The Oxford Compendium of Hope

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Hope in Ancient Greece and Rome

G. Scott Gravlee

The ancient Mediterranean world was complex and diverse, and the views of hope encountered there are a reflection of this. Hope can be found in ancient Greek and Roman sources that span the range of human expression, from dramatic comedy and tragedy, poetry, and philosophy, to coinage and temples, inscriptions, and historical narrative. From this wealth of sources, a substantial literature has emerged that attempts to articulate ancient understandings of hope. Occasionally, this literature reinforces common narratives—for example, that the Greeks were distrustful of hope, or that the Romans honored and admired it. Such broad claims are not without evidence, but part of my aim here will be to illustrate how individuals and communities held more complex attitudes.

In doing this, my own survey will necessarily be selective. First, the chapter will be held together by themes derived primarily from philosophical texts and by the application of those themes to areas in which hope played a significant practical role (such as military conflict and medicine). This approach will provide a thread of continuity to the discussion and will facilitate connections to current philosophical work on hope.[1] Second, and in line with the practical roles just mentioned, the chapter will focus primarily on normative evaluations of hope: whether hope is viewed positively or negatively and under what conditions, along with the relationships of hope to other normative categories such as rationality, courage, and motivation. Finally, I will explore some sources in more detail because they are said to embody a particularly positive or negative outlook on hope (e.g., Plato and Thucydides, respectively), and I will try to uncover some of the complexity embedded within these outlooks.

Besides being open to the complexity of the topic itself, a study of hope in the ancient Mediterranean must also acknowledge complexities of language and meaning. In particular, the Greek term *elpis*, which often signifies hope, is also used to indicate expectation or confidence, disinterested calculations regarding the future, or even fears regarding negative outcomes, none of which we would typically describe in terms of hope. Moreover, it is not always clear what we ourselves mean by hope. In the late 20th century, philosophers such as Day (1969,

[1] For discussions of hope in ancient poetry, drama, history, art, and epigraphic sources that could not be considered here, see especially the diverse contributions in Kazantzidis and Spatharas (2018a). See also Caston and Kaster (2016, Part 1) and Cairns (2020, pp. 28–30).

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1970, 1991) and Downie (1963) proposed what is now referred to as the "standard" account: Hope is the combination of a desire with the belief that attaining the object of desire is neither certain nor impossible. However, the early 21st century has seen some critique and modification of this definition (Blöser, 2019; Martin, 2014; Meirav, 2009; Pettit, 2004; among others), and there is ongoing discussion of the nature and value of hope.

Given these ancient and contemporary variations, clarity, flexibility, and a sensitivity to context will be virtues when investigating hope in the diverse settings of the ancient world. While keeping this in mind, in what follows I will ordinarily employ the criteria of the standard account in order to differentiate hope from phenomena such as expectation and fear and to more closely align the discussion with some common modern intuitions regarding hope. However, nothing in what follows is intended to insist on specific necessary and sufficient conditions for hope, and, in the end, an openness to broader conceptualizations of hope may enable ancient sources to provide otherwise unexpected insights.

Early Greek Literature and Philosophy

It is commonly asserted that the Greeks viewed hope in a largely negative light, more as a perilous vulnerability or weakness than as a virtue or a strength. There is an element of truth to this, but a more complete picture illuminates an ambivalence in ancient attitudes. This can be seen already in one of the earliest Greek references to hope, Hesiod's account of the story of Pandora (*Works and Days*, ca. 700 B.C.E./1988, Lines 50–105). Modern scholars remain divided on the question of whether *elpis*—personified as a kind of spirit—remains in Pandora's jar as a blessing and a comfort or as an evil that exacerbates human suffering.[2] But given the connections in the story between gain and loss, blessing and curse, it seems likely that hope plays a central role precisely because of its ambiguity, i.e., its links to *both* suffering and comfort. This ambiguity or duality is characteristic of many references to hope in Greek literature (Cairns, 2016), where the comfort of hope is often paired with its unreliability. So Sophocles writes in *Antigone* that "wandering hope brings help to many men, but others she tricks" (441 B.C.E./1954, Lines 615–616), and Bacchylides of Ceos advises mortals to hold a dual view of the future, as both fragile and full of promise (468 B.C.E./1991, Lines 75–82).

Hope is also present, although infrequently, in the fragments of early Greek philosophers, where we also encounter attempts to identify the conditions under which it is appropriate to hope. Democritus (ca. 420 B.C.E./1948), for example, repeatedly emphasizes a criterion of rationality: "The hopes [*elpides*] of right-thinking men are attainable, but those of the unintelligent are impossible" (68B58; see also B185, B292). In contrast, Heraclitus (ca. 500 B.C.E./2010), characteristically embracing paradox and opposition, depicts the tensions within hope:

[2] For discussion, see Wallace (2013) and Verdenius (1985, pp. 66–71).

"Unless he hopes for the unhoped for [*elpêtai anelpiston*], he will not find it" (10.39/22B18).[3] Here, in addition to suggesting that hope is important to human endeavor, Heraclitus seems to approve of hopes even—or perhaps especially—if they are based on a trust that enables them to extend beyond what is rationally expected (Post, 2009).

