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What is This Hope?: Insights from Christian Theology and Positive Psychology

Barbara Sain

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE OFFERS conflicting visions of a healthy, fulfilled human life. With those visions come different strategies for helping people who are discouraged or depressed. When a home-bound elderly man feels that his life no longer has meaning, is his struggle for hope best addressed with therapy, prayer, or medication? When a young parent feels overwhelmed by the demands of work and family life, is the problem spiritual, psychological, or both? Should individuals, communities, and educators use strategic interventions to try to prevent hopelessness before it happens? What is the best approach to fostering hope?

People seeking answers to such questions often turn to religion and psychology. In Christian theology, the answers offered draw on a long tradition of reflection on the meaning of human existence. Hope has been described in many ways, including as a passion, a virtue, and transformative action (*praxis*). In recent decades, hope has also received a lot of attention in the social sciences. While all branches of psychology and psychiatry can be said to have an interest in hope inasmuch as they work to overcome hopelessness, positive psychology has had the most explicit discussion of hope.[1] In that discussion, varying emphasis is placed on intellectual, emotional, and volitional components.

In this paper, ideas about hope in Christian theology and positive psychology are placed in conversation. The dialogue is interesting but not easy. Theology talks more about the nature of hope, while psychology offers more on how to foster it. Theology has both individual and communal theories of hope; psychology has looked mainly at individuals. Theology assumes the existence of God and the presence of grace in the world; positive psychology sticks to empirical evidence. Theology is used to discussing normative principles, while psychology generally refuses to. To add another layer of complexity, there are

[1] Positive psychology is an area of research that focuses on fostering positive emotions and character strengths. This research on human wellbeing is seen as a complement to psychology's traditional work of studying and treating pathologies.

significant differences in vocabulary and basic concepts across and within the disciplines. Engaging in this dialogue is like sitting down for dinner with two companions who have talked briefly on occasion but have never had a sustained conversation. Fortunately, these companions are confident that hope can lead to good things and that understanding hope is worth the effort.

The most promising connections between Christian theology and positive psychology on the topic of hope are found in what is said about virtues, the cognitive and imaginative awareness of hopes, and practices that foster hope. The most significant differences lie in their evaluation of hope that is not focused on goals, the place of hope within an overall understanding of the human person, and the relation of the natural to the supernatural.

What is Hope?: Theological Responses

Two key ideas in the theological discussion of hope are passion and virtue. These concepts can be traced back to medieval Christian anthropology, which in turn drew upon older biblical and philosophical traditions. These terms were common in early twentieth century Catholic theology and are still used today, especially by theologians who draw on the work of Thomas Aquinas. Both ideas involve a basic understanding of hope as a movement of attraction for something desirable that is possible, but difficult, to attain. If the outcome is perceived to be impossible then it will not be the object of hope. Nor will outcomes that are assured, easily within our power to achieve, or undesirable. This movement of attraction, which is also called a desire, can be present in a person in more than one way. When it occurs at the sensible level, as an involuntary response to something perceived by the senses, it is traditionally called a passion. It also occurs at a higher level where it is a movement of the will guided by the intellect. This form of hope is sometimes called a natural virtue.[2] A virtue is a stable disposition to act for the good. A person who has the virtue of honesty, for example, has a well-developed, consistent quality of being honest. A person with the virtue of hope consistently looks for good future outcomes with a desire strong enough to overcome difficulty.

Hope can also be received as a supernatural gift from God. The foundational text for belief in this form of hope is Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13). Theological

[2] There is debate about whether natural hope qualifies as a virtue. A virtue, by definition, tends towards the good. The fact that people sometimes hope for things that are not good for them stands as evidence in the minds of some scholars that hope cannot be a virtue. See Bernard Schumacher, *A Philosophy of Hope: Josef Pieper and the Contemporary Debate on Hope*, trans. D.C. Schindler (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 111-20 and 254-55. This paper takes the position that natural hope can be a virtue.

reflection through the centuries led to faith, hope and love being understood as infused “theological” virtues: supernatural gifts that elevate our nature beyond its normal capacities. Like natural virtues, these are stable dispositions towards the good. The difference is that theological virtues have God as their object and are infused by grace. No choice or effort can bring about this kind of hope. It is purely a gift and the appropriate response is gratitude. These three ways of thinking about hope—as a passion, an acquired virtue, and a supernaturally infused virtue—have been very influential and are still part of the theological conversation today.

If hope is a desire, it is easy to see how it is connected to specific outcomes. When I hope for good weather on the weekend, my hope is intrinsically connected to the upcoming weather conditions. The weekend weather determines whether the hope is fulfilled or not, and when those days have passed the hope is gone. The coming and going of hopes like this is part of the natural rhythm of life. When a hope is not fulfilled, people often respond by shifting the focus of their hope to a different possible outcome. Sometimes, however, such refocusing is not possible. The circumstances have changed so that the object of hope is completely lost and nothing can replace it.

Some individuals who experience the failure of an important hope respond with despair. Others respond with a profound resilience: a continuing stance of hopefulness in spite of the circumstances. The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel gives the example of a father waiting for the return of his son from a trip. The young man is long overdue, and no communication has come to explain the delay. As time stretches on and the father waits, he can continue to hope or fall into despair. If he despaired, Marcel says, it would be like saying, “‘I have been disappointed so many times there is every reason to expect that I shall be again to-day’…. ‘I shall never again be anything but the wounded, mutilated creature I am to-day.’”[3] Despair sees correctly that nothing can heal the wound of a lost child and responds by falling apart. Hope also sees realistically, but it refuses to capitulate and fall apart. In either case, the father does not simply shift his hope to a different object or fill the void with other hopes. There is no substitute for reunion with his son.

