, hope is one of the causes of fear of one's neighbor, but it is also one of the passions that contribute to the peacefulness of man and a condition for promoting peace. Hobbes's central assumption is that the state of nature is a war of each against all, which means "continually feare, and danger of violent death" (*Leviathan*, VIII (Hobbes 1991, p. 89)). Hope figures in the genesis of competition: According to Hobbes, men are equal in terms of their capacities, and hence there is an "equality of hope" that one will realize one's intentions (*Leviathan*, VIII (Hobbes 1991, p. 87)). Consequently, when two people hope and intend to attain the same object, they will enter into competition and become enemies.

Nevertheless, Hobbes also lists hope among the passions that contribute to the peacefulness of men (*Leviathan*, XIII (Hobbes 1991, p. 90)). In this regard, what is conducive to peacefulness is hope for the attainment of objects that one regards as belonging to an agreeable life through one's own effort.

Hobbes also mentions the role of hope in securing peace itself. It is a principle of reason "[t]hat every man, ought to endeavour Peace, as farre as he has hope of obtaining it" (*Leviathan*, XIV (Hobbes 1991, p. 92)). In this context, hope is a precondition for political efforts to secure peace. This thesis does not come as a surprise if one considers Hobbes's claim that hope is a necessary condition for deliberation: only if it is possible to realize peace can we can deliberate about what to do to promote it. Of course, the crucial question is what is needed to maintain belief in the possibility of peace. Hobbes provides us with a hint when he says "[t]hat a man be willing, *when others are so too*, as farre-forth, as for Peace, and defence of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things" (ibid., my emphasis). We can understand Hobbes as saying that one crucial condition for the possibility of peace is that one be able to rely on the cooperation of others. This idea refers back to the close connection between hope and trust as described in the *Elements*: In order to transition from the state of nature to the commonwealth, we must trust that others will do their part, such that we can proceed with our own efforts on the basis of this trust. This is the basis of hope for peace.³

³Titus Stahl concludes from the observation that hope is both relevant to characterizing the state of nature and entering into the legal condition that the role of hope in Hobbes's account is not merely

4.4 Baruch de Spinoza

Spinoza provides an extensive account of the affects in his *Ethics*. Spinoza's ethics deals in the first part with the nature of god and in the second part with the nature of the human soul. Part three is devoted to the affects. If we understand ethics as a doctrine of how to live a good life, this can be mainly found in Parts IV and V, where Spinoza discusses how to live well with the affects.

In Part I, Spinoza argues that god is the only real substance and the cause of all things that follow with necessity from his nature. God is not an anthropomorphic figure who created the world according to a plan, acting purposefully and judging human actions. Rather, Spinoza identifies god with nature, which led to his reputation as a pantheist (for discussion, see Nadler 2019). One consequence of this view is that Spinoza does not defend religious hope. In general, Spinoza has a rather critical view of hope. Since, as we will see, hope is necessarily bound up with doubt, it is a state of mind that should be overcome in our quest for knowledge of eternal truths. Of course, the view that human beings are capable of such knowledge (“[t]he human mind has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence” (Spinoza 1996 [1677], IIP47, p. 61)) reveals a remarkable hope, if not optimism, about human cognitive capacities (see Nadler 2019).

In Parts I and II, Spinoza establishes the claim that the human being in all its aspects is part of nature and governed by natural laws. In accordance with this view, Spinoza treats affects as natural phenomena, which therefore obey natural laws with necessity. Like Hobbes, Spinoza rejects Descartes’s view that the human soul is not part of nature and as such is free from the determining influence of the passions. Still, Spinoza describes in Part IV how it is possible to gain (some degree of) control over the passions and thereby free oneself from the influence of external causes.

Just like the other early modern philosophers, Spinoza identifies a few foundational affects and claims that the other affects are generated from them. The basic affects of the soul, for Spinoza, are joy, sadness (which correspond to pleasure and pain, insofar as they refer to soul and body taken together), and desire (Spinoza 1996 [1677], IIP11, p. 77). Hope is “nothing but an inconstant joy which has arisen from the image of a future or past thing whose outcome we doubt.”⁴ (Spinoza 1996 [1677], IIP18, p. 81) Doubt is an essential element of hope, but also of fear, which is “an inconstant sadness, which has also arisen from the image of a doubtful thing.” (ibid.) Spinoza points out that “it follows simply from the definition of these affects that there is no hope without fear, and no fear without hope” (Spinoza 1996 [1677], IIP50, p. 95). This closely resembles the view put forth by Descartes, who also claims that hope and fear go together, and Hobbes’s view that hope and fear arise from the consciousness of different causes “alternately working in our minds.”

instrumental but rather *constitutive* of the “emergence of a political sphere in the first place” (Stahl 2020, p. 269).

