

## Agency without Hope

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A widespread assumption: agency is sustained by a forward-looking orientation toward success, vindication, or achievement. When this orientation collapses, agency is undermined.

Role of hope: hope is envisioned as what sustains agency when expectations of success are low. When hope is lost, despair is supposed to follow.

My argument: this framework rests on a mistake. It assumes that agency is always mediated by a certain kind of forward-looking orientation. Accordingly, persistence under bleak conditions is taken to be intelligible only insofar as some form of hope can be attributed to the agent.

But that's false. And it obscures a fundamental form of agency. Some forms of commitment are not mediated by expectations at all.

Recognizing this allows us to make sense of persistence under low expectations of success/vindication without redescribing it as hopeful, while also clarifying the genuine, but limited, role that hope plays in sustaining agency under these conditions.

### 1. Agency without hope

We often assume that when hope is gone, agential collapse follows. But consider the following cases:

(Monet) continues painting despite near blindness, severe doubt, no expectation of vindication, no sense of improvement or progress: "I'm never finished with my paintings; the further I get, the more I seek the impossible and the more powerless I feel."

(Caregiver) A person cares for a partner with advanced dementia who no longer recognizes him, will never improve, and with whom no meaningful interaction is possible. He continues providing attentive, loving care.

(Activist) An environmental activist struggles to gather support for policies that might mitigate climate change. Eventually, though, she becomes convinced that we are far past the point at which anything she can do will make a difference; she believes that environmental and economic collapse is unavoidable and she has no hope that any forms of mitigation will be effective.

(Scholar) Gradually recognizes that his career will be undistinguished and his ideals unrealized, yet his commitment to teaching and scholarship remains unchanged.

These agents persevere without optimism, without confidence in success, and—at least in any ordinary sense—without hope. These agents do not appear confused, akratic, or practically irrational; their continued engagement remains intelligible.

From within the standard hope/despair framework, these cases are hard to accommodate. Why assume that hope must be doing the work whenever persistence under these conditions occurs?

## 2. The standard picture: hope versus despair

The pressure to reinterpret persistence in terms of hope is driven by an ambiguity in the hope/despair literature. The ambiguity:

|                | <b>Hope/Despair as Explanans</b>  | <b>Hope/Despair as Explanandum</b>                         |
|----------------|---|--|
| <b>Hope</b>    | A psychological factor that explains the persistence of agency when success is doubted          | The persistence of agency when success is doubted          |
| <b>Despair</b> | A psychological factor that explains motivational and agential collapse when success is doubted | Motivational and agential collapse when success is doubted |

Authors tend to slide between the two understandings of hope and despair. But this slide obscures an important realm of human action.

Hope is often depicted as a propositional attitude toward a desired state. There is debate about how to characterize hope. Most theories hold that there are either two or three aspects:

- Cognitive element: a presupposition that the hoped-for outcome is not impossible.
- Conative element: a desire for the outcome in question
- Some theories add further conditions, such as a requirement that the person be disposed to attend in certain ways to the hoped-for possibility.

Now let's consider despair. Despair is often treated as the opposite of hope. A few examples:

“Despair is hopelessness. To despair is to lose all hope, to be without hope, to be overcome with a sense of futility or defeat, to believe that there is no possibility at all of getting the desired object or outcome” (Govier 2011, 247).

Despair is “a mode of sadness whereby one experiences certain considerations as decisively defeating one's reasons to take seriously a desired outcome that one believes or feels will not occur” (Milona and Stockdale 2025, 1355).

“In the literature on hope, there is virtually universal agreement that despair is opposite to hope in that where there is despair, there is no hope, and vice versa” (Kwong 2024, 235)

The problem:

- When despair is treated as the practical opposite of hope, it is implicitly treated as *the collapse of agency itself*: the point at which projects no longer grip, reasons no longer move the agent, and withdrawal or indifference occurs.
- Despair, on this picture, is not merely a psychological state that *explains* collapse; it *is* collapse.

Once despair is understood as collapse, hope is correspondingly treated as whatever prevents collapse. If commitment survives, hope must still be present somewhere, in some form.

But this assumption blocks an alternative possibility from view: that commitment might survive even when hope is gone.

### 3. A complication: hopeful pessimism

Recent work on *hopeful pessimism* arises from pressure on the standard framework.

- That combination can seem surprising: isn't pessimism something like the view that nothing is worth doing, the action is futile, that the world is irredeemably bad? How could you think those things and also be hopeful?
- Pessimism looks like the sort of view that rationalizes withdrawal: if life is irredeemably bad or not worth living, it seems to follow that nothing is worth doing; and if nothing is worth doing, how could there be anything to hope for?

Pessimism appears to threaten agency. Yet people sometimes continue to act despite expecting failure and without believing that their efforts will succeed.