There are times when people experience the failure of not just one but all of their important hopes. Consider an elderly man in poor health who has outlived family and friends. Without meaningful companionship or the physical ability to enjoy activities, he may spend each day simply waiting for time to pass. For some people in this situation, belief in an afterlife provides focus for ongoing hope. For others, who believe life ends with death, there may seem to be nothing significant

[3] Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (Chicago: Regnery, 1951), 42.

left to hope for.[4] Interestingly, people in situations like this sometimes manifest a strong, persistent hopefulness that has no specific object. Joseph Godfrey, drawing on Marcel, describes such hope as "unaimed" hope:

> One can distinguish between hoping with a specific aimed-for state of affairs, and hoping without such an aimed-for state of affairs. Hoping without a specific aim consists of a refusal to yield to the temptation of despair, expressed as 'All is lost. I am lost.' Hoping thus consists in surmounting specific disappointments and not going to pieces even when one seems unable to imagine something worthwhile and possible. Such hoping exhibits patience, humility, and flexibility, in contrast with aimed hoping's ardor and specific focus.[5]

Unaimed hope is a positive attitude towards reality and the future that is independent of circumstances. It can also be described as openness or trust in existence. This basic, fundamental hope is most easily seen in situations where all ordinary hopes have faded, but it is also present in everyday life. In the midst of life, with the coming and going of many aimed hopes, we can occasionally catch a glimpse of a deeper hope that underlies them. Marcel asserts that such moments reveal the true nature of hope because in them we see hope separated from desire. The calculative thinking that accompanies desire narrows our focus to outcomes we believe are important for our happiness. The more we focus on those outcomes, the easier it is to despair if they do not happen. Ironically, the failure of aimed hopes allows for the recognition that true well-being does not depend on having those things.[6]

For Marcel, hope is more about being than having. It is intrinsically relational, and it emerges from community. The experience of being loved fosters openness, not only to the ones who share that love, but also to the possibilities of existence. A person who has known love can trust the possibilities of the future without knowing precisely what they are. This hope is not a passive waiting. It is a creative and transformative availability. Marcel considered himself a philosopher, not a theologian, but he spoke of the transcendent and acknowledged that his ideas are compatible with Christian theology. His work is often cited by theologians who want to highlight the relational or communal aspects of hope. He is included in this discussion because so many Christian thinkers have incorporated his ideas into their theologies of hope.

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[4] I am indebted to Annette Geoffrion Brownlee for this example. See Annette Geoffrion Brownlee, "The Dark Night of Hope," *The Journal of Religion and Aging* 1, no. 2 (1984): 9-25.

[5] Joseph J. Godfrey, S.J., "Hope," in *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 2nd ed., ed. L.C. Becker and C.B. Becker (New York: Routledge, 2001), 791.

[6] Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 45-47.

The twentieth century saw a surge of interest in hope in Western philosophy and theology. A seminal figure for this development was the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, who understood hope as an anticipatory consciousness of the future.[7] According to Bloch, the natural human drive for transcendence is oriented towards the future rather than towards the supernatural or any higher plane of existence. Hope is the imagination's ability to anticipate the future. As creatures who hope, we use our freedom to shape the concrete circumstances of history and actively bring about the future that we envision. Bloch was a formative influence on Jürgen Moltmann, who has been at the forefront of renewed interest of hope in Christian theology. Moltmann and other Christian theologians engaged in this renewal understand hope as a form of transformative action, or *praxis*. Hope highlights the difference between the harsh realities of the present and the possibilities of the future, particularly in light of the Gospel proclamation of God's kingdom. This critical awareness becomes a driving force for change. Therefore, when hope is present, so is resistance to injustice. Grace inspires, and is experienced in, the work for justice. These theologians, whom I refer to as the "school of hope," typically have a broad historical vision and a strong sense of hope as a social reality.[8]

There are other thinkers who emphasize the connection between hope and the future on a smaller scale. A good example is Andrew Lester, an American Christian pastoral counselor. In his book, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Lester describes people's expectations about the future as their "future stories." According to Lester, therapists are accustomed to asking about their clients' past and present experiences, but much less attention is paid to the future element of their self-awareness. In fact, some people are surprised to be asked about their "future story" because they are only minimally aware of the expectations they have. Lester argues that future stories are essential for understanding hope and hopelessness because people's sense of themselves is inseparable from the narratives of their lives. "These stories collect both the remembered past and the imagined future, which are then integrated into the person's present identity."[9] One's

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[7] See, Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); German original, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1959).

[8] The phrase "school of hope" was originally used for the leading figures in the renewed discussion of hope after World War II, such as Jürgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz, and Walter Capps. Their work has influenced a widespread and diverse array of Christian thinkers who understand hope as *praxis* and give it a central role in their theology. I will use "school of hope" in a broad sense for the original thinkers and those who build on their work.

[9] Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 5.

experience of the present is shaped not only by formative events of the past but also by what one expects will come in the future.

To help his clients regain hope, Lester encourages them to think about their expectations and imagine other ways that events might unfold. In the book, he gives the example of a man whose father and grandfather died from stroke and heart attack around the age of forty. When this man reached forty, he developed depression, anxiety, and physical symptoms that were difficult to diagnose. At first, he did not connect his problems with the deaths of his father and grandfather, but later it became clear that he expected his life to end soon and was grieving what he would miss, such as important events in the lives of his children. When he was reminded of factors in his health history that reduced his risk of heart attack, the "future story" in his mind changed. He began to be more confident that he would live beyond his forties, and he regained hope. Lester's understanding of hope highlights the temporal quality of human experience and the role of the imagination in generating and sustaining hope. "If the goal is valued and the story contains a plot that makes reaching the goal a possibility, then the future story contributes to hope. If the plot predicts that reaching the valued goal is not possible, then a person is vulnerable to despair."[10]

Another author who emphasizes the importance of imagination for hope is William F. Lynch. In *Images of Hope*: *Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*, Lynch describes hope as "the fundamental knowledge and feeling that there is a way out of difficulty, that things can work out, that we as human persons can somehow handle and manage internal and external reality…. Hope is, in its most general terms, a *sense of the possible*."[11] Imagination provides a foundation and direction for hope by presenting possibilities. Lynch is careful to note that this work of the imagination is not just fantasizing or the projection of egotistical desires. Fantasy can be an escape for people who do not know how to deal with reality. In order to be effective fostering hope, imagination must be realistic.