⁴I use the translation de Spinoza (1996).

If the doubt is overcome, hope becomes certainty and fear becomes despair (ibid.). Just like Descartes, and in contrast to contemporary positions, despair is not compatible with the view that the object is possible; it implies the view that the object is impossible. In contrast to contemporary positions, Spinoza does not view desire as a component of hope. He distinguishes joy or pleasure from desire and views hope as a kind of *joy* that is characterized by a certain doxastic attitude towards the object, namely uncertainty about its existence.

When it comes to evaluating the affect of hope, Spinoza argues that hope (and fear) lead to superstition, since we are so constituted by nature that we easily believe what we hope but reluctantly believe what we fear (see Spinoza 1996 [1677], IIP50, p. 95). This point is important in his political philosophy, as we will see shortly. A positive aspect of hope, at least at first sight, is that it is a kind of joy, and joy brings the soul to greater perfection (see Spinoza 1996 [1677], IIP11, p. 77). With “perfection”, Spinoza refers to the individual’s power (power to act, to be acted upon, and to persevere in being) (see ibid.). However, the fact that hope is always accompanied by fear and fear is a kind of sadness that reduces the perfection of the soul (see ibid.) neutralizes this advantage. This is what Spinoza says in Book IV of the *Ethics*, entitled “On Human Bondage, or the Powers of the Affects”. The negative evaluation of the affects expressed in the title also applies to hope (and fear): Insofar as they are accompanied by sadness, they cannot be intrinsically good—though they can have instrumental value if they moderate an excessive joy (Spinoza 1996 [1677], IVP47, p. 141). Therefore, insofar as we strive to live according to reason, we strive to be free of hope and fear.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza takes up the idea presented in the *Ethics*, namely the role of hope in grounding superstition: “[A]s the good things of fortune for which they [people] have a boundless desire are quite uncertain, they fluctuate wretchedly between hope and fear” (Spinoza 2007 [1670], p. 3). Even though Spinoza accords fear the most central place in the development of superstition (“Hence, fear is the root from which superstition is born, maintained and nourished” (Spinoza 2007, p. 4)), he repeatedly claims that a group of affects, among them “hope and hatred,” are the pillars of superstition—in contrast to reason (Spinoza 2007, p. 5).

This negative evaluation of hope does not lead Spinoza to demand that the political sphere must be free of hope and other affects. He considers this impossible. The fact that hope (and fear) belong to human nature also plays an important role in Spinoza’s view of the social contract in Chap. 16. He considers it an “universal law of human nature that no one neglects anything that they deem good unless they hope for a greater good or fear a greater loss, and no one puts up with anything bad except to avoid something worse or because he hopes for something better” (Spinoza 2007, p. 198). The same principle explains the phenomenon of abiding by a contract. Spinoza seems to hold that the bindingness of a contract in general, and the political contract as the basis of the state in particular, results from its being “in our interest” (Spinoza 2007, p. 199). This is how the state can secure its power via negative emotions: by inciting “fear of the ultimate punishment” (Spinoza 2007, p. 200). However, Spinoza also considers obedience based on “free will” as an alternative.

The sovereigns “are very much obliged to work for the common good and direct all things by the dictate of reasons” (Spinoza 2007, p. 200). This is superior to ruling by fear or violence.

At this point, however, one might wonder what role *hope* plays in a good political system. Spinoza seems to draw a contrast between ruling by inciting fear and ruling on the basis of reason. If hope and fear indeed cannot be had independently of each other (Spinoza suggests as much in his *Ethics*), there seems to be little room for a politics of hope *instead of* fear. On the basis of Spinoza’s argument for the social contract, however, one might infer that citizens cooperate with the government because they *hope* to attain greater goods by doing so (see Stahl forthcoming). On the assumption that it is possible to have hope without or instead of fear, and on the further assumptions that hope increases the power of the individual and that the power of the state depends on the power of its individuals, we can understand hope as constitutive of a powerful political community (see Stahl 2020; Tucker 2018).

4.5 David Hume

David Hume devotes the second book of his *Treatise of Human Nature* to the passions.⁵ He distinguishes between two “perceptions of the mind” (2.1.1, p. 181), namely impressions and ideas. Impressions, in turn, can be either “original” (from sensation) or “secondary” (from reflection): Original impressions are impressions of the senses and bodily pains and pleasures. Secondary impressions “proceed from some of the original ones, either immediately or by the interposition of its idea” (2.1.1, p. 181). Passions, and all emotions, are impressions of reflection. Again, Hume distinguishes between direct and indirect passions: hope, alongside desire, aversion, grief, joy, fear, despair, and security, belongs to the direct passions that “arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure” (2.1.1, p. 182) that we experience in the present, or think about occurring in the future.

