

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HOPE AND OPTIMISM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH FAITH

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Abstract

Philosophical discussions about 'hope and optimism' have been recorded throughout the history of philosophy across all philosophical traditions, but these topics were not paid as much attention as the topics like 'belief and desire'. However, there were some exceptions, like Italian philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), German Marxist philosopher Ernst Simon Bloch (1885-1977), French Philosopher Gabriel Honoré Marcel (1889-1973), etc., who acknowledged that hope is an important factor in human motivation, religious beliefs, and politics. They regarded 'hope' as an attitude in believing that certain action will result in a positive result. Hope is of two types, (i) a simple desire which is considered possible for which no action is needed, and (ii) a resolve to set oneself upon, pursuing a desired result, hoping that it will be accomplished. The expected result is treated as an object of hope. The words 'hope', and 'optimism' are used interchangeably by people, however, these are distinct from each other. A person can hope for a miraculous cure of his ailment, but he may not be optimistic about it as the evidence in front of him is contrary to his expectations. Therefore, it is said that hope is contrary to practical reasoning, but it works as a motivating factor for a person to involve in a hopeful activity. It is argued that hope could be rational and irrational. Similar is the case with optimism. The irrational optimism is known as 'optimism bias', which is fantasizing about a positive outcome by entertaining the feelings of irrational anticipation. All related issues, in this context, including the Islamic perspective of hope, have been discussed in this paper to help people to be objective in their actions and be motivated in pursuit of their goals in life.

Keywords – Hope, Optimism, Faith, Philosophy, Islam

Different opinions about hope

(i) Philosophy

The ancient Greek scholars used the word 'elpis' for hope. This word is found in the poetry of Hesiod, who is believed to have lived during (750 - 650 BCE). He was contemporary of famous Greek poet Homer.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) mentioned 'hope' in his famous work 'Nicomachean Ethics' describing that 'a brave man has hopeful disposition while the coward is a pessimistic person. Dinesh philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1885) wrote in his work 'The Works of Love', 'to hope, is to act as if you await the possibility of good, and to fear it, is to act as if you await the possibility of evil.' Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) wrote, 'only for the sake of the hopeless ones, have we been given hope.' German Marxist philosopher Ernst Simon Bloch (1885-1977) wrote in his book 'The Principles of Hope' 'what really matters, is to learn how to hope.' German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) adopted a complex view of 'hope and reason'. He wrote in his work 'Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View', 'hope is an unexpected offering of the prospect of immeasurable good fortune'. Italian philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and French Philosopher Gabriel Honoré Marcel (1889-1973) acknowledged that hope is an important factor in human motivation, religious beliefs, and politics.

The above are the examples of philosophers who regarded hope as a positive attitude. There were many philosophers who regarded hope as a negative attitude. Like, Plato (428 – 348 BCE), the student of Socrates (470–399 BCE), wrote in his work 'Timaeus', 'gods are mindless advisers who instill fear and naive hope'. German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900 CE) in his work 'Human all too human' wrote 'the deity Zeus intended that man, notwithstanding the evils oppressing him, should continue to live and not rid himself of life, but keep on making himself miserable. For this purpose,

he bestowed 'hope' upon man, which is, in truth, the greatest of evils, for it lengthens the ordeal of man'. In another work 'The Gay Science', Nietzsche wrote 'hope is the rainbow over the cascading stream of life, swallowed up a hundred times by the mist.' Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) in his work 'Ethics' wrote, 'hope is nothing but an unpredictable joy which has arisen from the mental image of a future whose outcome is doubted.'

(ii) Psychology

Systematic studies on 'hope' were carried out by Psychologists and psychoanalysts during the middle of 20th Century. In these studies, 'hope' was observed as a mental process of the sense of successful determination (agency) which is based on the awareness of an outcome which is important for a person (agent) to achieve, and it has a certain likelihood of achievement. Currently, this understanding is predominant in the psychological literature about hope.

Rand and Cheavens, in their 2009 study defined 'hope' in a goal-setting framework. They observed that there are two major, interconnected aspects of hope as follows.

(i) It is fueled by the perception of successful agency (determination) related to goals. The agency component refers to a sense of successful determination in meeting goals in the past, present, and future.

