

HOPE AND NECESSITY

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Abstract. In this paper I offer a comparative evaluation of two types of “fundamental hope”, drawn from the writings of Rebecca Solnit and Rowan Williams respectively. Arguments can be found in both, I argue, for the foundations of a dispositional existential hope. Examining and comparing the differences between these accounts, I focus on the consequences implied for hope’s freedom and stability. I focus specifically on how these two accounts differ in their claims about the relationship between hope and (two types of) necessity. I argue that both Solnit and Williams base their claims for warranted fundamental hope on a sense of how reality is structured, taking this structure to provide grounds for a basic existential orientation that absolute despair is never the final word. For Solnit this structure is one of unpredictability; for Williams it is one of excess. While this investigation finds both accounts of fundamental hope to be plausible and insightful, I argue that Williams’s account is ultimately more satisfying on the grounds that it offers a realistic way of thinking about a hope necessitated by what it is responsive to, and more substantial in responding to what is necessary.

I. INTRODUCTION

My exploration of hope takes a somewhat sideways-on approach, with a comparative analysis of ideas put forward by Rebecca Solnit and Rowan Williams. I focus on these thinkers insofar as Solnit offers a manifesto for political *activism*, while Williams gives us a thesis on *art*. I focus on Solnit’s account of activism as found in her *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*,¹ and on Williams’ reflections on art in his *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love*.² In focusing on activism and art respectively, both Solnit and Williams offer thoughts on human agency in response to value of some kind,

1 Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Haymarket, 2016).

2 Row Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (Continuum, 2005).

value that is in some way uncertain. Where we speak of agential response to something that is perceived to be of value but is in some way unrealised or as yet out of reach, we are in the arena of hope, for this is hope's structure. Solnit's account here is explicitly about the foundations and structure of hope as she understands it, which I will outline and evaluate. Hope is not discussed explicitly in Williams' *Grace and Necessity*, so the reading of hope I draw out here is one I take to be embedded in his thought and find illuminated by the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion, as I will make clear.

These two accounts of hope share certain features, in that they are both accounts of—to use Joseph. J. Godfrey's language—"fundamental hope" rather than "specific hope".³ Both Solnit and Williams are ultimately concerned with a framework that *grounds a disposition to hope*. It is hope at this fundamental level that I am hence exploring in this paper, as I will outline in more detail. Solnit and Williams nevertheless offer two different accounts of the grounds for hope. I draw out the differences between these two accounts as a way of thinking evaluatively about fundamental hope.

The topic of hope is, of course, of great existential importance as well as of intellectual interest. Fundamental hope is a way of orienting oneself: it will transform how we move through the world and the meaning we attach to this movement. To talk about fundamental hope is to give both descriptive and prescriptive analyses—analyses with consequences for how and why we live. The significance of fundamental hope should then always be before us when discussing the reasons for hope, particularly as hope is not inevitable. As some argue and many assume, it is not obvious that that we have sufficient grounds to adopt a hopeful disposition, because global and personal events which invite hopelessness abound. Insofar as Solnit and Williams both argue *for* a fundamental existential hope, both attempt to speak to our intellectual curiosity in offering what we might call a metaphysics of hope, but both also speak to our existential condition—namely our longing for hope, and our fear that its foundation is not secure—and the consequences of our hope for the meaning and activity of our lives.

I begin with some general terminological clarifications before moving on to explain and analyse Solnit and Williams respectively. I have chosen to focus the paper as a comparative analysis of Solnit and Williams insofar as it is inter-

3 Joseph J. Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987).

esting to observe how these two contemporary thinkers — both with a popular readership and influence, as well as scholarly expertise — have articulated and argued for versions of fundamental hope. I specifically focus on how these two accounts differ in their claims about the relationship between hope and (two types of) necessity. The way that necessity (or the lack thereof) is woven into their respective accounts is important, I argue, for both our understanding of the internal coherence of our hope, but also for its surety and significance in our lives, and what it means to live in the light of this hope. While this investigation finds both accounts of fundamental hope to be plausible and insightful, I argue that Williams’s account is ultimately more satisfying on the grounds that it offers a realistic way of thinking about a hope necessitated by what it is responsive to, and more substantial in responding to what is necessary.

II. HOPE, SPECIFIC AND FUNDAMENTAL

There are many different types of hope and possible ways of analysing them, but here I follow Godfrey’s terminology of “fundamental hope”, which is a dispositional hope, distinguished from “specific hopes”, or “hopes-that”. I do not intend to engage the content of Godfrey’s analyses of fundamental hope so much as to use these categories as a lens through which to read Solnit and Williams, and to bring them into conversation with one another.⁴

First, a brief overview of “specific hope” and “fundamental hope” as I am using these terms. Specific hopes have a *definite object*, which is perceived by the hoper as of *value*, where it is *uncertain* that this object will come to pass. I

4 “Fundamental hope” for Godfrey is in fact a subcategory of what he calls “deep-grounded hope”, which he sub-divides into “ultimate hope” and “fundamental hope”. While “fundamental hope” is understood to be a “tone or disposition”, as I will consider further, “ultimate hope” is defined as “hope that has an aim and is one’s deepest hope.” (Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, 3) “Ultimate hope”, then, is directed at our object of ultimate concern, towards that which is of greatest existential importance. These two strands of deep-grounded hope are connected but can be analysed as distinct. To turn to examine “ultimate hope” would involve focusing more theologically on the nature of the “object of ultimate concern”, namely whether this should be best understood as the Judeo-Christian God, or otherwise. As I outline in more detail below, I am bracketing these theological questions due to the constraints of the paper. Godfrey himself offers an analysis of “deep-grounded hope”, using Kant, Ernst Bloch and Gabriel Marcel. Godfrey’s angle on fundamental hope is different from mine here but nevertheless contains a number of points which are compatible with the ways of thinking about fundamental hope that I draw out from Solnit and Williams.