Plato

The Evaluation of Hope in Plato

Hope is important in the narrative context of several of the Socratic dialogues, and *elpis*—in its variety of meanings—occasionally enters Plato's dialogues as part of the philosophical discussion. In the narrative context, *elpis* is commonly embedded in expressions of motivation and desire—and so is more akin to hope than to mere expectation. In this context, and with Socrates as a model, Plato typically presents hopefulness in a positive light.

The clearest examples of this are near the end of the *Apology* and in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates expresses his hopes for a good afterlife. Responding to his death sentence in the *Apology*, Socrates declares that "there is much hope [*pollê elpis*] that death is a good" (40c), and he encourages the jury to "be of good hope [*euelpidas*] as regards death" (41c).[4] This positive language of hope continues in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates argues that

> there is much hope [*pollê elpis*] that on arriving where I am going, if anywhere, I shall acquire what has been our chief preoccupation in our past life, so that the journey that is now ordered for me is full of good hope [*agathês elpidos*].
>
> (67b–c; see also 63c, 63e–64a, 68a, 114c)

Although this Socratic hope includes mythological or religious elements, it is better characterized as a distinctively philosophical hope, one which Socrates has cultivated throughout his life and which is oriented toward the fulfillment of philosophical desires for knowledge or wisdom—"our chief preoccupation." In the *Phaedo* (63e–68c), Socrates is explicit about the philosophical nature of his hope, but additional instances of such philosophical hope can be found elsewhere in Plato. For example, at *Republic* 453d, Socrates admits he was afraid of having to justify the social arrangements of the ideal polis, and he compares this philosophical challenge to the predicament of Arion, who was said to have been rescued from the sea by a dolphin: "We must swim too, and try to save ourselves from the sea of argument, hoping [*elpizontas*] that a dolphin will pick us up or that we'll be rescued by some other desperate means." Although Socrates recognizes that this hope

[3] The connections to seeking and striving in both Democritus and Heraclitus suggest that *elpis* here is more than mere expectation (but cf. Wheelwright, 1959, pp. 131–132, 137–138).

[4] Translations of Plato follow those in Cooper (1997), with occasional modification. Elements of the following discussions of Plato and Aristotle are based on Gravlee (2000, 2020).

is desperate, it is clear that it nevertheless has positive value, spurring Socrates and his companions on to difficult philosophical work that they might otherwise have avoided out of fear or faintheartedness.[5] In the midst of philosophical difficulty, Socrates consistently embraces an attitude of philosophical hope, carefully balanced between resignation and presumption (see also *Greater Hippias* 294e–295b; *Sophist* 250e–251a).

And yet, Socrates's philosophical hopes are rarely, if ever, fulfilled, and so it might seem that Socratic hopes are a poor guide to living well. Even in the *Phaedo*, where we otherwise have a positive portrayal of Socratic hopes, Plato recounts that Socrates was deceived by the "wonderful hope [*thaumastês elpidos*]" (98b) he had concerning the writings of Anaxagoras,[6] and the *Euthyphro* memorably ends with Socrates's cry of dashed hopes (*elpidos megalês*, 15e–16a). Plato is not naive about the fact that philosophical hopes are often not fulfilled. Why then would Plato portray them in a positive light?

An answer may emerge if we consider passages where Plato is critical of hope and compare them with Plato's portrayal of Socrates. I will mention two passages here. First, at *Timaeus* 69d–e, Plato pairs hope (*elpida*) with passion (*thumos*: anger, spiritedness). Both are distanced from reason (conceptually and physically), but they differ in their responsiveness to persuasion. Whereas passion (or anger) is a stubborn emotional state ("hard to assuage," 69d) which isolates us from outside influences, hopes are easily influenced or "led astray" (69d), leaving us susceptible to manipulation.[7] Second, in Book Nine of the *Laws* Plato pairs hope with opinion (*elpidôn kai doxês*) and connects them both with ignorance (863b–864b; see also *Philebus* 12d).[8]

In contrast, Socratic hopes are more closely connected to rationality (*logon*, *Phaedo* 63e) and reflection (*ennoêsômen*, *Apology* 40c). Throughout the *Phaedo*, Socrates consistently ties his hopes to reason and argument in an attempt to mount a defense (*apologêsasthai*) for his hope (63b–c; see also 63e–64a). This reasoning is not conclusive (63c)—hence the need for hope—but it is grounded in the arguments of the dialogue. Further, Socratic philosophical hopes are directed at knowledge of the good (they have not been "led astray"), and they are motivational, as at *Republic* 453d (discussed above). Of these latter two attributes, one without the other will not be enough to merit a positive evaluation. On the one hand, when embodied in a gifted and powerful young person, motivational hopes that are misdirected into "impractical expectations [*amêchanou elpidos*]" can be

[5] So also, in a military context, the Athenians are sustained by the desperate hopes described at *Laws* 699a–c.

[6] Notably, Socrates's experience with Anaxagoras did not cause him to give up his philosophical hopes but to transfer them to a new thesis centered on the Forms (*elpizô*, 100b).

[7] Because an anticipation in which we have no emotional stake is unlikely to be easily led astray as Plato describes, *elpis* here suggests hope rather than a merely cognitive expectation.