In the section on the direct passions, Hume does not treat hope and fear merely as examples but rather devotes considerable time to discussing them in detail. He announces that “[n]one of the direct affections seems to merit our particular attention, except hope and fear” (2.3.9, p. 281). He defines joy and grief or sorrow as reactions to certainty concerning good and evil and hope and fear as reactions to the corresponding uncertainty: “When either good or evil is uncertain, it gives rise to FEAR or HOPE, according to the degrees of uncertainty on the one side or the other” (2.3.9, p. 281). Hume pays particular attention to hope and fear in what follows because he wants to understand why the situation of uncertainty “makes such a considerable difference” (ibid.) to our passions: “‘Tis evident that the very same event, which by its certainty wou’d produce grief or joy, gives always rise to fear or

⁵All quotes are taken from the *Treatise of Human Nature*, quoting (book.part.section, page), using the edition (Hume 2000).

hope, when only probable and uncertain” (ibid.). Hume refers back to his treatment of probability in Book I (“Of the Understanding”), where probability is a major topic of the third part.

In the chapter on the “probability of chances,” Hume divides “human reason into three kinds, viz. that from knowledge, from proof, and from probabilities” (1.3.11, p. 86). Whereas knowledge is assurance provided by the “comparison of ideas” and proofs are arguments “free from doubt and uncertainty,” which are based on the relation between cause and effect, probability concerns “that evidence, which is still attended with uncertainty” (1.3.11, p. 86). The situation of uncertainty is due to the fact that the subject can imagine causes that would bring the object into existence but also causes that speak against the object’s coming into existence.

Hume argues that hope and fear are mixtures of joy and sorrow or grief. The first assumption is that in situations of uncertainty, the understanding oscillates between the two possibilities—the existence and absence of an imagined good. Second, Hume claims that the emotional state of the person follows the understanding and therefore oscillates as well, namely between joy (imagining the existence of the good) and sorrow (imagining the absence of the good). Third, Hume assumes that the passions (in contrast to the imagination) exhibit a certain inertness: When the representation of the object changes (from coming-into-existence to not doing so), the passions do not immediately adapt to the imagination, but linger on. Therefore, in situations of uncertainty, the subject experiences a mixture of joy and grief, which give rises to hope or fear, depending on whether joy or grief is stronger (2.39, p. 283). The connection of hope to joy recalls Spinoza’s account. However, Spinoza views hope as a kind of joy (inconstant joy), whereas Hume describes hope as a *mixture* of joy and grief in which joy dominates.

If hope is distinguished from fear because the mixture of joy and grief involves more joy, this implies that hope presupposes that the subject takes the good to be more probable than not. This accords with the definition which was the starting point of Hume’s reflections, where hope and fear are distinguished “according to the degrees of uncertainty on the one side or the other” (2.3.9, p. 281). If this is true, Hume also deviates from the contemporary “standard account” according to which one may hope for what one takes to be very unlikely. For Hume, if a good event is considered very unlikely (and thus if an “evil” is likely), this leads to the dominance of grief in the mixture of grief and joy, which amounts to fear.

4.6 Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant’s account of hope differs from those of his contemporaries in important respects. On the one hand, he does not develop a taxonomy of affects and does not provide a definition of hope.⁶ On the other hand, Kant assigns hope a

⁶Kant’s works are cited using volume and page numbers (volume:page) of the standard Academy edition of Kant’s writings (Berlin, 1900–), except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The latter is cited

central place in his philosophy. In the Canon of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant states that “What may I hope?” (A805/B833) is one of the fundamental questions of reason. That is, Kant is mainly interested in the *normative* question of what makes hope rational. Despite the centrality of hope, interpreters have found it difficult to pin down Kant’s answer precisely. One reason is that immediately following the hope question, Kant seems to focus on faith, not hope, which has led many interpreters to conflate the two concepts. Further, Kant talks about hope in different writings, and it is not immediately clear whether there is one unified account in the background. For reasons of space, in what follows I will only present his account in the first *Critique*, followed by an overview of Kant’s treatment of hope in his political writings.⁷

