

ETHICS FOR THE DEPRESSED: ARGUING WITH “S”

DEVIN FITZPATRICK
University of Oregon

I have a friend, “S,” who also struggles with depression. They are intelligent, charismatic, funny, and generous. I love them very much. But I think that they have difficulty following through on long-term goals or projects, and I worry that they are frustrated by, and feel undeserved shame about, their struggles. Their days may be disrupted and their time consumed by episodes of deep listlessness, during which they describe themselves as feeling unmotivated and yet bored, both unable to act and dissatisfied with passivity. They have sought treatment for depression but, thus far, it has not been sufficient.

Recently, I had an argument with S about how they might respond to these episodes. I claimed, basically, that exploring different treatments might be worth trying despite the possibly considerable cost and effort involved. Their primary objection was not to my weighing of costs and benefits. Rather, they objected to the notion that the problem was at all internal to them. They are hopeless, they claimed, because the world is without hope.

I will call my rendering of their argument, in S’s honor, the “I Am Going to Become the Joker” argument, or The Joker Argument for short. In the hope that it will entertain S, and readers generally, I now present it in the style of a melodramatic comic book villain:

Look at the world around us. Inequality of opportunity and outcome is extreme. Frauds and grifters prey unobstructed on anyone who relaxes their vigilance. Disease runs rampant. Soon, climate change will ravage the earth until we spiral into war and famine. Politicians do nothing and will continue to do nothing as they feed from the festering trough of the wealthy.

In this world, still, I have tried to pursue my ambitions, to realize my dreams. I have failed. Of course, I have failed. This world is designed to deny our success. I am not to blame. Yet in one last spiteful mark of this world’s injustice, I cannot help but bear the shame.

You say that I am compelled by depression to some irrational conclusion. But there is nothing irrational about my response to this world. The world is hopeless, and my hopelessness is a rational recognition of its hopelessness. I am right to be hopeless. You are wrong to hope.

One may reasonably find this argument either moving or silly. But I think that it is powerful in an unsettling way, in part because it is premised on a pessimism about the world that may more accurately predict the future than optimism. It is also fatally flawed by a missing premise. Because S is a logical person, my case to them benefits from formalizing their claims.

In examining my formalization of S's argument, we may discern the structure of depressive thought. In observing what is missing from this structure, we may identify what depression tends to hide from depressed persons and what, more broadly, it tends to compel from them. Only once we understand what depression compels will we determine what, if anything, can come of arguing with S.



Figure 1. The author's rendering of S. (The author has not seen the movie, just its memes.)

THE JOKER ARGUMENT

What follows is a formalized and simplified version of S's argument. If you are unfamiliar with formalized arguments, do not be too concerned if you find it dense and difficult to understand at first. I will go through it step by step. If you are familiar with formalized arguments and find them tedious, please be patient. Simple claims lead to novel conclusions.

My formalization of the Joker Argument initially involves three premises and three conclusions:

- 1) **Premise 1.** If, for S, success in their hoped-for goals is impossible, then hope is, for S, irrational.
- 2) **Premise 2.** Only a select few may succeed in their hoped-for goals. For all others, the “unfortunate,” success in their hoped-for goals is impossible.
- 3) **Premise 3.** S is a member of the unfortunate, not the select few.
- 4) **Conclusion 1** (*from Premise 2 and Premise 3*). For S, success in their hoped-for goals is impossible.
- 5) **Conclusion 2** (*from Premise 1 and Conclusion 1*). Hope is, for S, irrational.
- 6) **Conclusion 3** (*from Conclusion 2*). S should not hope.

To maintain our focus on S, I have not represented S’s claim that I am wrong to hope. My central question will be if Conclusion 3 follows from the stated premises, or in other words, if the Joker Argument successfully shows that S should not hope. I also have not included a striking but ambiguous phrase that S employs: “the world is hopeless.” I will return to that phrase. First, let us consider these three premises.

Going forward, I will assume for the sake of argument that all three stated premises are true. But we should note that there are good reasons to doubt them all.

PREPARING TO REFUTE THE JOKER ARGUMENT

Premise 1 links the rationality of action to the possibility of its success. This might be reductive or overly simplistic. Perhaps someone could, for example, rationally decide to pursue an impossible goal for the sake of experiencing the journey rather than reaching an unreachable destination. The truth of Premise 1 thus depends on what one means by “rational.”