The creative work of the imagination cannot be done in isolation. According to Lynch, both imagination and hope are inherently relational. If hope is understood simply as an individual trait,

> The implication would be that it is a deep inward resource (completely inward in every sense of that word), which has the strength to save us once we succeed in tapping it. But, the implication would continue, somewhere, on a later level and at a later time, it gets into trouble and needs temporary assistance in order that it may again go on its merry

[10] Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care*, 37.

[11] William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as the Healer of the Hopeless* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 32.

> way unassisted by the undignified thing called help….Like most human statements this one contains some truth, but in its substance it contains a broadly prevalent clinical, philosophical and theological lie…. The truth is that hope is related to help in such a way that you cannot talk about one without talking of the other. Hope is truly on the inside of us, but hope is an interior sense that there is help on the outside of us.[12]

Lynch was thinking particularly of the mentally ill, whose difficulty managing regular life isolates them from the world of the healthy. At times this sense of otherness makes the sick feel less than human, but a relationship of trust can break through their isolation. The person who has felt hopeless, alone against the world,

> Now wishes *with* and not *against*, and is felt to be wished *with* by another. To be wished *with* by a true friend, or by a few, who are in touch with the depths of real feeling and wishing in the soul, and who help a man to discover and contact his own soul, is a possession without price. Now there is real hope, no matter what happens in the world outside such relationships.[13]

Help from others, in the form of love or as shared imagining of possibilities, is essential for rejuvenating hope in an individual.

These schools of thought and individual thinkers highlight different aspects of hope that are familiar from human experience. One question that emerges when comparing them is whether hope always has an object. Most of the approaches assume that it does. This is easily seen when hope is defined as a desire for a specific object or outcome. It is also important in the interaction of hope and imagination, as described by Lester and Lynch. However, there is more to the human experience of hope than aimed hopes, and they can even obscure the deeper roots of hope. Marcel's work highlights fundamental hope and provides an important complement to the idea of hope as a desire.

Another issue is whether hope is primarily individual or communal. The first approach that was described, which builds on the thought of Thomas Aquinas and thinks of hope as a passion or a virtue, defines hope almost exclusively as an individual quality. Jürgen Moltmann and theologians who describe hope as a social, historical, and political reality do so, in part, as a corrective to the individualistic focus of the first approach. Marcel captures elements of both in his understanding of hope. He talks about hope mainly as an individual quality, but it is a quality that emerges from the experience of love. Human beings find their fulfillment in relationships with others. An isolated, solitary ego

[12] Lynch, *Images of Hope*, 39-40.
[13] Lynch, *Images of Hope,* 170-171.

experiences despair rather than hope. Like Marcel, Lynch offers a description of hope that focuses on the individual in the context of relationships: hope is sustained within an individual through trusting relationships and shared imagination.

A third issue that comes into focus when comparing theological descriptions of hope is whether hope is active or passive. The ideas of hope drawn from Aquinas include both active and passive elements. On the most basic level, the passion of hope is a spontaneous, involuntary response of the sensible appetite to a desired object. The theological virtue of hope, as a supernatural gift, also comes to the individual from the outside. It is received rather than generated. However, neither form of hope is simply passive. Once initiated, they continue as active movements, guided by the intellect and chosen by the will. Hope understood as *praxis*, or transformative action, is inherently active. It is the driving force for social change that arises from awareness of injustice. In theological contexts, this idea of hope also has a receptive element. Recognition of future possibilities comes from the revelation and proclamation of God's coming kingdom. Hope is sustained by the awareness of God's presence in the world as a God of compassion and justice. Marcel's understanding of hope is an interesting mix of active and passive. He asserts that the true nature of hope is seen when all aimed hopes have failed and there is nothing a person can do to realize them. Hope then can be present as a refusal to capitulate and fall apart. Although it might seem passive because it is not engaged in any specific activity, this hope is better described as receptive. It is a stubborn refusal to give up on the positive possibilities of existence. Lester and Lynch also offer insights into hope that combine the active and the passive. They describe the powerful impact of consciously reflecting on and adjusting one's expectations about the future. In the background of these deliberate interventions, however, stands the powerful and often unnoticed effect imagination has on our everyday experience. In all of these theological understandings of hope (and implicitly in Marcel's), grace is present as a gift received from God that fosters our active engagement in the world.

Each of these descriptions of hope is set within a broader anthropology. The theological voices come to the table with explicit ideas of how human beings are constituted and what is needed to live a fulfilling human life. Hope plays a role within each vision, bringing humanity closer to fulfillment and to God. As one would expect, the theological descriptions of hope assume the presence of God in the world and the importance of grace for human happiness. They offer different levels of detail about how the natural interacts with the supernatural. Thomist accounts of hope are the most developed, making a clear distinction between hope as a natural passion or virtue and as a theological virtue. Each of the others combines prayer, grace, and revelation with the natural elements of their understanding of hope. Marcel is less

explicit about the supernatural, but his ideas about hope are easily integrated with Christian theology.