(ii) It is influenced by the perceived availability of successful pathways towards goals.

American Psychologist Charles Richard Snyder (1944-2006) and others developed several scales of hope like 'Adult hope scale' and 'State hope scale', etc., in which optimism is differentiated from hope, by linking 'hope' to belief about self-effectiveness. Optimism is treated as a generalized expectation about positive outcomes.

These scales are widely accepted and experimented all over the world. However, these have been criticized by many psychologists saying that the perception of 'agency' (successful

determination) in these scales is related to the past and future, which amounts to general trait of hopefulness rather than specific outcomes.

(iii) Political Philosophy

Politicians have used 'hope' to motivate people, and to mislead them, for their political gains. There are many examples in the history of the world in this context.

German political philosopher Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802 –1861) wrote, hope can play three distinctive roles in politics, (i) it is valuable if it becomes a motivating force for the people to achieve their desired results, (ii) it is fundamental for politics to be successful as citizens will only act together politically if they have civic hope, and regard each other as a source of potential benefit, and (iii) it plays a justifying role for enacting certain policies, which can publicly be justified, by public support.

Hope has an intrinsic value in bringing peace to a warring country. Promotion and engagement in positive and constructive activities in a society, with the hope to bring prosperity and peace, often has positive effects in the long run. Hope is also useful in holding on to the democratic ideals by the masses, particularly when a tyrant takes over the reins of a country.

(iv) Hope vs Virtue

Some philosophers say that hope is a political virtue. German Professor Darrell Moellendorf of Goethe University, Frankfurt, says that hope can be virtuous, if it guides our plans and actions. Hope in the formation of just political institutions helps people in overcoming injustice. Hope can also support individual and collective confidence of people in establishing a just society. In this case hope is a democratic virtue.

Christopher Bobier of the Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, USA argues that hope is an emotion, a passion, and virtue is not passion. To consider hope as valuable in certain ways is not enough to claim it is a virtue as virtues are complex traits of character. If we accept 'hope' as virtue, then we will have to accept that other

valuable emotions like fear, anger, etc., as virtues. In addition, virtue is part of ethics consisting of (i) moral character, (ii) deontology (rules and duties) and (iii) consequentialism (consequences of actions) which is different from the emotion of hope.

(v) Rational vs Irrational hope

It is observed that philosophers have varied and opposing opinions about hope, like it is (i) an attitude, (ii) a belief about self-effectiveness, (iii) an emotion (iv) a passion, (v) a virtue, (vi) an evil, (vii) unpredictable joy. etc. To rationalize these opinions, we have briefly discussed below what is rational and irrational hope.

(a) When we analyze the nature of hope, we understand that hope is of two types, (i) a simple desire for which no action is considered necessary, and (ii) a resolve to set oneself upon, pursuing a desired result, hoping that it will be accomplished.

It is the first type of desire, a wish for something to happen on its own, can be regarded as irrational hope. In such a situation, the person is wishing that someone else will accomplish his desired objective. This kind of desire is nothing but wishful thinking.

(b) Hope based on desire, fantasies, and relentless longing without attempting to pursue the objectives, is a biased hope. Passively hoping that a desired outcome will appear by itself is like abandoning the responsibility of working to achieve it. In this case, the person is giving a message to himself that he cannot do anything about it. When a person gives up himself into the hands of others, it means that he is surrendering the outcome of his hope which is surely doomed. This kind of hope is a tool of self-deception.

(c) It is claimed that rational hope is based on reason and logic which is assessed as per the principles of validity. Therefore, hope based on just a feeling without evidence and/or possibility is treated as irrational hope. Some philosophers disagree and argue that if hope without evidence and possibility is treated as irrational, then how come inventions and new discoveries were made

after hundreds of trials, setbacks, just based on hope? It is reported that Edison invented bulb after 1000 trials based on sheer hope, perseverance, and hard work. Therefore, hope is a positive and essential motivating force in achieving desired objectives. When we look at the history, it looks hope is woven into the fabric of human nature.

(d) It is important that we question ourselves, does hoping for something make a legitimate sense. It is important that hope is based on rationality of hard work and expecting that the object of hope is possible.