But if we understand the term “rational” to imply the possibility of success, then Premise 1 will necessarily be true. Since we are going to assume that Premise 1 is true, let us then take the term “rational” to imply the possibility of success, at least in the case of what is called means-end or instrumental reasoning, that being the capacity to formulate plans of action that are as likely to be successful as is possible.

Premise 2 distinguishes the select few, who may possibly succeed, from the unfortunate, who will never succeed. This claim suffers from being both excessively absolute and excessively vague. First, “success is impossible” is a sweeping claim that is at least difficult, if not itself impossible, to justify compared to a more moderate claim like “success is highly unlikely.” Second, its morbidly hierarchical vision of the world admits of no alternative communities where better equality of opportunity and outcome may exist. This seems narrow-minded at best.

But these absolutist assumptions, while highly dubious when viewed in this light, may still seem intuitive. For example, if S hopes for wealth or love, the globe-spanning reality of severe economic inequality or viciously demanding beauty standards could plausibly motivate a belief that the difference between the haves and have-nots is basically immutable, which is another way of expressing Premise 2.

Even so, the extent to which S's hopes will be obstructed by the world will depend on what specifically S hopes for. To take another example, imagine that S hopes instead for self-acceptance in an unjust and hostile world. Self-acceptance can be very difficult to attain or maintain, but it is still plausible that changing one's own mind is easier than changing the minds of many others. Arguably, then, Premise 2 is excessively absolutist: it flattens all hoped-for goals such that they appear equally unattainable. It is thus also vague as to whether some hoped-for goals might be more successfully pursued than others, even in an unjust or what S calls a "hopeless" world.

This problem of vagueness will then affect the truth of Premise 3, the claim that S is one of the unfortunate or have-nots. Whether S is personally likely to succeed in S's hoped-for goals may depend on what those specific goals are. Perhaps someone is a member of the "select few" in some contexts and an "unfortunate" in others, rather than simply being one or the other in all contexts. Premise 3 implicitly rejects this possibility, but it is plausible.

But let us grant all three premises for the sake of argument. Despite their problems, we will assume for now that they are true. We have a better target: Conclusion 3 itself.

Before we take aim at this target and develop a counterargument to S, there is a general definitional question that we will benefit from answering. What does S mean by "hope"? What, then, did S mean by saying that "the world is hopeless"? Has my formalization of S's argument adequately captured their meaning?

My account thus far understands hope in a standard sense as goal-directed or "intentional." Intentional hope is a motive or reason to pursue goals that emphasizes the possibility of success over the possibility of failure. An intentionally hopeful person is hopeful because they either 1) believe that they will likely succeed in their hoped-for goals or 2) simply do not dwell overmuch on the possibility of failure to achieve their hoped-for goals. This definition presumes, I think fairly, that the relevance of hope to a depressed person has to do not just with its affect, or how it feels to be hopeful or not, but with its relation to action. Intentional hope may facilitate goal-directed action and its absence may inhibit it. Because the intentional hopelessness of a depressed person may function as an obstacle to action, hopelessness may appear as a *problem*, as it apparently does to S.

I note that the term "intentional," as in "intentional hope," has an unconventional meaning borrowed from phenomenology and linguistics: it means "directed towards something" or "about something." For example, fear is fear *of* something and intentional hope is hope *for* something. In contrast, we can understand physical pain as just being a sensation that is not "about" anything, even if it is located in specific parts of the body. Such pain has causes, like injury, but these painful experiences are not "directed towards" or "about" its causes (which may be unknown or absent) in the same sense that fear or intentional hope are "directed towards" or "about" their objects.

This becomes a key insight if we recall the striking phrase I mentioned: “the world is hopeless.” If intentional hope is directed toward something, then the claim “the world is hopeless” is presumably directed toward “the world.” But what is S referring to by the phrase “the world”? Their surroundings? Their society? The planet Earth? The universe? If S’s hopelessness is a response to the world, then to know if there is any solution to S’s problem, we have to know what “the world” refers to.

Perhaps S is just saying: “the way things are, broadly speaking, makes it irrational for me to intentionally hope.” If so, that claim resembles Conclusion 1, which states that success in S’s hoped-for goals is impossible. In this case, we have already included the idea behind the claim that “the world is hopeless” in the Joker Argument, and nothing more need be said.