hope that the post will come before I have to leave for work, for example, or I hope that it will not rain tomorrow. We cannot be certain that these hopes will be fulfilled, because the specific objects or events in question are presented to us as possibilities that are neither actual nor certain. The object of hope is clear, and the nature of the uncertainty is clear: these are future events, currently possible rather than actual. Rain and post are empirically and metaphysically possible (rather than impossible or necessary), but more importantly for the phenomenon of hope, they are *epistemic* possibilities.⁵ In these cases, epistemic uncertainty tracks metaphysical/empirical possibility: the object is unknown because it is not (yet) actual. This “standard account” of specific hope, namely “that hope is based on uncertainty in belief together with a representation of an object as desirable,”⁶ is far from a complete account, but gives the features of specific hope which are relevant for my purposes.⁷

On what grounds are specific hopes warranted? Almost every writer on hope notes that it must be distinguished from “mere optimism” insofar as hope is something maintained while facing reality, rather than conjured by failing to properly attend to or properly calibrate reality. In the face of the illness of a loved one or the loss of something precious, hope is not simply a case of assuming that things will get better or that the difficulty will disappear, without a sense of why or how this thought is (epistemically) justified.⁸

Importantly, the objects of specific hopes present not just as possibilities but also as having a higher or lower probability or likelihood. We might think, then, that we calculate whether the desired object is worth hoping for by roughly calculating its probability, and then justifiably hoping for the things which are more probable than not. A straightforward “probabilistic hope” of this kind, while not able to hope for what is certain, hopes for what is probable or likely. Given the structure of hope, such an account would have to calculate not only the likelihood of the object’s outcome, but also in some way to weigh and analyse this in the light of the perceived *value* of the object and any *risk*

5 See Andy Egan and Brian Weatherson, eds., *Epistemic Modality* (OUP, 2011).

6 Claudia Bloeser and Titus Stahl, “Hope”, last modified March 8, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hope/>, §2.3. See also §3.

7 There is ongoing debate in the literature as to what a complete account of hope would need. See Bloeser and Stahl, “Hope” for an overview of objections to and developments of the “standard account”.

8 See e.g. Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (Yale Univ. Press, 2015).

involved in pursuing it.⁹ Godfrey calls this basic model the “desiderative-calculative approach.”¹⁰ Exactly how such a model would work does not need to be discussed here, but the basic idea is that, among the other variables, there is a roughly linear relation between the likelihood of an object coming to pass and the strength or likelihood of our hoping for it. Aristotle identifies such a version of hope in those who hope “because of their experience,”¹¹ which is to say, on the grounds of inferential likeliness that what they hope for will come to pass, given previous experience. One strength of this position is that it parses hope from blind optimism. Such a hope would always have grounds for its hope, namely that the object of hope is (roughly, and proportional to the good of the object) more likely to come to pass than not.

There is some question, however, as to whether a probabilistic approach to hope is descriptively or prescriptively sound. It seems that we do not simply hope for that which is probable, nor should our hopes necessarily function in this way. Aristotle criticises this way of ordering our hopes, for example, noting that those who hope this way “do not hold their ground against what is really fearful.”¹² A hope that can be reduced to a calculation, even a complex calculation, we might think, gets something wrong about hope, and this is evidenced in those terrible moments where hope is precisely what is needed, but where the calculation fails. Is there an alternative? If there is, it will also need to be able to distinguish hope from mere optimism. There are many possible strands of analysis here, but I am interested in how a second-order disposition to hope might play a role in understanding the legitimacy of specific hopes, and so help us think about alternatives to a probabilistic model. This form of hope will be the focus of my paper, and it is to this “fundamental hope” that I now turn.

9 Note that no-one is advocating a position that we *can* only hope for what is probable — it is quite obvious that we *can* hope for improbable things; the question here is whether hopes are *warranted*. Andrew Chignell helpfully sketches an overview of the modal conditions under which hope is and is not rational. He concludes the only case in which hope is forbidden by reason is when we are certain that the object is metaphysically impossible. See Andrew Chignell, “Rational Hope, Moral Order and the Revolution of the Will”, in *The Divine Order, the Human Order, and the Order of Nature*, ed. Eric Watkins (OUP, 2013).

10 Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, 40.

11 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (OUP, 2009), 50 (§3.6 115b). I am indebted to Bloeser and Stahl, “Hope” for this reference.

12 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 51 (§3.7, 30).

What is fundamental hope? Godfrey defines this as “a tone or basic disposition with which one faces the future...[it] has as its core the refusal to judge ‘All is lost, I am lost.’”¹³ He elaborates:

The best preliminary characterization of fundamental hope is as an openness of spirit with respect to the future. This means that, in relation to an ultimate hope or its contrary, one does not deny evidence or mis-calculate it. One faces up to the evidence. But openness also means a sense of the limits of evidence. Opposed to it are probably such closures that move from a judgement that all the evidence is in and accounted for, to the stance that therefore “I’ve got it made,” or “Everything’s going to be alright”; or on the contrary, “There’s no way out”; “I’m a goner.” It knows the difference between “This cause is lost,” and “All is lost.” The tonality here — to be called hope — is thus distinguishable from optimism and presumption on the one hand and pessimism and despair on the other.¹⁴

Fundamental hope, as I understand it then, is a second-order disposition or “tonality” within which one’s specific hopes are held: “Shall I wait, or shall I abandon hope? The appropriate answer to such a question depends, not only on the hope, but also on *how* it is held.”¹⁵ Fundamental hope plays a role in calibrating whether the frustration or non-resolution of specific hopes will lead to despair or not. It also therefore plays a role in establishing that certain specific hopes continue to be worth pursuing even if the likelihood of their being fulfilled initially presents as slim.