WHAT IS HOPE? RESPONSES FROM POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology stands out among the social sciences for its interest in hope. This area of research focuses on human being well-being and sees itself as a complement to psychology's traditional interest in pathologies.[14] While hope, as the opposite of hopelessness, has long been a goal of psychological treatment, in positive psychology hope is studied for its own sake. Hope is understood as a normal part of life, and the dynamics of hope are investigated in everyday situations.

The most prominent theory of hope in positive psychology comes from the work of Charles Richard Snyder. In his 1994 book, *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here,* Snyder says that hope is best understood as goal-oriented thinking.[15] Hopeful people are able to set clear goals, identify pathways to reach the goals, and generate the mental energy, or agency, needed to achieve them. When obstacles hinder their progress, hopeful people maintain motivation and come up with alternative strategies for reaching the goal. In the decades following *The Psychology of Hope*, Snyder and his colleagues developed an extensive research program based on this theory of hope. The results of that work include three measurement scales, hundreds of articles, a textbook, and a number of edited volumes, such as *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*.[16] Snyder's hope theory has been so influential that many psychology books draw exclusively on it for their descriptions of hope.

The work of Martin Seligman is also important for understanding hope in positive psychology because his research and advocacy spearheaded the field's development.[17] Early in his career, Seligman studied how failure and frustration contribute to a phenomenon he called

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[14] Meg A. Warren, Scott I. Donaldson, and Stewart I. Donaldson, "Evaluating Scientific Progress in Positive Psychology," in *Scientific Progress in Positive Psychology,* ed. Meg A. Warren and Stewart I. Donaldson (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017), 1-9.

[15] C. R. Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

[16] See William C. Compton and Edward Hoffmann, *Positive Psychology: The Science of Happiness and Flourishing*, 2nd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2013); *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, ed. Shane J. Lopez and C. R. Snyder, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and *Positive Psychological Assessment: A Handbook of Models and Measures*, ed. S. J. Lopez and C. R. Snyder (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003).

[17] See M. E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998); M. E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: The Free Press, 2002); and M. E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: The Free Press, 2011).

"learned helplessness." When people have repeated experiences of ineffective agency, they become more passive. They perceive themselves as being helpless, interpret events pessimistically, and become less likely to act. Seligman later studied how other factors, such as success influencing situations, can support the opposite mindset of positive perceptions, interpretations, and actions. This "learned optimism" is the focus of his 1991 book *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*. Seligman tends to use the term optimism rather than hope, but the popularity of his work has increased interest in both.

In the following decades, Seligman's interest in positive human traits continued. As President of the American Psychological Association in 1998 he called for a greater focus on positive psychology, urging his colleagues to "articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound and, at the same time, understandable and attractive…. [to] show the world what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, to flourishing communities, and to a just society."[18] In 2000, Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi edited an issue of *American Psychologist* dedicated to positive psychology, and in 2004 he and Christopher Peterson published *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*.[19] Both publications are considered milestones in the field of positive psychology. The handbook draws on philosophies, religions, and influential figures from around the world to present twenty-four positive personal qualities (character strengths) organized into six categories (classes of virtue). Hope is included as a character strength in the category of transcendence.

Character Strengths and Virtues was intended to be a first effort at classification that would be revised as research developed.[20] It has generated debate and illustrates some of the strengths and weaknesses of positive psychology. While the larger debate is beyond the scope of this essay, one point is helpful for understanding what is said about hope. The information in the book is presented as loose groupings rather than clearly defined characteristics and categories. The project drew on religions and philosophies from around the world to present a rich array of positive human qualities. These qualities are rooted in

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[18] Martin P. Seligman, "The President's Address," *American Psychologist* 54, no. 8 (1999): 561.

[19] *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, ed. Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[20] Nansook Park, Michael Barton, and Jace Pillay, "Strengths of Character and Virtues: What We Know and What We Still Want to Learn," in *Scientific Advances in Positive Psychology,* ed. Meg A. Warren and Stewart I. Donaldson (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017), 90. See also Nancy E. Snow, "Positive Psychology, the Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues, and Issues of Measurement," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 14, no.1 (2019): 20-31.

different anthropologies, cosmologies, languages, and cultural traditions. Recognizing the difficulty of organizing such diverse ideas into precisely defined groups, the authors opted for loose categories of related concepts: twenty-four character strengths, grouped into six categories of virtue.

The chapter on hope is titled "Hope (Optimism, Future-Mindedness, Future Orientation)."[21] The presence of four different terms in the title reflects the inclusive organizational method. The opening section offers this "consensual definition":

> Hope, optimism, future-mindedness, and future orientation represent a cognitive, emotional, and motivational stance towards the future. Thinking about the future, expecting that desired events and outcomes will occur, acting in ways believed to make them more likely, and feeling confident that these will ensue given appropriate efforts sustain good cheer in the here and now and galvanize goal-directed action.[22]

This description includes cognitive components (thinking, expecting, and believing), active components (goal-directed actions), and feelings (good cheer and confidence). The chapter goes on to survey the theories behind each of the four ideas in the title, the latest research and methods for measurement, the effectiveness of interventions, and areas for further study. While the overview is quite helpful for seeing how researchers are approaching this set of concepts, a reader looking for a clear description of what hope is and how it works will not find it. More clarity on the nature and mechanisms of hope is left for future research.

COMMON GROUND AND SEPARATE INSIGHTS

What common ground is there among these theological and psychological approaches to hope, and what insights might one discipline gain from the other? Positive psychology offers a broad category of hope and optimism which includes many definitions and researchers. Among them, Snyder's theory of hope is the most developed and widely applied, so it offers the best prospect for a careful comparison with theological ideas. The following analysis looks mainly at Snyder's theory of hope, referring occasionally to other voices. Attention is then given to some fundamental issues reflected in *Character Strengths and Virtues*.