I think that S is trying to express something else with the phrase “the world is hopeless,” and that S’s argument hides a second definition of hope that neither I nor S have yet explored. But before I can convincingly demonstrate this, we must return to S’s argument and what I have called our “better target.”

REFUTING THE JOKER ARGUMENT

Conclusions 1 and 2 of the Joker Argument seem to logically follow from the premises. According to Premises 2 and 3, S, as a member of the “unfortunate,” cannot succeed in their hoped-for goals. Thus, according to Premise 1, hope is, for S, irrational. So far, so good.

But does Conclusion 3 logically follow from Conclusion 2? Does it logically follow from hope being irrational for S that S should not hope?

No, it does not. There is a missing premise:

5.5) **Premise 4.** If hope is, for S, irrational, then S should not hope.

This is not just any old missing premise. It is the crucial move to the normative, to what one should do, from the descriptive, or what is the case. Premise 4 is logically necessary to make the move from the descriptive (“is”) Conclusions 1 and 2 to the normative (“should”) Conclusion 3.

Just because something is the case does not mean it should be the case. If I were to say, “Yes, our unequal world is divided into the unfortunate and select few, and we should accept that,” you might fairly respond, “Wait, why accept it?” Even if my description of what “is” the case is correct, that description alone does not determine what we “should” do. I am missing some additional justification.

How is Premise 4 justified? How do we know that if hope is irrational, S therefore should not hope?

The Joker Argument is invalid without Premise 4, because Premise 4 is necessary to logically conclude what S “should” do from what S claims “is” the case. But Premise 4 does not include its own justification. Behind the claim “if hope is, for S, irrational, then S should not hope,” there ought to be some criterion for what counts as a good reason for hoping. It is not clear what that criterion is.

Premise 4 is weak, and it is where I would strike. Consider a counterexample: the existentialist as depicted in Albert Camus’s (2018) *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

THE EXISTENTIALIST’S ARGUMENT AS A COUNTEREXAMPLE

The existentialist believes, basically, that their hoped-for goals are irrational, just as S says. All our acts will be forgotten, all our works will turn to dust, and all meaning is ephemeral, ever slipping through our fingers. Even so, the existentialist chooses to act. It is *because* acting to pursue their hoped-for goals is irrational that, therefore, the only reasons to act must be the existentialist’s own. No principles or traditions may constrain or guide them. In being completely bereft of any external affirmation that could truly justify their existence, the existentialist believes themselves to be truly free, choosing to continue existing entirely by their own will.

The experience of choosing to act without an external reason to justify action becomes the experience of radical freedom, which they take to be valuable of their own volition. Thus, absurdly, heroically, the existentialist pursues their goals, like the mythical Sisyphus pushing a boulder up a slope forever, repeating endlessly, achieving nothing that endures.

A formalized sketch of the existentialist’s argument might go:

- 1) **Premise A.** If success in hoped-for goals is ultimately impossible, then hope is irrational or absurd.
- 2) **Premise B.** Success in hoped-for goals is ultimately impossible.
- 3) **Conclusion A** (*from Premises A and B*). Hope is irrational or absurd.
- 3) **Premise C.** One should do what is absurd, as an expression of radical freedom.
- 5) **Conclusion B** (*from Premise C and Conclusion A*). One should hope, as an expression of radical freedom.

This is a valid argument: the conclusions logically follow from the premises. Of course, this does not mean that the premises are true. We do not have to agree with the existentialist as I have portrayed them here. The question is how this existentialist could coherently argue for “hope” given our previous definition of intentional hope.

Hope has taken on a different meaning in the existentialist’s argument. Recall that intentional hope involves an emphasis on the possibility of success over the possibility of failure. The existentialist does not believe in the possibility of success. By that definition, it would be incorrect to call them hopeful.

The existentialist's version of hope is a second definition of hope, the one that I believe to have been hidden in S's argument. This "existential hope," in contrast to intentional hope, is not hope for success or any specific achievement. Instead, it represents the existentialist's broad assertion, for them unjustifiable on the grounds of any external reason, that their own freely chosen action is valuable regardless of its success or failure. We might say that the existentialist hopes against hope: they justify existential hope for the sake of freedom, even when intentional hope cannot be justified. To try and fail, over and over, forever, may be understood as guided by and expressive of existential hope.

