

## Promising to Try\*

### Abstract

We maintain that in many contexts *promising to try* is expressive of responsibility as a promiser. This morally significant application of *promising to try* speaks in favor of the view that responsible promisers favor evidentialism about promises. Contra Marušič, we contend that responsible promisers typically withdraw from promising to act, and instead promise to try, in circumstances where they recognize that there is a significant chance that they will not succeed.

*Promising to try* is vexed. The person who promises to try can seem mealy-mouthed. Given the choice, we sometimes prefer not to rely on someone who merely *promises to try*. On the other hand, a person can do nothing more than to try (or, more precisely, a person can do nothing more than to try his or her best). And so it seems that the phrase *I promise* should always be read as elliptical for *I promise to try*: to promise anything more would be irresponsible. Considering these perplexities, what morally significant purpose can *promising to try* serve? Do responsible promisers *promise to try*?

The view that *promising to try* is defective was advanced recently by Berislav Marušič.<sup>1</sup> Marušič considers the following case: the person you love is being deployed overseas to fight in a war, and you consider whether to promise to wait. You have evidence that people tend to break promises of this kind, and you contemplate whether it is responsible

to promise “against the evidence” (you know that a disinterested third party would be skeptical of your chances). One option open to you is to *promise to try* to wait. Marušič does not find this avenue auspicious:

An initial problem with such a promise is that it is not clear what exactly you are committing yourself to. What is the substance of the promise? Under which circumstances would you be keeping your promise without actually waiting? Should the other expect that you will wait? And what sorts of expectations are you inviting?<sup>2</sup>

Marušič thinks that an evidentialist -- someone who thinks that we are irresponsible to promise to do something if we have evidence that there is a significant chance that we will not do it-- is faced with a dilemma if he or she withdraws from promising and promises to try. Either *promising to try* requires that you resist temptation (in which case, it amounts to promising against the evidence), or else promising to try does not require that you resist temptation (in which case promising to try constitutes inadequate commitment). To illustrate this dilemma, Marušič asks us to consider how we might make explicit the conditions that are implicit in *promising to try*:

What condition could you make your promise conditional on so that the promise would constitute an adequate commitment but wouldn't go against the evidence? For example, promising to wait unless you receive news that the other has died would still go against the evidence.

Meanwhile, promising to wait unless you meet someone else would not be an adequate commitment. But no single condition will satisfy both

desiderata. For you know that you will be tempted to leave the other. Yet, whenever we are confronted with a temptation worthy of its name, there is a significant (or not insignificant) chance that we will succumb. If in order to keep your conditional promise you have to resist this temptation, your promise will go against the evidence. If in order to keep your conditional promise you don't have to resist temptation, your promise will lack commitment.<sup>3</sup>

Marušič has two related ideas. The first is that a promise to try is like a non-explicit conditional promise. The second is that in this situation, nothing short of a fully unconditional promise expresses sufficient commitment. Promising to try is therefore defective for two reasons. First, it is vague. And second, it introduces conditions where there should be none.

In this paper, we consider whether there really is something inherently defective about promises to try, or whether the dim view one gets of *promising to try* from considering Marušič's case is misleading. We argue for the latter. We maintain that in a wide variety of contexts *promising to try* can be meaningful, adequate, and expressive of responsibility as a promiser. This morally significant application of *promising to try* speaks in favor of the view that responsible promisers favor evidentialism about promises. We contend that responsible promisers typically withdraw from promising to act, and instead promise to try, in circumstances where they recognize that there is a significant chance that they will not succeed. We then examine whether Marušič's central example really is one of promising "against the evidence," and conclude that if it is, the promise is irresponsible.

Admittedly, we are sometimes justified in our dim view of the person who *promises to try*. To explain why we feel this way, it is useful to attend more closely to the pragmatics of the phrase. Consider a case where a friend promises only to try to pick you up from the railway station at five in the afternoon, and you, unimpressed, prefer to take a taxi. In such a case, your friend's *promising to try* (as opposed to simply promising) has the conversational implicature that there is a non-trivial chance that he will fail to pick you up. The person who promises to try can seem unreliable.