(e) The greater are our expectations about the future, the greater will be the disappointment in case these expectations were not fulfilled. Therefore, it is important that we consciously restrain our future expectations to manageable level. Develop perseverance and work towards fulfilling the expectations despite hinderances.

(f) It is important to develop a reasonably flexible mindset, avoiding rigidity, about the outcome of our efforts. We should always give margins for unexpected eventualities in life which are common phenomenon in everyday life.

(g) When hope is repeatedly defeated, we become vulnerable to hopelessness and despair. It is important that we develop perseverance to accept the reality and stay strong and learn how to adopt to changes to achieve our desired objectives. To stay on top of things, it is important to independently take the responsibility of our actions, irrespective of their results. It is important that we attempted, and not just got involved in wishful thinking. Congratulate yourself for all the effort, perseverance, and zeal you have shown on the way.

(h) Hope is an important aspect which can be realistically rational in cases of panics and depressions because it takes us out of difficult situations. In such situations, hope gives us a direction and control in helping us come out of that situation.

Islamic perspective on hope

Muslims believe in Allah who is the creator of this Cosmos and who sustains it. Muslims start their works by the recitation of بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ [In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate and Most Merciful]. Meaning, they believe in Allah who is most compassionate and most merciful. Therefore, to hope that Allah will listen to their calls and supplications is inbuilt in Muslims' nature.

The Quran says – 'He (Prophet Ibrahim - عليه السلام) said, 'who can lose hope in the mercy of his Lord except those who have lost the straight path? (Al Hijr - 56).

Muslims believe that if we follow the guidance in the Quran and in Prophetic traditions, we will be rewarded abundantly in this world as well as in the Hereafter. To believe in the world after death is part of Muslim faith. The person who followed a virtuous path in this life will be rewarded with the permanent stay in the Paradise where he will have all comforts of life at an unimaginable scale. This is the reason Muslims are taught that they should never despair even in most difficult moments.

The Prophet (s) said, *'if you all depend on Allah with due reliance, He would certainly give you provision as He gives to birds who go forth hungry in the morning and return with a full belly at dusk.'* (Tirmidhi).

Muslims believe that all their supplications are answered by their Lord.

It is in the Quran, 'your Lord has ordained, call upon Me, I will accept your supplication' (Ghafir - 60).

Thus, Quran establishes that all supplications are answered by Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ). We have briefly discussed below how these supplications are answered by Allah.

(a) If the supplication is, as per the program of Allah in this Cosmos, and the time is also suitable, the supplication is granted right away.

(b) Sometimes the supplications are granted after a delay when the time is appropriate.

(c) Sometimes, a better thing is given than the one asked by the servant.

(d) If the supplication is not answered in this life, he will be granted in abundance in life after death.

It is in Prophet's (s) Hadith - Abu Sa'eed (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) said, *'there is no Muslim who does not offer any supplication in which there is no sin or severing of family ties but Allah will give him one of three things in return, (i) either He will answer his supplication sooner, (ii) or he will store it for him in the Hereafter, (iii) or He will divert an equivalent evil away from him because of it.'* The companions said, *'then we will do a lot of supplications'.* The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) said, *'Allah is more generous.'* (Ahmad)

Conclusion

We discussed different opinions of philosophers, psychologists, scholars, etc., about hope. We analyzed their opinions in the section of 'rational and irrational hope'. Then we provided the Islamic perspective hope. With the above discussions we concluded that hope is a positive aspect of human character. Rational hope is based on the trust in God which should be complimented by human endeavor in achieving desired objectives. Trust in God should be complimented by action. When a flood warning is given to a city, it is important that we pray our Lord to save us and at the same time move out of the city while the time permits. However, there are certain occasions when a human being become helpless and is caught unawares. In this situation, prayers are the only source that provides comfort and gives us the courage to face the eventuality boldly. At such situations, Muslims believe that God's help comes from unknown sources to take them out of difficult situations. If they are destined to be affected by that eventuality, Muslims believe that they will be rewarded abundantly in their life after death as their prayers will never go unanswered.

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About the Author



Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian, and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history, and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.