My point is not that the existentialist's argument is right and that S's is wrong. My point is that *it is not obvious that S is right and that the existentialist is wrong*. S argues that the world gives them their reasons to be hopeless. But if the existentialist is right, then S could instead respond to the same circumstances with absurd hope. For S's argument to hold, the existentialist, who is existentially hopeful in an intentionally hopeless world, must somehow be refuted. If the existentialist's response is a valid alternative to the Joker's, then the Joker Argument is not convincing.

I have chosen the example of the existentialist strategically. I have not merely targeted S's Premise 4—the claim that if hope is irrational, one should not hope—because I think it is the weakest premise. I have targeted it because I think S will be sympathetic to the existentialist who is its counterexample, and I am playing on their sentiments. The existentialist is a romantic figure. I predict that S will admire the existentialist, even desire to be like them, yet feel powerless to do so.

Why do they feel powerless? That question is what I want to direct their attention towards. If there is no *reason* that the existentialist is wrong to hope against hope, what is the *cause* of S's feeling of powerlessness to, say, emulate them? Both S and the existentialist seem to see themselves as being powerless to make the world a better place in which to pursue their goals. But why, then, does this absurd world, which seems for the existentialist to provide a reason to act, seem obviously to S to be a *reason for inaction*?

I may now reformulate my original claim to S, that different treatments for depression may be worth pursuing despite the costs and risks. Recall that S objected to this recommendation because it implies that at least some cause of their hopelessness was distinct to them rather than purely a rational response to a hopeless world, which treatment of S would not change. Let us grant that all the causes of S's feelings of powerlessness are external or shared with the hypothetical existentialist, relating to the hopelessness or absurdity of the world, and that none are internal or distinct to S, in the sense of being related to brain chemistry or trauma. I will soon qualify these notions of "internal" and "external," but some minimal distinction like this is needed to understand what S's argument has missed. Namely: the cause of the feeling of powerlessness *seeming to obviously be a reason for inaction* must be at least partly *internal*.

This is because the existentialist and S differ in their responses to their equally hopeless or absurd external worlds. If causes of action are either internal or external and there is no external difference between the worlds of S and the existentialist, and yet their actions differ, it follows that there must be some internal difference between them.

The Joker Argument fails fundamentally because, in failing to distinguish between intentional and existential hope, it fails to diagnose S's problems. It could be true that, as its three premises state, none of S's hoped-for goals are achievable. It could be true that the world is a tragic, farcical place where the success of the few exists to taunt the many for whom failure is punished and guaranteed. In such a world, intentional hope is absurd.

But the example of the existentialist shows that S's problem is not just the absurdity of intentional hope. Rather, S's central problem is that they seem to lack the existential hope that motivates the existentialist even in the absence of rational intentional hope. In other words, it may be a problem that "the world is hopeless" in the conventional sense, or that the world is such that intentional hope is irrational. But it is also, separately, a problem that S is hopeless, or that S is such that they seem to lack the existentialist's existential hope.

S's argument arises from a fixation on the consequences of their actions, specifically, their estimation of how likely they are to succeed. They are overpowered by a fear of shame and pain stemming from failure, unable to fully accept or reject the societal standards that define success. As I mentioned when we first surveyed the premises of the Joker Argument, their estimation of their chances of success in their goals seems skewed by excessive absolutism and vagueness. But as we have now seen, even *if* their three premises are correct, their conclusion does not follow. If they could think like an existentialist, they could justify action even if success were impossible. But they do not. Maybe they cannot.

In the end, then, the problem is not really that success is impossible. The problem is that "the world," everything and anything, seems fragile, fearful, drained of color. All that appears to S is the prospect of disgrace and punishment. In S's state, the actual features of the world are beside the point. The world is hopeless. That is, S is hopeless, and the world is all that appears to S.

Now, I must be very clear here. First, S did not choose to be hopeless and is not to blame for their hopelessness. Even if S could eventually come to "think like an existentialist," assuming anyone can or should, I expect that this would involve a process of habituation, not simply choosing to become more hopeful and calling it a day. To claim or even to imply otherwise is cruel and unfair to S. The purpose of this argument is to take S's claims seriously in the process of refuting them, not to assign blame.

Second, I am not claiming that the internal causes of S's inaction are "more important" than the external causes, just different. We can agree that the intentional hopelessness of the world, the unjust way it undermines the hopes of the unfortunate, is a serious problem. My point is simply this: an external problem may require external solutions, by which I mean, actions to change the world, if possible. An internal problem may require internal solutions, including indirect approaches like, say, different medication or therapies. Furthermore, individual responses to internal problems, like seeking different medication or therapies, may be more likely to succeed than individual responses to external problems, like trying to change the world on one's own.