In what epistemically legitimate sense could a hopeful disposition calibrate our response to the fulfilment or lack thereof of specific hopes? Godfrey suggests that this is because fundamental hope is “objectless; or — in a loose sense of the word — cosmic,”¹⁶ elsewhere referring to it as a “cosmic hope or umbrella hope.”¹⁷ If we were to say that this hope has an object, he says, it would be “everything.”¹⁸ Fundamental hope is not random, but a disposition grounded in a conviction about how — to knowingly misappropriate Wilfred Sellers’ famous remark — “things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in

13 Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, 3.

14 *Ibid.*, 64–65.

15 *Ibid.*, 63.

16 *Ibid.*, 14.

17 *Ibid.*, 144.

18 *Ibid.*

the broadest possible sense of the term.”¹⁹ Thus far this is highly vague, but an analysis of the scholars I have in mind—Solnit and Williams—who offer an account of how things “hold together” such that fundamental hope is warranted, should illuminate the kinds of claims that might fit the bill here.

Just as specific hopes can be “false hopes”, disqualified as mere optimism through failure to face reality appropriately, something similar also holds for fundamental hope: on what grounds is such a disposition warranted? What keeps it from vague cosmic optimism? In different ways, this is the question I take both Solnit and Williams to be answering. Both offer reasons for dispositional existential hope, namely a way of framing why it is sometimes worth hoping for the improbable, and why we should never succumb to fundamental despair.

The question of God looms large here. Williams, of course, makes his case as a religious practitioner committed to Trinitarian theism. Solnit on the other hand rejects the Judeo-Christian God. Typically, the approach here might be to try to first establish the truth or falsity of theism or a specific doctrinal claim or eschatological premise, and then to evaluate these two accounts on the basis of these presuppositions. In this paper I am somewhat flipping this methodology. My focus here is on a philosophical analysis of the *structure* of Solnit’s hope and Williams’s hope respectively, rather than an analysis of their theological content. Their positions vis-à-vis theism are relevant to their accounts of fundamental hope, as I will draw out further, and the philosophical analysis has theological implications. However, there are some distinct considerations which arise as a consequence of initially bracketing the question of theological vs atheological conceptions of hope specifically. Approaching the question from this direction offers a different kind of perspective on the issue, one that can then feed back into the related issue of the persuasiveness (or not) of theological hope.²⁰

Having laid out some of the basic features of hope, distinguished “specific hope” from “fundamental hope” and having outlined some elements of the relationship between the two, I now turn to outlining the two varieties of fundamental hope that I find in Solnit and Williams respectively.

19 Wilfred Sellers, *Science, Perception and Reality* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 1.

20 For this reason I am not focusing on some of the well-established texts and debates in the theology of hope, such as Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*, which focuses on the shape and centrality of hope in the light of Christian eschatology specifically. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (SCM, 1967).

III. SOLNIT'S HOPE

Solnit, a popular contemporary essayist, offers an account of hope for political activists, particularly those campaigning on environmental issues. Observing a tendency towards dispositional cynicism in activist sub-cultures, her aim is to argue that dispositional hope is warranted. Solnit may seem like a strange choice to bring into conversation with an established academic philosopher and theologian like Williams, as her text is framed as a manifesto for action more than it is intended as a contribution to academic philosophy or theology. I argue nevertheless that Solnit is a worthy conversation partner for Williams, as the explicit philosophical claims which her argument trades in are worth exploring in more detail. These philosophical claims are not accidental, as she explicitly takes herself to be offering a systematic account of *what hope is* and *why it matters*. As such, what we have in Solnit is an account focused on meaning and praxis, which makes clear metaphysical and existential assertions. A well-articulated and widely-engaged account of this kind is precisely the kind of hypothesis which should be of interest to philosophers of religion and theologians.

To be clear, the focus of Solnit's argument is not that a set of specific hopes are worth pursuing because they are likely to come to pass, but rather focuses on reasons for pursuing all and any political goals which present as valuable, with dispositional hope, regardless of whether individuals or collectives are likely to succeed in bringing these goals about. In this section I will lay out what I take to be her central claim.

Solnit's position is captured in the following passage:

[H]ope is not about what we expect. It is an embrace of the essential unknowability of the world, of the breaks with the present, the surprises. Or perhaps studying the record more carefully leads us to expect miracles — not when and where we expect them, but to expect to be astonished, to expect that we don't know. And this is grounds to act.²¹

The nub of her claim is that, when it comes to working and campaigning for significant political or social change, the probabilities of our specific hopes coming to pass are always hidden from us. They are hidden from us because the way that things “hang together” is always significantly more complex and

21 Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 109–10. Solnit is of course using “miracles” here in a non-technical, non-supernatural sense.

non-linear than we are capable of calculating. No human probabilistic hope calculus could offer reliable output on whether or not the objects of our specific hopes will come to pass or not. Her claim is not just that the objects of our hope are uncertain (this, as we've noted, is a condition of all hope) but that the *probabilities* that we attach to these hopes are also fundamentally uncertain. It is for this reason that a straightforwardly probabilistic model of hope can be rejected. The basis of her argument is that history evidences breakthroughs in social change that would have seemed highly unlikely to those living through those changes at the time. This testimony of change lends support to the idea that attempts to write off specific hopes as unlikely, and therefore not worth pursuing, are misguided.

Solnit opens her text with a quote from Virginia Woolf, written during the First World War: "The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think." It is a quote that Solnit returns to, holding it up as the grounds for a fundamental hope. She elaborates on Woolf's remark:

Dark, she seems to say, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. We often mistake the one for the other. Or we transform the future's unknowability into something certain, the fulfilment of all our dread. But again and again, stranger things happen than the end of the world.²²

This idea of "stranger things" is what she takes to disrupt and therefore rule out naïve forms of probabilistic hope, forms that she identifies lurking in activist discourses: "A lot of activists seem to have a mechanistic view of change.... They operate on the premise that for every action there is an equal and opposite punctual reaction and regard the lack of one as a failure."²³ Against this, she advocates the view that, from the perspective of history, past futures have constantly thrown out the unexpected, and, as part of this, *some* specific human hopes and actions have played crucial roles in these positive human changes, in ways that they could not have known would be the case at the time. "Who could have imagined [at the time] a world in which the Soviet Union had vanished and the internet had arrived?"²⁴ she asks. Her positive assertion is that: "Cause and effect assumes history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water

22 Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 1.

