



# Despair and Hopelessness

**ABSTRACT:** *It has recently been argued that hope is polysemous in that it sometimes refers to hoping and other times to being hopeful. That it has these two distinct senses is reflected in the observation that a person can hope for an outcome without being hopeful that it will occur. Below, I offer a new argument for this distinction. My strategy is to show that accepting this distinction yields a rich account of two distinct ways in which hope can be lost, ways that map onto the two senses of hope: A person can lose hope either by ceasing to hope for an outcome (hopelessness) or by ceasing to be hopeful that it will obtain (despair). Thinking about these negative attitudes in these two ways, I contend, is explanatorily rich and fruitfully reveals how they differ in phenomenology, behavioral differences, and the ways in which a person can escape them.*

**KEYWORDS:** hope, hoping, hopefulness, despair, hopelessness

## Introduction

In the philosophical literature on hope, it has recently been proposed that *hope* has two distinct senses (Kwong 2020, 2022a). On the one hand, it can be understood as *hoping*, as in ‘I am hoping that travel restrictions due to COVID will soon be lifted’, or, on the other hand, as *being hopeful*, as in ‘I am hopeful that travel restrictions due to COVID will soon be lifted’. That hope can be distinguished in these two senses is reflected in the observation that a person can hope for some outcome without necessarily being hopeful that it will occur. Thus, I can hope that travel restrictions will soon be lifted because I want to visit family who live overseas, but not be hopeful at all that it will happen because COVID cases keep on increasing, and strict travel restrictions are still in place. Hoping and being hopeful are therefore distinct mental phenomena. On this view, to hope for an outcome is roughly to desire it and to believe that it is obtainable, whereas to be hopeful is to have positive thoughts and feelings about the chances that an outcome will obtain. In order for a person to be hopeful about an outcome, she must first hope for it. However, hoping for an outcome does not require that one be hopeful about it; on the contrary, a person can hope but not be hopeful or feel indifferently about the chances that the outcome will occur.

Distinguishing between hoping and hopefulness has various explanatory advantages. Among other things, such a distinction can more accurately capture the various ways in which we use the word ‘hope’ and its cognates, offer a better understanding of hope’s phenomenology, and shed light on a standing dispute in

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the literature concerning the difference between hope and despair (Kwong 2022a, 2022b). Affirming the distinction, however, does imply a commitment to the standard account of hope (or something close to it), which states that hope is a matter of desiring an outcome and believing that its obtainment is possible. This definition, as stated above, is one of *hoping*. The standard account, however, has been rejected by many theorists on the grounds that it cannot explain various features of hope. But such a rejection rests on a mistake because many of these features that the standard account is expected to explain are in fact features of hopefulness. Insofar as the standard account is an account of the *other* sense of hope (namely, hoping), the critics' insistence that it should explain these features is therefore misguided.

In this paper, I offer a new argument for the distinction between hoping and hopefulness. I show that accepting it can yield a rich account of two distinct ways in which we can *lose* hope: A person can lose hope either by ceasing to hope for a desired outcome (i.e., hopelessness) or by ceasing to be hopeful that a desired outcome will obtain (i.e., despair). Thinking about these negative attitudes in these two ways, I contend, is explanatorily rich and fruitfully reveals their differences in phenomenology and behavioral differences. It can also offer insights into how people who experience these states can be characterized and how they might escape from them, an issue of critical importance to some recent discussions in social and political philosophy. For example, Katie Stockdale has argued that people who live under oppressive conditions often face the real risk of losing all hopes as well as their ability to hope and are threatened with a kind of 'all-encompassing despair that damages [their] moral agency' (2021: 149). To prevent such devastating effects of despair and to restore hope, Stockdale proposes that oppressed people can appeal to and harness a kind of 'intrinsic faith', which not only can help bring about a moral-political solidarity but can also create a form of collective hope among them (2021: 181).

Like other hope theorists, Stockdale assumes that hope is opposed to despair in that the former precludes the latter and vice versa. However, if my arguments in this paper are on the right track, we see that this assumption can be challenged. As I argue below, despair is opposed only to one sense of hope (i.e., hopefulness) but not to the other (i.e., hoping). In other words, despair is compatible with *hoping*. This interpretation, I contend, can offer us an alternative framework under which to understand and characterize the experience of oppressed people and to recommend additional strategies to combat the loss-of-hope state. Thus, people living in conditions of oppression have every reason *not* to be hopeful that their hopes will be realized. Yet, their despair, contrary to what Stockdale and other hope theorists maintain, need not necessitate in their ceasing to hope for these outcomes (since hoping is distinct from hopefulness). This has important implications: The fact that oppressed people can continue *to hope*, albeit unaccompanied by hopefulness, could mitigate the damage to their moral agency and enable them to retain their identities (with respect to the outcomes for which they hope). The idea that oppressed people can 'hope without hope' also directs us to a remedy centered on hopefulness, which has to do with how one thinks and feels about the chances that a hoped-for outcome will obtain, as opposed to

hoping, which is concerned with whether the outcome is obtainable in the first place. A more complete treatment and defense of this view in the context of oppression undoubtedly must be reserved for another occasion. What I aim to do below is simply to lay down the groundwork for that treatment.

This article will be structured as follows. First, I will review some of the ways in which the concepts of despair and hopelessness have been discussed in the literature on hope. In the second section, I will consider how hope is polysemous and distinguish its two senses. In the next section I then use this distinction as a springboard to reveal and motivate two ways in which hope can be opposed, namely, despair and hopelessness. After discussing some central features of each of these negative attitudes, I will identify some explanatory advantages of my account and offer, in the concluding section, suggestions for future research.