This is just to say that some hoped-for goals, like self-acceptance, may, even if they are still very difficult, be more likely to succeed than others, like creating a fairer world. This claim conflicts with the absolutism of S's Premise 2. But I think it may still seem reasonable to S.

Third, the internal-external causal distinction that I just presented has limits: not all causes of action or depression are easily categorized in those terms. For example, so-called internal causes like brain chemistry or trauma may be responses to or activated by one's environment. To call them "internal" is just to say that one "carries" them into different contexts or circumstances. I relied on the distinction to show how S and the existentialist are different even though their circumstances seem to be the same, i.e., hopeless.

But some of the features that one "carries," like one's body, are visible to others in a way that complicates these categories. To take another example, one's physical appearance may consistently trigger hostility or cruelty from others. This is "carried" like an internal cause, but it is others, external to oneself, who are causing the problems. This is just to say that we should not take the internal-external distinction too far. It is only sometimes useful.

Finally, as I think their thoughtful argument shows, S is very reasonable. Yet they *still* compulsively and unknowingly assert Premise 4. They erroneously take their assertion of an ostensible fact or descriptive claim, that it is impossible for them to succeed, to be a normative reason for inaction, despite the valid counterexample of the existentialist. Let us examine this point more closely.

LEAPS AND COMPULSIONS

There is nothing necessarily objectionable about taking facts to obviously be reasons, at least in practice. I do so all the time. If I perceive a dangerous object to be hurtling at me at dangerous speeds, I do not have to reflectively conclude that I have a reason to get out of the way. My mind takes a shortcut around conscious thought to protect me. I may be leaping aside before I even understand what I am doing. Moreover, although I did not choose to leap, I will judge afterwards that it was good to leap. This leap is consistent with my desires and beliefs regarding my own self-preservation.

Here is a useful way of understanding practical reasoning. If we understand "acting rationally" in a purely reflective sense, to mean "reflectively endorsing a reason for action," then my instinctive leap would not be a rational act. I did not, in that moment, choose to value my self-preservation and then deliberately act on that choice. But if we understand "acting rationally" to mean, in a more practical sense, "acting in accordance with reasons that one would reflectively endorse," then even an instinctive act like my leap is rational.

True, my mind took a shortcut from the factual claim of "there is a threat" to the action of "avoid it" without deliberating about what that *fact* is a *reason* to do. But even if my leap is not "from" reasons, because it was instinctive and not reflective, it is "in accordance" with reasons of self-preservation that I would reflectively endorse (for example, that I would judge afterwards to be good reasons). Thus, though I was *caused* to leap, my leap is fairly called rational.

Note that I have distinguished between causes and reasons. Outside of the context of ethics, it is typical to use the terms "cause" or "motive," on the one hand, and "reason," on the other, interchangeably. The interrogative word "why" is ambiguous between causes

and reasons. Both a cause and a reason are “why” something might happen. If I am asked “why” I leapt aside, I will explain that I was dodging the object. It will not matter in this context that I was compelled by instinct, a causal force, to move and that I did not choose, by reflectively endorsing a justifying reason, to move. My answer is an appropriate and acceptable response.

But imagine that instead of leaping, I am hitting someone, and when I am asked why, I respond, “Because I was angry.” This is an explanation, but it is not an excuse. My listener may understand my meaning, but it does not follow that they agree that my action was acceptable. In this ethical context, which is the *normative* context of reasons that is the primary theme of ethics, the distinction between causes and reasons is essential and necessary. Anger may be an understandable *cause* of or *motive* for someone hitting someone else, but it is not therefore a good *reason* to accept them doing so.

Now imagine that instead of leaping to dodge, I am leaping seemingly at random. What if this leap is not consistent with my desires and beliefs? That is, what if I do not want to leap and do not think it is a good idea, but find myself doing so anyway? I will then find myself having already acted in ways contrary to those desires and beliefs. I will have to react not just to the world but to myself, attempting to correct my own actions after the fact so that they conform to my desires and beliefs. I will have to move back to my previous location after cleaning up whatever mess I have made by leaping in some random direction at some random time. This will require additional effort from me and will likely involve some embarrassment, even if (I dread to even mention the possibility) no one has been hurt.

