Hope as the Transformation of Positive Emotions into Permanent Motivations

Juan Andrés Mercado, Jerónimo Ayesta

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 7th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 3th – Saturday 5th January 2019.

These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

Hope as the Transformation of Positive Emotions into Permanent Motivations

Juan Andrés Mercado, Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Italy

Jerónimo Ayesta, University of Navarre, Spain

Hope is tendency elevated to the rank of virtue

L. Polo, Ethics, 167

The grounding of a moral argument is ultimately in facts about human life–facts of the kind that Anscombe mentioned in talking about the good that hangs on the institution of promising, and of the kind that I spoke of in saying why it was a part of rationality for human beings to take special care each for his or her own future

P. Foot, Natural Goodness, 24.

Abstract

Hope can be presented as the framework to develop authentic human life. It means that hope is tightly related to our highest aspirations and the way we conduct our lives.

Ancients described it as a feeling produced by a favourable situation in the future that appears within our reach (Aristotle and Aquinas). Hope is also a basilar strength of character linked to our highest aspirations and our lifestyle. It synthesises experience and prepares us to cope with an uncertain future, integrating desires and pleasures into consistent behaviour.

Contemporary psychology has recovered nuclear elements of hope as a virtue, but more often than not, explanations remain at a very functional level. Significant discoveries by Seligman et al., M. Erickson, W. Mischel, C. Dweck will be useful in an updated explanation of hope.

1. Introductory remarks

As the main aim of the Conference is to explore questions about the locality versus the universality of virtues from different theoretical and practical perspectives, we individuated hope as an essential subject to propose during the event.

In their seminal work, Peterson and Seligman studied hope as one of those qualities that are present in all the cultural and religious traditions. They insist on the commonalities regarding hope and future-mindedness found in different traditions and contemporary research (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 570-1).

They assert that traditionally hope "has referred to positive expectations about matters that have a reasonable likelihood of coming to pass" (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 570) and then start explaining the relationship with optimism as a recent and more psychological and philosophical approach. They go on extending the discussion to include some sociological trends that conditioned the debate in the last decades of last century (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 572-3) and close the section with some of the most renowned explanatory and applied proposals to evaluate and foster hope (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 574-9).

2. From Plato to Aristotle

Now let us try to illustrate the way some of the most renowned classic philosophers tried to explain the internal structure that explains our behaviour.

The strategy developed by Plato and uttered by Aristotle as well implies the identification of the "objects" of our movements (what are we moving at) and the internal powers that make the actions possible.[1]

That is why the first internal power or element discovered by Plato was a general desire with multiple manifestations. This vast source of impulses aims at acquiring things or situations (goods) that comply with our basic needs, such as food or reproduction.

However, Plato "discovered" a different source of motion that responds to demanding stimuli, such as pain or fear. We can react with a courageous action to defeat an enemy or take advantage of a dangerous situation to obtain something arduous but convenient.

Non-intelligent animals have highly developed desires, as Greeks acknowledge. Even the image of one of the parts of the soul in Republic is identified with a lion, meaning the capacity to desire objects that imply difficult tasks or hindrances, and more specifically, the energy needed to overcome such obstacles.

Aristotle poses the example of some big animals to illustrate his claim: animals have complex perceptions, so they identify their preys-to-be through some of their qualities, like the scent. So a dog may detect the scent of hares and delight in advance, but not because of scent, but on the perspective of eating them. Similarly: "nor does the lion delight in the lowing of the ox, but in eating it; but he perceived by the lowing that it was near, and therefore appears to delight in the lowing; and similarly he does not delight because he sees 'a stag or a wild goat', but because he is going to make a meal of it" (Nic. Ethics , 3, 1118a17-22, emphasis added).

These two principles are the classic appetites – concupiscible and irascible – that together with reason explain the celebrated tripartite composition of the soul and make us able to handle different kinds of desires.

---

[1] The next lines summarise some lengthy discussions of *Republic*, books 3 and 4.