23 Ibid., 60.

24 Ibid., 1.

wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension.”²⁵ Later she expresses that “[h]istory is made out of common dreams, groundswells, turning points, watersheds — it’s a landscape more complicated than commensurate cause and effect.”²⁶ In a nutshell, one can never say with confidence that hopeful action — one’s own or others’ — is not making a difference in the grand scheme of things, which means these efforts can never be written off: “Nobody can know the full consequences of their actions, and history is full of small acts that changed the world in surprising ways,”²⁷ and so, she concludes, “it’s always too soon to calculate effect.”²⁸ We are asked to “trust the basic eccentricity of the world, its sense of humour, and its resilience.”²⁹ Her orientation towards reality as fundamentally *ad hoc* grounds her fundamental hope. Without this, she says, we start to view reality as “static”, which leads either to presumption or cynical fatalism.

To return more explicitly to the relationship between fundamental hope and specific hopes, Solnit is claiming that fundamental hope is justified because while some — maybe many — of the things that we specifically hope for will not come to pass, *some will*, including hopes we (individually or collectively) thought improbable. We do not know which hopes will come to pass and which will not, so all are worth pursuing. The hopes that come to be realised may not be the ones we thought were the most likely and may not be realised in exactly the way we envisaged, but this disconnect is precisely why it is always worth holding a fundamental disposition of hope. This is why her account of hope can be distinguished from mere optimism: it faces reality by *expecting* that many specific hopes will not be fulfilled, but offers a reason as to why this is no grounds to give up hope completely.

I will attempt some more detailed analysis of Solnit’s fundamental hope in subsequent sections. For now, however, I want to observe that while Solnit rejects a probabilistic account of hope at the level of specific hopes (we might call this a “naïve probabilistic account”), there is a sense in which a probabilistic approach to hope operates at the level of her fundamental hope. Solnit’s fundamental hope, it seems to me, is premised on the fact that at a mac-

25 Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 3.

26 Ibid., 60.

27 Ibid., 66.

28 Ibid., 3.

29 Ibid., 75.

roscopic scale reality operates in a mysterious, non-linear, and sometimes even random way. Given that this is the case, it is *likely* that some specific hopes will work out and some will not. Inference from previous experience is then at play in the foundation of this fundamental hope: our experience is that some specific hopes are frustrated, but that others find resolution. On balance, then, while we cannot say *which* hopes will fly, we can expect that this pattern from the past will continue into the future and can thus wager confidently at this second-order level that some of our specific hopes will pay off. This analysis tallies with her claim that: “Hope... can be based on the evidence, on the track record of what might be possible — and in this book I’ve been trying to shift what the track record might be,”³⁰ and more explicitly that “though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records or recollections of the past.”³¹

Having sketched Solnit’s hope, I turn now to outline the fundamental hope I find in the work of Rowan Williams.

IV. WILLIAMS’S HOPE

Williams’ *Grace and Necessity* focuses on the phenomenology of aesthetic perception and creative artistic endeavour. In this description and analysis, Williams demonstrates a fundamental orientation or disposition, based on a “cosmic or umbrella” conviction about how things “hold together”, within which specific attempts at creative work are given meaning and justification. For this reason, I transpose his discussion onto my discussion about fundamental hope.

Williams draws on the work of Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain who, in Williams’ words, “...identified the labour of art as something rooted in the sense of an unfinishedness in ‘ordinary’ perception, a recognition that the objects of perception were not exhausted by what could be said about

30 Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 64. Interestingly, she follows this claim with a direct comparison between her version of fundamental hope with “faith” as she understands it: “But faith endures even when there is no way to imagine winning in the foreseeable future, faith is more mystical.” Exactly what she means by this is unclear, and her comparison between “faith” and “hope” is not developed at all, but this remark echoes something of the comparison that I want to bring out in my evaluation of these two types of fundamental hope under discussion.

31 Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, xix.

them in descriptive, rational and pragmatic terms.”³² While Williams explicitly discusses theological aesthetics, what we have here is the articulation of a “way” of engaging with a specific hope: with the hope of bringing about a work of art that is not yet created (comparable in some ways to the social or political change that the activist wants to bring about). The claim is that this specific hope is “rooted in the sense of the ‘unfinishedness’ in ‘ordinary’ perception”, which is to say, I will argue, a sense both of how things “hold together” and an understanding of the nature of a basic epistemic uncertainty with which we can engage the objects of possible specific hopes.

“Art in one sense ‘dispossess’ us of our habitual perception and restores to reality a dimension that necessarily escapes our conceptuality and our control. It makes the world strange,”³³ Williams tells us. Just as Solnit evokes a “strangeness” to the way of the world that founds her fundamental hope, so does Williams, but — as we will see — in a different way. Let us get a better sense of what Williams has in mind by the “‘unfinishedness’ in our ordinary perception”. Artistic labour, he states, is:

a sense of the work achieved as giving itself to the observer in an ‘overflow’ of presence... This object is there *for me*, for my delight; but it is so because it is not there *solely* for me, not designed so as to fit my specifications for being pleased.³⁴

This puts us in “some kind of relation with an aspect of reality otherwise unknown.”³⁵ This idea of an “overflow” of presence gestures towards what we might call the phenomenology of “excess”. This is an idea that we find in Emmanuel Levinas’s work on the phenomenology of “infinity”, where Levinas’s focus is intersubjective — rather than aesthetic — perception. In direct encounter with “the Other”, says Levinas, I encounter something that always “exceeds” my pre-existing framework of perception and understanding. In Levinas’s language, the “infinity” of the Other breaks into the “totality” of my world: “The face [of the other] is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed.”³⁶ This idea of encountering something that exceeds my existing conceptual scheme is what

32 Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, x.