## 1. Despair and Hopelessness

Discussion of despair and hopelessness typically occurs in the context of hope. Theorists examine these negative states as opposites to hope in an attempt to clarify our understanding of hope and of a person's experiences when she ceases to or is unable to hope. There is, however, little consensus as to what these negative attitudes amount to, how they threaten hope, or even whether they are distinct from each other. Below, I will briefly examine some recent views on the subject.

In 'Hope and Its Opposites', Trudy Govier disputes that any singular attitude constitutes *the* opposite of hope, proposing instead that hope can be opposed in multiple ways. In particular, she identifies despair as one such way and characterizes it as follows: 'Despair is hopelessness. To despair is to lose all hope, to be without hope, to be overcome by a sense of futility or defeat, to believe that there is no possibility at all of getting the desired object or outcome' (2011: 247). Furthermore, she specifies three dimensions in which we can compare and contrast despair (and in her view, hopelessness) with hope. First, despair is cognitively opposed to hope in that someone who experiences despair lacks the belief that the hoped-for or desired outcome is possible. As we will see below, the possession of such a belief is widely taken to be a necessary condition for hope. Second, despair is emotionally opposed to hope because the former has a felt negative quality or emotional tone, whereas the latter has a positive one. Third, despair is similar to hope in terms of what she calls 'involvement': Both presume 'vulnerability' given that a person possessing either attitude 'is in the stream of things, expecting to be affected by the unwanted outcomes' (2011: 247).

For Govier, there is no difference between despair and hopelessness. In this regard, her view reflects our pretheoretical intuition that these terms are synonymous and can be used interchangeably. Indeed, this view is also prevalent in many lexical entries. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, lists 'feeling or causing despair about something' as a definition for 'hopeless'. Not everyone, however, thinks that despair and hopelessness refer to the same phenomenon. For example, Anthony Steinbock (2007) argues that these negative attitudes rival the experience of hope in distinct ways. According to Steinbock, we feel hopeless with

respect to specific endeavors (or what he calls ‘trying’) when we experience their ‘ground of hope’ as impossible (2007: 441). Thus, an ambitious amateur who undertakes to take apart and reassemble a car engine is likely at some point of her endeavor to see that what she is doing is hopeless. That is, she comes to recognize her hope for the task as impossible. Despite seeing this task as a hopeless one, her ground of hope for other desired outcomes remains intact and enables her to hope for them in the future. By contrast, Steinbock argues that we are in despair when we experience the ground on which we can entertain *any* hope as impossible. Given that despair prevents us from entertaining specific hopes, Steinbock regards it as posing the ‘most profound challenge to hope among these [rival] experiences’ (2007: 435).

Interestingly, Matthew Ratcliffe (2013) advances a position similar to Steinbock’s. Ratcliffe is principally concerned with the question of what it is to lose hope, in particular, with the phenomenology of hopelessness. According to him, our ability to entertain specific intentional hopes is premised on another kind of hope that he describes as having a ‘pre-intentional’ orientation (2013: 597). Such a pre-intentional hope, the content of which he claims cannot be adequately captured or expressed propositionally, ‘gives us a sense of how things are in the world’ and makes the possibility of forming, nurturing and losing specific hopes intelligible (604). Loss of this kind of hope, in his view, comes with a distinct phenomenology and can take on many forms, including depression, demoralization, loss of trust, and loss of aspiration. Borrowing from Jonathan Lear (2008), Ratcliffe labels this kind of pre-intentional hope ‘radical hope’ and likens it to Steinbock’s notion of ‘ground of hope’. Unlike Steinbock, however, Ratcliffe is hesitant to label the loss of radical hope as despair. Given the qualitatively different forms which such a loss can take, Ratcliffe simply asserts without elaboration that some of them are instances of despair, while others are instances of hopelessness.

The final position that I would like to consider is that of Ariel Meirav, who discusses despair in the context of the standard account of hope (2009). In his view, such an account is false because it fails to distinguish hope from despair. According to the standard account of hope, which has also been labelled as the ‘orthodox’, ‘common denominator’, or ‘bare bones’ account, to hope for an outcome is to desire it and to believe that its attainment is possible (or that it is neither a certainty nor an impossibility). The problem with such an account, Meirav points out, is that a person who hopes for an outcome and another who despairs both satisfy the desire and belief requirements as set forth by the standard account. To illustrate, Meirav discusses an example in which he brings home a lottery ticket. Although he hopes to win the jackpot and is ‘full of enthusiasm’, his wife by contrast despairs and exhibits such reactions as resisting and suppressing hope, not being ‘full of enthusiasm’, not feeling hopeful, and being skeptical and indifferent (2009: 222–23). Yet, both he and his wife actually desire to win the lottery and believe that despite the improbable odds, winning is possible. Meirav thus concludes that the possession of the requisite desire and belief cannot be what distinguishes hope from despair, and therefore, said possession does not constitute a sufficient explanation of the nature of hope. Much attention has since

been given in the hope literature to enhance the standard account with a third factor that addresses the problem of despair (e.g., Milona and Stockdale 2018; Kwong 2019).

Based on this preliminary review of arguments on despair and hopelessness, a few conclusions can be drawn. The first is that despair and hopelessness, regardless of what they might entail, are clearly related to hope in that they are its opposites. Someone who experiences either presumably cannot simultaneously hope. The second is that hardly any consensus exists as to what despair and hopelessness are. As we have seen, some theorists, like Govier, do not distinguish between the two, while others who do distinguish in turn fail to explain or clarify why some attitudes are labelled despair but not hopelessness and vice versa. Thus, the same attitude constituted by a person's inability to entertain specific hopes is regarded, on the one hand, by Steinbock as despair and, on the other, by Ratcliffe as hopelessness (and possibly as despair in some cases). Admittedly, these theorists can simply stipulate these terms to serve their specific purposes. Even so, readers can still query how these attitudes under such stipulations differ from one another.