Aristotle developed an idea that remained implicit in the Platonic proposal, i.e. that of the voluntary action, in contrast with animal behaviour. In a lengthy discussion, he distinguishes the various levels of voluntariness of subjects in different stressful situations (cf. Nic. Ethics, 3).[2]

Aristotle raises an extreme case of blackmail: the one that can exert a tyrant who disposes of the life of a loved one and orders us to do something terrible that we do not want and thus preserve it from possible harm. A similar case is that of the navigators who, during a storm, throw the load into the sea to reduce the risk of shipwreck (Nic. Ethics, 3, 1110a5-20). In both situations, there is room for deliberation and direction of the activity. If one acts according to the dictates of the tyrant, or that of the right reason that “compels” us to get rid of the burden, there is voluntariness, but thwarted by our desires.

3. Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas worked on the same path and reformulated the composition of the soul with the will, that became the “rational appetite.” It means that one of the central tendencies is radically related to reason.

Within this quadripartite division of the soul, Aquinas finds the place for a variety of passions, i.e., the alterations of our internal powers that can originate an action.

In this context, the Medieval Thinker presents hope as one of the most fundamental sentiments of human beings. When we foresee a convenient situation that requires a specific effort, we can “feel that we can” or that we cannot, i.e. feel some joy while facing an attainable good, or some sadness if we do not appreciate it as reachable.

Aquinas explained hope as a primary passion, i.e. a deep feeling produced by an external good – being it a thing or a situation – that appears within our reach. This feeling depends both on our present knowledge and our experience: an experience which implies the awareness of the relation between desires, efforts and pleasures, and the situations in which we have been able to harmonise them. Until this point, we can draw back to the Aristotelian remarks about the behaviour of animals: perception of something convenient, experience and the perspective of reaching the right thing.

In the small “constellation” of passions described by Aquinas, there is room for the passion contrary to hope, i.e. despair. The Christian Author includes a rich philosophical tradition concerning sadness and hopelessness schematically: hope is a movement towards a good according to the reason of good. Despair is the distancing of a specific good and fear is the separation from evil. Hope and despair are the reason for fear and audacity, for audacity follows the hope of victory, and fear the despair of succeeding (cf. Summa Theol. 1-2, 23, 4, c; and q. 25, arts. 3-4).[3]

---

[2] Book 3 (1109^{b}30-1115ª3) deals with voluntariness and involuntariness, associated to knowledge, deliberation, choice and self-control. Book 7 (1145ª15 on) is about pleasure and the way we can relate to it, so again self-control and temperance come to the limelight.

[3] St. Thomas refers to *Nic. Ethics* 2 (1105b23) and offer slightly different accounts of the order of passions in *De veritate*, q. 26, a. 4.; *Sententia Ethic*., lib. ii, l. 5 n. 5 182. Cf. Serrano 2014, 56.

So for the Medieval Author, the difference between desire in general and hope, is that the latter implies a future good that is arduous and at the same time attainable (achievable), while the former regards any good, and can be directed to unattainable things or situations (cf. Summa Theol. 1-2, 40, a.1).

It also means that we can never be sure that we will achieve the desired object we expect. Also, despite the uncertainty and the consideration of the obstacles, the attraction we feel for the good must turn us to action. Actions should build up a complete lifestyle because human life means to move oneself with all of one's emotional and cognitive achievements and forces. Hope is one of the pillars of the moral profile of an individual and is opposed to fickleness.