33 *Ibid.*, 37.

34 *Ibid.*, 13.

35 *Ibid.*, 14.

36 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Duquesne Univ. Press, 1998), 194.

structures this encounter as an “epiphany”.³⁷ Levinas is inspired by Plato’s idea of the transcendent Good, as well as the “idea of infinity” in Descartes’ Third Meditation, where Descartes asserts that “I do not comprehend the infinite.”³⁸ Levinas thinks that Descartes here captures a phenomenological truth about an encounter with “infinity”, namely that this is an encounter with something which overflows the very idea or concept of itself. To encounter the infinite is to encounter “the presence in a container of a content exceeding its capacity.”³⁹

This idea is also found in Jean-Luc Marion’s work on the “saturated phenomenon.”⁴⁰ Rather than a kind of uncertainty where what is given in our experience of an object *fails* to satisfy the pre-existing concept that we have the object, what is “given” in a saturated phenomenon *outstrips* what the concept can grasp. Uncertainty in this case is born not of lack, but of excess. Marion famously uses the example of an “icon”, in which we see “more than” what we literally see in ordinary perception. It is an opening or access point for the infinite. (This is contrasted with an idol, with which our openness to its reality stops at what we already know.⁴¹) Williams’s hope, I argue, should be understood as a saturated phenomenon.⁴²

Williams echoes the Levinasian language of the “phenomenology of infinity” in his articulation of our responsiveness to reality in artistic labour: “[the] finishedness in the work being always incomplete at some level, ‘limping’, like the biblical Jacob, from the encounter with what cannot be named, achieved art always has *that kind* of imperfection through which infinity

37 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*. See e.g. 51, 60 and 75.

38 Rene Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy”, in *Key Philosophical Writings*, ed. Enrique Chávez-Arviso (Wordsworth Classics, 1997), 157.

39 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 289. See also “God and Philosophy” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1996), 129–48.

40 Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (Fordham Univ. Press, 2002). This is a theme throughout his work.

41 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies* (Fordham Univ. Press, 2001).

42 Here I am particularly indebted to Robyn Horner’s excellent discussion of hope as a saturated phenomenon, which has a different emphasis to mine here, but which also draws on Levinas and Marion. See Robyn Horner, “On Hope: Critical Re-readings”, *Australian eJournal of Theology* 15, no. 1 (2010). Her discussion focuses on the question of whether the object of religious hope should be determinate. She outlines various ontological and phenomenological aspects to hope as a saturated phenomenon which I take to be counterpart to my focus on fundamental hope specifically, on types of uncertainty and on freedom and necessity.

wounds the finite.”⁴³ Central to Williams’s claim is not only the thought that we can identify a phenomenology of excess in aesthetic perception, but that insofar as this is a response to a reality beyond us, artistic labour hopes to realise the epistemically possible only insofar as it responds to something excessive perceived in what is already *actual*. In his words, a work of art is not plucked out of the void by the sheer will of the artist, but rather is “necessarily oriented towards being.”⁴⁴ His conclusion here is that “[a]rt therefore is bound to show what is in some sense real.”⁴⁵ The idea is that in holding a specific hope, the content of this hope seeks to be responsive to that which definitionally (already) ‘exceeds’ it. Williams illuminates this idea further:

...art seeks to reshape the data of the world so as to make their fundamental structure and relation visible. Thus the artist *does* set out to change the world, but — if we can manage the paradox — to change it into itself.⁴⁶

We should take seriously this idea of a “paradox” in the structure of what I am calling Williams’s fundamental hope. Specific hopes aim at what is not yet the case, in some clear sense: they aim to create a piece of work that does not yet exist and so aim at what is metaphysically possible and not yet actual. At the same time, however, insofar as hope motivates agency to labour towards bringing about the fulfilment of these specific hopes, this hope is also aimed at what it perceives to “already be the case” in that which is “saturated” and therefore “unfinished” in our understanding. It is this glimpse of the actual that then founds this fundamental hope. To use Williams again:

The artwork is...an extension of ‘nature’; but it is so by the thoroughness of its transmutation of given nature into another material reality that reflects it and in so doing alters it and displays ‘more than it is’.⁴⁷

This kind of fundamental hope is therefore founded on the idea that surface appearances do not tell the whole story about how things hang together. It is founded on a kind of “bearing witness” to a depth of reality which exceeds the “totality” of our individual ordinary ways of engaging reality. It invites par-

43 Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 21. Williams cites Maritain’s Mellon Lectures: *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 166-7.

44 *Ibid.*, 17.

45 *Ibid.*, 17.

46 *Ibid.*, 17-18.

47 *Ibid.*, 60.

ticipation in what some thinkers have called the “sacramental imagination”, which “allows us to recognize transcendence in immanence.”⁴⁸ There is a conviction in this position that there is an inherent epistemic uncertainty in our viewpoint on the world: not because it is random, but because it is “infinite” and therefore in principle exceeds our capacity to grasp it fully.

Fundamental hope as a saturated phenomenon does not subscribe to the probabilistic model at either the level of specific hopes or fundamental hope. The fundamental hope is that the cosmos is “excessive”, both in its reality and its goodness, and further, that all the objects and events of ordinary perception are capable of being brought into greater conformity to this reality. The fundamental hope is that reality really is structured this way. This grounds specific hopes insofar as the probability of a specific hope coming to pass based on “ordinary perception” is disrupted from outside by “new information”, that takes this hope out of the economy of probability and into the excess of the actual. This fundamental hope takes itself to “track”⁴⁹ reality in a non-probabilistic way (albeit that this is a reality that it cannot ever know fully). It takes itself to be responding to something that is epistemically uncertain but metaphysically actual, tracking something that remains true and valuable in all the nearest possible worlds (indeed, interpreted theistically, as we will see, true and valuable in all possible worlds).

