

# Hope from Despair\*

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THE public discourse on climate change has long centred around hope-based narratives pushed by both the media and mainstream environmentalist agents from Greenpeace and WWF to Bill Gates and Al Gore.<sup>1</sup> The promises of scientific and technological advance in particular, they argue, give us reason to be hopeful that it is in our hands to halt the incipient climate catastrophe. We just need to roll up our sleeves and get on with it.

In the face of humanity's apparent inability—on display most recently at COP26 in Glasgow—to adopt the 'rapid and far-reaching changes in all aspects of society' required to at least keep average global temperature increases below 1.5°C,<sup>2</sup> this narrative has come under pressure. More radical climate activists make the case for an affective shift away from hope in the face of global warming towards darker attitudes such as anger, panic, or fear, or, most surprisingly perhaps, despair. The activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR) has arguably been the most vocal in their call for hope to 'die'.<sup>3</sup> Hope, they worry, obscures the truth about global warming as the single largest existential threat to the planet and hampers the kind of radical action that would be required at least to rein in its consequences. 'In facing our climate predicament', they argue, 'there is no way to escape despair'.<sup>4</sup>

Reactions have been mixed, both from within and beyond the climate movement. While some fellow activists express enthusiasm about an explicit

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<sup>1</sup>Most recently, see for instance Gates 2021.

<sup>2</sup>IPCC 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Greta Thunberg (2019) famously encapsulated this sentiment in her Davos speech: 'I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act.'

<sup>4</sup>Extinction Rebellion 2019, p. 13. The notion of 'climate despair' has been used at least as far back as Pooley 2010, but has only recently gained prominence.

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invocation of despair,<sup>5</sup> others worry about its potentially stifling and depoliticizing effects on the public. According to the American scientist Michael Mann, the rhetoric of despair ‘is in many ways as pernicious as outright climate change denial, for it leads us down the same path of inaction’;<sup>6</sup> writer and activist George Monbiot even considers succumbing to despair to be a moral failure.<sup>7</sup> In the media, XR are frequently portrayed as the ‘eccentric and dangerous merchants of despair’.<sup>8</sup>

This discursive backlash chimes with a philosophical scepticism about despair that is both widespread and long-standing. According to Euripides’ *Amphitryon*, despair is the ‘mark of a worthless man’;<sup>9</sup> Aquinas considers it ‘the greatest of sins’;<sup>10</sup> Kant’s greatest worry is that we might ‘succumb to despair’ in the face of moral obligation;<sup>11</sup> Charles Peirce equates despair with insanity.<sup>12</sup> And contemporary philosophers juxtapose celebratory accounts of hope as a motivation and source of grit with a view of despair as unproductive, impotent, or nihilistic. Despairing agents, they argue, should either give up on the relevant end or cultivate an attitude, such as hope, that strengthens their resolve rather than undermining it.<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, political philosophers tend to agree that ‘a hopeful politics, one based upon a vision of generalized global prosperity and sustainability, best addresses the problems of climate change’.<sup>14</sup>

The aim of this article is to withstand this wholehearted rejection of despair in philosophical and public discourse alike. I shall argue that a specific form of despair that I call *episodic* has an important role to play in our practical and particularly in our political lives.<sup>15</sup> In guarding against certain pitfalls of false hope, episodic despair can help us to hope (and ultimately act) well. Against this background, I propose to understand XR activists not as asking us to reject or give up hope, but as aspiring to a more robust and realistic kind of hope, which *arises from* despair.

Before I can make good on this idea, some conceptual ground-clearing is in order. I start by defining episodic despair in contrast, yet closely related, to hope (Section I). An agent who experiences episodic despair is unable to imaginatively close the gap between themselves and a desired future, such that the unlikeliness of the outcome, rather than its possibility, is salient. In Section II, I argue that rational or justified hope requires a complex trade-off between various epistemic

<sup>5</sup>Hine 2019, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Mann 2017.

<sup>7</sup>Monbiot 2019.

<sup>8</sup>Harris 2020.

<sup>9</sup>Euripides, *Heracles*, 105–6, cited in Cairns 2020.

<sup>10</sup>Aquinas 1923, Qu. 20, Art. 3.

<sup>11</sup>Kant 1996, 8: 309.

<sup>12</sup>Peirce 1992, p. 405.

<sup>13</sup>E.g., Han-Pile and Stern forthcoming.

<sup>14</sup>Moellendorf 2021a, p. xxi.

<sup>15</sup>Hope itself has only recently attracted the attention of political philosophers (e.g., Howard 2021; Stockdale 2021). For an overview, see Blöser et al. 2020.

and practical considerations that is often difficult to come by precisely from within a hopeful stance. There is thus an inherent risk that hope will degenerate into wishful thinking, complacency, or fixation. In Section III, I draw on claims and statements from XR members (as well as fellow radical climate activists) in order to illustrate how episodic despair can guard against these dangers. As a deliberative corrective, episodic despair can help us to realistically assess the empirical circumstances (III.A), to act in courageous and creative ways (III.B), and to critically reflect on our ends and available alternatives (III.C). However, despair that persists rather than resulting in new and different kinds of hope is fatal, too (Section IV): in destroying our basic underlying sense that the future is open to our intervention (our *fundamental hope*), it undermines practical agency as such. Hence we should be careful not to play hope and despair off against each other.

## I. HOPE AND DESPAIR

Despair has not received much attention in Western philosophy, at least within the broadly analytic tradition; its details therefore remain underexplored.<sup>16</sup> Wherever mentioned, it is scolded and rejected. In the present section, I will take my cue from the recently burgeoning debates about the nature of hope in order to get a grip on that to which it is usually thought to be the antidote: despair.