The theory of hope developed by Snyder divides hope into three clear components: goals, pathways thinking, and agency thinking.

[21] "Hope (Optimism, Future-Mindedness, Future Orientation)," in *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, ed. Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 569-582.
[22] Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, 570.

Snyder explains in *The Psychology of Hope* that he intentionally "anchor[ed] hope to a concrete goal"[23] in order to focus on realistic hopes. Vague and unrealistic hopes can be disappointing and even dangerous, so he constructed a model of hope that avoids them. To Snyder, the connection with goals is essential for hope. A person who lacks clear goals will also lack hope. In addition to identifying goals, he says, hope "involves the perception that one's goals can be met."[24]

For Snyder, "pathways thinking," or "waypower," is the process of identifying ways to reach goals. Even the most clearly defined goals will not be achieved without an effective strategy. People who are successful reaching their goals are skilled not only at developing strategies but also at reworking their plans if they encounter obstacles. Snyder describes pathways thinking as "a sense of being able to generate ways to our goals" and "a belief that one can find multiple ways."[25] This involves interpretation and imagination. Sometimes "waypower" must find creative new pathways when the easiest or most common options fail. Agency thinking, or "willpower," is the ability to achieve goals. Just as defining goals without a strategy for reaching them is ineffective, having a strategy without the ability to implement it will not lead to the desired result. The descriptions Snyder gives for "waypower" include a "sense of mental energy," "a reservoir of determination," and "willful thinking."[26]

According to Snyder, having a high level of hope leads to achieving goals, and that success supports ongoing hope. Hopeful people are optimistic and competitive. They see themselves as being in control and capable of solving problems. They tend to have high self-esteem and positive affectivity. In contrast, people with low hope respond to obstacles by losing momentum. Eventually they lose the sense that reaching goals is even possible for them.

The goal-oriented character of hope in Snyder's theory is similar in many ways to aimed hopes in theological discussions. Most theories of hope assume the presence of aimed hopes as part of normal life. An exception is Marcel, who sounds a note of caution worth listening to. His description of fundamental hope, a persistent disposition of hopefulness independent of circumstances, shows that there is more to hope than aimed hopes. It connects with the popular notion that hope involves waiting, uncertainty, and lack of control. Importantly for a comparison with Snyder, Marcel emphasizes how hope can be present when there is nothing to do or accomplish. In Snyder's view, the positive energy of hope comes from goal-directed thinking. He and other

[23] Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope*, 3.
[24] Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope*, 3.
[25] Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope*, 8-10.
[26] Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope*, 6-8.

researchers applying his theory of hope have little to say about situations when there is nothing to "do," when circumstances severely limit possibilities for setting and accomplishing important goals.

There is overlap between the pathways thinking in Snyder's theory and what Lester and Lynch say about the imagination's role in hope. All three stress how a person's ability to envision good possibilities in the future is essential for sustaining hope. Lester describes how one person can help another develop alternative, encouraging future stories when previously he or she expected only difficulty and failure. This is much like the ability of a high-hope person in Snyder's theory to come up with multiple pathways towards a goal and adapt to unexpected obstacles. Lynch emphasizes the importance of realistic hopes, which is a point of agreement with Snyder. However, they have different views on what grounds hope and makes it realistic. For Lynch, the grounding comes from relationships. With compassion, trust and shared imagination, people help each other to hold realistic hopes. For Snyder, the realism of hopes is based on cognitive clarity.

Snyder's theory of hope focuses on individuals. He does note the importance of childhood influences for the development of goal-oriented thinking, but their role is to foster the skills of goal-oriented thinking, somewhat like a coach. He does not elaborate on how other aspects of relationships, such as love and trust, might affect hope. Other studies of hope and optimism in positive psychology have also focused primarily on individuals. As a result, the research reveals more about individual hope than it does about communal hope, or even the relational character of individual hope. An increasing number of voices are calling for a broader focus, in psychology as a whole and positive psychology specifically.[27] In his foreword to *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Positive Psychology*, Isaac Prilleltensky states,

> From an epistemic point of view, our understanding of well-being is hampered when we ignore cultural and environmental circumstances surrounding the experience and expression of well-being. From a moral point of view, we risk descent into person-centered explanations of health and wellness, which often turn into victim-blaming accusations…. From a political standpoint, individualistic accounts of behavior wittingly or unwittingly support the social status quo, which

[27] See James M. Nelson and Brent D. Slife, "A New Positive Psychology: A Critique of the Movement Based on Early Christian Thought," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 5 (2017): 459-467; Michael Billig, *The Hidden Roots of Critical Psychology: Understanding the Impact of Locke, Shaftesbury and Reid* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008); and *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Positive Psychology*, ed. Nicholas J. L. Brown, Tim Lomas and Francisco Jose Eiroa-Orosa (New York: Routledge, 2018).

> benefits the few and harms the many. According to this logic, it is people who need to change, not the system.[28]

To the extent that hope is a relational and communal phenomenon, it cannot be accurately understood by research that defines it as an individual quality.

Marcel and Lynch might be helpful conversation partners for psychologists interested in the relational component of individual hope. Lynch draws on his pastoral experience to explain how trust, love, and imagination can help transform hopelessness into hope. Marcel is less concrete, but his insights are being applied by a variety of theologians, including some who engage with psychology. The theological discussion, in turn, can benefit from the insights of psychological research as it expands to study relational elements of hope in more detail. Hope researchers in psychology who want to address social issues and combat injustice will find theological partners in the school of hope, which emphasizes how hope can transform social structures.

