On Hope as a Moral Virtue

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Introduction

If, as Alexander Pope tells us, “Hope springs eternal from the human breast: Man never is, but always to be blest,” how could hope be a virtue, any more than other natural things that so spring in every normal human being, such as the circulation of the blood? If a trait develops naturally in all normal humans without our having to do anything in the way of special training to acquire it, then it is a bit odd to think of it as virtuous. Nevertheless, Augustine tells us, hope—when suitably theologically restricted—is indeed a theological virtue, that is, a quality of character linked with salvation and requiring divine grace. This leads one naturally to the question: Could hope, suitably morally restricted, also be a moral virtue? In this discussion I will assume that hope is indeed a theological virtue, and I will argue that some arguments and considerations advanced for treating hope as a theological virtue can be suitably modified to make a case for hope’s also being a moral or natural virtue.

Indeed, a prima facie case for hope’s being such a moral virtue is not at all hard to construct. Following Aristotle let us take virtues to be traits of character that lead to human flourishing. Contrast two lives otherwise the same except that one is filled with natural hope, that is hope regarding natural, not supernatural ends, and the other sadly lacking in it. It seems clear that the former life is the more fulfilled. On the basis of this simple comparison, it is reasonable to suppose that moral hope is a trait which tends to result in human flourishing, while moral hope’s several traditional opposites, including despair, cynicism, and indifference, are traits that tend to lead to human diminishment. Thus, moral hope is naturally taken as a virtue.
But, the claim of hope to be a moral virtue faces two challenges. First, Aquinas has claimed that hope, while a theological virtue, is not a moral virtue. To make the case for hope’s natural virtue-hood his arguments need to be examined and refuted. Second, it also clear that not just any sort of hope should count as virtuous, so the problem of imposing suitable limitations on what might be the proper object of natural or moral hope also needs to be addressed. The goal of this presentation is to argue for the moral virtue of hope by demonstrating how such a moral virtue complements and supports the theological virtue of hope. I hope to convince the reader that if she grants that hope is a theological virtue, then she should be willing to grant that hope can be a moral virtue as well.

This project is part of a larger effort regarding the traditional theological virtues as a whole. These virtues—faith, hope and love—are an interesting if somewhat heterogeneous lot, even if, as Augustine tells us, they are radically interconnected:

Wherefore there is no love without hope, no hope without love, and neither love nor hope without faith. (*Enchiridion*, VIII)

While one of these three virtues, faith, I take to be an exclusively theological virtue\(^2\), the other two, hope and love, seem different. This discussion focuses specifically on the case of hope, arguing that a special kind of hope plays an important role as a moral virtue in addition to the related role that it plays as a theological virtue.\(^3\)

In this paper I do three things. First, I consider what kind of hope might plausibly count as a moral virtue. Second, I critically examine the arguments from Aquinas that restrict hope to being a theological virtue. I attempt to demonstrate that he has not succeeded in showing that hope’s being a theological virtue is incompatible with its also being a moral virtue. And, third, I present two arguments as to why hope is both a theological virtue and a moral virtue as well. In doing so, I also try to make a case for the special importance of the moral virtue of hope.
Some Basics on Hope

But first it is useful to turn back to Augustine for some important basics regarding hope versus faith. Augustine reminds us that it is important to distinguish between faith as “the evidence of things not seen” and hope. He points to the following differences:

1. Accordingly, faith may have for its object good as well as evil.
2. Faith, moreover, is concerned with the past, the present and the future, all three.
3. Again, faith applies both to one’s own circumstances and those of others.

For Augustine, hope is importantly different from faith in three ways:

But hope has for its object only what is good, only what is future, and only what affects the man who entertains the hope. (Ibid.)