What if I find myself leaping, inconsistent with my desires and beliefs, over and over? I will then constantly be reacting to my own actions, struggling to resist myself like I am my own adversary. Eventually, even as I consistently perceive the threats to me as being from without, I may come to suspect that the threats to me are coming from within, that some alien force has already infiltrated me. My presumptive boundary between an external world of possible threats and obstructions and an internal world of freedom and security will seem to degrade. I will become at once hypervigilant and exhausted. No amount of vigilance will be enough to forestall the activation of a cognitive shortcut that takes over before I can think.

In the context of depression, I will call this sort of cognitive shortcut a “compulsion.” The compulsive move from the fact of a threat to a reason to evade seems useful for rapid response in self-preservation. But imagine that a person who is otherwise reasonable may experience the presence of a threat at any time, regardless of if one is present. The self-preserving reaction of aversion will trigger, again and again, and every time this person will have to ask: is something out there? This time, what if my instincts are right? I’d better wait. I’d better hide. I’d better just lie still for a while. After all, what is the alternative but inching forward, my every synapse crackling and every nerve straining, telling me over and over I’m in danger from a threat that must be there even if there is no other evidence?

In this story, the mind makes just one error: either some assertion or some sense that a threat is present, one that makes the possible failure of prospective action seem both

punishing and practically guaranteed. This threat may come to mind in any number of ways. It may stick to any object of one's perception or reflection. It may be fear of the shadows, or fear of getting out of bed, or fear of the shame of failure, or fear of one's fearfulness being noticed and being shamed for inaction, or fear of what one's fearfulness says about one's own character. It may seem to switch between these fears or to be all of them at once. This is because it does not matter what the fear is of. To turn to metaphor: the mind has already decided that there is a threat. The heart is left to sort out the rest.

I take the invalidity of S's argument to represent and reveal the operation of distinct depressive compulsions interfering with their reasoning. But maybe it would be a mistake to take S to be an exemplar of depression. I have, admittedly in jest, presented S as villainous. Yet depressed persons are not generally villains. I take my caricature of S to represent one possible, and especially defiant, response to a general sense of precarity and isolation, one that may also manifest as anxious paralysis or retreat. If depression may be fairly, if very loosely, defined in reference to this deep sense of precarity and isolation, then my argument with S is useful in identifying compulsions most significant in depression. A depressed person may not identify with S. But they may empathize with S or have had such thoughts themselves at least once.

That said, depression is not necessarily compulsive. Inaction, despair, dread, and rumination are understandable responses to the seeming impossibility of success or inevitability of punishment, and there may be contexts of extreme brutality or injustice in which success really is impossible and punishment for failure really is inevitable. Even if existential hope might remain a valid response to such a desolate context in theory, in practice one probably cannot flip a switch and become Sisyphus. That is, one may be depressed or demoralized just because of external causes, unlike S. My account of the compulsive causes behind S's argument would not apply to such a person.

Even so, I venture that this person is likely to be traumatized by that context. Made cruelly aware of their vulnerability to being put in hopeless situations, habits of vigilance and doubt would color their experiences of less brutal or unjust circumstances, introducing a sense of threat where before it was absent and suppressing hope where before it was possible. If this is true, then these defensive habits or trauma responses could constitute new internal causes of depression, "carried" into different contexts. Because I posit that trauma responses to external causes of depression produce compulsions like S's, and because compulsions explain the specific flaws or gaps in S's argument for hopelessness, I take S to be an exemplar of depression and focus on the compulsions of the depressed.

Let us identify the compulsions most significant in depression, then. First, of course, there is Premise 4, the jump from the impossibility of success to the imperative of inaction. But there is also Premise 2, the initial assertion of the impossibility of success. As I noted, "impossible" is a sweeping claim.

I propose that S does not really think that successfully acting toward their hopes is impossible, or at least, they do not *just* think so. I suspect that they already have thoughtful plans for action that involve reasonable estimations of success. But even if they do have

these plans, Premise 2 overrides them, effectively rendering them irrelevant. Thus, S may come to both believe and disbelieve in the possibility of success.

The absolutism and vagueness of Premise 2 is, like Premise 4, the product of compulsion. It is like the threat that seems to come from everywhere and nowhere, at once absolute and vague, disrupting action and destroying hope.