The final point to be made about Snyder's description of hope before returning to *Character Strengths and Virtues* concerns vocabulary. While Snyder's model identifies the three components of hope very clearly, he uses many different terms to describe them. For example, in *The Psychology of Hope* the second and third components of hope are described as ways of thinking (pathways thinking, agency thinking) and as powers ("waypower," willpower). Thinking is traditionally associated with the intellect, and willpower with the will. Here those categories are used interchangeably or even combined, as when willpower is described as "willful thinking."[29] Snyder also makes frequent use of the terms "sense" and "perception." For example, willpower is a "sense of mental energy," and it "taps our sense of potential action."[30] "Waypower" includes both "mental plans" and "the perception that one can engage in planful thought." It is a "sense of being able to generate ways to our goals," and a belief that one can do that.[31] It is difficult for the reader to tell if sense refers to thoughts, feelings, or both. A similar flexibility in vocabulary is often seen when other researchers apply Snyder's theory of hope.

This observation is meant to be constructive, not simply critical. Clarity of terms and categories is vital for interdisciplinary dialogue, where differences of method and content already present challenges to understanding. Attention to vocabulary is even more important for

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[28] Isaac Prilleltensky, "Foreword: Interiorizing and Interrogating Well-being," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Positive Psychology*, ed. Nicholas J. L. Brown, Tim Lomas and Francisco Jose Eiroa-Orosa (New York: Routledge, 2018), xx.

[29] Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope*, 7.

[30] Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope,* 7.

[31] Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope,* 8.

contemporary theology and psychology because both are affected by shifts in anthropological categories that have occurred in recent centuries. More will be said about this below. First however, it will be helpful to return to Seligman and Peterson's *Character Strengths and Virtues*. Three issues raised by the 2004 handbook are important for this discussion of hope: the role of virtue, the anthropological significance of the categories, and the relation of the natural to the supernatural.

The concept of character strength in positive psychology bears some resemblance to traditional Western ideas of virtue, which trace back to Aristotle and have enjoyed a revival among scholars in recent decades. This similarity is recognized by positive psychologists and clearly reflected in Peterson and Seligman's 2004 handbook.[32] It offers a promising connection with the theological idea of hope as a natural or supernatural virtue.

The strongest point of connection is the basic idea of virtue as a stable personal quality that contributes to happiness or wellbeing. Classical Western philosophers, Christian thinkers, and modern secular intellectuals have all highlighted the importance of such stable characteristics in human life and offered lists of virtues. In *The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology*, for example, Blaine Fowers notes the parallels between virtue theory and psychological concepts. In a virtuous person, the cognitive understanding of the good combines with attraction and motivation to form a reliable disposition to act for the good.[33] Another point of connection comes from the fact that virtues can be practiced and developed. Traditional lists of virtues are often accompanied by practices recommended to foster them. Positive psychology has studied the various character strengths and developed interventions to strengthen them. Comparing the practical advice from each tradition could be of benefit to both.

Some aspects of virtue theory do not fit as well with positive psychology. In the traditional understanding, the virtues are ordered in specific ways to human fulfillment.[34] Even though humanity displays a tremendous array of interests, abilities, and beliefs, there are some

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[32] Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, 3-89. See also Blaine J. Fowers, in "Virtue Ethics," in *The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology*, ed. Shane J. Lopez (West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1011-1016; Blaine J. Fowers, "Virtues," in *The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology*, 1016-1023; and Kristján Kristjánsson, "Positive Psychology, Happiness, and Virtue: The Troublesome Conceptual Issues," *Review of General Psychology* 14, no. 4 (2010): 296–310.

[33] Fowers, "Virtue Ethics," 1012-1013.

[34] See Brent Dean Robbins and Harris L Friedman, "The Unavoidable Role of Values in Positive Psychology: Reflections in Light of Psychology's Replicability Crisis," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Positive Psychology*, ed. Nicholas J. L. Brown, Tim Lomas and Francisco Jose Eiroa-Orosa (New York: Routledge, 2018), 15-25.

things that all people need in order to flourish. People cannot find happiness in just any kind of life.

> [A]ccording to Aristotle, it is empirically true that the flourishing of human beings consists of the realization of intellectual and moral virtues and in the fulfillment of their other specifically human physical and mental capabilities. The virtues are at once conducive to and constitutive of eudaimonia; each true virtue represents a stable character state (hexis) that is intrinsically related to flourishing as a human being.[35]

The main voices for virtue in positive psychology, such as Seligman and Peterson, have been reluctant to identify specific virtues as necessary for flourishing. Even a more cautious, descriptive statement that a character strength or virtue is valued by all people exceeds what they are willing to claim. Their reluctance is consistent with the scientific methodology of psychology, which views statements about morality as beyond its domain. However, positive psychology intends to provide empirically sound information about human wellbeing. It is hard to do that without saying that some characteristics are better than others. Kristján Kristjánsson suggests that the problem stems from a conflation of evaluative and prescriptive statements.

> The key lies in the ambiguity of the term "normative," which can either mean "evaluative" or "prescriptive" …. The inclusion of empirically grounded moral evaluations in psychological theories does not thereby undermine their objectivity, therefore. On the contrary, by correctly describing the world of factual values it strengthens their objectivity. It is only prescriptions—imperatives to act—that undermine objectivity and violate the "is-ought" distinction.[36]

He argues that psychologists should not hesitate to make evaluative statements supported by their research.