Given the multifaceted role hope plays in our lives, it is hardly surprising that philosophers struggle to provide a unified definition of the phenomenon. According to the so-called ‘orthodox definition’,<sup>17</sup> hope is a compound state that combines a desire that  $p$  with a belief, or at least a presupposition, that  $p$  is possible but not certain.<sup>18</sup> Hope’s cognitive element distinguishes it from modally less constrained wishes on the one hand (I can arguably wish, though not hope, to fly away simply by flapping my arms) and more confident expectations on the other. Its conative element captures the fact that a hoping person takes a pro-attitude towards the hoped-for object.

It may well be the case that some of our more superficial and mundane hopes can be defined along these lines: for instance, my hope that there will be apple pie for dessert or that the train will arrive on time. However, the orthodox definition arguably cannot account for hope in its most complete or paradigmatic form, sometimes referred to as ‘substantial hope’,<sup>19</sup> where the stakes are high, but the probability is low: for instance, my hope for recovery from a serious illness or to have a successful career in academia. These hopes command our attention, thus

<sup>16</sup>Milona 2020, p. 100. Some exceptions are Steinbock 2007; Govier 2011; Ratcliffe 2013; Calhoun 2018.

<sup>17</sup>Martin 2014, p. 211; originally see Downie 1963.

<sup>18</sup>On the question of whether hope requires belief in possibility, or rather a lack of belief in impossibility, see Chignell 2022, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>Pettit 2004, pp. 157–9; see also Calhoun 2018, pp. 84–9; and Martin 2014, p. 20, who refers to this as ‘hope against hope’.

playing a particularly prominent role in structuring and shaping our thoughts and actions, in ways that go beyond the mere belief-desire combination.

This problem comes to the fore most clearly in the orthodox definition's inability to distinguish between hope and despair. Notice that two people who equally desire an outcome and believe in its possibility may nonetheless differ with regard to their affective outlook. Take Luc Bovens's by-now iconic example (based on Frank Darabont's film *The Shawshank Redemption*) of Andy and Red, two prisoners serving a life sentence for murder.<sup>20</sup> They both desire to be free and believe that there is a (small) chance they will be able to escape. Yet, while Andy hopes to get out, Red despairs of the low odds.

Hence much of the recent debate has focused on identifying a third component (in addition to belief and desire) that would allow us to distinguish hope from despair. Instead of committing to one specific among the countless proposals,<sup>21</sup> I would like to crystallize what I take to be the shared idea underlying most of them: that hopeful and despairing agents differ in the way they relate to, 'attend to',<sup>22</sup> or 'perceive'<sup>23</sup> the possibility of the desired outcome. The latter looks at the situation and says, 'I grant you it is possible, but the chance is *only* one in a thousand!', while the former says, 'I grant you the chance is only one in a thousand, but *it is possible!*'.<sup>24</sup> It seems that for the hopeful agent the possibility of the desired outcome is salient or in the foreground, rather than its unlikelihood.

The imagination appears to play a crucial role in explaining what accounts for this *gestalt shift*.<sup>25</sup> According to Bovens, for instance, in hoping we 'mentally image' what it would be like if the desired state of the world were to materialize.<sup>26</sup> Cheshire Calhoun takes hope to include a 'phenomenological idea of the determinate future whose content includes success', that is, 'we previsualize a particular future in our imagination'.<sup>27</sup> Most explicitly, perhaps, Jack Kwong argues that a hopeful person is able, by exercising her creativity and imagination, to see (that is, to visualize in her mind) a way in which the desired outcome can come about, and she sees the way as a genuine possibility.<sup>28</sup>

This framework allows us to define despair in contrast to this particular kind of (substantial) hope. Like the hopeful agent, the despairing agent experiences a gap between themselves and the desired outcome. In contrast, however, they cannot mentally close this gap by visualizing what it would be

<sup>20</sup>Bovens 1999, pp. 668–9.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.; Pettit 2004; Meirav 2009; Martin 2014; Kwong 2019, to name a few.

<sup>22</sup>Chignell 2022.

<sup>23</sup>Stockdale 2021, pp. 16–20.

<sup>24</sup>Meirav 2009, pp. 222–3.

<sup>25</sup>Martin 2014, p. 44.

<sup>26</sup>Bovens 1999, p. 674.

<sup>27</sup>Calhoun 2018, p. 72.

<sup>28</sup>Kwong 2018. Notice that, in contrast to these authors, the involvement of the imagination is not *constitutive* of hope on my account. Hope requires the possibility of an outcome to be in the foreground; whether this is the case is typically (though not necessarily) a matter of the imagination.

like or how we might get there. This also helps us understand why, in cases where the attainment of the hoped-for object depends on our own contribution (which I will primarily be concerned with),<sup>29</sup> hope helps sustain our resolve or what is now often called ‘grit’,<sup>30</sup> while despair potentially undermines it. The hopeful agent’s ability to imaginatively inhabit the desired future or project themselves into it stabilizes and structures their connection to that outcome. By contrast, the agent who despairs because they cannot see a way forward is disposed to give up on it.

In a specific sense, I conceive of hope and despair not just as mutually exclusive antagonists,<sup>31</sup> but also as jointly exhaustive. For in the kind of high-stakes scenarios I have in mind, agents necessarily attend to the desire in *some* way—mental or affective abstention is not an option. In other words, the circumstances are such that we conceive of a desired outcome either from the perspective of its possibility or its unlikelihood. This will be important to keep in mind as I develop the idea that despair is not just a tonic against false hope, but (thereby) helps us to cultivate warranted hope.

I should add that I take myself to have defined a particular kind of despair, which I call *episodic*. I do so primarily to demarcate it from what I refer to (and discuss in more detail in Section IV) as *fundamental despair*: a general state of hopelessness, where all sense of agency is lost and the future in general is conceived as already determined. Along these lines, Anthony Steinbock describes despair as an ‘utter loss of any ground of hope’, as the ‘experience of abandonment as ultimate and decisive’.<sup>32</sup> Episodic despair differs not only in that it is propositional or intentional—we despair *over* or *of* something—but it also leaves open the possibility of regaining or redirecting our hope at any point. For, while we cannot experience hope and despair at the same time, the two are closely related, differing only in how the agent relates to a desired yet unlikely outcome. Indeed, agents often find themselves oscillating between the two—depending on whether, at any one moment, the possibility or the unlikelihood is in the foreground.