Third, many attempts to explain despair and hopelessness, such as Steinbock's and Ratcliffe's, appeal to a kind of hope *outside of* intentional hope. That is, when a person experiences these negative attitudes, she ceases to have the kind of hope—a 'basal' hope (Ratcliffe 2013; Calhoun 2018)—that enables her to entertain instances of intentional hopes. Whether such a kind of hope exists remains an issue of contention among hope theorists and will not be addressed in this article. However, it is worth noting that these theorists' appeal to this kind of hope cannot be used to explain how a person could experience either despair (Steinbock 2007) or hopelessness (Ratcliffe 2013) with respect to specific hopes; after all, the absence of basal hope renders one unable to entertain *any* hopes at all. Yet, plausibly, a person could despair over some hoped-for outcome or feel hopeless about it. In this respect, Meirav's (2009) position, insofar as it addresses despair as it is directed at specific outcomes, has an advantage over Steinbock's and Ratcliffe's. Jakob Huber's recent analysis of episodic despair, too, shares this explanatory edge because it is concerned with a kind of despair that is intentional and propositional in nature (2022). However, these accounts are not without difficulties. Unlike Steinbock and Ratcliffe, neither Meirav nor Huber discusses hopelessness, which I argue can also be 'episodic' in that it can be experienced in relation to particular outcomes. Moreover, as I will point out below, both theorists mischaracterize the relationship between despair and hope, using the relationship misguidedly as a theoretical desideratum against the standard account of hope. In short, while there have been discussions of intentional despair, hopelessness and despair still need to be explained as distinct phenomena with respect to specific desired outcomes.

The remainder of this article will be organized around the above three remarks on despair and hopelessness. Specifically, I aim to show how a person can experience these states with respect to specific outcomes (e.g., 'I despair that  $x$ ' and 'I am hopeless about  $x$ '). Additionally, I argue that these two negative attitudes are distinct, and I identify important ways in which they differ in their opposition to hope. Finally, and perhaps controversially and counterintuitively, I contend that

despair is, in fact, not opposed to hope but presupposes hope (that is, despair presupposes hoping and is opposed only to hopefulness).

## 2. Hoping and Hopefulness

In the hope literature, it has recently been argued that the word ‘hope’ is polysemous in that it is sometimes used to refer to *hoping* (as in ‘I hope (or am hoping) that tomorrow will be a better day’) and at other times as referring to being or feeling *hopeful* (as in ‘I am feeling hopeful that tomorrow will be a better day’; Kwong 2020, 2022a). Given that this distinction is crucial to the discussion below, it is important to briefly review the basis for it. Far from being synonymous and interchangeable, these two senses of hope—hoping and hopefulness—are distinct. The fact that a person hopes for some outcome does not imply that she feels hopeful about it. Indeed, she can feel unhopeful about it despite hoping for the outcome. For instance, prior to being tested, a person exhibiting all the telltale symptoms of COVID-19 hopes that she does not have it even though, deep down, she knows she is infected. This person can thus be characterized as hoping that she does not have the virus but not at all hopeful about her actual condition. Similarly, a guitar player who hopes to master a difficult riff need not have given any thought to whether she is additionally hopeful that she can do it; despite recognizing the fact *that* what she hopes to do is obtainable, she simply has not given any further thought to *how* she feels about such chances. In such a case, she can be said to hope for the outcome without feeling hopeful or unhopeful about it. Hoping therefore neither implies nor requires hopefulness. To wit, if we are told that a person hopes for some outcome, we cannot infer from that fact alone whether she is additionally hopeful or not. The mental phenomena in question are logically distinct.

What is the nature of hoping and hopefulness such that a person can hope for an outcome without being hopeful? One suggestion is that hoping is a matter of registering that one has a certain kind of desire that one wants to obtain, namely, a desire one believes to have some possibility or chance of obtaining (Kwong 2022a). When I hope that I will be able to travel overseas again, I am consciously noting that I have a desire to travel next year, an outcome that I want to obtain and that I believe has some chance of happening. On this construal, hoping is a mental act that is neutral with respect to what we do with, or how we feel about, our registered desires. In some cases, we may devise plans to help bring about our desired outcomes (‘I hope that I will do well on my exam’). In others, we may simply acknowledge them but not give them another moment of thought (‘I hope that my favorite TV series will be renewed’). Furthermore, some instances of hoping are such that they are positively valenced (‘I hope that I will win the award’), whereas others are filled with fear and trepidation (‘I hope I will not be blamed for the accident’; see Stockdale’s discussion of fearful hopes [2019]; cf. Kwong [2022b]) or are neutral in valence (‘I hope the city fixes the potholes soon’).

Notice that the standard account of hope, which construes hope as a matter of having a desire that one believes to be obtainable, comes quite close to capturing what hoping is. The present construal differs from that account only by further

stipulating that in hoping, a person has to register that she has a desire that she believes is obtainable. In this regard, it is even closer to Luc Bovens's (1999) account, which holds that hoping requires that one expend some mental energy in imagining the desired outcome. Where the two accounts differ is that the registration account limits the kind of mental imaging to mere registration of one's desires and makes no provision, *pace* Bovens, that hoping is pleasurable or otherwise positive. For the task at hand, readers who are not fully convinced by this construal of hoping may well replace it with Bovens's as my argument below does not rely on this construal. All that my argument requires is that we distinguish hoping from hopefulness, a distinction that is not always drawn or fully appreciated.