[8] The association of hope with passion in the *Timaeus* and with opinion in the *Laws* may reflect Greek ambivalence on whether hope is more like an emotion or a cognitive state. On this issue, see Kazantzidis and Spatharas (2018b) and Fulkerson (2015, p. 68, 2017, pp. 209–211). For further discussion of hope in the *Laws*, see Cairns (2020, pp. 19–22, 2022, pp. 53–56).

the root cause of "the greatest evils to cities and individuals" (*Republic* 494c, 495b; see also *Letter Eight* 353d).[9] On the other hand, merely hoping for a genuine good without being motivated to act, when action and choice are possible, can be a moral failing (*Republic* 425e–426a).

Thus, it appears that Plato has grounds to present even unfulfilled philosophical hopes in a positive light, when they are rationally defensible, oriented toward the good, and motivational (see also Gravlee, 2020, pp. 10–12; for contemporary discussion, see Pettit, 2004). In addition, as Meirav (2009) has observed, hopefulness is often dependent on one's attitudes toward "external factors." To some extent, Plato's emphasis on the intrinsic value of a philosophical life minimizes the role of external factors in a well-lived life (*Apology* 30c–d, 41c–d; *Republic* 444d–445b). However, where external factors play a role, Plato can view the fostering of hope more favorably than some other Greek writers because he has a greater trust in external factors such as the gods (*Republic* 379a–c; *Apology* 41a, 41d; *Phaedo* 63b–c; *Philebus* 40b) or even the power of reason (*Phaedo* 89c–91c).[10]

The Significance of Plato's *Philebus*

The *Philebus* contains Plato's most extensive philosophical discussion of *elpis*. The main topic of the dialogue is the place of pleasure in the good life, and Plato introduces *elpis* as part of his discussion of true and false pleasures (31b ff., with *elpis* at 32c, 36a–b, 39e–40a, 47c). For Plato, pain involves the disruption of a creature's natural harmony or balance, often described as a process of emptying, while pleasure arises from the corresponding restoration or filling (31d). Simple examples of pain include hunger and thirst, while pleasures are those processes (eating, drinking) that restore an organism's balance (31e–32a). Plato then introduces *elpis* as a special case: a pleasure that occurs *prior* to the process of restoration. As Socrates paradoxically puts it, "the hope [*elpizomenon*] before the actual pleasure will be pleasant" (32c).

Plato explains the pleasure of *elpis* by an appeal to memory (33c–36c). After memory preserves a sensory perception of pleasure, the soul is able to reproduce that perception by recollecting (*anamimnêskô*, 34b) what has been preserved, thereby producing an experience of pleasure independently of current bodily sensations. For Plato, all desires for fulfillment, including those associated with hope and anticipation, are directed and made pleasant by a remembered experience of filling, a past point of "contact" with what would restore our current emptiness or disruption (35b–d). In this way, present hopes and expectations can be pleasant prior to any future fulfillment.

Among Plato's references to *elpis*, the *Philebus* has received the most attention. However, much scholarly discussion in the latter half of the 20th century

[9] Compare with the "good hope [*kalês elpidos*]" (*Republic* 496e) of those who retain their philosophical direction.

[10] On this point, see also Cairns (2016, pp. 39, 43).

focused on Plato's arguments concerning true and false pleasures (Frede, 1985, 1992; Gosling, 1959; Penner, 1970), and the resulting discussion of *elpis* was somewhat incidental. It is only recently that *elpis* has become a primary area of focus (Cairns, 2020; Forte, 2016; Gravlee, 2020; Vogt, 2017), but with this focus has come disagreement over whether *elpis* represents "our" concept of hope and, therefore, over what the *Philebus* can contribute to our understanding of hope. Frede, for example, restricts the meaning of *elpis* in the *Philebus* to "clear expectation" and "certainty" (1985, pp. 165, 170; see also Frede, 1992, p. 445, but contrast Vogt, 2017, p. 45), which, some would argue, is not really *hope* at all, or at least not in its primary sense. More recently, Cairns (2020, 2022) has argued that, although *elpis* most likely does represent hope in some places in the *Philebus* (12c–d, 39e, 40a, 61b), the main argument concerning true and false pleasures contains significant tensions among the various uses of *elpis*, and "this is a sign that the presentation of *elpis* in *Philebus* has little to tell us about the moral psychology of hope" (2020, p. 19).