Thus, it is clear that the theological account of hope so conceived, while sharing some points in common with other non-theological instances of hope, is importantly different. While both types of hope share the feature of being future oriented, there are clearly non-theological hopes that involve evil befalling some people, and also hopes involving others. Whether I can have a really non-self-interested hope remains a matter of phenomenological enquiry and social and personal investigation. Can I hope that others do well even if this does not appear to affect me in some way? There are of course psychological egoists who argue that all of our psychological motivation, which includes all of our hopes, is exclusively self-oriented. But, in response to these egoists it is commonly claimed that this is indeed possible and in this paper I will assume that it is. That there can be other-regarding hopes I will take, in what follows, to be an important part of what would be required for hope to be a moral, i.e. a non-theological, virtue. I do, however, agree with Augustine that one cannot have hope about the past or the present, that all forms of hope are, necessarily, future oriented. And, I will argue in what follows that any virtuous form of hope must have some form of goodness as its object.
Which non-theological hopes are virtuous?

What would it take for a bit of ordinary hoping to count as virtuous? In order to answer this question let us consider what kinds of hopes strike us as morally problematic. Surely not every sort of hope counts as virtuous. But why not? An initial suggestion is that many hopes are what we might call “weak hopes”. Perhaps most of the ordinary non-theological hopes we have count as weak hopes. I hope there’s a good movie on television tonight, I hope the cafeteria has a food serving that I will like, I hope I don’t spill coffee all over my tie, and so forth. Where “hope” seems to count as almost a synonym for “desire that it be the case that”, if the desire is relatively weak, it is hard to see why such a desire might count as virtuous.

One might want to reply that humans need to have desires, including weak desires, and that it is good that humans have such desires since our lot requires us to make many choices between minimally different items; to avoid the fate of Balaam’s Ass, we need to be able to act in those situations in which we lack a powerful ethical argument for picking one action over others. Still, it is still a big step from agreeing that there is such a need to act to the claim that all desires, being a partial expression of this need, are virtuous. We can agree that the ability to make regular choices is required for human flourishing. This, however, does not ensure that any old set of objects of one chooses will make one virtuous in the choosing.

In addition to weak hopes there are strong hopes. I strongly hope that a certain candidate is re-elected in an up-coming election in November, I strongly hope that my adult child will find gainful employment, etc. In fact there seems to be a continuum of hopes from those extremely weakly hoped to those extremely strongly hoped, so one attempt to identify moral hope might be to pick a specific degree of fervor and identify virtuous hopes with those having at least that degree of fervor.
But, the fervor account faces two devastating objections. First, one could point to specific hopes that have a great deal of fervor, but do not seem plausible candidates for being called moral. (Consider, for example, the fervent hope of the deranged serial killer who has just dispatched his sixth victim not to be caught before successfully killing his twelfth victim.) Second, might one not have a weakly held hope that was also virtuous or at least on its way to becoming virtuous? Consider a theological hope that happens in a particular case, due to an infirmity of faith, to be weakly held. (Suppose, for example, that a believer is going through an especially bad period of doubting which is also affecting her hoping.) It would seem that all hopes, including theological ones, can come in a variety of degrees of fervor. If we grant that even a weakly held theological hope might still be virtuous, then it cannot be the degree of fervor that determines a hope’s virtue-hood but something else.

What else do the various non-virtue-related instances of hope all seem to have in common? One likely answer is that the non-virtuous hopes considered above seem either to be trivial or selfish or to be directed towards the wrong sort of object. But, virtue does not seem to attach to items that are trivial, selfish or directed towards immoral objects. One way to confirm this claim is to turn instead to what is distinctive about theological hope. It is clear that the objects of theological hope—God, salvation—are the very opposite of trivial, selfish or immoral; they are indeed momentous items, to borrow an oft-cited term from William James. A momentous item is something extremely important and of very great value. But, unlike James, who wants to recognize variety regarding the momentous for objects of religious significance, i.e. he is willing to allow some items to be momentous for some individuals and not for others, I want to employ the term in the moral context to pick out objects that are not subjectively momentous, but have a claim to being objectively momentous for the common good.
So, consider such examples as hoping for the extermination of malaria, hoping for an end to domestic violence and child-abuse, hoping for world peace, hoping for a better world, even hoping for everyone’s salvation. These items seem to fare better than the other hopes listed above. All of them seem to fit well into the category of the momentous, all seem to count as worthy hopes of great significance, all have a claim to being objectively momentous. So, having hopes of this sort would surely count as moral hopes, if anything would. So it is tempting to identify the having of such hopes with having the moral virtue of hope.