A word of caution is in order. Even though the registration construal of hoping (as well as Bovens's) is meant to amend the standard account, it is importantly different from other 'revised' standard accounts found in the literature (e.g., Meirav 2009; Milona and Stockdale 2018). This is because these latter accounts are concerned, among other things, with revising the standard account in order to distinguish hope (or in fact, hopefulness) from despair. By contrast, the registration construal aims only to capture the phenomenon of hoping better, which it argues should be kept distinct from hopefulness. Accordingly, the registration construal makes no attempt to distinguish hoping from despair because it does not take these to be opposites and thus does not view despair as being within its explanatory scope. One way to see how the registration construal differs from existing revised standard accounts is to note that critics can easily argue that the former faces the same objections as those raised against the original standard account and may thus be rejected on similar grounds. For example, the registration construal cannot explain the difference between hope and despair because a person who experiences the latter also registers the requisite desire. Such registration therefore cannot be the criterion for differentiating between despair and hope. In response, my view is that this objection, like others raised against the standard account, is misguided precisely because it fails fully to observe the distinction between hoping and hopefulness. Once we keep this distinction in mind, we can see that these objections diminish in persuasion. Below, I will show how the objection based on despair equivocates on 'hope' and that the above construal of hoping in fact can help us better understand the relationship between hope and despair.

Let us now turn our attention to hopefulness. What is it to feel hopeful about a desired outcome? I submit that hopefulness is constituted by a person being positively oriented on balance toward the chances that her desired outcome will obtain. Whereas hoping is directed at an outcome that one desires, hopefulness is directed instead at a different target, namely, at the chances, the likelihood, and, if applicable, the probability, that such an outcome will obtain. To have a positive orientation toward these chances is not simply a matter of recognizing *that* the obtainment of a desired outcome is possible; hoping for it already presupposes that. Rather, it is additionally to entertain good thoughts and feelings about the chances, such as displaying enthusiasm and fantasizing about and anticipating the realization of the outcome. Thus, Jordan is hopeful that she will do well on her exam insofar as she feels good on the whole about her chances of succeeding. By

contrast, a person who is not hopeful will, on balance, have a negative orientation toward the chances of her desired result's obtaining. For example, although Samantha hopes that her car will not require major repairs, she is not hopeful given that it has been making strange and loud clanking noises. Her lack of hopefulness is constituted by her being overwhelmed by worries that her car has suffered significant mechanical damage, and she thinks that these repairs will likely be expensive. In short, she does not have good feelings and thoughts that her hope of a quick and cheap repair will be realized.

It is important to note that hopefulness is *not* a function of a person's belief in the likelihood that her desired outcome will obtain. On my view, a person can be hopeful about an outcome that she believes has a very low chance of obtaining so long as she entertains good thoughts and feelings about these chances. Similarly, she can fail to be hopeful about an outcome that she takes to have a good chance of obtaining if all she can entertain are negative thoughts and feelings. What, then, are the conditions that control for a person's hopefulness, or lack thereof, with respect to her desired outcome's obtaining? Here, a number of answers can be extrapolated from the literature on hope (though these conditions are not presented as such; rather, they are offered as constitutive conditions for hope *simpliciter*). For example, whether we are able to see a pathway forward toward the outcome (Kwong 2019), whether we think that the ultimate external factor responsible for bringing about the outcome—whether luck, God, fate, or nature—acts on behalf of our goals and interests (Meirav 2009), whether we perceive the situation as encouraging (Milona and Stockdale 2018). Thus, if Kikuchi thinks that he is a generally lucky person, he may feel hopeful about the chances that his raffle ticket will be the winning one, even if he acknowledges that the odds of winning are extremely low. Conversely, if Ryu, a deeply religious person, thinks that God has set out to punish him, he may not feel hopeful about the likelihood of, say, finding inner peace. Whether a person feels hopeful or not can hinge on any or all of these aforementioned conditions.

Now that the distinction between hoping and hopefulness has been drawn, I will show how it can yield an account of hopelessness and despair. However, a word about argumentative strategy is in order. Some readers may not be entirely convinced by the above distinction between hoping and hopefulness, or they may have doubts concerning the adequacy of the accounts of both. Insofar as this distinction and these accounts will be used to ground my arguments below, these readers may already be skeptical. My response is to ask for these readers' indulgence and ask them to adopt a 'wait and see' approach. My strategy is to demonstrate how talking about hope in terms of hoping and hopefulness is fruitful: this approach can be used to distinguish between despair and hopelessness and to point out which attitudes mark out and correspond to differing and important ways in which hope can be opposed. Furthermore, my approach can yield rich accounts of these negative attitudes, including hints on how to eliminate or reduce them. My hope, then, is that these explanatory advantages will support my contention that not only is the distinction between despair and hopelessness worth making, but so, too, is the distinction between hoping and hopefulness.



### 3. Opposing Hope

The central message of the previous section is that 'hope' is polysemous and can refer to hoping and to hopefulness, which are distinct phenomena. The former refers to a person's desire for a certain outcome and her belief that it is obtainable, whereas the latter concerns how she is oriented with respect to the chances that the outcomes will obtain (that is, whether she has good thoughts or feelings overall about such chances beyond her recognition that they exist). More important, a person can hope but not feel hopeful. Given that hope can be construed as hoping and as hopefulness, we might reasonably expect hope to be opposed in its two respective senses. I argue that these ways in which hope can be opposed are also distinct.

What is it for a person to lose hope with respect to a desired outcome? Keeping the two aforementioned senses of hope in mind, this question can be parsed and reformulated into two separate ones: (1) what is it to cease to hope for the desired outcome, and (2) what is it to cease to feel hopeful about it? Either question, I contend, could plausibly be the object of inquiry with respect to the initial question. More important, these questions track different mental phenomena, which I argue can usefully be thought of as hopelessness and despair, respectively. Below I will examine each in turn.