We can call "immature" hope that derived from an insufficient experience or a lack of sound contact with reality. Aquinas takes advantage of Aristotle's Rhetorics (1389a13-28) and the Nicomachean Ethics (Bk. 3, 1117a13) to support his statement regarding the hopefulness of youth. It is a significant text because it provides us with numerous hints about the phenomenology of hope. Aquinas uses as a framework the three conditions of the good which is the object of the hope, i.e. that it is future, arduous and possible:

For youth has much of the future before it, and little of the past: and therefore since memory is of the past, and hope of the future, it has little to remember and lives very much in hope. Again, youths, on account of the heat of their nature, are full of spirit; so that their heart expands: and it is owing to the heart being expanded that one tends to that which is arduous; wherefore youths are spirited and hopeful. Likewise, they who have not suffered defeat, nor had experience of obstacles to their efforts, are prone to count a thing possible to them. Wherefore youths, through inexperience of obstacles and their shortcomings, easily count a thing possible; and consequently are of good hope. Two of these causes are also in those who are in drink–viz. heat and high spirits, on account of wine, and heedlessness of dangers and shortcomings. For the same reason, all foolish and thoughtless persons attempt everything and are full of hope (Summa Theol., 1-2, 40, a. 6c).

Aquinas refers to hope in different texts at different levels. All of the above-quoted passages belong to the treatment of the human person regarding the emotional sphere.

The other approaches to hope developed by St. Thomas depend on the tradition of the theological virtues, i.e., love, faith and hope. In this context, hope is immediately linked to that superior and universal capacity to know the good. It places hope as a virtue at a very different level from the passion of the same name. The object of hope is not any longer an arduous attainable (relative and sensible) good, but the supreme good, i.e. God himself (Quaestio de Spe, a. 1). Even if the first part of the corpus of the first article of the Quaestio runs in the very same lines of the anthropological texts, Aquinas conducts it to the theological level: the expectations regarding relative goods depend on our resources, while the expectations regarding the highest good (beatitude, perfect happiness) rely on God's assistance. (ibidem; cf. Summa Theol., 2-2, qq. 17-18).

So, in the texts of Aquinas, there is not a direct approach to hope as a human virtue. It does not mean that his refinements to the Aristotelian tradition are useless for an in-depth explanation of the human dimensions of hope.

One of them is the inclusion and expansion of the gnoseological elements, i.e., the acknowledgement of the range of the calculation of sensible (animal) knowledge as estimativa. Besides, his underscoring about the influence of reasoning on our desires: when he wants to define the overflow of higher potencies and activities into the lower ones he uses the term “repercussion” (redundantia, or per modum redundantiae) (Summa Theol. 1-2, q. 59, a.5, c.).

Before presenting some contemporary ideas on the study of hope, we can state a premise to start a discussion on it. The integration of desires and pleasures into consistent behaviour requires thought, the capacity to perceive and transmit meaning, to correct oneself in the face of new evidence and so on. Feeling positive emotions while performing right actions implies a well-developed personality, which demands firmer foundation than innate dispositions. That is why we need self-control and not only optimism.

The whole treatment developed so far aims at showing the universality of hope. The inclusion of animals by the classics departs from common sense experience, and modern psychology brings new insights into this peculiar commonality of animals, including the rational.

4. Lessons from the drowning rats

Peter Railton reports the works of Karl Lashley during the thrilling days of behaviourism (1920), that raised questions about what rats can learn in the controlled conditions of the laboratory. One day, a rat escaped the start box of its maze, climbing up on top of the structure. The conditioned response model would predict that the rat would walk (say) x steps forward, turn right, walk x steps, turn right again, and find the food. After all, that was the motor pattern that had been so assiduously reinforced.

But instead, the rat scampered diagonally across the top of the maze, directly to the food station (Lashley, 1929). Laboratory conditions prevented the rat from ‘following its nose’ to the food—somehow, it was following something else, something more abstract that it had learned while running trials in the maze. Thus began the idea that rats might not be slaves to stimulus-response conditioning, they might form mental representations of locations and paths extending in space, permitting them to respond flexibly and intelligently to entirely novel opportunities afforded by the world. Not only that, but the novel behaviour had never been reinforced. Could learning really take place in light of internally represented values or goals (‘purposes’), without the external carrot of reward or stick of punishment? (Seligman et al. 2016, 67-8).