But, is this enough? Is the mere having of such great hopes sufficient for having the virtue of hope? Let us imagine a person who regularly and vehemently entertains the hope that child abuse will end. Is such a person thereby virtuous with regard to her hope? Before we rush to say “Yes”, there seem to be some further potential issues to consider, namely worries about scope and activity.

Let us first consider the scope of hope with respect to hope’s being a virtue. Is one species of hoping sufficient or must there be a significant cluster of broadly extended hopings? If we are interested in a moral virtue of hope, the latter alternative seems more appropriate. For suppose, to continue our test case, our subject has just the one momentous hope regarding the end of child abuse, but totally lacks hopes regarding any of the other elements just listed, nor any hopes regarding any other elements one might consider to be equally momentous (AIDS, cancer, genocide, pollution and deforestation, etc.) and in fact turns out to indifferent with respect to whether these objects continue to exist or not. Such an individual would not seem to count as virtuous with respect to hope any more than one who, though thoroughly cowardly his entire life, would count as courageous for performing one courageous action on his forty-third birthday.
The specific problem here is that moral hope is unlike theological hope in that the latter can be achieved with just one object or two (God, salvation). It seems unreasonable to think that moral hope can similarly be achieved with such a paucity of (admittedly lesser) objects. It is more reasonable to maintain that to accomplish the moral virtue of hope one must hope for a significantly robust set of objects.

A second scope consideration arises if we imagine a person who has restricted hopes, hoping that child abuse, domestic violence, etc. all end only in, say, in her town, or only in southwestern Wisconsin, or in her tribe, with no concern for anyone else in any other area or group. Suppose the same individual has an impressive accompanying array of hopes relating to many other subject areas (domestic violence, hard drug use, pollution, public incivility, etc.) again limited to the same particular population or area. Such parochial hope, even if it is broad in what it encompasses, if restricted to a specific area or a specific group or a specific and limited part of existence, seems not to count as morally virtuous. The virtue of moral hope cannot be narrowly limited in terms of those whose good is hoped for; it cannot be partial, partisan or parochial in its intentionality.

There is a further requirement for a moral virtue of hope. There needs to be not merely the entertaining of hope or the hoping of a hope in all its passivity with regard to what it is that is to be hoped. Something else must be added, namely an active connection, be it a direct trigger or an indirect contributory cause, something that provides an inducement to action. Hope without any connection to action seems empty, not much worth having. Suppose one has the hope that malaria will soon be exterminated in the world, but still lacks any connection between hoping and actions, activities or dispositions with which to associate the hope. Suppose that the individual feels powerless in this case, which results not in action but in inaction, in continual
despair about the suffering caused by malaria without there being any resolve to do anything about it. While the moral sympathy of the hoper is to be praised, there seems to be no virtue associated with her hoping in such a case. On the other hand, things are different if one’s hope causally leads to raising awareness about the problem of malaria, or contributing to or even organizing malaria extermination efforts.

Here there is an analogy with the theological virtue of hope as traditionally conceived. What makes hope a theological virtue is that it aims to connect the hoper with the ultimate, i.e., God, and with a state of being in a special relation with God, namely, salvation. In the moral realm, what makes hoping a moral virtue is the hoper’s aiming to connect her hopes with a set of objectively significant good events that she is actively hoping will come to pass. In both cases, there is a doubled or reinforced intentionality with respect to both the hoped for objects as well as with respect to the hoper engaging in actions that aim at the same objects. This doubled intentionality is crucial for hope’s being a virtue, for it is the engagement of the hoping agent in appropriate activity for bringing about the hoped for object that is necessary for hope’s satisfying the key behavioral requirement of virtue, namely its being a disposition to be behave in a way that tends to bring about human flourishing.

So let us now take stock. In response to the objection that hope could not be a moral virtue as there were too many different kinds of hopes that had nothing to do with virtue, it was proposed that the virtue of hope be taken as a severely restricted proper subset of such hopes. These restrictions include the following three requirements.