To be hopeless about a desired outcome, on my view, is to believe that there is no hope that a desired outcome will obtain. Prereflectively, when a situation is declared to be hopeless, we are asserting that there is no way out of it or that there is zero chance that some hoped-for prospect will be realized. Returning to an earlier example, the amateur car enthusiast who hopes to take apart and reassemble a car engine sees what she is doing as hopeless when she realizes that she has no chance to succeed. The task turns out to be far too complex for her to tackle, requiring experience and knowledge that she lacks. In this case, to explain her hopelessness, notice that she first *hopes* to rebuild the car engine. According to the above construal of hoping, this simply means that she desires to rebuild it and believes (initially) that there is some chance or possibility for her to succeed. However, as she embarks on this project, she realizes at some point just how impossible the task is. She may be completely overwhelmed by the innumerable constituent parts that have been removed and placed on the garage floor, or she may be confounded by the realization that she lacks specialized machinery for the reassembly. When this realization of impossibility happens, my suggestion is that her belief has changed. Whereas she earlier believed that there was a possibility for her to succeed, she now no longer believes that there is a possibility of her succeeding. This latter belief may well be false; if she had persevered, she might have discovered that she indeed had the know-how to complete the task. But the possibility in question relevant to hoping is epistemic and subjective in nature in that she need only *believe* that the task is now not possible, it need not in fact be impossible.

When a person ceases to believe that a desired outcome is obtainable, she ceases to hope for it. This is because she no longer satisfies the necessary condition of believing that her desired outcome has some possibility of being obtained, which is a requirement posited by the above construal of hoping and by nearly all

contemporary accounts of hope (cf. nonreductivists like Blöser 2019; Segal and Textor 2015). This, of course, does not mean that she stops desiring the outcome. Indeed, in light of her changed belief, she might now stand in a different relationship to her desire. For instance, she might now *wish* that she could rebuild the engine, usually construed in the literature as a mental attitude directed at a desired outcome believed to be impossible (e.g., I wish I could fly). The important point to note here is that she no longer hopes for the outcome, an attitude that requires that she believe that the desired outcome's realization is possible. Given that our amateur car enthusiast ceases to hope to rebuild the engine, she is in this way *hopeless* and ends up abandoning the project.

Two additional points are worth noting. The first is that hopelessness can occur at any point during hoping. In the above example, the car enthusiast sees the situation as *hopeless* *after* she attempted to take apart and put back the engine, due perhaps to the overwhelming evidence against her initial belief that such a task was possible. However, a person can also be *hopeless* about some outcome at the stage of merely desiring it. For instance, when asked why she never applied for a tenure track job at a prestigious institution, Lin may well respond as follows: 'Yeah, it would be great to work there, but I didn't even give the job ad much consideration. The market is just too tough. I don't stand a chance against other applicants with much more impressive CVs. It's hopeless!'. This response suggests that although Lin desires the outcome that she gets the job, she does not believe that it is possible. To reiterate, she may be mistaken to have such a belief (e.g., with her remarkable credentials), but that is not relevant for hoping. All that matters is that she believes it to be the case that there is no possibility for her to get the job. As such, Lin's desire never turned into a hope; she is *hopeless* about the prospect.

The second is that we can explain hopelessness without appealing to the notion of hopefulness. In the examples of the car enthusiast and the job seeker, neither individual is noted to be hopeful about the chances of their desired outcomes' obtaining. Recall that in my view, hopefulness is construed as having an overall positive orientation—that is, as having good thoughts and feelings—toward the chances that a desired outcome will obtain, where such chances refer to the range of possibilities between impossibility and certainty. Accordingly, the job seeker does not have *any* orientation toward the chances that she will get the job precisely because she believes there are *no* such chances; there is thus no object about which to have feelings or thoughts, good or bad. Similarly, the car enthusiast may well have hoped to rebuild the engine without having considered whether she felt hopeful about it. Although she initially believed the task to be possible, she may not have given any thought about the chances that she will succeed, let alone whether she felt positive or negative about them. Nevertheless, in both cases, we are able to explain why these individuals experienced hopelessness: They ceased to hope for their respective desired outcomes because they did not believe (or no longer believed) that they can be realized. At its core, hopelessness is *not hoping*.

Let us now turn our attention to despair. Whereas a person is *hopeless* with respect to a desired outcome when she ceases to hope for it, she experiences

despair when she hopes for it but does not feel hopeful toward the chances that such an outcome will obtain. My view of despair thus presupposes *hoping* and is opposed to *hopefulness*. 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. My present contention that despair presupposes hope may immediately seem implausible. Note, however, that when theorists assert that despair is opposite to hope, they do not distinguish between hoping and hopefulness, an important distinction that I am urging must be made. Once we differentiate between these two senses of ‘hope’, we will see that these theorists actually have hopefulness in mind when they discuss despair. Because they do not separate the two senses of hope and use the same word interchangeably for both, they thus seem to be committed to the conclusion that despair is opposed to hope. Below, we will see that despair *is* indeed opposed to hope, but it is opposed only to one sense of the word, namely, that of hopefulness, but not to the other (i.e., hoping).

When a person hopes for a desired outcome, she desires it and believes it to have some chance of obtaining. Now, merely believing that obtainment is possible does not guarantee that she feels good about its chances of happening. This is most evident in cases where the probability is virtually nonexistent, such as in cases of hoping against hope. Thus, Alan, the cancer patient from Adrienne Martin’s example is not hopeful at all that he will be cured by the experimental drug, which has an efficacy rate of less than a 1% (2015). Even though Alan hopes to be cured—for example, he has the relevant desire—the probability is far too low to warrant any degree of hopefulness. It must be noted, however, that a belief that one’s desired outcome has a low probability of obtaining is neither necessary nor sufficient for feeling unhelpful. Despite the unfavorable odds, Bess, the other cancer patient in Martin’s example, ‘hopes against hope’ that she will be cured partly because she sees the 1% rate not in terms of a low percentage but in terms of a possibility of being cured (Martin 2015). Also, a person may not feel hopeful with respect to outcomes that she believes to have a good chance of obtaining. For instance, someone who has been beset with adverse experiences or thinks that the world is ‘out to get her’ will not feel hopeful about outcomes that have a decent, even good, chance of obtaining.