While it is true that the *Philebus* does not offer a full and systematic Platonic theory of hope, it does represent a significant attempt to fit *elpis* into a broader set of psychological concepts, and the connections that Plato makes among *elpis*, memory, desire, and pleasure can still serve to provide insight into *hope*. The connection to memory, for example, is equally applied by Plato to "every impulse, and desire, and the rule over the whole animal" (35d), as well as to more cognitive aspects of *elpis*, such as *logoi* and *doxa* (38b, 38e–39a, 40a). Therefore, regardless of one's particular interpretation of *elpis*, the breadth of these connections makes it fair to say that *hope* depends on memory (as illustrated also at *Laws* 699a–c). This is significant not only for the psychology of personal hopes but also for understanding the dynamics of social hopes, where remembrance of the past—expressed in stories and histories, and embodied in museums, memorials, and rituals—is often fueled by a desire to instill hope for the future (see also on Thucydides below). Likewise, the *Philebus* also supports the view that hope is a pleasure (Protarchus's initial claim at 36a notwithstanding) and the view that hope involves the use of mental imagery (a "painter" in the mind, 39b–e). These are important claims that have been both disputed and supported by contemporary scholars of hope.[11]

Aristotle

Several themes in Plato's *Philebus* recur in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Like Plato, Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* defines pleasure as a movement from a disruption or compulsion to a normal or natural state (*Rhetoric* 1.11, 1369b33–1370a17; but cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* [*NE*] 7.12, 1152b34–1153a17 and *NE* 10.4, 1174a12–b7), and, like Plato, Aristotle recognizes that pleasure and pain can be oriented toward the

[11] Stockdale (2020) argues that some forms of hope can be "*entirely* negatively valenced" (p. 121, emphasis in original). On the importance of mental imaging (and its relation to pleasure), see Bovens (1999, pp. 673–676).

present through sensation, the past through memory, and the future through *elpis* (*Rhetoric* 1.11, 1370a27–35).[12] Aristotle also echoes Socrates's claim that hope is a pleasure even when we are currently in pain (*Philebus* 36a–b; *Rhetoric* 1.11, 1370b7–28). This coexistence of a present pain with a past or future pleasure lies at the core of Aristotle's characterization of "most of our desires" (1370b16) and notably even places *elpis* at the center of emotions such as anger, which involves both the current pain at being slighted and the pleasure of expecting or hoping for revenge (*Rhetoric* 2.2, 1378a32–b9). As in the *Philebus* (39b–40b), this expectation or hope involves a process of visualization, picturing, or imagination (in Aristotle involving *phantasia*) that is dependent on sensation (*Rhetoric* 1.11, 1370a28; 2.5, 1383a17; *On the Soul* 3.3, 428b10–429a9).[13]

As with other Greek sources, the wide semantic range of the term *elpis* raises the question of when and to what extent Aristotle's discussions of *elpis* can illuminate phenomena related to hope. For example, in *Rhetoric* 1.11, Aristotle discusses the pleasures of memory and *elpis*, but both of these can also be painful or neutral, and *elpis* is used in all of these ways throughout the corpus (compare *NE* 9.4, 1166a26 with *NE* 9.4, 1166b16 and *On Memory* 449b11–12, 449b25–27). This suggests that Aristotle conceives of *elpis* not fundamentally as hope for a perceived good but as a neutral cognitive or imaginative faculty (Kazantzidis & Spatharas, 2018b, pp. 11–12), an ability to create in our minds a weakened form of sensation (*Rhetoric* 1.11, 1370a29) and to "project it to the future" (Kazantzidis & Spatharas, 2018b, p. 12), with an affective aspect that will vary with the context or with what is being imagined.

Elpis appears as something more akin to hope (as visualizing a desired future *good*) when Aristotle uses modified forms such as *euelpis* (commonly translated as "hopeful," but often closer to optimism or confidence). Regarding *euelpis*, Aristotle exhibits Greek cautiousness. For example, throughout his discussion of the virtue of courage at *NE* 3.6–3.9 (see also *Eudemian Ethics* [*EE*] 3.1), Aristotle notes that *euelpis* can motivate actions that appear similar to courageous actions. However, such actions are based on optimism or confidence in the circumstances or in one's own skill,[14] rather than on a courageous determination to face a known danger for the sake of acting nobly, and once it is recognized that the situation is not what was expected, those who depend on this kind of optimistic or confident hope "run away" (*NE* 3.8, 1116b17, 1117a15, 1117a25). *Euelpis* in these contexts is neither a reliable basis for virtuous action nor is it a kind of hope that sustains us in difficult circumstances.

[12] On similarities to the *Philebus*, see also Knuuttila and Sihvola (1998, p. 9). Translations of Aristotle will follow those in Barnes (1984) or Freese (1926), with occasional modification.

[13] The pleasure of expectant imagining is akin to our experience in dreams (*Rhetoric* 2.2, 1378b7–9). Compare with Diogenes Laertius, who reports of Aristotle, "He was asked to define hope [*elpis*], and he replied, 'It is a waking dream'" (ca. 225 C.E./1925, 5.1.18). For further discussion of mental imagery in both Plato and Aristotle, see Moss (2012).

[14] Such confidence may stem from experience and expertise (*NE* 3.6, 1115b3–4; *NE* 3.8, 1116b3–23), from previous good fortune (*NE* 3.8, 1117a9–12; *EE* 3.1, 1229a19–20), or from ignorance of danger (*NE* 3.8, 1117a23–27).