Kant’s starting point in the first *Critique* is a statement about what we de facto hope for: “all hope concerns happiness” (A805/B833). At first sight, the question *what may we hope* seems to concern what we are *morally permitted* to hope. However, this is not exactly Kant’s focus, as we see in his second formulation of the hope question: “If I do what I should, what may I then hope?” (A805/B833). Kant is in fact asking *what may we hope to attain regarding our happiness as a result of our moral conduct?* He draws a conceptual connection between moral behavior and *worthiness* to be happy: The moral law “commands how we should behave in order [. . .] to be worthy of happiness” (A806/B834). In the hope question, Kant already presupposes moral conduct (“If I do what I should. . .”) and thereby the worthiness of being happy. Does being worthy of happiness mean that one can expect or hope to attain happiness? This is the question that Kant wants to answer affirmatively.

According to Kant, each of us may have “hope for happiness in the same measure as he has made himself worthy of it in his conduct” (A809/B837). Kant calls the state in which happiness is attained in exact proportion to morality the “highest good” (A814/B842). Thus, one might suppose that the answer to the hope question is “the highest good.” Note, however, that Kant reserves hope for one of the two elements of the highest good, i.e. when he speaks of the “*hope* of being happy” and the “*effort* to make oneself *worthy* of happiness” (A810/B838, my emphasis).

This is not yet the full answer to the hope question, as Kant suggests in the third version of it: “Now if I behave so as not to be unworthy of happiness, *how* may I hope thereby to partake of it?” (A809/B837, my emphasis). This question is motivated by the fact that we might question how the highest good is even possible: Neither nature nor human agency can ensure the necessary connection between happiness and morality (A810/B838). Therefore, it seems that we do not have grounds to hope for our happiness as part of the highest good. This problem and

using the A- and B-editions (A/B). I use the following translations: *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998), *Critique of Practical Reason* (Kant 1996b), *On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice* (Kant 1996c), and *Toward Perpetual Peace* (Kant 1996d).

⁷For an overview of all contexts in which Kant treats hope, including the *Religion*, see my chapter “Hope in Kant” (Blöser 2020).

its answer lie at the heart of Kant's hope question. We can reformulate the question as "What do I have grounds to hope for?"⁸

Kant argues that only if we assume god's existence and the existence of a "future life" can we conceive of the highest good as possible (A811/B839). Only by assuming that a just and benevolent god will distribute happiness in proportion to morality can we imagine that the necessary connection between morality and happiness will be established. As we can see that this does not happen presently on earth, we must assume a future life in which the highest good is realized. Therefore, hoping for one's happiness as part of the highest good requires assuming the existence of god and immortality. The normative question of whether we *may* hope also requires that these assumptions be *rational*.

In a nutshell, Kant argues that even if the assumptions of god and a future life can never be justified on *theoretical* grounds—by providing an a priori argument or pointing to evidence—we have decisive *practical* reasons for these assumptions. Therefore, we may rationally assume the existence of god and a future life as objects of faith or "moral Belief"⁹ (A828/B856), or, in the terminology of the second *Critique*, we may hold them as *postulates* of pure practical reason. Discussing Kant's argument in detail would exceed the limits of this chapter. Instead, allow me to focus on two central features of postulates and to point out their consequences for an understanding of hope. According to Kant, a "postulate of pure practical reason" is "a *theoretical* proposition, though one not demonstrable as a such, insofar as it is attached inseparably to an a priori unconditionally valid *practical* law" (5:122), which is the moral law. A postulate is a theoretical proposition (i.e. it concerns an existence claim), but it is not justified on theoretical grounds. However, it is a necessary precondition of the moral law—Kant argues that the assumption of god and immortality are necessary conditions for a moral duty, namely that of promoting the highest good.

This reconstruction reveals how hope and faith are related: Faith is an epistemic attitude towards the grounds of hope for deserved happiness (god and immortality), of which we lack knowledge. We may hope because hope is based on *rational* faith. Thus, the full answer to Kant's hope question is: if I do what I should, I may hope for happiness as part of the highest good, because it is rational to assume that this hope has grounds, i.e. because it is rational to have faith or moral Belief that god exists and the soul is immortal.

The connection between hope and faith is responsible for a special feature of Kant's conception of hope: its status as "sure hope" (6:482). This feature is particularly interesting against the background of the other early modern views of hope we have seen so far. According to Kant, hope for happiness is sure in two respects: First, hope does not go hand in hand with fear. For Kant, hope and fear have different

⁸Günther Zöllner (2013, p. 254) draws attention to the fact that "may" [*dürfen*], in Kant's time, was used not only in the sense of permission but also in the sense of "having grounds" [*Grund haben*].