1. The moral or non-theological virtue of hope involves a set of hopings that are aimed at objectively significant—we called them “momentous”—goods.
2. The moral virtue of hope involves a significant set of such hopings that are universal, not limited to specific populations. Finally,
3. These hopings must not be totally passive in their effects but need to be linked to dispositions to act appropriately.
There remain, to be sure, a number of areas requiring further clarification. These include addressing how broad the set of hopes should be, how extensive their range should be, and how much and of what sort actual action-linkage is required. But, I hope that enough has been said so far to indicate how one might start to flesh out a serious candidate for a non-theological and moral virtue of hope. Let us now turn to our second worry, namely Aquinas’ arguments that hope, while a theological virtue is not a moral virtue.

**Aquinas’ Objections**

Aquinas presents his case in Section 5 of Article 62 of the *Summa*: “Of Hope, Considered in Itself: Whether hope is a theological virtue”. After having argued that hope is a virtue in a previous section, Aquinas here aims to demonstrate that hope is indeed a theological virtue and is not a moral virtue. In his discussion Aquinas tries to demonstrate that hope is an exclusively theological virtue by considering arguments for the claim that hope is a moral virtue and then refuting them. Aquinas’ discussion follows his typical format of raising objections and then replying to them. His approach is informative. How might one accuse hope of being a moral virtue and not a theological virtue? One strategy is to accuse hope of really being a disguised form of another variety of obvious moral virtue. Thus Aquinas considers the objections that hope might be taken as a species of fortitude for involving longanimity, or as a species of magnanimity since its object involves something arduous. Aquinas deflects these challenges, noting that hope, unlike longanimity, does not necessarily imply delay, and that magnanimity refers to things in one’s own power whereas hope requires another’s help. (While Aquinas’ replies to these two challenges seem convincing, additional significant connections between hope, fortitude and magnanimity remain that I will explore at the end of this paper.)
Another strategy examined by Aquinas is the charge that hope has the wrong sort of goal for a theological virtue; and, a third strategy is to claim that hope has a feature had by all and only moral virtues, namely being the mean between two vices. As these objections are more troublesome they deserve explicit consideration. Here the responses that Aquinas gives are less than compelling and appear to beg the question at hand in various ways. Let us consider his replies to these objections in order.

Aquinas notes the objection that “a theological virtue is one that has [only] God for its object” but that hope has for its object “not only God but also other goods which we hope to obtain from God.” His reply is that “whatever else hope expects to obtain, it hopes for it in reference to God as the last end, or as the first efficient cause.” (Ibid.) But, the same kind of response can be given by the believer with respect to any virtuous action she performs, if God is supposed to be the ultimate object of every action. So a courageous action one might plausibly suppose to be one ultimately found pleasing to God. A temperate action one might take to be such that its ultimate purpose is to make one more deserving of salvation, and so forth. So, Aquinas’ reply to this first objection, the wrong object objection, seems to blur any distinction between theological and moral virtues.

Aquinas also considers the objection that hope cannot be a theological virtue as it is the mean between presumption and despair, and theological virtues are not means between vices. In reply Aquinas notes that “hope has no mean or extremes, as regards its principal object, since it is impossible to trust too much in the Divine assistance.” Aquinas, however, is prepared to grant that hope may accidently have both mean and extremes in connection with “those things a man trusts to obtain”, as one might “presume above his capability” or “despair of things of which he is capable”. But this reply is weak for three reasons. First, it assumes that the direct object of all
virtuous hope is Divine assistance, ruling out moral hope *ab initio*. Second, it assumes all moral virtues must be means between vices. While many are, as Aristotle amply demonstrated, it by no means follows that all are. Third, it is not clear why, for all Aquinas has demonstrated, presumption and despair might not be perfectly acceptable vices in between which hope lies as the means. One might well be presumptuous with respect to one’s expected salvation, and one might well despair of ever meriting salvation. And, fourth, there seem to be many cases of hope which lie between presumption and despair. Were they to fit the definition of moral hope proposed above, they would be perfectly acceptable as cases of a moral virtue.