Notice also that *episodic despair* differs from what I call *resignative despair*: that is, a desire for a state of affairs combined with the belief that it is *impossible*. This notion is widespread in discussions of despair. According to Han-Pile and Stern, for instance, ‘the despairing person keeps desiring the good but without being able to act to bring it about because they think it is unobtainable, or that it

<sup>29</sup>Calhoun (2018, p. 6) refers to this as ‘practical hope’.

<sup>30</sup>Rioux forthcoming.

<sup>31</sup>While hope rules out despair, it can go along with other emotions such as fear (Stockdale 2019), as well as attitudes such as pessimism. If we are pessimistic about a desired outcome, we expect it not to come about: i.e., we consider its likelihood to be  $<.5$  (e.g. Milona 2019, p. 724). Hence one can be pessimistic yet hold out hope (given that possibility is in the foreground). As a corollary, pessimism cannot tame the dangers of hope that I discuss below. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to clarify.

<sup>32</sup>Steinbock 2007, pp. 446–7.

cannot obtain on its own'.<sup>33</sup> Despair, on this view, is experienced as a kind of painful longing for the impossible that goes along with a sense of frustration and inner conflict. This attitude, they quite plausibly argue, is irrational; if I was hoping to have sea bass at my favourite restaurant, but it turns out there were none at the market today, I should (as a matter of rational consistency) not despair, but simply order something else.<sup>34</sup> Episodic despair differs from resignative despair in that it retains a belief in possibility, such that it is not necessarily irrational. That, of course, leaves open the question what, if any, value it has for our practical lives. To answer this question, I turn from the nature of hope to its norms.

## II. HOPING WELL

I have provided a definition of *episodic despair* as the antonym of (substantial) hope. In contrast to the hopeful agent, the despairing agent is presently unable to imaginatively close the gap between themselves and the hoped-for future, such that its unlikelihood is in the foreground rather than its possibility. My claim in the remainder of this article will be that this kind of despair can help us to hope well: that is, to cultivate rational or justified hope by guarding against certain dangers of false hope.<sup>35</sup>

To prepare the ground for this argument, I first need to explain what it means to *hope well*. To start with, it is not at all obvious that hope is the kind of mental state that is responsive to reasons and thus open to rational assessment in the first place. In fact, in the history of philosophy, hope has often been conceived as a passion or affect and hence as something fundamentally noncognitive. At this point, suffice it to point out that our communicative practices around hope are highly evaluative: we ask each other to give reasons for our hope, we laud each other for 'courageous' or 'resilient' hopes, we criticize 'careless' or 'empty' hopes.<sup>36</sup> Notice that to say that we can deliberate about the justification or rationality of hope does not commit us to say that we can will ourselves to have or give up hope in every or even most circumstances.<sup>37</sup> Hope shares this feature with emotions such as anger,<sup>38</sup> which can be more or less fitting or apt independently of whether they are under our direct voluntary control.

In investigating the norms of hope, we can take our cue from the observation made in the preceding section that hope, in representing its object as possible and

<sup>33</sup>Han-Pile and Stern forthcoming. See also Kretz 2013; Vice 2019.

<sup>34</sup>Han-Pile and Stern forthcoming.

<sup>35</sup>Following McCormick (2017, p. 131), I use these terms interchangeably, capturing the difference between hoping well and hoping badly.

<sup>36</sup>Rioux 2021; see also McCormick 2017, p. 131.

<sup>37</sup>Martin (2014, p. 67) does uphold that in conceptualizing a mental state as responsive to reasons we thereby commit ourselves to the view that 'it is possible for a person ... to adopt, relinquish, revise, or maintain the state ... as a direct result of deliberation about the reasons for doing so'.

<sup>38</sup>See Srinivasan 2018, p. 127 n. 19.

desirable, contains both cognitive and conative elements. From this it follows that hope is subject to both epistemic and practical norms. The former concern the belief component: for hope to be epistemically rational or justified, we must be justified in believing that the desired outcome is neither impossible nor certain. I would like to suggest that beyond that, though, there is no single epistemic threshold for hope. That is to say, it is not per se irrational or misplaced to hope for outcomes that are highly unlikely.<sup>39</sup> While evidence indicating that the desired outcome may be out of reach gives us *a* reason against hope, we may still have warrant to hope for it all things considered—for instance, because we are highly invested in it,<sup>40</sup> muster little mental energy, or if there are simply no available alternatives. These are scenarios where the opportunity costs of hoping tend to be low.

Hence, what matters from an epistemic perspective is that a hope is based on a *justified* probability assessment.<sup>41</sup> For instance, prisoner Andy (see above) is epistemically justified in hoping to escape as long as his belief about the odds of succeeding is justified given the available evidence. Darrel Moellendorf calls this a *pragmatic approach* to the epistemic standards of hope, according to which ‘different hopes might be warranted under different factual and evidential scenarios depending on the circumstances, and those circumstances might depend on some sort of pragmatic, cost/benefit, calculation regarding hoping’.<sup>42</sup>

In the practical domain, we have to distinguish between moral and strategic norms. On the one hand, given that hope commits us to the goodness of its object, we can ask whether it is rational or justified given the demands of morality (whatever those are taken to be). That is to say, we should not hope for what is bad or immoral. Adapting an example from Luc Bovens, a car-racing enthusiast with a secret desire to witness an accident should not hope for this to happen: that is (on Bovens’s specific account of what it is to hope), ‘devot[e] much mental energy to what it would be like if such and such accident were to occur ... the stories I would be able to tell my friends, etc.’.<sup>43</sup>

When it comes to strategic norms, on the other hand, we have to further distinguish two kinds of questions. First, we can ask whether hope makes the attainment of a particular (permissible) desire more likely. Ideally, hope motivates us to sustain our pursuits in difficult circumstances where the prospects of success are dim.<sup>44</sup> Yet, this presupposes an accurate understanding of the relation between our own contribution and external circumstances such as luck, environmental conditions, or the agency of other people. Notice that

<sup>39</sup>McFall 1991; Stockdale 2017, p. 376 n. 2.