In the forties of the last century, Edward Tolman had claimed that these animals were able to build “cognitive maps” out of little exploration, without external reinforcement. The scientist from Berkeley presented rats as purposive creatures whose cognitive maps enabled them to pursue goals in an “autonomous” manner, extracting information from their limited experience of the maze to build general-purpose mental representations which allowed them to shift the way they pursue their goals without new incentives. Railton remarks that such ideas like “autonomy” and “purposive behaviourism” were very much in line with the experiments explained by William James on the non-linear results of the vivisectional operations of the different nerve-centres of frogs. It seemed that the organism tried to keep some elementary functions despite the excisions, struggling to compensate for the lack of some of the nerve-centres. Even if he was cautious in his conclusions, he included teleology and purposiveness as terms with a significative explanatory power of non-conscious actions (The Principles of Psychology, c. 2) (cf. Seligman et al. 2016, 68-9).

In 1957, Curt Richter published his conclusions from the experiment of the "drowning rats". The experiment was relatively simple: putting single rats from different groups into jars half filled with water, and watching them drown. He discovered that the majority of the domesticated rats swam for days before drowning, while wild and aggressive specimens lasted only a few minutes.

In another phase of the experiment he put other rats, that were momentarily rescued by being lifted out of the cylinder for a few seconds, then put right back into the water.

When the rats learned that they were not doomed, that the situation was not lost, that there might be a helping hand at the ready – in short, when they had a reason to keep swimming – they did. They did not give up, and they did not go under.

Richter concluded from the behaviour of the second group of rats –the wild ones – that their situation scarcely seemed one demanding fight or flight – it was instead one of hopelessness. "[T]he rats are in a situation against which they have no defence… they seem literally to 'give up.'"

So the general conclusion was that "after elimination of hopelessness the rats do not die" (Hallinan 2014)[4]

The rats that knew there was a chance of being rescued again had a goal – to stay alive until the next rescue. The other group had no goal, so they just gave up.

Railton, Seligman and their colleagues have been working on the reinsertion of James' ideas on teleology in an outspoken critique to the basis of modern science set by Descartes and Laplace (Seligman et al. 2013, 2016) (Seligman, Railton, y Baumeister 2016; Seligman et al. 2013). That is why they called their collaborative work Homo Prospectus, reminding the inspirational term minted by William James.

Theirs and many other psychologists' research is producing reliable evidence on the sophisticated mechanisms of putting into effect by the neural system of animals to elaborate information coming from experience in accordance to their actual situation. So, they are recovering the Aristotelian way of comparing human and animal behaviour.

It is of great significance their insistence on the intertwining of the affective and the cognitive elements in this purposive behaviour. They go further than the Ancients on the evaluation of the internal situation of the agent to stress the importance of two sides of this estimation. We learn to estimate the distance from the desired object, together with our actual internal dispositions or energy to respond to its stimulus.

Aristotle and Aquinas synthesised this tunning of passions and reason in a very general way through the notion of right reason and the way the upright man feels, decides and behaves (Inciarte Armiñán 2005, 415-20). The integration of desires and pleasures into consistent behaviour requires thought, the capacity to perceive and transmit meaning, to correct oneself, i.e. the capacity to readdress plans and behaviour. Feeling positive emotions while performing right actions implies a well-developed personality, which demands firmer foundation than innate dispositions (cf. Nic. Ethics, 1098b-1099a,

---

[4] J. Hallinan summarises the famous article from Richter *On the phenomenon of sudden death in animals and man* (1957). Richter's remarks are taken from Hallinan's text.

1113a24-31, 1169a32, 1170a12-1, cf. 1104b9-24). That is why we need self-control and not only optimism.

Aristotle glimpsed an element that we will have the opportunity to highlight in the next paragraph. It refers to the flow of desires and gratifications in time:

What is pleasant is the activity of the present, the hope of the future, the memory of the past; but most pleasant is that which depends on activity, and similarly this is most lovable (emphasis added, Nic. Ethics, 1168a13-15).

5. Some hints from the Positive Psychology

The promoters of the Positive psychology movement started with a comprehensive study on the qualities judged as good in the most important cultural, philosophical and religious traditions. Hope was one of the attitudes that appeared in all the sources studied, and they included it among the “Strengths of Transcendence”, tightly associated to optimism, future-mindedness, and future orientation (Peterson and Seligman 2004, ch. 25).