Thus, Aquinas’ attempt to demonstrate that hope is only a theological virtue, not also a moral virtue, is less than successful. Aquinas assumes that all virtues are either theological or moral. Not entertaining the possibility that some might be both, his arguments for hope’s purely theological status are not ultimately compelling. And, I would like to suggest, they should not be. This is because there are three good reasons for those who accept the theological virtue of hope to grant that it also has status as a moral virtue as well.

**Why the Virtue of Hope is both Theological and Moral**

Considerations of design or development provide us with the first persuasive reason to grant a moral virtue of hope. Let us call this argument the Argument from Design or the Argument from Development. It is obvious that humans are creatures that engage in a wide variety of hopings, some explicitly theological, most not. In virtue of what can humans engage in theological hopings? One answer is that theological hoping emerges as a special result of normal development according to an established plan from non-theological hopings. Now, how can virtuous hopings, those taking God as explicit object, just emerge from hopings which are
completely non-virtuous? This reply is hard to justify, it seems to label a problem rather than to explain it away. Another answer is that theological hoping were implanted in the soul and gradually emerged as the ability to hope in general developed. If this is the case, then why must we assume that all other instances of this ability, which has a clearly virtuous part, must have only non-virtuous other parts? This too seems arbitrary. The claim that we would have been designed to have a very important capacity such as the capacity to hope that could not be used virtuously in more than one way seems suspect.

Why would God have created us with the capacity to have good hopings about our fellow creatures, as clearly many of us can and do have? A truly plausible response is that such hopings will promote good will, good relations, aid the development of other virtues; they help all people flourish. This explanation is much more compelling than the approach defended by Augustine and Aquinas. But, this response requires that there also be a moral virtue of hope.

Further, for a second argument to recognize the moral virtue of hope let us consider what we might call the “spill-over effect”. Suppose we grant the theological virtue of hope. Why would it be unreasonable to suppose that one of the good effects or by-products of having this virtue is to cause humans who possess it to be sensitive to the needs of others and to have the tendency to try to help them as much as they can? Hope is contagious. It naturally “spills over” from the theological context into non-theological contexts; it stimulates all sorts of virtues in response to the needs of particular situations. An additional powerful and positive benefit of the theological virtue of hope is that it can stimulate and encourage moral hope as well. Indeed, many of the most powerful examples of remarkable individuals who exhibit moral hope with respect to social justice efforts are those who are also recognized for their deep theological hope as well.¹⁴ Thus, if we suitably restrict the objects of hope in the ways specified above, there
seems no contradiction or serious problem with claiming that hope as a virtue can have both theological and moral manifestations. And, if we think of the required object of the theological form and the typical object of the moral form we should not be surprised that this is case.

A third reason for embracing a moral virtue of hope arises when we consider an important natural role for hope in the life of virtue. Suppose you take the virtues seriously, suppose you think that there is a family of traits that all humans should have and that need to be developed by means of moral education. Consider the four cardinal virtues. Which of these virtues all by itself will encourage the virtuous activity of the others? What is required is a spark, something to ignite each of us to be interconnectedly virtuous. What might this be? One obvious candidate is to look to the theological virtues. Here St. Thomas is instructive. He says of hope, “hope makes us adhere to God, as the source whence we derive perfect goodness.” Thus, hope is the virtue which orders our will towards ends. The importance of having moral hope included as a member of the family of virtues is that we need it to order our will to accomplish moral ends as well, to serve as a source of initiative, a spring of motivation to be morally virtuous. While some may reply that there is really one end worth accomplishing, namely the theological end, I would suggest that even to accomplish this one very important end one needs also to involve a great many other moral ends along the way.

**Postlude on Hope, Fortitude and Magnanimity**

Let us now turn to some final comments. As noted above, Aquinas is concerned to distinguish hope from both fortitude and magnanimity. But, it is important to emphasize that moral hope as I have here sketched it will typically require large doses of both fortitude and magnanimity in the hoper. Fortitude is important for hope because fortitude is required to
sustain one’s specific hopes aimed at improving the common good. Many significant moral hopes have to be passed on from one generation to the next. No serious problem can be easily fixed, and significant staying power, fortitude, is required on the part of the hoper to sustain her moral hopes.