Euelpis is not a virtue for Aristotle, but this does not mean that it has no value in Aristotle's approach to the good life. In fact, Aristotle does connect *euelpis* with courage both at *NE* 3.7, 1116a3, where also we find cowardice connected to despondency (*duselpis*), and at *Rhetoric* 2.12, 1389a26–28, where Aristotle associates *euelpides* with both confidence and courage.[15] Aristotle's view appears to be that, while not all *euelpis* is courageous, courage does imply a kind of confident hopefulness.[16]

If we wish to find in Aristotle instances of a hope that is both less certain or confident and more sustaining, we may return to the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle references an *elpis* that occurs together not only with confidence (2.5, 1383a14–17) but also with fear and deliberation. So, at *Rhetoric* 2.5, 1383a3–8, Aristotle claims that for someone to feel fear,

> it is necessary that some hope [*tina elpida*] of salvation remain, concerning which they strive. And the sign of this is that fear makes one deliberate [*phobos bouleutikous poiei*], and yet no one deliberates concerning things that are not hoped for [*tôn anelpistôn*].

This passage is part of a larger argument, where Aristotle claims that people do not feel fear either when they are "in the midst of great prosperity" or when they "have grown accustomed to terrible things, already having suffered everything and being coldly indifferent to the future" (1383a1–4). Somewhere between these two states of confidence and resignation is a place where both hope (*tina elpida*) and fear remain, and it is here that deliberation, choice, and action can take place. Importantly, this is a sense of *elpis* that many might consider most properly "hope," an *elpis* that is uncertain, perhaps even desperate, and that sustains us as a necessary condition for our deliberations and strivings.

For Aristotle, good deliberation is important not only when there is fear of immediate danger but also as a regular part of both becoming and being a virtuous person (*NE* 6.5, 6.9, 6.12–13, throughout). Recognition of this role for deliberation implies recognition of a similarly significant role for hope in Aristotle's overall approach to a flourishing human life (Gravlee, 2000). Heartened by an underlying hope, and guided by practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), good deliberation helps us become more fully virtuous by recommending actions that will shape our "natural" capacities for virtue into more established character traits (*NE* 6.12, 1144b4–7).

A number of recent scholars have suggested models of hope that draw from an Aristotelian framework. Some of these approaches begin from the observation that hope occupies an intermediate space between confidence and resignation,

[15] Aristotle also links *euelpis* with the natural "high-mindedness" (*megalopsychia*) of youth (*Rhetoric* 2.12, 1389a16–34). This natural high-mindedness can develop into a central virtue, but it can also develop into arrogance and contempt (*NE* 4.3, 1124a20–b5; *Rhetoric* 2.5, 1383a1–4), thus highlighting one of the dangers of confident hope. For further discussion, see Gravlee (2000, pp. 473–477).

[16] Duff (1987, p. 10) suggests that a courageous person has a "*hopeful confidence* in the worth of her action" (emphasis in original) rather than in the likelihood of a good outcome.

much like an Aristotelian virtue, while other approaches have drawn from broader Aristotelian notions of character development, motivation, and human flourishing.[17] For example, Snow (2020) suggests ways in which hope develops from a natural virtue to a moral virtue, connecting virtuous hope with an orientation toward the good and with a flourishing life. Woolfrey (2016) also emphasizes the development of natural virtue and further argues that "it is out of hopefulness that the other virtues come" (p. 134). Reflecting an Aristotelian emphasis on upbringing as central to moral development (*NE* 10.9, throughout), Woolfrey argues that hope motivates a community to care for children in a way that instills hopefulness in the children themselves, which is "crucial to them maturing into ethical deliberators" (p. 134). Along other lines, Kontos (2021) has proposed an Aristotelian account of "justified hope" that "bridges the gap" (p. 422) between the reliability of "our own agency" (p. 426) and the uncertainty of moral luck.

Hope and Realism in Thucydides

In contrast with the "deeply optimistic" philosophy of Socrates and Plato, Thucydides's history of the Peloponnesian War, written roughly contemporaneously with the war itself, is often characterized as a "realist" history, indicative of Thucydides's negative attitude toward hope (Geuss, 2005, pp. 223–224; see also Lateiner, 2018, pp. 136–147; Tsoumpra, 2018). As Thucydides has the Athenians say during the Melian dialogue, "those who rely on hope [*elpis*] when they have other resources may be damaged but are not destroyed by it," but those who must stake everything on hope "see the truth only at the moment of disaster" (ca. 431–404 B.C.E./2013, 5.103). Here, and elsewhere (3.45, 4.108), Thucydides certainly presents a distrustful view of hope. However, further consideration suggests that Thucydides's overall attitude toward hope may be more nuanced.

The Melian dialogue itself can be used to illustrate this more complex understanding of hope. Although the Athenians disparaged Melian hopes as an unreliable basis for resisting Athenian power, these hopes were "not altogether irrational" (5.104). Even in the absence of hoped-for assistance from Sparta (5.104, 5.106, 5.108), the Melians withstood the Athenian siege for several months, making occasional successful counterattacks (5.115–116). Further, and importantly, the Melians were realistic in recognizing the difficulty of their situation (5.104; compare also Pettit, 2004, pp. 160–162), and so their hope was not only that they might prevail against the Athenians but also that they would retain their dignity and honor (something the Athenians tried to exclude from the conversation, 5.101): "For us to yield now would be to give up all hope [*anelpiston*] straightaway, but as long as we are taking action we may still hold up our heads in hope

[17] Snow (2020, p. 175), citing Govier (2011), notes the challenges in placing hope neatly as a mean between two extremes. See also the critique of hope as a mean, and as a moral virtue more generally, in Bobier (2018, esp. pp. 226–232).