As a consensual definition for this group of positive attitudes they propose the following formula:

[1] Thinking about the future, [2] expecting that desired events and outcomes will occur, [3] acting in ways believed to make them more likely, and [4] feeling confident that these will ensue given appropriate efforts sustain good cheer in the here and now and galvanize goal-directed actions (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 570; numbers in brackets added).

We want to underscore that the first two elements find perfect parallels in the classical texts quoted above, while the ancients barely explored the third and the fourth. That is why we decided to spotlight the Aristotelian text at the end of the previous paragraph as a relevant link between the philosophical perspective of the Stagirite and modern psychology.

In the last decades of the XXth century, psychologists devoted considerable attention to hope, often returning to its original meaning

as somewhat grounded in reality – illusory perhaps but not delusional. Contemporary approaches also assume that this strength entails a belief about agency: the notion that good events can be made more likely and negative events less by appropriate actions on the part of the individual (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 572; emphasis added; cf. 577).

They underscore how recent research is integrating the cognitive approach (based on reality),[5] the elaboration of useful tools (explanatory style, learning of pathways) and the affective dimension. The inclusion of these different elements is bearing valuable results in two different fields. The first one is a more balanced theoretical approach, which implies scaling down the heritable-biological conditioning. The second one refers to the development of educative instruments, both for big institutions, small groups and individuals. Apart from that, it is worth noting that a high number of initiatives do not directly focus on therapies or to face critical situations but to equip people with useful life instruments in regular education or dealing with day-to-day challenges (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 578-81).

---

[5] We have explained some ideas from Maslow and Rogers regarding the correlation of a sound relation with reality with constructive feelings and fruitful decision making in a previous paper. In another non published paper we place some experiences of Walter Mischel and his colleagues about the positive influence of the awareness of one’s capacities to modify her or his own situation.

6. We are always living in the future

Leonardo Polo developed a comprehensive anthropological philosophy that draws back to ancient Greek authors but copes with the challenges of the Existentialist movement of the last century, notably Martin Heidegger.

We cannot dwell in the depths of his proposal, but there is an illuminating insight into the way humans consider the future that can be of use in our discourse.

Polo explains freedom as the capacity to live projected into the future. The way we anticipate situations, achievements and problems influences the way we live our daily tasks.

The Spanish philosopher stresses the fact that humans “live in the future” with the awareness that they are only drafting some feasible projections. To signify this he coined the term “no desfuturización del futuro”, intending to explain that we figure out future situations with the awareness that are not yet real, or maybe they will never become true.

The remarks from Baumeister and his colleagues recover this idea for their proposal:

To construct a psychological theory about how people imagine and use the future, one should recognise that the future looms as unsettled, undetermined. The future consists of possibilities, only some of which will come true […] determinism is profoundly unhelpful. A woman struggles with an unplanned pregnancy and must decide whether to abort, have the baby and give it up for adoption, or become a mother, and these point her along very different life paths (Seligman et al. 2016, 163-4).

Moreover, for Polo, human development implies the concentration of our inner powers in meaningful projects. For him, human life cannot be the simple course or lapse of time: growing is the most intensive way of making good use of time, putting it at the service of life (Polo 1998, 158).

That is why he defines hope as “the axis that gives meaning and mettle to the life of man. Hope is the framework of the existence of the human being in time.” (Polo 1998, 157).

Polo’s approach is consistent with the ideas about wisdom as described by Aristotle but in the Aristotelian proposal, the connection of reason with emotions does not go in this direction.

Going ahead into the realms of Polo’s work, we can point at some ideas regarding human organisations. The work of the Spanish philosopher explains transcendence – the sense of belonging to something more significant than the individual, so superficially and often quoted in contemporary culture – in an entirely different way of that of the Humanist psychologists, that were unable to overcome the individualistic culture of our age.