This difference in implicature between promising and promising to try can at first seem puzzling. How can the range of excusing conditions for failing to pick you up be enlarged if your friend merely promises to try as opposed to straightforwardly promising to pick you up on time? Perhaps your friend is worried that he might fail to pick you up at the rail station because a major earthquake may destroy the highway or trap his family in a dangerous location. But it would not then matter whether your friend had promised or promised to try. In either case, he would be released from his promise: we would not expect him to arrive at the station on time *or* to try to. However, perhaps your friend is worried that he may fail to pick you up on time because his capricious jalopy won't start. In such a case, you could justifiably rebuke him for having made an irresponsible promise to pick you up at five. Knowing how unreliable his car is, he should not have made this promise in the first place. It would have been better to promise to try, since this would have signaled to you that it would be prudent to make contingency plans. So, here we have a use of promising to try that is expressive of conscientiousness. We maintain that it is just this kind of conscientiousness that distinguishes the responsible promiser.

Indeed, *promising to try*, as opposed to promising, has real and morally significant meaning. Consider another case: The young daughter of an Olympic luger implores her mother: “I told all my friends at school that you are the best in the world. Promise me you’ll get the gold!” Although the athlete is entirely committed to summoning every last ounce of willpower in order to win, she knows that, contrary to her daughter’s naïve faith, her effort alone cannot guarantee such an outcome. The last thing she wants to do is to break a promise to her young daughter, so she responds with, “I can’t promise you I’ll win, but I promise to try”. Here, the decision to promise to try is motivated by a desire not to let her daughter down, and hence not to promise more than would be responsible. The athlete is attuned to the distinctive stringency of promises (as opposed to mere expressions of intention). She does not lack commitment.

To generalize: promising to try can genuinely restrict a promise in a way that is responsible and morally significant. One reason for promising to try rather than promising to achieve something is to allow for the possibility that some uncontrollable factor will make the achievement impossible despite one’s best efforts. Responsible promisers care very much about whether others will be let down in relying on them and are loath to communicate any sort of assurance that they cannot guarantee. This is particularly salient in cases where manifest and substantial uncontrollable factors contribute to the final outcome.

The anticipated uncontrollable factor need not be external to the person. Consider: Frank has broken your favorite teapot, and he is afraid of how you will react when you find out. Before owning up, he implores, “Promise me you won’t be furious!” Sensing that Frank has done something that may well arouse your ire, you reply, “I can’t promise that I

won't be furious, but I promise to try to control my anger." In a case like this, the insistence on a promise strikes us as unfair, and the retreat to promising to try entirely justifiable. Promising to try is often appropriate when what is promised ranges over emotions rather than actions, since emotions are not under our direct control.

But what if the anticipated cause of failure to pull through is not only internal but also under the control of the will? We might be tempted to say that in such circumstances, a promise to try fails to express sufficient commitment. But this would be a mistake.

Consider the earnest child in the confessional who considers promising never again to tell a lie, and then, skeptical of whether she can responsibly promise such a thing, promises to try never again to tell a lie. Here the threat to keeping her promise is entirely *internal*: it is up to her whether or not she is honest. At the same time, her decision to refrain from promising is sincere, responsible, and not in bad faith. We can easily imagine that she is deeply committed to truthfulness while at the same time realistic enough to know that a life free of deliberate deception is unlikely for non-angels.

We might yet have the lingering suspicion that there is something dishonest about *promising to try*, or that its use is symptomatic of an aversive stance toward commitment.