[*stênai elpis orthôs*]" (5.102; see also 5.100). To some extent, this Melian hope was achievable regardless of the outcome of the siege, and it shares features with Aristotle's characterizations of hope and courage at *NE* 3.6–8. It was not the optimistic or confident hope that Aristotle attributes to sailors and trained mercenaries (*NE* 3.6, 1115a35–b4; 3.8, 1116b3–23), but it was a courageous hope in their ability to act for the sake of what is noble (*to kalon*, *NE* 3.7, 1115b12–13, 1115b20–24).

In the end, and despite the criticism of the Athenians, it is not clear that Thucydides himself wholly disapproves of the hopes of the Melians. Both sides of the dialogue provide a reasoned defense of their position, and Thucydides is willing to portray the Athenians as unjust (*ou dikaious*, 5.104), or at least as indifferent to traditional justice (5.89–90). Moreover, the hopes that Thucydides critiques throughout his history are typically of a different kind: overconfident and inflated by good fortune (as in Plato, *Republic* 494a–495b; Plato, *Letter Eight* 353d; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.5, 1383a1–4). In fact, the arc of Thucydides's overall narrative demonstrates that the Athenians are wrong about hope. Hope is most dangerous to people who *do* have resources, as evidenced by the hopes that preceded the disastrously overconfident Athenian expedition to Sicily (6.24, 6.31).[18]

Reflecting on Thucydides's overall project, Schlosser (2013) has argued that the act of writing history is itself an expression of Thucydides's own hopeful attitude toward the future. Thucydides states his purpose as writing an accurate history in order to be "useful [to] those who want to have a clear view of what . . . can be expected to happen again" (1.22). Like Plato in the *Philebus*, Thucydides sees responses to the future as connected to perceptions of the past, and he writes with the hope that people will use knowledge of the past to better prepare for the future. In this sense, the "realism" of Thucydides is intended to create the conditions for hope: "Despite its overarching tone of pessimistic realism," Schlosser argues, Thucydides's work "is also a hopeful history: it approaches human affairs with the hopes that it might inform and improve them (through exact knowledge of the past)" (2013, p. 179).[19]

Ancient Greek Medicine

Many people experience hope most profoundly in the context of health and medical care. Thucydides himself underscores the sustaining function of hope when he notes that hopelessness (*anelpiston*) was the "most terrible thing" about the Athenian plague because it led those who became ill to succumb more easily (ca. 431–404 B.C.E./2013, 2.51). It will therefore be worth saying something about hope in the context of ancient medicine. Medical practice during the classical Greek period incorporated two distinct approaches that complemented one

[18] See also Schlosser (2013, pp. 171–172), who observes in Thucydides (esp. 3.45) a connection between destructive hopes and inflated desires.

[19] For further discussion of *elpis* in Thucydides, see also Avery (1973) and Gervasi (1981).

another (Gorrini, 2005; Panagiotidou, 2016). One approach was based on a system of Asclepian healing temples, where a central element of therapy involved *incubation*—a patient sleeping in a sacred space in hopes of experiencing a divinely inspired dream that would move their treatment forward. A second approach was based on a more scientific or pragmatic attitude associated with the techniques of Hippocratic medicine.[20] These two approaches can be distinguished by the different ways they conceptualized and used *elpis* (Thumiger, 2016).

On the one hand, Hippocratic texts generally treat *elpis* from the physician's point of view, as a matter of correct prognosis.[21] Conceived of in this way, *elpis* "belongs to professional protocol, and is entirely unconcerned with the emotions of the sufferer" (Thumiger, 2016, p. 209). When a patient's hopes, fears, or related emotions are mentioned, it is typically as a set of symptoms to be managed, or as side effects of patient ignorance, rather than as legitimate emotional responses to suffering. In this way, Thumiger argues, Hippocratic medicine defined itself as a profession "via the subjugation of the patients' emotions to the intellectual authority of the doctor" (2016, p. 214), and *elpis*—here, more like expectation than hope—is treated as a matter of expert and objective calculation rather than as a matter of subjective emotion.

On the other hand, in recognition of the role of patient emotions in the healing process, the Asclepian healing temples were designed to foster and respond to the emotional hopes of patient-pilgrims. At the Asclepian complex at Epidauros, inscriptions were placed before the entrance to the incubation sanctuary, recounting stories of miraculous healings. Reading these narratives was meant to be part of a therapeutic process that engaged patient anxieties and "constructed" hopes in those seeking healing (Martzavou, 2012).[22] This was achieved partly by including descriptions of cases where healing occurred even for a patient who had doubts about the process or who did not have a traditional dream experience. Used this way, these inscriptions took practical advantage of the connection, already seen in Plato and Thucydides above, between representations of the past and hopes for the future. Narratives of the past—whether as cultural histories, individual memories, or even as myths and rumors (Martzavou, 2012, p. 195)—play an important role in the construction of hope. By presenting a desired outcome as possible (something similar having happened previously), such narratives can transform what might otherwise be an empty wish or despondent resignation into a potentially restorative hope.