The reluctance to prioritize some character strengths or some pathways to happiness over others also reflects a broader feature of positive psychology: the lack of a basic anthropology. On the one hand, studying human wellbeing is at the heart of positive psychology's project, and strong claims are made for the benefit of various character strengths. On the other hand, they shy away from claiming universal benefit, or necessity, for any particular quality. Willingness to make evaluative statements, based on their research findings, would allow positive psychologists to deepen their engagement with virtue theory. It would also facilitate dialogue with other schools of thought that have more detailed anthropological frameworks. Kristjánsson notes,

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[35] Kristjánsson, "Positive Psychology," 301.
[36] Kristjánsson, "Positive Psychology," 308.

correctly, that positive psychology has come a long way in a short time. It is not surprising that there are questions still to be answered.[37] Similarly, Seligman and Peterson offered the classification in *Character Strengths and Virtues* as a first step, not a final one. A more detailed anthropological framework would provide excellent common ground for further dialogue with theology.

The idea of hope as a supernatural gift from God, or even as a human characteristic supported by God's grace, is not discussed in positive psychology. This is consistent with its emphasis on scientific method. *Character Strengths and Virtues* does have transcendence as one of its six virtue categories and gives spirituality as the paradigmatic example. However, transcendence and spirituality are described very broadly. Significantly for a comparison with Christian theology, neither is understood to necessarily include belief in a god. The relation of the natural to the supernatural is the most difficult issue for psychology and theology to bridge. Theology believes not only that God exists but that God is present and active in the world in ways discernible to human beings. Unity with God is widely considered to be the primary object of Christian hope, and God is believed to guide other hopes through love and revelation. To the extent that positive psychology is committed to the scientific method, it has few tools to study transcendent phenomena. The emerging research on spirituality in positive psychology tends to focus on the effects faith or spiritual practices have on the believer. Humanistic psychology, a subdiscipline that preceded positive psychology by several decades, has had more success integrating religious experience with psychological theory. However, the relationship between humanistic psychology and positive psychology has been contentious, in part because many positive psychologists consider humanistic psychology unscientific. This difference between theology and positive psychology presents a significant challenge for collaboration, but the inclusion of transcendence as one of the six virtue categories is promising. Further conversation in that area may open new doors.

Shifting Terms and Categories

The task of comparing descriptions of hope is complicated by significant shifts that have occurred in the vocabulary and categories of Western anthropology.[38] In medieval Christian theology, the terms

[37] Kristjánsson, "Positive Psychology," 308.

[38] See Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Thomas Dixon, "'Emotion': The History of a Keyword in Crisis," *Emotion Review* 4, no. 4 (2012): 338-344; Ute Frevert, "Defining Emotions: Concepts and Debates Over Three Centuries," in *Emotional Lexicons: Continuity and Change in the Vocabulary of Feeling 1700-2000,* ed. Ute Frevert, Monique Scheer, Anne Schmidt, Pascal Eitler, Bettina Hitzer, Nina Verheyen, Benno Gammerl, Christian Bailey and Margrit Pernau (New

"passion" and "virtue" were embedded in a complex anthropology. They were defined with great precision in relation to other anthropological terms, such as "appetite," "affection," "intellect," "will," "soul," and "body." As the centuries passed, new anthropological ideas were introduced. Sometimes new terms were adopted to describe aspects of the human person. More often, old terms were applied in new ways.

In the Middle Ages, the term "passion" referred to an involuntary movement of the lowest part of the soul, the sensitive appetite. In a well-ordered person the passions are regulated by reason. By the nineteenth century "passion" came to mean a deeply rooted inclination, first associated with the soul and later with the body, that is difficult for reason to change or overcome. In the twentieth century, "passion" lost its reference to a specific aspect of the person and came to signify intensity or motivation more generally. The term "affect" or "affection" had been used in medieval thought for a movement of the will, superior to the sensible disturbances of the passions. After 1800, "affect" "increasingly became the term for superficial emotions located primarily in the body: fast, reactive, and quickly dissipated."[39] By the twentieth century "affect" had largely fallen out of popular usage, continuing as a specialized term in some academic disciplines for the most basic level of experience, before emotion.[40]

Intellect and will had long been regarded as the two primary faculties of the soul. In the late 1700s some German thinkers, including Immanuel Kant, began to speak of a third faculty in the soul: feeling (*Gefühl*). The term "feeling," which had previously been used for the perception of physical sensation, shifted to mean an internal awareness, or mental experience. "This separation of the third faculty from the existing faculties of intellect (or understanding) and will was one of the crucial factors in laying the groundwork for various theories of passions and emotions that saw them as both irrational and involuntary…."[41] Rather than regulating the passions and guiding them towards the good, the intellect came to be seen as opposed to passions.

While the traditional categories of soul and body persisted into the modern era, new explanations were given for how they relate to each other. In medieval anthropology, the soul and body were seen as distinguishable but intrinsically related. The higher faculties of the soul, intellect and will, governed the lower appetites and the body. That

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York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-31; and Monique Scheer, "Topographies of Emotion," in *Emotional Lexicons: Continuity and Change in the Vocabulary of Feeling 1700-2000,* 32-61.

[39] Scheer, "Topographies," 34.

[40] Frank Biess and Daniel M. Gross, "Introduction: Emotional Returns," in *Science and Emotion after 1945: A Transatlantic Perspective*, ed. Frank Biess and Daniel M. Gross (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 6.

[41] Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, 71.

shifted to descriptions in which the body more actively shapes the soul or the activities traditionally associated with the soul are assigned to higher or lower parts of the body. Eventually the category of soul was eclipsed by mind and brain in most secular and scientific discussions. The term "soul" continued with a strong religious connotation.