To make sense of this, the hopeful pessimism literature introduces a distinction:

- First, these philosophers distinguish pessimism and despair, treating pessimism as a theoretical view and despair as the collapse of agency and motivation.
- Second, these philosophers claim that if pessimism concerns expectations about the future or about the outcomes of one's actions, and hope concerns agency and motivation, then pessimism is compatible with either hope or despair.
- In other words: pessimism contrasts with optimism; despair contrasts with hope. The former pair is about theoretical views; the latter pair is about agency or motivation.

But notice what's happened here: hope is now being identified with the persistence of agency and motivation in the absence of expectations of success/vindication, rather than with *a factor that explains* persistence in these conditions.

- This is exactly the slide noted above: hope moves from explanans to explanandum, and once it does, alternative sources of persistence disappear from view.

### 4. Hopeless commitment

The literature assumes that we need to appeal to hope in order to make sense of agential persistence in the absence of expectations of success/vindication. My claim: this is a mistake.

John Williams's *Stoner* (1965) offers a good illustration of this phenomenon. Over the course of his life, Stoner gradually recognizes a series of facts about himself and his situation: that his academic career will be undistinguished; that his marriage is a failure; that his child will be alienated from him; that he will lose the love of his life; that his pedagogical and scholarly ideals will not be institutionally realized; that his work will not be remembered.

- These recognitions are not resisted or softened. They are accepted plainly and without illusion.
- Crucially, this recognition does not alter the structure of Stoner's commitment.
- He does not persist because he expects eventual success, recognition, or vindication. Nor does he persist out of defiance, stubbornness, or tragic resolve. There is no sense in which he continues because he still hopes that things will turn out well.

What's important here is that the disappearance of hope appears to make no practical difference at all. His practical life retains its structure even after the usual teleological and justificatory supports have evaporated.

If hope is what sustains agency when prospects of success fade, then Stoner's continued engagement is puzzling. There is no outcome-oriented expectation left to preserve, no future vindication kept live in imagination, and no sense in which things are expected to turn out well.

Stoner (and the cases in section 1) involve persistence without hope. What explains the continued commitment here?

## 5. Two types of commitment

Some commitments are *expectation-dependent*. Their standing weakens as prospects of success recede or as justificatory confidence falters. For these commitments, hope matters. Sustaining engagement requires maintaining a sense that success remains possible, or that one's efforts can still make a difference.

Other commitments are *expectation-independent*. Their standing does not track expectations of success or vindication. Even when success is no longer expected, and even when justification is doubted or abandoned, these commitments continue to present themselves as calling for action. (These commitments need not be independent of all expectations, but they are independent of expectations of success, recognition, or justificatory payoff.)

## 6. Devotion

There are multiple species of expectation-independent commitments. One especially central instance of an expectation-independent is *devotion*.

A devoted agent remains bound to an object (an activity, relationship, value, or way of life) even when the considerations that would ordinarily justify persistence no longer apply.

**(Devotion)** An agent is devoted to an object (a person, state of affairs, value, goal, etc.) iff (i) she is committed to engaging in the relevant ways with that object, (ii) this commitment is dialectically invulnerable and (iii) she is disposed to maintain the dialectical invulnerability of this commitment.

A commitment or attitude is *dialectically invulnerable* when there is no argument, distinction, clarification, or other dialectical move that would dislodge it or cause it to dissipate. Showing the commitment or attitude to be irrational, inconsistent with other commitments, in conflict with moral principles, lacking adequate justification, and so forth has no effect. (Katsafanas, *Philosophy of Devotion*, OUP 2023).

Devotion needn't involve hope. Devoted commitment need not involve keeping success in mind as a possibility, attending to unswamped possibilities, or sustaining an orientation toward future goods. The devoted agent can fully acknowledge that her efforts will fail, that no vindication is forthcoming, and that the future offers no reassurance.

## 7. Conclusion

The recent literature on hope treats it as the central resource that sustains agency when expectations of success or vindication are low. When agency persists under those conditions, hope is taken to explain that persistence; when agency collapses, the loss of hope is taken to explain the collapse.

I have argued that this picture rests on a mistake. Hope and despair are sometimes treated as psychological factors that explain persistence and collapse under low expectations of success, and sometimes as names for persistence and collapse themselves. When these roles are not distinguished, persistence without hope becomes invisible.

There are important forms of commitment whose persistence does not depend on expectations of success, vindication, or future payoff. Example: devotion.

- Devoted commitments continue to bind independently of how things are expected to turn out. They do not require that success remain possible, that vindication remain live, or that the future offer reassurance.
- Their grip survives precisely because it is not mediated by expectation.
- Recognizing this structure helps explain how agents without hope, illusion, or optimism can avoid agential collapse.

Broader point:

- Hope is important but is not the sole explanation of persistence in the absence of expectations of success/vindication.
- Some commitments persist not because agents continue to hope, but because the commitment is not tethered to expectations of success or vindication.
- Agency does not always depend on maintaining a positive orientation toward the future. There's a form of commitment that the standard theories systematically overlook: one in which a commitment survives the collapse of hope and certain kinds of vindication.