Outside of medical practice itself, some representations of medicine in popular Greek culture also appeared to recognize the importance of a patient's emotional responses to the future. Thumiger (2016) notes that in the play *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus brings to humans not only the gift of a technical (and in this sense

[20] For the contrast, see the Hippocratic *The Sacred Disease*, esp. sections 1–6 (Jones, 1959, pp. 138–155).
[21] On the importance of correct prognosis, see the Hippocratic *Prognostic*, section 1, with instances of *elpis* in sections 7, 9, 15, 19, 22 (Jones, 1959).
[22] Martzavou (2012) includes 33 of the inscription stories as an appendix.

Hippocratic) style of medicine (Lines 476–483) but also the gift of "blind hopes" (*tuphlas elpidas*), which "cure" humans of the disease of foreseeing "their own deaths" (Aeschylus [?], ca. 450–430 B.C.E./1975, Lines 250–252). Here, "blind" hope can be contrasted with a Hippocratic *elpis* of prognosis and foresight, and the play appears to recognize that *elpis* as emotional hope—even when blind—can be a gift and even a medicine (*pharmakon*, Line 251). In this sense, the play portrays *elpis* as part of a patient's natural emotional response to illness, and as a potential therapy, rather than as a professional technique related to accurate prognoses.

Divergent Developments in Hellenistic Philosophy and Roman Public Life

The multifaceted approach to hope we have seen in classical Greece persisted in distinctive ways through the Hellenistic and Roman periods. So, although there is reason to characterize Epicurean and Stoic philosophies as cultivating largely negative attitudes toward hope, even here there is room for insight and variation.[23] At the same time, broader trends in Roman public religious and political culture were typically of a more positive nature.

Stoicism advocates a radically cognitive approach to the emotions. Emotions, as distinct from physiological responses or preliminary passions (*propatheiai*), are judgments about what is good or evil (Brennan, 1998, pp. 31–32). In making these judgments, a Stoic attempts to accept what is not in their control, bringing their mind into accordance with the rational governance of nature.[24] For example, since mortality is in accordance with human nature, death should not be judged as evil or as something to be feared. Thus the Stoic Epictetus (ca. 135 C.E./1948) advises that "if you embrace your child or your wife, [remember] that you embrace a human being, for then when they die you will not be distraught" (*Enchiridion* 3; see also Seneca, ca. 62–65 C.E./2015, *Letters* 104.11). In this sense, Epictetus counsels minimizing emotional investment in the future. Likewise, according to the Roman Stoic writer Seneca, we can avoid worry or fear about the future in "only one way—by not allowing our life to look to the future but gathering it into itself" (*Letters* 101.9).

For Seneca, fear and hope go together,[25] and so one way to reduce fear is to reduce hope. Quoting the Stoic Hecaton with approval, Seneca writes, "You will cease to fear, if you cease to hope [*sperare*]," explaining that

[23] There has been little scholarly work dedicated directly to the study of hope in the major philosophical schools of this time, but see Kazantzidis and Spatharas (2018b, pp. 12–14 on Stoicism and pp. 19–23 on Epicureanism) and Prost (2017). In addition, Warren (2001, esp. pp. 164–179) and Sorabji (2000, esp. pp. 235–240) both address attitudes toward the future generally, including attitudes of trust or hope.

[24] If we follow Meirav's (2009) emphasis on the "external factors" present in hope, we might already conclude that a Stoic, in letting go of what is out of their control, will let go of hope.

[25] As also for Aristotle at *Rhetoric* 2.5, 1383a6–9.

> just as the prisoner and the guard are bound to each other by the same chain, so these two that are so different nonetheless go along together: where hope [*spem*] goes, fear follows. . . . Both belong to the mind that is in suspense, that is worried by its expectation of what is to come.
>
> (*Letters* 5.7–8)

Elsewhere, Seneca does acknowledge that hope can be practically useful as a defense against fear and potential despair, but this advice to "drive out one fault with another: balance fear with hope [*spe metum tempera*]" (*Letters* 13.12; see also *Letters* 104.12) still conceives of hope as a fault. In general, a Stoic could not approve of hope for the "indifferents" or "externals" that are beyond our control and which would be the objects of ordinary human hope. However, the *eupatheiai* (good emotions) of a Stoic sage, particularly the rational wish for a genuine good such as virtue, do provide a way of conceptualizing a more idealized Stoic hope (Brennan, 1998, pp. 34–37, 54–57; Graver, 2007, pp. 51–52; Knuuttila & Sihvola, 1998, p. 17), and Prost (2017) has defended the possibility of hope not only on the part of the Stoic sage but also in the context of Stoic moral progress.

To avoid both hope and fear in relation to future indifferents, many Stoic writings place a decided emphasis on the present (Seneca, *Letters* 5.8–9; see also 101.9–10, and Marcus Aurelius, ca. 170–180 C.E./1964, *Meditations* 2.14, 6.32, 7.29, 8.36). This emphasis on the present can be compared with two alternative attitudes toward the future. First, as we have already seen in Epictetus, ancient Stoics sometimes recommended the practice of anticipating what we would ordinarily call misfortune (such as losing a loved one), but with the caveat that we avoid judging such events as evil (see also Seneca, *Letters* 24.2, 104.11; Cicero, 45 B.C.E./2002, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.34). This approach enables the Stoic to have an orientation not only toward the present but also toward the future—but that orientation is still deliberately not a hopeful one.