We maintain that these morally troubling aspects are not intrinsic features of *promising to try*. As with straightforward promises, promises to try can be *honest* or *dishonest*. Among those that are honest, promises to try may express *total* or *limited commitment*. Among those that convey limited commitment, only some express *insufficient* commitment

First, consider the dimension of honesty. A car salesman, after taking a small deposit from you on Friday, won't promise to hold the car for you until Monday when you will

return with a certified check for the full amount but only promises to try. There is undoubtedly something slippery about this. What is the source of his insincerity? Here is an interpretation. We generally use “promise to try” to alert the listener to a significant chance that we will not succeed in pulling through. This may be due to a perceived threat external to our control, or to a suspicion that we in particular may lack sufficient resolve or willpower, or to our doubting that it is responsible for any human being to make such a promise. It does not normally require much effort or resolution to refrain from selling a car to a higher bidder, so it is strange to use the locution to communicate lack of resolve. The implicature generated is that there is a hard-to-avoid threat; but in the case at hand, this is unlikely to be true. And so the salesman has co-opted the language of promises to convey that you had better get your money to him quickly, but he has not made a promise at all. He has neither proffered assurance nor transferred moral authority.<sup>4</sup> And this is why *his* promising to try is dishonorable and dishonest. But as we have seen, not all promises to try are such.

Now, consider the dimension of commitment. Sometimes promising to try indicates that the promiser is not fully committed, but this is not always the case. In Marušič’s case, the lover who promises to try to remain true may indeed be insufficiently committed. In the context he describes, there may be no use for anything but categorical resolve. The lover who promises to try might not lack honesty or integrity, but only the unconditional commitment that many demand from relationships of romantic love. Our ideals of love are not tolerant of conditions, which is why we eschew any hint of hedging in our wedding vows. By contrast, the Olympic athlete does not want for resolve. The reason she withdraws from promising *tout court* is that she perceives threats external to her will

– the talent of the other competitors, the possibility of injury. The case of the earnest child in the confessional is a bit more complicated. She may categorically abjure deception, but also know that lies can sometimes tumble out when a person isn't careful, and that a life free of deception is highly improbable for any human being. But this does not mean that she is not entirely committed to telling the truth.

Finally, we should note that such totalizing commitment is not always required, nor indeed appropriate. Consider a final example, the piano teacher who berates his student: "I'm planning a recital and you are my protégé. Promise me that you will practice every day for at least three hours until the performance – do not embarrass me on that stage!" Here it would be completely reasonable for the student to promise to try, even though the threat to her success lies largely with her own resolve. It is true that she is not fully committed, but she is fully within her moral rights to decide which of her projects merit her total commitment. Indeed, her downgrading of the promise may be a mark of responsibility if it is done to shield her teacher from possible public humiliation. If her teacher recoils at the promise to try and tries to extract a unconditional promise, the student is within her rights to resist. It is part of being a human being to have a limited supply of willpower. In some cases promising to try just means being honest about this fact. It is not a mark of bad faith, faulty reasoning, or dishonesty.

One might ask why the piano student may promise to try rather than make an explicitly conditional promise. We think the reasons may simply be practical: the conditions are very hard to state. What if after two hours of slogging, she finds herself losing focus, and no longer improving? Or if her grades in school start to slip, and she has a chemistry exam the next day? Or if the solitary hours start to make her feel seriously depressed?



Any attempt to list all of these conditions is bound to miss some, or to overstate others. Then why commit herself to trying? Well, perhaps she really does care about piano, and does think that a sustained effort will be a worthwhile endeavor. But this need not imply unconditional commitment.

Thus far we have shown that there are morally significant uses of *promising to try*. While a promise to try can sometimes be slippery or dishonest (as in the car salesman case), this is not always so. Moreover, a promise to try does not always express less than full commitment (sometimes promising to try simply draws attention to external threats). And even when the threat is internal, promising to try does not necessarily express less than total commitment (as in the confessional case). Finally, even when a promise to try does express less than total commitment, that does not always entail that commitment expressed is *insufficient*. In general, we promise to try because we have evidence that there is a significant chance that we will fail to pull through and we understand that it is therefore irresponsible to invite reliance.