I contend that a person experiences despair with respect to a desired outcome when she possesses an overall negative orientation toward the chances that it will obtain. This negative attitude is what I have been describing above as *not* feeling hopeful or feeling unhelpful and lacking in hopefulness. As such, despair is opposed to feeling hopeful. When a person experiences despair, she entertains more bad feelings and thoughts than good ones about the odds that an outcome that she desires will obtain, including a lack of enthusiasm and an absence of anticipation or expectation that the outcome will obtain. Indeed, this characterization of despair is consistent with Meirav’s (2009). As mentioned earlier, according to him, people who experience despair, like his wife in the lottery example, resist and suppress hope, are not ‘full of enthusiasm’, are not hopeful, and are skeptical and indifferent (2009: 222–23). In my view, his characterization of despair is fitting for a person who does not feel hopeful. As to why a person feels despair, I noted above that a number of explanations are

available. For example, she fails to see a pathway toward an outcome that she believes to be possible; she thinks that the external factor determining the outcome acts against her interests and goals, and so on. Any or all of these can explain why a person despairs.

How is despair different from hopelessness? The principal difference, I maintain, is that whereas a person sees a situation as hopeless when she does not believe that a desired outcome has a chance of obtaining, the one experiencing despair still does have that belief. As such, the latter can still be said to *hope* for the outcome: She desires an outcome that she believes to have some chance, no matter how slim, of obtaining. Furthermore, what separates her from the person who is hopeless is that she is negatively oriented toward such chances. That is what her despair consists in. This is the reason why I maintained earlier that Meirav (2009) mischaracterizes his wife in the lottery example. In that example, she desires to win the lottery and believes that there is a chance (however low and improbable) of that happening. Under the present construal, she can therefore properly be said to hope for the outcome. By contrast, Meirav and other theorists think that this is a *reductio* of the standard account of hope: If the standard account's requirements for hope can also be satisfied by people who despair, it simply cannot differentiate hope from despair. According to these theorists, the standard way of thinking about hope is therefore either false or insufficient.

My assessment is that this *reductio* is misguided, specifically, in failing to distinguish the two senses of hope. The standard account is meant to carve out the conditions of hoping, and the intended contrast is with, for lack of a better expression, *not hoping*. That is, the standard account aims to differentiate between a person who hopes for a specific outcome and another who does not. However, *not hoping* is hardly the same thing as despair. Put another way, a person who does not hope (i.e., who is *hopeless*) for some desired outcome does not (and on my view, cannot) experience despair about it. For example, a person may not hope to run a marathon because she believes that there is no chance for her to succeed. Far from despairing, she may simply move on and try to accomplish something else (though perhaps she now *wishes* that she could run a marathon). In short, the standard account was never meant to identify conditions that distinguish people who hope from people who despair. Critics are therefore mistaken in demanding that the standard account, *qua* an account of hoping, explain this difference. Their error, I have suggested, consists in failing to identify the *other* sense of hope, namely, hopefulness. Once we keep this sense of hope in mind, which is a separate mental attitude from hoping, we see that there is in fact a clear way to see the difference between Meirav and his wife. Though both hope to win the lottery, he is hopeful, and she is not. A more complete description of them is that whereas his wife hopes to win the lottery but is not hopeful about her chances (her hoping in this scenario should not be construed as anything more than her desiring an outcome that she believes to have some chance [however miniscule] of obtaining), he hopes for the same and is *additionally* hopeful about his chances. She despairs, while he is hopeful.

Before proceeding to look at some of the explanatory advantages of my account of despair and hopelessness, I would like to consider an objection that may be raised

against it. Critics may argue that my distinction between despair and hopelessness can be made *without* the distinction between hoping and being hopeful. Indeed, any 'revised' standard account of hope (in the sense identified above) already has the resources to capture the difference between despair and hopelessness. As an illustration, consider Huber's recent analysis of episodic and resignative despair (2022). According to him, a person experiences episodic despair when she desires an outcome, believes its obtainment to be possible, but fails, say, to visualize how she might get to the desired outcome. In contrast, she experiences resignative despair when she desires an outcome but believes its obtainment to be impossible. Huber's distinction between these two kinds of despair thus seems to capture what I have been calling despair and hopelessness, respectively. Moreover, it seems to be able to do so without distinguishing between hoping and being hopeful.

There are two ways to neutralize this objection. First, it is not clear whether Huber's notion of resignative despair really can be a form of despair. As noted, a person experiences such despair when she desires an outcome but believes its obtainment to be impossible. Notice, however, that this construal goes against the way despair is commonly treated in the literature, which postulates that despair *presupposes* that a person believes that it is possible for the desired outcome to obtain. This presupposition is supported by examples of despairing discussed in the literature, some of which Huber mentions: Red from *Shawshank Redemption*, Meirav's wife in the lottery example, and Alan the cancer patient. Indeed, it is precisely because all of these subjects *also* desire  $x$  and believe  $x$ 's obtainment to be possible that the standard account has been criticized for failing to distinguish these subjects from their hopeful counterparts. Thus, a person who desires  $x$  but believes its obtainment to be impossible is not despairing at all. Huber is therefore mistaken to refer to this person's state as resignative despair. Nevertheless, I agree with him that there is a need to identify such a state, specifically, such a loss-of-hope state that is *not* despair. My argument in this paper is that this state should be construed as hopelessness, which needs to be distinguished in principle from despair. (Note: This response also applies to accounts of despair that construe it as a loss of belief in the possibility that the outcome can be realized, e.g., Govier 2011; Han-Pile and Stern, *forthcoming*.)