<sup>40</sup>Chignell (2018) and McCormick (2017) disagree as to whether the demand for evidential support increases or lessens when it comes to particularly important, life-structuring hopes.

<sup>41</sup>Bovens 1999, pp. 678–80; Stockdale 2021, p. 53.

<sup>42</sup>Moellendorf 2021b, pp. 6–7.

<sup>43</sup>Bovens 1999, p. 679.

<sup>44</sup>E.g., Pettit 2004; Chignell 2018.

hope (of the *practical* kind I am interested in) is characterized by a distinct combination of agency and vulnerability. While success depends on my contribution, it is not fully within my hands: if I could simply act so as to bring about the desired outcome, I would not need to hope. In hoping, that is to say, we ‘actively engag[e] with our own current limitations in affecting the future we want to inhabit’.<sup>45</sup> Justified hope successfully navigates this tension, neither overestimating our own power nor overly relying on factors beyond our control.

However, we cannot leave it there. Importantly, a second set of strategic norms concerns the conduciveness of a particular hope to our (permissible) ends more generally; this is a matter not of *securing*, but rather of *selecting* our ends. In this context, it is particularly important to keep in mind that hope has opportunity costs. As we invest mental energy in a particular object, we potentially forgo or lose sight of alternative paths. For instance, ‘imagine a political activist who might reject attainable, modest, but real reforms because these would take away from planning and building support for some even better and more thoroughgoing, but far less likely, change’.<sup>46</sup> For a hope to be justified in this respect, its benefits must outweigh the opportunity costs.<sup>47</sup> In order to make this assessment and remain aware of ‘what is lost’ when we hope for a given object, we need to constantly monitor the wider practical landscape including any available alternatives.

To sum up, a hope is justified if (1) it is based on an accurate probability estimate, (2) helps us realize a (permissible) end, and (3) advances our (permissible) ends more generally. Hoping well, that is to say, requires a constant triangulation between ourselves, our ends, and the wider epistemic and practical circumstances. Now, I want to suggest that, somewhat paradoxically, this trade-off is particularly difficult to come by from within a hopeful stance itself. For hope is essentially a way of focusing on or zooming in on (the possibility of) a particular outcome—of blinding out, by way of the imagination, detrimental evidence and alternative paths. Hoping well, however, requires precisely the ability to zoom out and align our ends with various epistemic and practical considerations. This is why there is an inherent risk for hope to degenerate into *false* hope: hopeful agents may be disposed to wrongly estimate the likeliness of the outcome, to overly rely on external factors, or to be blind to alternative, more realistic goals. As I hope to show in the next section, episodic despair can thus function as a corrective on hope that guards against these dangers.

<sup>45</sup>McGeer 2004, p. 104.

<sup>46</sup>Moellendorf 2021b, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup>An anonymous referee has suggested to me that there may be further, ‘affective’, opportunity costs, for hope may rule out incompatible attitudes or emotions. Here, I focus on the strategic opportunity costs that concern the likelihood of attaining an end we have set for ourselves.



### III. DESPAIR AGAINST (FALSE) HOPE

In conjunction, my claims in Sections I (concerning the nature of hope) and II (concerning the norms of hope) yield a predicament: hope itself may complicate the trade-off between various epistemic and practical considerations that is needed for justified or rational hope. In this section, I propose to read XR's call for despair as responding to this predicament. Despair can guard against wishful thinking, complacency, and fixation—three forms or expressions of false hope, which they diagnose in our relation to the climate crisis. Ultimately, it can help us to hope well.

#### A. DESPAIR AGAINST WISHFUL THINKING

One of XR's central claims is that we must finally 'tell the truth!'<sup>48</sup> about climate change. Activists worry that we underestimate the magnitude of the problem and, as a consequence, overestimate the prospects of solving it. According to XR founder Roger Hallam,

one of the main problems we have experienced with climate change and environmental activism is that people rarely seem to talk about empirical reality (i.e. the latest science) and thus aren't even aware of how desperate the situation actually is.<sup>49</sup>

What he alludes to is a particular form of climate denial; not the form that denies the basic geophysical facts about anthropogenic global warming, but a more widespread yet largely unconscious kind of climate denial that refuses to accept or process just how dire the situation really is. In other words, we must 'come into knowing' on a much deeper and more serious level.<sup>50</sup> While the public may be craving reasons to be hopeful or even optimistic about climate change,<sup>51</sup> we must get them to 'stop pretending'<sup>52</sup> and to accept that we are currently headed for mass extinction.

Arguably, the obvious way to read these claims would be as saying that despair rather than hope is appropriate given the epistemic circumstances—if we properly attended to the evidence, we would despair over the prospect of averting climate change. In so doing, we simply acknowledge the facts. As activist Derrick Jensen puts it, 'despair is an entirely appropriate response to a desperate situation'.<sup>53</sup> However, this claim would sit uncomfortably with my remarks above about the epistemic norms of hope. Adverse evidence surely makes it more difficult, as a matter of moral psychology, to sustain our hope, simply because the gap between ourselves and the desired outcome that we have to imaginatively close is bigger. Yet I denied that there is a single

<sup>48</sup>See Extinction Rebellion 2021a.

<sup>49</sup>Hallam 2019, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup>Extinction Rebellion 2019, p. 61.

<sup>51</sup>E.g., Solnit 2021.

<sup>52</sup>Hine 2019; see also Franzen 2019.

<sup>53</sup>Jensen 2006, p. 5.

determinate epistemic threshold where agents *should* despair over an outcome rather than hope for it. What matters is that the belief contained in our hope appropriately reflects the relevant facts.