There is also an important link between hope and magnanimity. Aristotle distinguishes magnanimity from liberality in terms of the resources one can bring to bear for others. Liberality involves small sums, magnanimity involves large sums. Thus, magnanimity requires one to have super-abundant resources which most of us lack. There is a similarity with respect to the moral virtue of hope as I have outlined it here. There will be many who, due to personal circumstance, will not be able to develop this virtue. This may have been the case for those engaged in the internecine warfare that characterized Aristotle’s Greece. Perhaps this also was the case for Augustine during the twilight of the Roman Empire. But, in our current world situation, when wars among the most powerful have been officially eliminated, when there exist important efforts to promote world cooperation and common labors to attack common problems to improve the common good, perhaps it is more widely possible for there to be a non-trivial number of individuals with the moral virtue of hope.

Both an extensive knowledge of major problems facing the world as well as a settled and secure life-style are required for moral hope. But, many more individuals are now in a position to have both requirements met. And, if so, then one important point of optimism that we can take is that perhaps the moral virtue of hope could become much more widespread now than has ever been possible before. So, even if many of us cannot be truly magnanimous with our goods, there are many of us who can now be giving to others with our hopes and our related efforts. And, this is something that should give us all great hope!
Notes

1 Alexander Pope, An Essay on Man, Epistle I, 1733. The complete quatrain is:
   Hope springs eternal in the human breast;
   Man never Is, but always To be blest:
   The soul, uneasy and confin’d from home,
   Rests and expatiates in a life to come.

2 This is not to say that there may be a related, if still a different moral virtue, namely loyalty, which seems closely tied to that of faith. But, faith, unlike loyalty, I take to have a specific content which is such that one believes in it, whereas the object of loyalty is not content qua content but a person or an ideal.

3 If I can make the case for hope, then I am confident that I can also make the case for love. It seems reasonable to suppose that care is just this moral virtue.

4 But, the question needs to be posed: should those who take the theological virtue of hope seriously not also allow that theological hope can also be other-regarding as well? Why should I not be concerned about the salvation of others, not for myself, but for these others as “ends-in-themselves”?

5 See William James, “The Will to Believe”

6 One remaining thorny issue is how to evaluate the case of the hoper who erroneously takes a particular hope to contribute to the common good, when in fact it does not.

7 Here I do part company with Augustine (and, perhaps, with Calvin, whom he inspired). Why would I not hope for everyone’s salvation? But, even if I know that some are not predestined to be saved, might I not still “hope against hope” that everyone will achieve salvation?

8 Still, while “mere hope” is not sufficient for virtue, it is not completely without value. For it can provide at least the basis for the genuine virtue once its possessor becomes aware of her shortcomings and is encouraged to make the connection between mere hope and action.

9 The disposition to bear injuries patiently

10 The fact that the non-believer might have any sort of hope is not considered. But, as many non-believers appear to have hopes for things other than God, Aquinas’ reply to this objection is indeed deficient.

11 Similar claims can be made with respect to the other moral virtues.

12 These would seem reasonable reactions for those such as Augustine and Calvin who accept predestination.

13 There are many more problems that come to mind. Here is a prominent one. Consider the case of the heretic, perhaps an Albigensian, who willing dies for her heretical faith, with the hope she will be rewarded in the hereafter for her martyrdom. Does the heretic exhibit hope? If would seem natural/normal/appropriate to say so. One only needs to ask: Suppose I were such a heretic? Would I, could I, have hope?

14 Examples such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Sister Helen Prejean and Mother Theresa come readily to mind.

15 Al Fredosso glosses this as follows: “[Theological] Hope is a virtue of the will by which our will is ordered toward our supernatural ultimate end in the manner of intending that end as something possible to attain. See A. Fredosso, Question 62, Internet reference.