An illuminating real-life example of hope as a saturated phenomenon can be found in Jonathan Lear’s excellent analysis of what he calls the “radical hope” of a leader of the Native American Crow Nation, Plenty Coups, in demonstrating hope for a future for his people while they experienced the total collapse of their traditional way of life around them. Plenty Coups was convicted that the Crow would survive and thrive even though everything they knew would be destroyed as a result of the influence of white settlers. From the perspective of history, this hope has shown itself to reflect

48 Anthony J. Godzieba, “The Catholic Sacramental Imagination and the Access/Excess of Grace”, *New Theology Review* 21, no. 3 (2008): 16–17.

49 In using this language I have in mind Robert Nozick’s language of “truth-tracking” as a condition of knowledge—namely that knowledge must track the truth of an assertion in all nearby possible worlds. (See Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Clarendon Press, 1981), Ch 2.1) Nozick himself also uses the language of “tracking bestness” (317) to express the related idea of our actions tracking evaluative facts in all nearby possible worlds. Nozick defines tracking in terms of a set of subjunctive conditionals. I am not concerned with the details how this tracking mechanism might work, nor does this account need to adopt Nozick’s way of formulating this.

something true — the Crow did survive, in a new form, with a new way of life — even though the fullness of the meaning of this truth could not have been known at the time. Lear focuses on how this kind of hope takes its shape from the unknown not only because its object is located in the future, and so beyond certainty in this sense, but also because it exceeds the subject's existing framework of full intelligibility. In this case, the Crow's traditional way of life was so fundamentally bound up with their identity that a move away from this way of life involved "the emergence of a Crow subjectivity that did not yet exist,"⁵⁰ and so something outside the horizon of their comprehension.

Lear draws out the significance of this in the following:

What makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.⁵¹

Plenty Coups himself did not know what the future would look like. The *nature* of the object of hope itself was uncertain and not only whether it would come to pass or not. It was uncertain because it "exceeded" the "totality" of Plenty Coups's current conceptual scheme, but yet he trusted that "the goodness of the world transcends our finite powers to grasp it."⁵²

Lear's example illustrates that this form of hope is not a form of mere optimism. It faces reality, first by not ignoring the reasons that make the fulfilment of hope improbable in one's existing framework and perception. It therefore recognises the great cost or suffering that may lie ahead. In Plenty Coups's case, he recognised that his people were about to lose everything that they had previously known and loved. What kept him in hope was the recognition that although all the possibilities that he could imagine might be put to death, the possibility of a resurrection — definitionally in terms not yet possible to comprehend — was still given. In cases of genuine hope this is not pulled out of thin air but is given "from outside", as a kind of promise. In Plenty Coups's case this was given in the symbolism of a dream. This hope, in Lear's words, is thus also

50 Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2006), 104.

51 Lear, *Radical Hope*, 103.

52 *Ibid.*, 121.

“responsive to reality”⁵³ insofar as it taps into something “prophetic”⁵⁴ which tracks and reflects something true about how things “hang together”.

This formulation of hope as a saturated phenomenon is not intended as a *proof* of the existence of God. There may be space for non-theistic formulations of this form of hope, as Lear suggests, though I do not have the space here to explore if and how this might be done.⁵⁵ It is clear, however, that Levinas, Marion and Williams would have us understand the phenomenology of infinity in theistic terms,⁵⁶ and that this model of hope as a saturated phenomenon is further patterned in a specifically Christian hope, marked by death and resurrection, and directed towards the person of Jesus — in whom the material of ordinary perception is opened to a divine reality that “exceeds” full comprehension.⁵⁷

To re-cap, both Solnit and Williams base their claims for warranted fundamental hope on a sense of how reality is structured, taking this structure to provide grounds for a basic existential orientation that absolute despair is never the final word, that we can never say “All is lost”. For Solnit this structure is one of eccentricity, for Williams it is one of excess. There are many ways we might compare and evaluate these two accounts, but here I will focus briefly on two: (i) the different role and definition of freedom in each account, and (ii) the stability of each of these fundamental hopes in each case. These comments, interestingly enough, involve two types of necessity. I will conclude that while both accounts are credible, hope as a saturated phenomenon has strengths that Solnit’s hope does not match. I turn to the first of these points now.

53 Lear, *Radical Hope*, 113. Interestingly Lear joins Levinas in evoking Plato as the inspiration here. See 120-121.

54 *Ibid.*, 113.

55 Lear, for example, says explicitly that his “radical hope” is open to both theistic and non-theistic readings (see 113-115). The “excessive” quality of reality here perhaps referring to that the sum total of reality “beyond me”, without this needing to be “infinite”. On the other hand I note that it may be possible to formulate some variety of Solnit’s hope which is theistic in some sense, but again I will not explore this further here.

56 This reading is compatible with the “Thou” who grounds Godfrey’s intersubjective model of deep-grounded hope. Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, 117–21.

57 See N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (Harper Collins Publishers, 2008), 93–107 for more on patterns of the “continuous and discontinuous” that structure hope in Christian theology and the Christian imagination.

V. FREEDOM AND NECESSITY

The first point of comparison I note is that these two types of fundamental hope make different suggestions about the nature of *freedom* in relation to hope. In philosophical ethics, we find the question of how it can be the case that we are responsive to the *obligations* of value, and yet that at the same time we must choose to respond to these values *freely*, rather than as a form of coercion.⁵⁸ In the same way, we might ask how we are to conceive the relation between hope, freedom and determinism. Note that this is not the question of whether we are free to act on what we hope for, but whether and how our freedom is involved in the formation of our hopes as our own.