Second, as it turns out, Huber's distinction between episodic and resignative despair makes use of the distinction between hoping and hopefulness I have proposed. To set the stage for his discussion of despair, Huber first examines what he takes hope roughly to be. Beginning with the orthodox account, he notes that hope is defined as 'a compound state that combines a desire that  $p$  with a belief . . . that  $p$  is possible but not certain' (2022: 3). Shortly after that, however, Huber observes that this definition is problematic because it fails to differentiate *hopeful* from despairing agents. As a remedy, he proposes that an adequate account of hope would need to include a third condition that specifies in some way how agents can mentally close the gap between themselves and the desired outcome (2022). The important point to note here is that the focus of Huber's discussion of hope has shifted from *hoping* to *being hopeful*. As I pointed out above, the orthodox account is essentially concerned with laying out the conditions for *hoping*, or for what it is to hope. However, in demanding that the

orthodox account differentiate the aforementioned agents, Huber has expanded the account's scope of hope to include hopefulness, which I have argued is distinct from hoping. Although Huber does not explicitly make this distinction, he in fact relies on it in distinguishing episodic from resignative despair. This latter distinction, I contend, implicitly recognizes these two senses of hope and the two distinct ways in which hope can be lost, namely, *not hoping* and *not being hopeful*. In short, Huber's distinction is arguably premised on an assumption captured by my distinction between hoping and hopefulness. Insofar as most other 'revised' standard accounts also expand their scope of hope in a similar way, namely, to include hopefulness, this response *mutatis mutandis* applies to them.

#### 4. Explanatory Advantages

Construing hopelessness and despair in the way just characterized has a number of explanatory advantages, some of which will further illuminate the nature of hopelessness and despair. First, my account can capture and readily explain a central difference between despair and hopelessness, which is that the former attitude can be experienced in degrees whereas the latter cannot. On my construal, a person despairs when she has on balance more negative thoughts and feelings than positive ones that her hoped-for outcome will be realized. Despairing is therefore consistent with possessing *some* positive thoughts and feelings, provided that she entertains fewer of these than of negative ones. Accordingly, a person may be said to be somewhat despairing if her orientation consists of slightly more negative thoughts than positive ones and more so if the disparity between these widens. When her orientation consists entirely of negative thoughts and feelings, she would then find herself in utter despair. Conversely, a person may despair less or be completely free from it when she starts to have, for whatever reason, more positive thoughts and feelings. When these thoughts and feelings overwhelm the negative ones, she would no longer be in despair; instead, she would be hopeful.

By contrast, hopelessness cannot be experienced in degrees. This feature can readily be explained by my account. Whether or not a person is hopeless hinges on whether she believes the desired outcome to be obtainable. If she has the requisite belief, then she does not see the situation as hopeless (although she could despair about it). However, if she believes that the outcome has no possibility of obtaining, then she experiences hopelessness. Importantly, to be hopeless is to *foreclose* on the possibility that the desired outcome will obtain; it is to opt no longer to pursue the outcome and to consider the issue of its pursuit closed or settled. In this sense, foreclosure either holds or not, and it does not admit of a middle ground. As such, hopelessness does not admit of degrees; it is instead dichotomous. Notice, however, that when someone believes that the chances of a desired outcome's occurring are dwindling, she may proclaim that she is starting to see the situation as hopeless, which seems to suggest that hopelessness too admits of degrees. We should, however, resist this suggestion. *Starting* to see something as hopeless is *not* the same as *being* hopeless. If this person is confronted with the question 'Is the situation really hopeless?', she will reply in

the negative, clarifying that she still thinks it may happen but that the chances are not looking good. In other words, she may be experiencing despair.

A second explanatory advantage of my account is that it can locate behavioral differences between hopelessness and despair. When a person experiences hopelessness—that is, when she no longer hopes for some desired outcome and has foreclosed on the pursuit of its obtainment—she ceases to engage in activities typically associated with hoping, like anticipating, checking, worrying, ruminating, and planning and has essentially abandoned the pursuit of that outcome, given that she thinks there is no chance that it will be realized. By contrast, the person who experiences despair continues to hope for the desired outcome. She believes that it is still possible that the outcome will be realized although she does not feel good about the chances and engages to a lesser degree now in the aforementioned activities. For example, suppose Stella learns that her friend was involved in a plane crash. She hopes that her friend has survived the crash in that she desires such an outcome and believes that it has some chance of obtaining, however miniscule it may be. But she experiences great despair because she is consumed by negative thoughts and feelings about the likelihood that her friend has survived. To reiterate an earlier point, Stella's despair is not constituted by the thought that the chances are low; hopeful people can in fact 'feel good' about the same low chances. Rather, Stella despairs because she is unable to envision a mental pathway to the outcome of her friend's surviving the crash or because she thinks that things never really go her friend's way. Nevertheless, given that Stella still entertains the hope that her friend has survived, she will still check the list of survivors with some degree of anticipation that her friend might be on it. Admittedly, she does these things with great fear and trepidation and little expectation. Nevertheless, low expectation of a friend's survival is still *some* expectation. The fact remains that she still hopes (but is not hopeful) that her friend will survive; she just does not feel good about the chances.

A further way to illustrate this point is to appeal to the notion of desperation. When a person is desperate, she would try anything to bring about a desired outcome. For example, an atheist who has learned that she has late-stage cancer may, out of desperation, start praying or practicing other rituals in order to be cured of the disease. Such acts of 'last resort' are ways for her to exercise her agency for a desired outcome, typically under time constraints ('I'm running out of time'). Importantly, notice that such desperate acts reflect the fact that the person still believes that the outcome is obtainable, that there is still some chance—however miniscule—for her desired outcome to come about. In other words, its impossibility is not yet a foregone conclusion for her. She is thus *not* hopeless but despairing, an apt description given that 'desperation' and 'despair' are cognate terms.