Hence I would like to suggest an alternative take on this aspect of XR's case for despair, namely that hope *itself* can prevent us from seeing the evidence clearly. A hope-based discourse, according to this argument, obscures the truth about climate change because it shades how dire the situation really is. This claim is at odds with the widespread view, put forward for instance by Nancy Snow,<sup>54</sup> that hope is an epistemic virtue that facilitates intellectual flourishing in a variety of ways. According to Snow, hope can be a source of motivation to pursue an intellectual goal in the first place (for example, acquiring new knowledge about the world), and it can equip us with the kinds of resilience, perseverance, flexibility, and openness that are essential to the achievement of our intellectual goals. By contrast, the agent who lacks a hopeful disposition may resign her enquiry too quickly and despair of the possibility of understanding.

XR, I take it, highlight that there is also a darker side to the epistemic effects of hope. While Snow may be right that, in some instances, hope helps us to recognize or represent the world as it is, in other cases it can be an epistemic vice that hinders us in doing so. As Aaron Cobb argues, 'hope can also create dispositions that threaten the agent's capacity to engage in responsible inquiry', for instance because 'the hopeful agent ... may ignore or fail to attend to evidence indicating that the desired outcome is impossible'.<sup>55</sup> Why is this so? According to Luc Bovens, the imaginative activity involved in hoping is the primary culprit.<sup>56</sup> Specifically, our visualization of a successful future may, as it were, 'bleed into' our perception of reality, thus obfuscating a distinction that is in turn critical for our ability to form beliefs on the basis of the evidence. This explains why hopeful agents may display an epistemic bias, in the sense that they end up being more confident about the desired outcome than they have epistemic reason to be. Their hope then turns into wishful thinking (if they simply raise the probability assessment beyond what is warranted) or even ungrounded optimism (if they mistakenly conclude that the outcome is probable rather than just possible).<sup>57</sup>

By contrast, the despairing agent does not close the gap between themselves and the desired outcome in this way. In despairing, recall, we see a desired future from a different perspective: the perspective of unlikeliness rather than possibility. Given that the despairing agent does not face the predicament of blurred lines between reality and imagination, they are able to look at the evidence in a more sober and less rose-tinted way—their despair makes them more attuned to the actual circumstances. A hope formed on the basis of such an epistemic assessment would consequently be more robust and realistic. In the prisoners'

<sup>54</sup> Snow 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Cobb 2015, p. 270.

<sup>56</sup> Bovens 1999, p. 678.

<sup>57</sup> On the difference between hope and optimism in particular, see Eagleton 2015.

example above, Red's despair may actually make him more attuned to the risks of a possible escape (such as the challenge of surmounting the prison's security regime). He may thus end up with a more realistic assessment of the prospects than his hopeful friend, an assessment on the basis of which he would be able to form a hope that is epistemically justified.

Theodor W. Adorno instructively worries about precisely these epistemic pitfalls of hope, in a very different context. Writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Adorno is concerned that hope is essentially a psychological coping mechanism for people to come to terms with the traumatic events they have experienced. Hope is a sentiment that may fulfil people's 'need for metaphysical solace',<sup>58</sup> yet it prevents them from really 'working through' [*aufarbeiten*] the past—that is, from facing up to the radically evil character of the modern world. In Adorno's view, this is (also) an epistemic problem: the 'truth content' of any beliefs people acquire because they have been manipulated to 'think positively' is 'hopelessly undermined' and 'utterly destroyed'.<sup>59</sup> By contrast, if we give space to despair, we will understand the full force of our predicament, so that a new and more authentic form of hope can arise. We must first undergo the experience of 'thinking the last extreme of horror', Adorno argues, before we can 'gain mastery over it';<sup>60</sup> or, as Timo Jütten puts it, 'hope comes after despair has been worked through'.<sup>61</sup> In this vein, several among the 25 XR activists interviewed for a study stated that honesty about the facts of climate change is crucial precisely because it 'can help us to move through despair to a new sense of hope'.<sup>62</sup>

## B. DESPAIR AGAINST COMPLACENCY

According to XR activists, it is not enough to tell the truth, we must 'tell the truth and act as if the truth is real'.<sup>63</sup> This call to immediate and radical action is central to their agenda, and hope is identified as the primary culprit of what they conceive to be widespread passivity in the face of climate change. XR's slogan 'hope dies, action begins', displayed across their banners and placards, speaks to the suspicion that it is hope which stands in the way of a more effective fight against global warming. As environmental activist Derrick Jensen puts it,

there is the false hope that suddenly somehow the system may inexplicably change. Or technology will save us. Or the Great Mother. Or beings from Alpha Centauri. Or Jesus Christ. Or Santa Claus. All of these false hopes lead to inaction, or at least to ineffectiveness.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Jütten 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Adorno 2000, pp. 194–5.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>61</sup> Jütten 2019, p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> Stuart 2020, p. 497.

<sup>63</sup> Hallam 2019, p. 20.

<sup>64</sup> Jensen 2006.

This quote highlights that hope is in fact suspected of playing an ideological role in environmental discourse. People are told to stay put and rely on the efforts of mainstream institutions to take the relevant steps, or on technological advances (from renewable energy and electromobility to carbon capture and even geo-engineering) to miraculously solve the problem. According to Jensen, hope ‘serves the needs of those in power as surely as belief in a distant heaven; [it] is really nothing more than a secular way of keeping us in line’.<sup>65</sup>

As Katie Stockdale has pointed out,<sup>66</sup> that hope keeps us chained to a system that has proven to fail us is a line of critique familiar also from discourses around racial injustice in the US. There, a growing number of authors argues that a politics of hope ultimately leads the oppressed to remain in and affirm the structures that keep them in their predicament.<sup>67</sup> By placing their hope in charismatic figures such as Barack Obama who promise (and appear to themselves embody) incremental progress towards a ‘postracial era’, people of colour are distracted from the hard realities they continue to face in the contemporary US and are more likely to refrain from the radical kind of action that would actually be required to bring about racial justice. The charge is that hope is manufactured by the privileged and powerful in order to keep oppressed groups in their place.