We might think of hope as casting out into the void of the not-yet, creating each object of hope *ex nihilo*, as a product of the unconstrained will of the hoper. Hope, trading in the economy of pure possibility, is an exercise in a kind of libertarian freedom of the will. Solnit's hope, I think it is fair to say, implies something of this structure. It is difficult to be too exacting in this reading, as the meta-ethical mechanics of hope formation are not Solnit's focus. She clearly takes the activists she is addressing to have their hopes directed towards making the world a better place, and the extent to which they are responsible for *deciding* which world is the best world to fight for is unclear. However, the will seems to play an important role in this visioning process, with Solnit calling for "the freedom for each to participate in *inventing* the world... the power to make one's life and to make the world."⁵⁹ It seems that for Solnit, the content of our hopes are ours to birth, ours to project into and onto the dark. It is our responsibility to conceive and cast our hopes into a world that otherwise may twist and turn in any direction: "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to

58 I look at this issue for moral autonomy in Sarah Pawlett Jackson, "Darwall and Williams: Moral Reasoning, Priority and the Second-Person Standpoint", in *The Moral Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. Chris Herrera and Alexandra Perry (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013). In titling *this* paper "Hope and Necessity" I had in mind not only Rowan Williams' *Grace and Necessity*, which I have been engaging throughout, but also the other Williams — Bernard Williams. The latter's *Shame and Necessity*, which I look at in *Darwall and Williams*, considers the way that shame is a phenomenon both externally "necessitating" and internally constitutive of autonomy. See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Univ. of California Press, 1993).

59 Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 95. Emphasis mine.

act.”⁶⁰ This “spaciousness” — an absence of direction from the world itself — is a kind of vacuum or opening into which the individual or collective will has the power to bring about something new. This pure possibility (and not actuality) is the condition of hope itself and of hope’s agency.

Hope as a saturated phenomenon, on the other hand, conceives hope’s freedom in a slightly different way. Because the sacramental imagination takes itself to respond to something actual, this is an action *not* characterised by a radically free will. On the contrary, this is a form of epistemic uncertainty that chooses to be “obedient” to what it glimpses in the “overflow” of ordinary things. Williams says explicitly:

You have to find what you must obey, artistically; and finding it is finding that which exists in relation to more than your will and purpose — finding the depth of alternative embodiment in the seen landscape, the depth of gratuitous capacity in the imagined character (when what you *want* to imagine will not come) and so on... the artist looks for the “necessity” in the thing being made.⁶¹

Williams understands the hope of artistic labour as a kind of “obedience” or “responsiveness” to that which we recognise as the “more-than” in our ordinary perception. I do not think we should read this as the idea that there is no freedom in hope; rather, this account offers us a way of understanding the nature and structure of hope’s freedom. Hope’s freedom is not the radical freedom of unconstrained and arbitrary possibility, but rather, freedom-as-response. We can again use resources from Levinas to understand this more fully. Levinas articulates helpfully that freedom is not the ability to choose whatever one likes from unlimited possibility, but that we must “liberate freedom from the arbitrary.”⁶² Moral freedom is “constrained” by the good, but not in a way that limits it, but is constitutive of it, (just as the “constraint” of truth upon my epistemic freedom is constitutive of it rather than a hinderance to it.⁶³) So too, I take it, Williams’s fundamental hope takes its “obedience” to be constitutive of its freedom.

On this point I would argue that Williams’s account paints a more realistic picture of hope’s freedom. In understanding itself as structurally constrained by what is already given, we have a portrait of hope that is “liberated...from

60 *Solnit, Hope in the Dark*, xiv.

61 Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 147.

62 *Ibid.* 84–85.

63 See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 83–84. See also Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 170–71.

the arbitrary". This is not to say that Williams' account is a form of fatalism. It is not that the divine excess bypasses our autonomy in inspiring hope in us; this would be to continue to define hope's freedom as arbitrary choice. The point is that the freedom in hope is freedom to hope for that which is worthy of hope: hope is *necessitated* by the transcendent good.

If these two accounts of hope differ in their characterisation of hope's freedom, they also differ in the nature of their uncertainty, with consequences for the quality of their hope. It is to this final point that I now turn.

VI. CONTINGENCY AND NECESSITY

Hope happens at points of uncertainty, and uncertainty can involve different modal claims. Uncertainty is an operation of epistemic possibility. As we have seen, epistemic possibility might follow what is metaphysically possible but not (yet) actual, or it may pertain to what is actual but unknown, or not fully known. For Williams, the epistemic uncertainty involved in fundamental hope is the latter, for Solnit, the former. For Solnit this is metaphysical possibility at two levels — the level of specific hope and the level of fundamental hope itself. Her fundamental hope is warranted because the metaphysical possibility that "All is not lost" is probable. Solnit's fundamental hope will therefore endure so long as history continues to conform to the pattern of triumphs as well as defeats, so long as some leaps forward are made as well as steps back. This itself is contingent, as she herself would assert: "To hope is to gamble. It's to bet on the future."⁶⁴ I agree with her that this pattern she identifies is likely to continue into the future, and that her version of fundamental hope is coherent and well-founded in this sense, but it is worth considering whether and how the second-order probabilistic model colours the phenomenology of this hope.

We cannot pronounce Aristotle's criticism that Solnit's hoppers "do not hold their ground against what is really fearful", at least not in the same way as Aristotle intended it. Solnit's hoper does face what is fearful, because they believe that it may not always be so fearful, or that something good on another day will be a triumph, balancing out fear and joy. Some version of Aristotle's worry, however, can be applied here, insofar as we can make the descriptive observation that this version of fundamental hope is still in some way vulnerable

64 Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 4.

to the contingencies of history. This may not be a criticism. The response here might be that it is quite right that fundamental hope should be responsive to the contingencies of history. Not that hope should swing wildly with every specific hope dashed or fulfilled, but that if, as a society, we fall into times where breakthroughs are no longer observed at all, then eventually this *would* be grounds to give up fundamental hope. This willingness to give up fundamental hope might be seen as the mark of its distinction from cosmic optimism. It may not be possible to say that fundamental hope will never give way to fundamental despair, but it probably will not, and we should not hope more for our hope.