ETHICS FOR THE DEPRESSED

The intuitive leap from facts to reasons—from observing a state of affairs to taking that state of affairs to give us a reason to act—may be self-preserving, as when I dodge. Thus, it is not necessarily destructive. It may even be the beginning of ethical reasoning as such. But S is making two specific leaps, first from the unlikeliness of success to the impossibility of success, and then from the impossibility of success to the imperative not to try. The point is not that S is wrong. The point is that S, who is otherwise reasoning carefully, is making these leaps anyway.

These leaps are S's internal problem, distinct from any problems posed by the absurdity of the world. This problem has two aspects, the first descriptive and second normative: it is the compulsion to leap 1) from the seeming unlikeliness of success to the seemingly certain impossibility of success, and then 2) from the seemingly certain impossibility of success to the imperative of inaction.

But now we have a new problem. Let us assume that all that I have said is correct. S is thus under a compulsion to assert Premises 2 and 4. So what have I achieved by arguing with them? Haven't I suggested that S already, on some level, believes that Premise 2 is false? Yet S has asserted Premise 2 anyway. If S's self-refutation is ineffective, why would my refutation be effective? How could arguing with S change their mind?

This objection is not to my argument but to my attempt to argue with S. Again, S is a very reasonable person. But Premises 2 and 4 are not responsive to reasons, theirs or mine. In arguing, I am being stubborn at best and cruel at worst, myself compulsively philosophizing.

Point taken. Yet I think it is possible for this argument to achieve at least two things:

- 1) **Exhortation through Description.** S concluded that the world gives them sufficient reason for inaction. I have demonstrated this to be false by refuting Premise 4. Now, even if S compulsively asserts Premise 2 and 4, if S recognizes them as being compulsive assertions, their attitude toward these premises may change. S may come to view them as internal threats to hope and thus acknowledge that there are internal, and not just external, threats to hope. Then, perhaps S will be motivated to seek new methods of easing their compulsive power. Even if S cannot choose to be more hopeful, there may yet be treatments or coping mechanisms that will ease their

episodes of hopelessness, thereby enabling them to better act in accord with their other desires and beliefs.

Now, the idea that I may “motivate” S might seem strange, since one might think that S, being depressed, lacks any desire to seek solutions to their internal problems. But in my telling, S’s problem arises from two specific compulsive mental leaps. Desire was not mentioned. It is thus entirely possible that S retains all the desires that provide them the motivation to pursue and value their goals. S’s problem would then only seem to be a “lack of motivation.” Rather, *S would be motivated but effectively unable to act* due to the compulsive and absolute assertion of the impossibility of any action’s success. This would explain why S, in depression, is bored and dissatisfied, yet does not act. S may feel as though they lack desire, that they “do not care.” But they only suffer because they desire, because they care.

2) **Exhortation through Prescription.** This is a riskier bet. Perhaps S will only feel frustrated with me or with themselves as our argument collides impotently with Premises 2 and 4. Perhaps S will feel disrespected, victimized, betrayed, or humiliated by the experience that I will seem to have inflicted. But there is another option. S may also feel respected because I am taking S seriously. I am treating S not merely as sick or confused but as making an argument worthy of consideration. Arguing with S will likely not be enough to change S’s mind, because some of S’s premises are the products of compulsion. Worse still, it is possible that by showing S that there is a hypothetical way forward from their position (that being the indirect rejection, through treatment or coping mechanisms, of Premises 2 and 4), they will only feel more isolated. They may feel that although this hypothetical way forward exists for others, they themselves, somehow, cannot proceed with it.

But I am placing my hopes on another possibility: that through reasoning, S experiences themselves as an essentially reasonable person. S is *mostly* responsive to reasons. More importantly, S wants to respond to reasons. Otherwise, S would not bother to argue fairly with me.

If someone wants to respond to reasons and is already at least somewhat responsive to reasons, then whatever they might think, there is hope for them. They may still find reasons to go on. They need not wait for the world to give them those reasons. In truth, they already have them.

I have argued for a redescription of depressive thinking in terms of two compulsions: 1) to perceive an absolute and vague threat that causes disruption to action and 2) to take this disruption as also being a reason for inaction. Depression’s first, descriptive compulsion makes intentional hope seem irrational. Depression’s second, normative compulsion

neutralizes the depressed person's remaining motives for action. This includes both specific desires and, underlying or implicit in them, a general affirmation of the value of going on.