I take it that these worries pick up on another expression of false hope, complacency. Hopeful agents, the argument goes, are often led to lean back and hand their destiny over to other forces. Victoria McGeer calls this ‘wishful hope’: that is, the ‘failure to take on the full responsibilities of agency and hence to remain overreliant on external powers to realize one’s hopes’.<sup>68</sup> A wishful hoper, on this view, passively awaits, rather than working towards, the fulfilment of their desires. As indicated in the preceding section, underlying is an imbalance in, or misconstrual of, the relation between our own agency and the external circumstances on which we depend. While complacency is a form of practical irrationality, it is, of course, closely linked to the epistemic irrationality just discussed. It is precisely because they have a bias towards seeing external factors as working in their favour that hopeful agents feel they can postpone or omit their own contribution.

We have to understand XR’s case for ‘embracing despair ... and channelling it into action’ against this background.<sup>69</sup> An unadorned grasp of the evidence—an awareness of how dire the situation really is—should do away with the temptation to lean back and rely on things working out irrespective of our own efforts. On Jensen’s view, people tend to cling to hope precisely because ‘they fear that if they allow themselves to perceive how desperate things are, they may be forced to do something about it’.<sup>70</sup> The thought is that despair effectively recalibrates the

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Stockdale 2021, pp. 33, 55.

<sup>67</sup> E.g., Teasley and Ikard 2010; Stockdale 2021, p. 55.

<sup>68</sup> McGeer 2004, p. 110. See also Stockdale 2021, p. 79.

<sup>69</sup> Westwell and Bunting 2020 p. 547.

<sup>70</sup> Jensen 2006.

relation between that which is and that which is not in our control, making it much less likely that people hand over their destiny rather than taking the initiative. In other words, it conveys a sense of urgency that hope sometimes lacks. To return to our earlier example, while Andy's hope may lead him to rely on his accomplices outside the prison to organize his escape, Red (who despairs) is likely to have a more sober grasp of what is needed in terms of his own contribution.

Going a step further, I would like to suggest that despair not only activates our disposition to act in the first place, it can also change the way we act. It is often said that hope fosters or cultivates creativity.<sup>71</sup> I have no intention of denying that. Recall, however, that the hopeful agent, unlike the despairing agent, can already see a way forward from where they are to the desired future. It is the latter, hence, who is forced to come up with and try out new or unconventional paths—at times to act haphazardly—in a way the former is not. Moving on unfamiliar terrain like this and without the goal firmly in view requires not only creativity, but also courage.

This is nicely illustrated in Jonathan Lear's discussion of Plenty Coups, chief of the Crow Nation, who leads his tribe through a period of cultural devastation brought about by colonialism.<sup>72</sup> The Crow are confronted with a profound sense of disorientation as they are moved to a reservation and forced to give up their traditional way of life, which revolved around hunting and warfare. They essentially lose an entire system of meanings that had made sense of all their activities, such that 'after the white man came, nothing happened'.<sup>73</sup> Without explicit reference to the notion, Lear describes the Crow as in a state of despair, unable to imagine or see a way forward to living a good life in the future.

For Plenty Coup to lead his tribe through this dire scenario, he needs courage and creativity. Courage allows him 'to make decisions in radically new historical circumstances',<sup>74</sup> that is, without a clear trajectory ahead. And, through creativity and 'imaginative excellence', he is able to leave the old Crow ways behind and make a series of 'canny decisions and acts' that allow the Crow to 'hold onto their land, and ... create a space in which traditional Crow values can be preserved in memory, transmitted to a new generation, and, one hopes, renewed in a new historical era'.<sup>75</sup> This shows that agents who despair rather than hoping are sometimes disposed not only to act more decisively and take their destiny into their own hands, but to do so in unconventional and unexpected ways.

<sup>71</sup> E.g. Snow 2013, p. 163.

<sup>72</sup> Lear 2006.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

I take it that XR's distinct form of activism can be interpreted along similar lines. They reject any reliance on established and mainstream institutions both within government and civil society. 'Conventional approaches of voting, lobbying, petitions and protest', they argue, 'have failed because powerful political and economic interests prevent change'.<sup>76</sup> Instead, they opt for more contentious, unconventional, and disruptive forms of agency. Nonviolent civil disobedience, in particular the blockage of public infrastructure with the aim of seeking mass arrests, is a central element in XR's repertoire.<sup>77</sup> Again, though, the ultimate goal is not to play hope and despair off against each other. Instead, despair is intended as an antidote to *false* hope. Ultimately, hope is to be regained by finding a way forward where we currently do not see one. Despair, according to XR, 'allows a new space for a new imagination to flower in the face of incipient tragedy, a new hope and dignity for human agents'.<sup>78</sup>

### C. DESPAIR AGAINST FIXATION

A third central claim of XR is that we should acknowledge that the climate catastrophe is not a hypothetical scenario somewhere in the future, but that it is already ongoing. On their view, we have already entered 'a period of abrupt climate breakdown' and find ourselves 'in the midst of a mass extinction of our own making'.<sup>79</sup> Hence, rather than insisting that global warming can be averted, we must acknowledge and come to terms with what has already been lost. The thought is that this acknowledgement has a liberating effect: we can give up on the fight that is not winnable and focus instead on salvaging what remains. 'Once we stop pretending that the impossible can happen', that is to say, 'we are released to think seriously about the future'.<sup>80</sup> After all, the fight against climate change is not an all-or-nothing matter. David Wallace-Wells, for instance, highlights that while a non-warming future is no longer possible, it remains an open question just how bad its consequences will be. Both the planet and the way we live on it will unavoidably be transformed, yet it remains in our hands how profoundly so.<sup>81</sup> Starting from an even bleaker diagnosis, author Jonathan Franzen writes in a much-noticed *New Yorker* article that the war on climate change may have been lost, yet we can still do our best to adapt to it and devote more attention to what we personally value.<sup>82</sup>

This way of framing the problem can be situated in a wider 'postapocalyptic' movement.<sup>83</sup> For a long time, climate activists were driven by visions of a

<sup>76</sup> See Extinction Rebellion 2021b.