Williams's hope on the other hand, is tethered to something outside of the ebb and flow of contingent probability. As we have noted, there are uncertainties at the level of specific hopes which pertain to non-actual possibilities on his account. To stay within the example of art, it is uncertain whether I will be able to complete a piece of work for all kinds of reasons. All kinds of specific contingencies may conspire such that the novel does not get written, or — to think about specific hopes in other areas of life — why the protest does not effect change or why the relationship may not be reconciled. We can legitimately hope for such things, however, because a sacramental imagination shows us that these situations always contain within them “more than they are”: this is their “possibility”, that they might be conformed to the likeness of a (good, true and beautiful) pattern that is, in Williams's paradox, already the case. Further, even in the case of seeming defeat, there lurks the promise that such a defeat is a death that might be taken up into a resurrection that our present worldview and imagination is not able to contain.

If fundamental hope as a saturated phenomenon tracks what is actual rather than what is probable, its foundation is more secure than the second-order probabilistic approach. This is true regardless of whether one takes a classical theistic reading of the saturated phenomenon or not, because what is actual is a more secure base than what is probable. There is a further modal claim to make, however, if hope as a saturated phenomenon is theistic, as we find in Williams, namely that this hope tracks not just what is actual, but what is necessary. Here we identify necessity in a different sense to that discussed in the previous section: here hope tracks what is necessary not just insofar as reality necessitates action in accordance with itself, but in the sense that it is

also metaphysically necessary — a (still yet “excessively” uncertain) constant across all possible worlds and all possible futures.⁶⁵

Lear’s account of radical hope again supports this reading, as a prophetic hope that differs from all forms of probabilistic hope. Lear speaks of “a gamble with necessity”⁶⁶ that shows itself only in cases of radical hope. He notes that for the most part all of us “gamble that the entire field of possibilities will remain stable; that one will continue to be able to judge success or failure in its terms.”⁶⁷ This is to say — most of us know that we live in a world where there are things that we do not know and we cannot be certain of. Very few of us labour under the illusion that we are omnipotent. But we do tend to labour under the view or the framework that all things are intelligible, that ultimately all things *are* or *can be made to be* intelligible under my framework of understanding, once I am given enough information. Radical hope, in Lear’s terminology, tells us that this is not necessarily the case. This is a hope that can track what happens on the far edges of the possible worlds that you yourself do not even know are there. In a very remote possible world you will lose everything, even your ability to think as you do currently — “even the concepts with which we understand ourselves and the world may collapse.”⁶⁸ Radical hope tracks even this possibility and still finds that there is reason not to lose all hope.

In a similar way, in terms of the relation between specific hopes and fundamental hope, Williams’s fundamental Christian hope is that even if *every* specific hope were to fail to come to pass, there is something — the possibility of an “overflow of presence”, the possibility of resurrection — that would remain. We find something of this sentiment in the penultimate verse of Emily Brontë’s *No Coward Soul is Mine*:

Though earth and moon were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be
And Thou wert left alone
Every Existence would exist in thee.⁶⁹

65 If my title plays with Rowan Williams’ *Grace* and Bernard Williams’ *Shame* in evoking the first kind of necessity, I enjoy also the fact that the “rigid designators” of Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* speak to the second kind of necessity.

66 Lear, *Radical Hope*, 26.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 120.

69 Emily Brontë, “No Coward Soul is Mine”. In *The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë*, ed. C. W. Hatfield (Columbia Univ. Press, 1995), 243.

Hope as a saturated phenomenon is ultimately not inferential or probabilistic in the ways that Solnit's hope is. In taking itself to be responsive to what is already there, 'hidden' in ordinary perception, it is not vulnerable to a shift in the distribution of successes and failures. What this kind of hope does require, however, is the right kind of attentiveness to reality as an 'icon' rather than an 'idol'. This, then, is a vulnerability of a different kind, tied to our willingness to embrace the sacramental imagination.

VII. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have drawn out two distinct accounts of fundamental hope from Solnit and Williams. Both offer thoughtful and systematic understandings of what might ground our basic disposition to the world as hopeful or hopeless. Both offer a warranted way of thinking about how specific hopes can be oriented within the context of a more fundamental disposition of hope. The accounts are not necessarily in competition with each other in every way, in that both identify forms of epistemic uncertainty that may co-exist in some way: in different contexts we may derive hope from the unknowability of whether future events will come to pass *and* on the trusted excessive goodness of the world. As *worldviews*, however — namely as *total* accounts which purport to give an ultimate reason for fundamental hope — they are mutually exclusive. Each account offers a fundamental hope which frames “how things hang together” in a different way, and so offers different reasons for ultimately trusting the universe. Whether we respond as disciples of Solnit or of Williams, then, I have argued, will change what and how we do art, activism, and indeed all forms of action.

I have tried to show that both accounts are well thought out and internally coherent. Both speak to the existential predicament that human beings face and offer a way of attending to the world realistically, in a way that is fundamentally hopeful. In addition, both offer ways of understanding how and why we might act as a result of our fundamental hope. This attentiveness and conception of agency is different in each case, however. Solnit proposes attentiveness to the arbitrary and the unexpected, and offers a hope-driven agency that sets its own goals and casts them into the void opened up by possibility. Williams proffers attentiveness to the depths of the ordinary, and calls for a hope-filled activity which is an obedience to what the artist or the prophet in each of us sees in those depths.

In a nutshell, Solnit divorces hope and necessity, whereas Williams brings them together. I have argued that Williams's account makes better sense of the phenomenology of the necessitation of fundamental hope via the sacramental imagination, and that insofar as hope and necessity are brought together, this provides a true "anchor of the soul."^{70,71}

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70 Hebrews 6:19 (NRSV).

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