It is precisely the conscientiousness characteristic of responsible promisers that restrains them from inviting the reliance of others if they judge that there is evidence of a significant chance of failure.<sup>5</sup> *Promising to try* alerts the promisee to the significant chance of failure, allowing her to make contingency plans if necessary. Responsible promisers are evidentialists about promising because evidentialism is the default position of an person who has conscientious attitude about inviting reliance.

It may be objected that our argument still leaves open the logical possibility that there are nonetheless responsible promises that go against the evidence. But recall that Marušič's

rejection of the evidentialist condition on promising is revisionary, and it is motivated in part by his contention that there are no other feasible alternatives if we wish to retain the sincerity, rationality, and responsibility conditions on promising. Marušič considers *promising to try* as a way out, but he gives it short shrift. Withdrawing from *promising to act* in favor of *promising to try* allows us to be sincere, rational, and responsible, while also retaining the orthodox evidentialist position. Since we demonstrate that the characteristic reason of the responsible promiser for refraining from promising to act in favor of promising to try is the judgment that it would irresponsible to invite reliance if the evidence indicates a significant chance of failure, the burden falls to the anti-evidentialists to give us a convincing example of a responsible promiser who promises against the evidence.

Let's return one final time to Marušič's central case of the war-time lovers. Marušič maintains that in this context, a promise to try expresses insufficient commitment. Marušič imagines the lover saying, "If I promise to wait for you, there is a significant chance that I will break my promise since I'll be tempted to break it. That's why I won't promise it."<sup>6</sup> He concludes, "This strikes us as somehow wrong; the other will be disappointed and will take it that you don't value the relationship enough."<sup>7</sup> But what if the lover promises to try her utmost, and really means it? Is she really insufficiently committed, and if so, what more can one ask? Why should the departing lover who is offered a promise to try be dissatisfied? What is the source of his discontent, and is it fair to insist on anything more?

We can think of two things the departing lover might be after. First, he may expect there

to be motivational pay-off from a straightforward promise that is not present in a promise to try. Whether one has tried one's utmost is a very difficult thing to know. As such, there is a certain fudge factor. When you fail to remain faithful, it might seem too easy to be able to say, "Be that as it may, I tried my utmost." With a straight-forward promise, you know that you will always be "in the wrong" if you fail because of lack of willpower.

Second, when we promise rather than promise to try, we are communicating that we take it to be within our power to carry off what is promised. I should not promise, but can promise to try, to do things that I am skeptical that I will be able to do. The lover who tries to extract a promise might be after the other's explicit declaration of the belief that it is within her power to stay faithful.

How could it be responsible for the lover to promise to wait if the objective evidence *seems* to indicate that there is a significant chance that she will fail at this? We suspect that the lover must have evidence that she (or her relationship) is different from the, say, two-thirds of people who fail to carry off such a promise. This account may well be private. The fact that evidence is not easily communicable does not in itself undermine its status as evidence. Alternatively, she might have a plan to stay faithful that she takes to be different from those kinds of plans that so often fail. These accounts and plans may defeat the evidence that there is significant chance that she will fail. Such considerations are notoriously influenced by wishful thinking, and a responsible promiser will be accordingly vigilant. But if she knows the evidence, reflects on it, and promises nonetheless without such an account or plan that defeats the evidence, then she promises irresponsibly.<sup>8</sup>

In the lovers case, Marušič's central example of responsible promising against the evidence, we maintain that either the promise is irresponsible, or that it does not go against the evidence. If the lover lacks evidence indicating that she will fare better than most others in a similar situation, then it is wrong of her to invite the reliance of her beloved. If she possesses evidence that indicates that she will fare better in the form of a distinctive strategy or plausible account of why her situation, personality, or relationship is atypical, then her promise does not go against the evidence.