The term "emotion" has only been widely used since the nineteenth century. As it gained popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "emotion" was used broadly for activity in the nervous system, bodily feelings produced by outside stimuli, physical changes in the brain, mental states, and facial expressions. The term has taken over meanings previously held by "passion" and "affect," and it is usually used without explanation of how it relates to intellect, will, or feeling. Some people think emotions can be integrated with reason; others see them as inherently irrational. Similarly, some think emotions should be managed by the will; others view them as spontaneous and uncontrollable. The relationship between emotion and feeling is even more unclear, because the English word "feeling" also has a very broad application. Today "emotion" is the term of choice, in both technical and colloquial contexts, when previously several terms with different meanings would have been used. "We no longer talk of feeling, passion, fervour, affect, sensibility, sentiment, appetite, changes of temper, and its inclination, but for the most part simply of emotion."[42]

Awareness of these vocabulary shifts is important for understanding hope in both theology and psychology. In theology the presence of different anthropological frameworks has led to significantly different ideas of what hope is and how it works in human life. The asymmetry of terms and categories makes it difficult to compare theologies of hope and gather the best insights from each. The meaning of the term "emotion" is particularly important for positive psychology because positive emotions have been at the heart of its research. Is the term "emotion" being used more precisely by psychological researchers, or does it reflect the breadth of popular usage? According to Kristjánsson,

> [T]he label "positive emotion" has a number of different meanings, both in ordinary language and academic parlance. In addition to the two common meanings … of (a) appropriateness and (b) pleasantness, "positive emotion" is sometimes used as a shortening for (c) "positively evaluating emotion", namely an emotion that evaluates a given state of affairs in a positive light, and even for (d) "an emotion conducive to health....[43]

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[42] Frevert, "Defining Emotions," 16.
[43] Kristjánsson, "Positive Psychology," 304.

He says the second meaning, pleasantness, is the one most commonly used by researchers.

Interestingly, there are efforts to introduce more precision into contemporary discussions of hope.[44] Some of the suggested distinctions replicate categories from earlier time periods. Recall the traditional description of hope as a movement of attraction towards an object perceived as good that is possible, but difficult, to attain. In a 2018 article, "Distinguishing Hope from Optimism and Related Affective States," Patricia Bruininks and Bertram Malle describe four rules of hope formulated by J. R. Avrill and his colleagues. Two of the rules, that hope is appropriate if the outcome can realistically be attained and that hope should focus on what is appraised as good, match traditional criteria for the object of hope: that it is perceived as good and possible to attain. A third criterion, that the object or outcome is difficult to reach, is supported by research Bruininks and Malle cite later in the article. While some researchers are seeking clarity by introducing distinctions, others are moving in the opposite direction. Knowing that few contemporary readers know the medieval meaning of the word "passion," many theologians using Aquinas's ideas of hope now replace "passion" with "emotion." The strategy makes their writing more intelligible for today's readers but sacrifices the precision of the original term. The need for a more sophisticated vocabulary is highlighted by psychological researchers Nansook Park, Michael Barton, and Jace Pillay:

> [T]he first step in cultivating character strengths is to legitimize a strengths vocabulary in whatever settings people happen to be. Here the VIA Project can be extremely helpful by providing the words with which we can describe our own strengths and those of others, strengths that already exist, and strengths that we want to build. With a strengths vocabulary in place, one needs to start using these words often enough so they become a natural part of everyday language.[45]

Park, Barton, and Pillay are correct to say that describing human strengths requires a complex vocabulary. Ironically, their call for a more adequate vocabulary is evidence that the nuanced anthropological categories of previous generations are no longer familiar. Sometimes. it is valuable to cast a net broadly: to use a single word or category that captures many meanings. However, in the current discussion

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[44] See Patricia Bruininks and Bertram F. Malle, "Distinguishing Hope from Optimism and Related Affective States," *Motivation and Emotion* 29, no. 4 (2005): 327-355 and *The Oxford Handbook of Hope*, ed. Matthew W. Gallagher and Shane J. Lopez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3-81.

[45] Park, Barton, and Pillay, "Strengths of Character," 92. "VIA Project" refers to ongoing work studying the twenty-four character strengths listed in *Character Strengths and Virtues*.

of emotions the opposite is true. More attention to vocabulary and distinctions, perhaps even the retrieval of older anthropological categories, could be tremendously helpful for describing hope within and across disciplines.

CONCLUSION

What is this thing, hope, that is described in so many ways? To a certain extent the lack of agreement about hope highlights weaknesses of the various theories and the fact that psychological research on hope is in its early stages. However, it also reflects the richness of hope in human experience and the difficulty of capturing it in a succinct definition.

One question that has come out clearly in this comparison is whether hope always has a clear object. Snyder thinks that it does, and many researchers have followed his lead in equating hope with goal-oriented thinking. Marcel disagrees, and he also is not alone. Hope is associated with patient resilience that can be present without focused goals. This side of hope is captured better by Marcel than by Snyder and other psychologists who emphasize confidence and effective strategies.

Hope is individual, relational and communal. It is a quality found in individuals that flourishes with good relationships and falters without them. It can also be a characteristic of a group, setting the tone for their common vision and shaping each member. The various theories examined in this paper offer a mix of ideas about the nature of hope and how it is generated. The idea of hope as an individual characteristic is the best represented, especially in psychology, but the relational and communal aspects are also important. If hope is a truly relational character trait, or if it is supported in a significant way by relationships, then theories that do not account for relationality will not accurately describe hope. Part of the challenge for both disciplines is to articulate the relational and social character of hope more clearly.

In order for the insights about hope offered in theology and psychology to be seen clearly and shared, it is necessary to have a more precise vocabulary, which will in turn lead to discussion of intellect, will, emotion, desires, and other aspects of the human person. Greater clarity, or at least sustained discussion, on those topics may shed new light on ideas of hope. Most importantly, such discussions can make theology and psychology, separately and together, more able to assist people who seek hope. M