I have said that S seems to lack existential hope. What our examination of the compulsive structure of depressive thought reveals is that S *does not actually lack existential hope*. In suffering, in struggling, in arguing with me, S evinces hope against hope, or existential hope even as intentional hope seems irrational. Although I have used the existentialist as a counterexample to the Joker Argument, I thus do not think that S necessarily requires some additional Sisyphean affirmation of absurd hope in order to go on. This affirmation is implicit in their behavior. As S's argument hid the possibility of existential hope, so depression hides S's existential hope from them, by rendering it functionally impotent and affectively inaccessible. Framing depression as compulsive may begin the process not of creating existential hope anew but of revealing and releasing the hope that still endures.

S may respond to my argument with self-exhortation through description, observing the leaps in their own depressive reasoning and naming those leaps as products of compulsion, not personal or intellectual failings. This, alongside other forms of treatment and coping, may ease the spiral of doubt and guilt that short-circuits motivation. When motivation becomes possible, reasons may become acceptable, good enough for going on again. But the frailty of the reasons for going on that one may have once taken for granted will not be forgotten. The questions depression raises—how and why one should go on—will endure.

To do ethics for the depressed is to ask what philosophical argument can do for those who seek justification for action but struggle with these specific limits on their responsiveness to reasons. My dissertation, "Ethics for the Depressed: A Value Ethics of Engagement," presents its arguments to an interlocutor suffering from these compulsions. It first presents a metaethics for the depressed: "ethics as a reliable guide" as a response to "demoralization" and "hypermoralized deliberation." I challenge what I call the Stocker-Smith account of depressive loss of motivation as being a loss of desires, arguing instead that it involves the defeating presence of what the phenomenologist Matthew Ratcliffe (2015) calls "pre-intentional" mental states that interfere with intention formation and action despite the persistence of desire. Though depressed persons may feel as though they have lost their desires, it is plausible that their experience instead reflects a reality in which they retain all their desires but a pre-intentional state, like a compulsive "quasi-belief" (Noggle 2016) that success is impossible, is neutralizing the motivational efficacy of those desires.

I then present a normative ethics for the depressed, or a "value ethics of engagement" that is a "gentle perfectionism" of "contingent value ranking." By concluding in the first half that depressed persons may retain their desires, I attempt to premise a value ethics upon what I call a depressed person's consistent desire for a "sense of stability" in response to experiences of precarity and isolation. My earlier metaphorical distinction between the "mind" and the "heart" develops into a phenomenological concept of the heart as the set of "felt values" or intuitive value paradigms that are motivation-compatible pre-intentional states to which a depressed person, who has become vigilant about motivation-defeating pre-intentional states like compulsive beliefs, is more likely to be attuned.

I thus attempt to structure a complete ethical theory, integrating plural philosophical traditions and founded on the phenomenological category of the pre-intentional, in response to the presence of two specific compulsions experienced by an otherwise reasonable interlocutor. I put an orthodox style of philosophy in service of an unorthodox agent: one who I call “aspiringly autonomous.”

I have done this knowing that, in the context of depression, theory and argument only go so far. My reasoning remains vulnerable to the same depressive sense of isolation that it aims to ease. A depressed person may always respond to me, “What you say may be true for others, but I am certain, somehow, that it is not true for me. I am uniquely hopeless.” That response is resistant to refutation. Their certainty might not yield to any argument I muster.

There is one last problem. I fear that S’s pessimism is accurate. Even if S becomes able to hope, that hope will likely be frail. If the world is too cruel or unfair, their trust in it may be betrayed and their hope may be destroyed. Changing S, or many Ss, may not change the world.

Still, I am hopeful. I am hopeful that theory and argument may give hope, that hope may give way to trust, and that, through trust, the world may change, becoming less hopeless and more trustworthy for us all, S included.

REFERENCES

- Camus, Albert. 2018. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Fitzpatrick, Devin. 2022. “Ethics for the Depressed: A Value Ethics of Engagement.” PhD diss., University of Oregon. ProQuest (29214608). <https://www.proquest.com/openview/551acc7222cdb2b84436d44f10b0c39f/1.pdf>.
- Ratcliffe, Matthew. 2015. *Experiences of Depression: A Study in Phenomenology*. Oxford University Press.
- Nogge, Robert. 2016. “Belief, Quasi-Belief, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.” *Philosophical Psychology*.