Second, in contrast with the Stoics, the Epicureans evidently recommended anticipating, not misfortunes, but pleasures (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.32–33)—or at least the removal of pains.[26] This is presumably because visualizing future pleasures is pleasant in the present, as we have already seen in both Plato and Aristotle (Sorabji, 2000, p. 237; Warren, 2001, p. 175), and it thereby advances the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure as a natural good. Recent scholarly work on Epicurean attitudes toward the future has led to differing characterizations. Kazantzidis and Spatharas (2018b, pp. 19–23), in their discussion of the Roman Epicurean writer Lucretius, argue that, since hopes imply agency and since Epicurean metaphysics holds that "things take place either by necessity (*anankê*) or chance (*tukhê*), . . . it is meaningless [for an Epicurean] to hope for anything" (p. 23). However, Warren (2001, pp. 164–179) argues that the Epicurean recommendation that we not only visualize but also plan for future pleasures (as in

[26] So Seneca describes with admiration the attitude of his aging Epicurean friend Bassus, who hoped (*sperare*) that death would not be painful and anticipated that after death he would "no longer experience pain" (*Letters* 30.14; for discussion, see Prost, 2017, pp. 146–148).

Epicurus, ca. 300 B.C.E./1997, *Letter to Menoeceus* 129–130) indicates a certain level of trust or "moderate confidence" (p. 172) in the future.

At roughly the same time as this mixed reception in Hellenistic and Roman philosophy, hope found a more positive place in late republican and imperial Roman public political and religious culture, although it remained a complex and varied concept in the private sphere and in literature and the arts (Armstrong, 1998, pp. 30–42; Clark, 1983, pp. 85–86; Fulkerson, 2017; Tataranni, 2013; see also Kazantzidis & Spatharas, 2018b, pp. 25–28).[27] In the public sphere, *spes* had a place both as a public virtue—those who could bring practical benefits to the community were conceived of as its hope—and as a public or political deity, with evidence of dedicated temples in Ostia, Rome, and elsewhere (Armstrong, 1998, p. 32; Clark, 2007, pp. 59–62, 194, 201; Clark, 1983, p. 81; Tataranni, 2013, pp. 68–72). *Spes* also appeared on imperial coinage, where the phrase *Spes Augusta* (the hope of Augustus), accompanied by an iconic illustration of a personified Hope, represented the virtues and promise both of youth generally and of the emperor and his heirs specifically (Clark, 1983, pp. 83–84; on *spes* and youth, see also Tataranni, 2013, pp. 74–76, and compare Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.12). In this, we also witness the increasing cultural importance of a kind of hope we have not yet emphasized: hope as embodied in another *person* (particularly political or military leaders), as distinct from hope for a specific outcome.[28]

The deification of Hope as *Spes* in Roman public religious life may seem to have its counterpart in Hesiod's early personification of Hope as *Elpis*. However, although *elpis* was often invested with the characteristics of a person or spirit in Greek poetic literature, and even sometimes deified,[29] it did not appear to have a dedicated cult or temples (Cornford, 1907/1969, pp. 223–228; Kazantzidis & Spatharas, 2018b, p. 24, note 59; Tataranni, 2013, p. 68, note 13), and it did not take on the public symbolic or political roles that *Spes* did in Rome.[30] Because it did not have a strong civic and communal function in Greek society, *elpis* was more able to retain its complexity and ambiguity throughout Greek culture, much as Roman *spes* did outside of its public roles. In these contexts, as we have seen, one can rarely say that hope was viewed simply in a negative or a positive way. Instead, the complexity and importance of hope were expressed in its associations with both fear and courage, foresight and blindness, and virtue and vice, thus reminding us that hope, although often a necessity for human agency and well-being, is rarely an unqualified blessing or curse.

[27] For further discussion of *spes* in Latin literature, see Kazantzidis & Spatharas (2018a, Part 2) and Armstrong's discussion and translation of the Latin poem *De Spe*, which Armstrong identifies as "probably the longest description in Latin literature of Hope as a negative quality" (1998, p. 30).

[28] So, Clark (1983, p. 94): "By the time of Cicero, hope in a single individual was viewed as traditionally Roman and as such it was the concretization of the hope of Roman citizens." See also Clark (2007, esp. pp. 263–273) and Tataranni (2013). For contemporary discussions of interpersonal hope, see Martin (2014, Chapter 5, 2020) and Rioux (2021, pp. 6–7).

[29] See, e.g., Theognis, *Elegiac Poems*, Lines 1135–1150 (reproduced in Cairns, 2016, p. 27), where *Elpis* is described as the only deity to remain after all others have abandoned humankind. *Spes* plays a similar role in the work of Roman poet Ovid (ca. 12–13 C.E./2005, *Black Sea Letters* 1.6, Lines 27–44).

[30] For further discussion of the distinction between personification and deification, see Stafford (2000, esp. pp. 1–19).

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