<sup>77</sup> Underlying this is Hallam's distinct theory of change, according to which 'mass breaking of the law through nonviolent civil disobedience' is 'the most successful model for regime change'; Hallam 2019, pp. 6–7.

<sup>78</sup> Extinction Rebellion 2019, p. 164.

<sup>79</sup> Extinction Rebellion 2021c.

<sup>80</sup> Kingsnorth 2010.

<sup>81</sup> Wallace-Wells 2017.

<sup>82</sup> Franzen 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Swyngedouw 2013, p. 15.

(counterfactual) future disaster; the environmental apocalypse was a future *to come* if we continue as before. Accordingly, the prevalent narrative was that we must act before it is too late; activists mobilized on the basis of the idea that we can still change course because the future is not yet settled. Postapocalyptic discourse, by contrast, starts from the acceptance that the catastrophe is already ongoing and we must come to terms with it. Hence, activism defines itself as responding to a loss that is occurring or has already occurred rather than as averting it.

Arguably, what prevents us from this kind of reorientation is a third danger of false hope: fixation—the blind pursuit of a particular goal to the detriment of alternatives. In hoping, recall, we mentally focus on the possibility of a particular outcome and thereby commit ourselves and our energy to it. In so doing, however, we may be led to lose sight of the wider practical landscape, including more realistic alternatives. Even if hope makes it more likely that we bring about a particular given end, it is an open question as to whether our practical ends as a whole are thereby served. From this perspective, resilience is not always desirable; sometimes it is vital instead to critically reflect on our ends and potentially redirect our agency.<sup>84</sup>

This is where despair comes in. For it disposes us to question our very investment in a given end and, if we come to conclude that alternative paths are more conducive to our overall priorities, redirect our hope accordingly.<sup>85</sup> Hence, it is precisely that which despair is usually charged with—that it disposes us to give up on an unlikely end—which may turn out to be a virtue. In distancing us from our goals and sharpening our eye for more realistic alternatives, despair equips us with a kind of mental and thus practical flexibility that hope sometimes lacks. In the prisoners' case, Red (who despairs) may end up turning away from the very idea of a jailbreak and instead hope to get out by exploiting any legal remedies he may have available, or focus his energy on comporting himself so as to be released earlier for good conduct. In short, by going through despair, he may cultivate a warranted kind of hope that actually serves his ends more reliably. This consideration, I take it, also underlies the idea that even though 'activists claim that they have lost all hope for a future without global warming and species extinction', ultimately 'giving up hope may be a way to gain hope'.<sup>86</sup>

#### IV. DESPAIR WITHOUT HOPE?

In the preceding section, I outlined three ways in which episodic despair can guard against the dangers of false hope by checking it against the wider epistemic and practical landscape. The hope that arises from despair is more

<sup>84</sup> As an anonymous reviewer has helpfully pointed out to me, giving up on a particular (mediate) end or strategy can itself be a form of resilience in relation to broader, more fundamental ends.

<sup>85</sup> Sometimes this kind of critical reflection will not lead us to redirect our hope, but to reassert it despite the low odds—for instance, if no plausible alternatives are available. Yet, having gone through despair, our endorsement will then be reflective in a way it was not before.

<sup>86</sup> Cassegård and Thörn 2018, p. 14.

robust and less likely to degenerate into wishful thinking, complacency, and fixation. Sometimes we have to go through despair, that is to say, in order to hope well. As the XR handbook puts it, ‘there is a lot that people can gain from ... despairing before then piecing things back together for themselves’.<sup>87</sup> Against my partial defence of despair up to this point, the present section takes a more cautionary direction. I highlight that the justification of despair is conditional and instrumental; that it is valuable only *insofar as* and *to the extent that* it helps us to hope well. Despair must indeed dissolve into hope if it is not to have precisely those stifling and paralysing effects so often attributed to it.

To see this, we must ask what it is that enables us to overcome despair and find new hope. I want to suggest that it is a deeper, more basic kind of hope that I call *fundamental hope*. In contrast to the propositional hopes of the form *hope that p* I have focused on up to this point, fundamental hope is not directed at a specific object.<sup>88</sup> Instead, it is a ‘pre-intentional’ orientation or ‘existential feeling’,<sup>89</sup> an anticipatory stance that represents the future as ‘sufficiently hospitable to our agential efforts’.<sup>90</sup>

While fundamental hope arguably plays a prominent role in thinkers from a more continental background, such as Gabriel Marcel or Ernst Bloch, in contemporary debate it is usually Jonathan Lear who is credited with first conceptualizing a version of it that he labels ‘radical’. I have referred above to Lear’s discussion of the Crow Nation, who find themselves in a state of cultural devastation as their system of meanings collapses. Lear argues that it is radical hope which allows Plenty Coups to anticipate ‘the possibility of new Crow possibilities’.<sup>91</sup> This is a kind of hope that is directed ‘toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is’; it anticipates ‘a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it’.<sup>92</sup>

Lear is usually read as suggesting that radical hope is something agents summon up when they lack any propositional hope. By contrast, what I call fundamental hope is an ‘experiential backdrop’<sup>93</sup> that sits beneath all our specific hopes; only against the background of this general orientation or sense of how things are with the world do particular hopes become intelligible. As long as we retain fundamental hope, even though some or even all propositional hopes are

<sup>87</sup>Extinction Rebellion 2019, p. 68.

<sup>88</sup>While the boundaries are certainly blurry between fundamental hope and our deepest, life-structuring hopes, such as the hope to have a meaningful life, I disagree with Milona and Stockdale (2018, pp. 218–19) that it is simply a form of propositional hope ranging over a very broad content.

<sup>89</sup>Ratcliffe 2013, p. 597.

<sup>90</sup>Calhoun 2018, p. 74.