Incidentally, this explanation of desperation as an act of despair is yet another explanatory advantage of my account. Consider Steinbock's account of desperation. For him, desperation is *not* a negation of hope but a mode of it. It is 'reckless' and 'impatient', resulting in our making 'last ditch' or 'foolish' efforts to produce the desired results (2007:438). In Steinbock's view, desperation as a mode of hope reflects that 'there must be something more internal to what I do to make what I do work', which presupposes that the desired outcome is still for the

desperate within the realms of possibility (438–39). In these respects, Steinbock's construal of desperation is similar to mine. However, the similarity ends when he regards despair as the 'most profound challenge' to hope. According to him, a person experiencing despair has lost her 'ground of hope as such', rendering her unable to sustain any specific hopes. The problem with this construal is that desperation and despair, which are cognate terms, are not unified on Steinbock's account. For Steinbock, desperation presupposes hope (or in my terminology, hoping) whereas despair excludes hope (or hoping). By contrast, my view makes clear what these two cognate terms have in common: Both the desperate person and the despairing person hope for the outcome in question (that is, they desire some outcome believed to have some minimal chance of obtaining) and have a negative orientation toward the chances that it will obtain. Desperate acts (or acts of despair) are what a despairing person might attempt as a 'Hail Mary' to bring about the desired outcome and reflect that she still thinks that its realization is possible. Put another way, it was her hoping for the outcome (albeit without hopefulness) that played a role in initiating and executing such desperate acts.

I would like to conclude by briefly discussing a final benefit of my account, which is its ability to explain some ways in which despair and hopelessness differ with respect to their phenomenology. In my view, experiences of despair can be especially torturous. The reason that a despairing person keeps hoping is that she still believes the outcome to have some chance of obtaining. Even though she does not feel good about the chances that it will occur, she does not give up; after all, she desires the outcome. The despairing person is anxious and tormented, simultaneously torn between two opposite sides. When she is overwhelmed with negative thoughts and feelings that her desired outcome will likely not come about, she is reminded of the very possibility that the outcome is obtainable (though not enough to warrant hopefulness). But then when she focuses on the fact that such an outcome is obtainable, she is flooded again with thoughts and feelings that suggest otherwise. The belief that the outcome remains possible thus keeps the despairing person in limbo and perpetual torment. By contrast, the person who experiences hopelessness is not similarly tormented, though she may be so in a different respect. Insofar as she has given up the hope for some outcome (due to her belief that it is no longer possible), she may experience emotions associated with unfulfilled desires, like frustration, lament, longing, anger, and resentment. Her experience of hopelessness can be especially devastating and destructive if the outcome she once hoped for is constitutive of her sense of self-worth, relationships of love, or life plan (Bovens 1999: 676–78), or 'fundamental' in Blöser and Stahl's sense (2017). By the same token, however, relief is also possible for her: By ceasing to hope for the impossible outcome, she can revisit her life plan to determine how the abandoned hope might affect her other hopes, and engender new ones (Bovens 1999).

## 5. Conclusion


The main aim of this article has been to examine the nature of despair and hopelessness, two underexplored topics in analytic philosophy. In particular, I



argue that the distinction between these negative attitudes is worth drawing, given that they refer to distinct ways in which hope is absent or lost. My strategy builds on the premise that hope has two distinct senses, namely, hoping and hopefulness, and I argue that a person can lose hope in corresponding ways by either *not hoping* (i.e., hopelessness) or *feeling unhopeful* (i.e., despair). As explained above, this framework for distinguishing despair from hopelessness has several explanatory advantages, including a rich description of these negative attitudes and of their behavioral and phenomenological differences. No doubt much more can be said about despair and hopelessness. However, my goal has been to show that talking about despair and hopelessness and hoping and hopefulness in the terms above can be interesting, fruitful, and promising. I will conclude by briefly suggesting a topic for future research.

One limitation of this study is that it has primarily been concerned with intentional despair and hopelessness, that is, when these are directed at specific outcomes. Nothing has been said about what it is for a person to experience these negative attitudes as a general disposition. Nevertheless, my distinction above may help shed light on this issue. Thus, a person who is disposed to experiencing despair may be one who adopts an indiscriminate negative orientation toward the chances of any of her desired outcomes to obtain. For example, she may believe in bad luck or ill fate. By contrast, someone who is disposed to feeling a general sense of hopelessness may stop hoping for anything substantive or important (or in the extreme case, for any outcome). This is because she believes, for whatever reason, that there is no chance for any of her desired outcomes to be realized. In short, the despairing person does not feel hopeful about outcomes for which she hopes, whereas the person experiencing hopelessness simply does not hope.

Second, distinguishing despair from hopelessness in the ways I have suggested has important practical applications. For instance, it offers some guidance on how we might escape or mitigate hopelessness and despair, especially in cases that involve outcomes with high stakes. Thus, if a person is hopeless with respect to a desired outcome, she may be persuaded to hope for it if she can be shown that there is in fact *some* chance that such an outcome will obtain. The key is to convince her that her belief that the outcome has no chance of being realized is mistaken. By contrast, a person who experiences despair already believes that there is some chance that the desired outcome will obtain. She differs from the person who is hopeless in that she has a negative orientation toward such a chance. To lessen or eliminate her despair, an alternative approach is called for. Thus, we might encourage her to imagine possible pathways to the outcome, to think about the nature or role of the external factor responsible for realizing her desired outcome (whether God, luck, fate, destiny, or the like), to focus on the outcome not as improbable but as a possibility, etc. All of these suggestions could help encourage and inspire the person to be hopeful. On my account, the paths out of hopelessness and despair are suggestively mapped.

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