⁹Translating Kant's term "Glaube" into English is difficult; it is sometimes translated as "faith" or as "Belief" with a capital "B" (Chignell 2013).

presuppositions: hope presupposes faith, and fear presupposes the absence of faith (see A830/B858).¹⁰ Second, hope for happiness is sure because it is empirically indefeasible. It is based on faith, which is theoretically undecidable and immune to any evidence to come. If we can have faith come what may, we can also hope, come what may, that we will attain deserved happiness.

In his historical and political writings, Kant envisages hope for moral and legal progress in various passages (e.g. 7:93, 8:17, 8:307, 8:386). A parallel to the account of hope in the *Critiques* is suggested by calling the goal of progress—perpetual peace—the “highest political good” (6:355). A further similarity between Kant’s various treatments of hope is that in the political context also, Kant aims to justify the assumption of a ground of hope. The role of god in the highest good is assigned to nature (understood as a teleological order) or providence (see e.g. 8:361). Just as we lack knowledge of god, the teleological order of nature cannot be an object of knowledge; it can only be an object of faith or trust (8:313).

In the *Common Saying*, Kant advances an argument that is meant to show that even people who deny the reality of progress—like Moses Mendelssohn, whom Kant cites as an advocate of this view—must “hope for better times” if they act to promote the “general well-being” (8:309). Kant gives the following rationale for this thesis: “[H]e [Mendelssohn] could not reasonably hope to bring this about all by himself, without others after him continuing along the same path” (ibid.). That is, Kant focuses here on actions where (1) the success cannot be brought about by a single individual and (2) the success is possible only after the death of the acting individual. To be motivated to perform these kinds of actions, we must not believe that they are impossible. Just how the role of hope should be understood here is an open question in Kant scholarship. First, Kant can be understood as holding that lack of belief in the impossibility of success amounts to *hope* that our actions will be successful. This would mean that hope for the success of one’s actions is a necessary presupposition of rational action.¹¹ A problem with this interpretation is that Kantian hope, as described thus far, implies a kind of certainty that *goes beyond* lacking belief in the impossibility of the outcome. Second, Kant can be understood as holding that hope is *conducive* to difficult action where success is uncertain without being *necessary* for rational action at all. Kant emphasizes that “the mind is [...] cheered up by the prospect that matters could become better in the future” (8:309), which plausibly has a positive effect on our willingness to act and contribute to this future.

¹⁰By way of a thought experiment, Kant suggests that for a person who lacks faith in god and immortality, “there is enough left to make him fear a divine existence and a future. For to this end nothing more is required than that he at least cannot pretend to any certainty that there is no such being and no future life” (A 830/B858).

¹¹Onora O’Neill emphasizes this aspect of Kant’s account of hope (O’Neill 1997).

4.7 Conclusion

Enlightenment views of hope are mostly found in the context of a general theory of the affects or passions. Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Hume advance definitions of hope that can be seen as precursors of the contemporary “standard definition,” according to which hope consists of a desire and a belief in the possibility, but not the certainty, of the desired outcome. In contrast to contemporary definitions, however, Descartes, Hobbes, and Hume advocate a stronger evidential condition for hope: according to their view, we do not hope for what we take to be merely possible, no matter how unlikely it is; we hope for what we take to be more likely. The consistency with which early modern philosophers arrive at this position, and the consistency with which contemporary philosophers of hope maintain that hope is compatible with low probabilities, might lead one to suspect that “hope” has come to express a different concept over time.¹² Perhaps enlightenment views of hope would today be classified as views of *optimism*. Alternatively, the discrepancy between early modern and contemporary views can be taken to point to the fact that hope can take different forms, and that early modern authors were primarily concerned with a kind of hope that does not receive much attention today.

While Descartes, Hobbes, and Hume see hope as connected with a higher probability estimate of the good outcome than fear, Kant distinguishes hope and fear by grounding hope in *faith*. Kant does not provide a definition of hope, since he is not interested in giving an account of hope in the context of empirical psychology. Rather, he focuses on the rationality of hope and argues that we may hope for our deserved happiness because we are rationally entitled to assume that the grounds of hope, namely god and immortality, exist. The other early modern authors wanted to avoid grounding their accounts of hope in metaphysical assumptions. Instead, they treated hope in their taxonomies of affects, which were meant to be based solely on the methods of empirical science. Note that Kant, too, is concerned with providing a philosophical account that does not *contradict* empirical findings. Nevertheless, his restriction of knowledge claims to the empirical realm leaves open the possibility of having faith in god on practical grounds, which is the basis of *sure* hope.

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