<sup>91</sup>Lear 2006, p. 98.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>93</sup>Ratcliffe 2013, p. 74.



lost, there is a prospect that, through creativity and imagination, we may fill this general sense of openness with concrete objects.

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that climate ethicists have pointed to the importance of fundamental hope in the face of the radically uncertain future caused by climate change. Allen Thompson,<sup>94</sup> for instance, takes his cue from Lear's work in arguing that we currently lack the concepts that would allow us to make sense of what it would mean to live well in a warmer world, or how we could overcome the culture of material consumption, with its attendant expectations of comfort and convenience, that have set us on this path. As a climate activist from Kiribati, whose islands are at risk of becoming uninhabitable, puts it: 'I feel hopeless in one way that our people are suffering, but I also have the hope that they will try to find a way to adapt'.<sup>95</sup>

So there certainly is a sense in which fundamental hope is more robust or resilient against disappointment than propositional hope; no one specific set of facts or piece of evidence is able to destroy our sense of the future as open to our intervention. I do not think, though, that it is entirely 'immune to empirical disappointment'.<sup>96</sup> Our interest in the future generally, at least occasionally, has to manifest itself as an interest in particular future outcomes. If over a prolonged period of time, there is nothing at all we can pin our hope to, even fundamental hope is in peril. Katie Stockdale has recently argued that this happens to groups living under oppression, for instance in conditions of poverty, colonialism, racism, and sexism. At some point, they are going to lose the very sense that their actions make *any* difference or that the future is not yet determined.<sup>97</sup>

I would like to suggest that, in this case, fundamental hope itself is lost and turns into what I call fundamental despair: an existential feeling that is directed at the world as a whole; a loss of all meaning, where our entire temporal horizon breaks down.<sup>98</sup> In analogy to fundamental hope and in contrast to episodic despair, we do not despair of or over something, but find ourselves in a—much deeper and consequential—state of being in despair: a sense that nothing we do makes any difference and the world is closed off to our intervention. According to Steinbock, in this condition our loss of hope is so profound that we even lack a sense of what has been lost.<sup>99</sup> If I am in fundamental despair, any attempt to act constructively seems absurd. The phenomenology of fundamental despair is thus sometimes likened to that of depression. The depressed, Calhoun argues, are 'not dispirited about this or

<sup>94</sup>Thompson 2010.

<sup>95</sup>Cited in Stockdale 2021, p. 155.

<sup>96</sup>Martin 2014, p. 101.

<sup>97</sup>Stockdale 2021.

<sup>98</sup>This idea arguably plays a central role in existentialist authors such as Soren Kierkegaard; see Fremstedal 2020. Ratcliffe (2013) speaks of a 'loss of hope' as opposed to 'loss of hopes'.

<sup>99</sup>Steinbock 2007, pp. 446–50.

that bit of the future, but about the future generally. They lose a globally motivating interest in *The Future*'.<sup>100</sup>

It strikes me that parts of the climate movement have indeed fallen into this kind of despair. It is no coincidence that the term 'climate depression',<sup>101</sup> circulates among younger activists in particular, describing precisely this feeling of helplessly confronting a mass-extinction event that threatens civilization and there is nothing we can do about it. Unless we are happy to settle for a form of defeatism or nihilism where inaction takes over, this is something we should be concerned about.

Part of the problem, I believe, lies in the way in which public discourse on climate change is conducted, almost exclusively around dystopic or apocalyptic images such as melting polar caps, droughts, hurricanes, floods, and, more generally, an increasing state of chaos; the future is overwhelmingly represented as a threat and disaster. According to Mathias Thaler, this prevalent type of climate catastrophism speaks to the extent to which global warming has, among all its other negative consequence, also brought about a 'crisis of the imagination'.<sup>102</sup> There is no doubt that these dystopic images (some of which are, of course, already a harsh reality) do serve as important reminders of how dire the situation is and how urgently action is required. Yet they must be complemented with more positive and hopeful visions of how we might act together so as to halt, or at least attenuate, the looming climate catastrophe, and of what life in a warmer world might look like. Thaler appeals to the power of utopian thinking in this context—a kind of utopianism that does not serve to escape reality, but that galvanizes a type of hope that gives us the resolve we need to face up to the realities of global warming and act decisively.

We now see that the conflicting features of episodic despair that we have encountered throughout this article have to do with its constitutive instability: it enables us either to regain or redirect our hope (once we see a way forward to some desired version of the future) or it collapses into a more fundamental form of agony and paralysis that corrupts our very sense that the future is open to our intervention. Normatively speaking, this highlights that the value of episodic despair is contingent on our ability to work it through rather than remaining tied to it; unless the sense of urgency it conveys gives rise to new hope as the possibility of our goal comes to be salient, we will eventually give up. Hence any reasons we have to despair are ultimately reasons to adopt more realistic kinds of hope. Despair is only justified to the extent that it makes us better hopers—we should keep this in mind whenever we call for it.

## V. CONCLUSION

My aim in this article was by no means to unconditionally celebrate despair. Some forms of despair are plainly irrational, others paralyse us, yet others lead us

<sup>100</sup>Calhoun 2018, p. 52.

<sup>101</sup>See McKibben 2020; Kalmus 2021.

<sup>102</sup>Thaler 2021.

to act in erratic or reckless ways (think of the proverbial act of desperation). Instead, the question I set out to ask was whether there is *anything* to be said in favour of despair as a practical attitude. Nor was my affirmative answer to this question intended to deny that hope, in allowing us to anticipate a better future and motivating our efforts to bring it about, plays a vital role in political life in particular. Sometimes, however, hope leads us astray. Episodes of despair can then help guard against the dangers of wishful thinking, complacency, or fixation. My suggestion is, furthermore, that we can understand XR activists not as denouncing hope, but as making the case for a different and more realistic kind of hope, one that arises from despair. As activist Dougald Hine puts it, ‘whatever hope is worth having today, it lies on the far side of despair, where the maps run out, at the margins or hidden in plain sight’.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup>Hine 2019.

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