7. What about organisations?

At the level of human organisations, he asserts that human association is made to optimise human time. However, the sense in which he explains optimisation depends on his idea of human growth: organisations are the space for human flourishing. In modern societies, organisations have an enormous responsibility for handling human time in the best possible way. It means that the workplace should be a platform for personal growth. It is the place in which humans structure their time. To waste human time is morally accountable.

Precisely because it implies risk, hope is a source of solidarity. The power of summoning hope is that the one who waits is risky and the one who does not take risks does not wait. Hope brings together two great forces of the spirit: friendship and antagonism; one positive and one negative. However, the first is the most powerful. As hope is a matter of a heart that - like the prow of a ship - opens horizons, the one who expects is not without shelter; and not because he takes cover, but on the contrary, because he exposes himself and does not conform, nor does he take refuge in a bunker. That is why he drags others. Therefore, the hopeful activity is a game that does not overwhelm: a cheerful game that can be bet because everyone wins. The last element of hope is joy (Polo 1998, 162).

Polo thinks that hope acquires a more significant level when linked to a sense of mission, be it natural or supernatural. He opens his discourse to the Christian meaning of theological hope, without neglecting the significance of organised human endeavours.

We can finish these reflections with some of Polo's final remarks about the role of hope in our lives:

If our knowledge is broad and clear, we will elaborate projects, with goals that are more or less distant (the more ambitious the project, the further the goal, but it is not thereby any less a goal). All this is clear. 'Tell me what you hope in, and I will tell you how you live'; one lives as one hopes. Of course, betting always entails risk because, although we may guess with our minds what the future will be, we do not have an entirely precise actual knowledge of it. Plainly, to the extent that we draw closer to the future goal, we will gradually see more characteristics of it. In the beginning, it tends to be indeterminate, and it continues to be such for someone who moves only for the immediate and concrete like Sancho Panza. Retreating in the face of such unreality is tempting. People who want everything all at once have withdrawn in time; they have shortened the distance of their temporal horizons.

The loss of the sense of the future is a weakening of the will that, linked as it is to the last end, is unable to find any way of acting that would bring it closer to the last end, because the intelligence does not show it the way or because disenchantments or vices have accumulated. An ambitious project for the future demands the highest precision possible: discuss it, collect information and advice, prepare resources. In our time there is a substantial loss of hope, and yet, today more than ever before there are projects with possibilities." (Polo 2008, 176-7).

References

Aquinas, Thomas. 1964-1981. Summa Theologiae. Latin text and English Translation. T. Gilby (ed.) Eyre and Spottiswoode: McGraw-Hill.

Aristotle. 2014. Complete Works. Rev. Oxford Translation. J. Barnes (ed.). Princeton University Press: Princeton

Hallinan, Joseph T. 2014. 'The Remarkable Power of Hope'. «Psychology Today» (blog). 7 May 2014.

https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/kiddingourselves/201405/the-remarkable-power-hope. [accessed Nov. 29, 2018]

Inciarte Armiñán, Fernando. 2005. First Principles, Substance and Action. Studies in Aristotle and Aristotelianism. Zürich: Olms.

Peterson, Christopher, and Martin E. P Seligman. 2004. Character Strengths and Virtues : A Handbook and Classification. Washington (DC): American Psychological Association, Oxford University Press.

Plato. 1982 (1902). Opera. Oxford Classical Texts. Clarendon Press: Oxford.

Polo, Leonardo. 1998. 'La Esperanza'. «ScrTh» 30: 157–164.

———. 2008. Ethics. A Modern Version of Its Classic Themes. Manila: Sinag-Tala.

Seligman, Martin E. P., Roy F. Baumeister, Chandra Sripada, and Peter Railton. 2016. Homo Prospectus. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.

Seligman, Martin E. P, Peter Railton, Roy F. Baumeister, and Chandra Sripada. 2013. 'Navigating into the Future or Driven by the Past'. «Perspectives on Psychological Science» 8 (2): 119–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691612474317.