Contrariwise, were the lover merely deliberating about whether to wait (rather than about whether to promise to wait) matters would be different. Merely deciding to  $\emptyset$  does not typically require an equally stringent standard of due care regarding whether in fact one will  $\emptyset$  having so decided.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, there are contexts where one is well advised to direct attention away from evidence of a significance chance of failure. The lover may find that reflection on her objective chance of success erodes her firmness of purpose. But such tactics are not appropriate for the lover who considers *promising* to wait and thereby deliberately and explicitly invites reliance.

Marušič's analysis of the well-known Professor Procrastinate<sup>10</sup> case is problematic for similar reasons. Professor Procrastinate considers whether he ought to promise to write a review considering his dismal track record of procrastination. Marušič maintains that, despite his acknowledged history, it would nevertheless be responsible for Professor Procrastinate to promise to write the review if "he took the evidence seriously in his practical reasoning – in particular his reasoning concerning how to go about writing the review – and in that way came to believe that he will write it." (317). But Marušič does not think that Professor Procrastinate's plan must defeat or outweigh the evidence in

order for him to promise responsibly. Marušič's standard for responsibility is lower. The Professor's strategies must merely make it "credible" that he will succeed in writing the review, even if the relevant belief still goes against the total body evidence, and he knows this to be the case (317).

But this standard is surely too low. Surely, if Professor Procrastinate fails to produce the review, and his promisee – who made no contingency plans having accepted the promise - learns of his dismal track record, his promisee is justified in rebuking him for having made an irresponsible promise. Professor Procrastinate should feel correspondingly remorseful. Marušič anticipates this objection, and maintains that the Professor could defend himself against the charge of irresponsibility by appealing to his assessment of the importance of writing the review, a consideration of practical reasoning rather than theoretical reasoning (317). But this misses the point. Professor Procrastinate's assessment of the importance of writing the review is sufficient reason for him to strive, intend, or resolve to write the review. But it is not sufficient to promise such a thing, because promising invites the reliance of others, and, considering his dismal track record, that is not an invitation he is entitled to make. The point might be put this way: while striving to do X merely requires that one make a serious attempt to do X, intending to do X adds in the belief that one has a good chance of succeeding to do X and promising to do X communicates a confident form of this belief to the promisee. There are times when our past behavior restricts the range of things that we can responsibly promise. If in the future Professor Procrastinate manages to gain control over his chronic procrastination, then he could responsibly promise to write the review by the stipulated deadline. Until that time, if he is conscientious he will restrict himself to promising to try.

Marušič is right to think that we are in bad faith when we allow the theoretical question of what we will do settle the practical and sometimes moral question of what we should do. To borrow his formulation, it is indeed the “agent’s prerogative” to intend, strive for, resolve and commit herself to courses of action for which she has evidence that there is a significant chance that she will fail. But in promising to succeed in such uncertain endeavors, she shows herself undeserving of the regard we reserve for those who take seriously the reliance of others, that is, the regard we reserve for responsible promisers. There is nothing to reproach in striving or intending to do something that one worries may be beyond one’s powers, but the situation is different when one moves beyond this to promising.

This conclusion is bittersweet. On the one hand, *promising to try* is all that we are entitled to when a straightforward promise would go against the evidence. On the other hand, *promising to try* is not devoid of moral significance, and there is no bad faith in making such promises.

\*We received insightful comments on this work from Bradley Armour-Garb, Lewis Davis, P.D. Magnus, and Pamela Robinson as well as two anonymous reviews from this journal.

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<sup>1</sup> Berislav Marušič, “Promising Against the Evidence,” *Ethics* 123 (2013): 292-317.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>4</sup> For the “assurance” account of promising, see T.M. Scanlon (*What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998). For the “rights transfer” account see Seana Shiffrin, “Promising, Intimate Relationships, and Conventionalism,” *Philosophical Review* 117 (2008): 481-524. Our account of *promising to try* is compatible with either kind of view.

<sup>5</sup> An anonymous reviewer from this journal notes that there are cases where our body of evidence is such that we judge that there is a significant chance that we will fail at *trying* (because of severe depression, for instance). Does our view of responsible promising imply that in such cases we ought to refrain from promising to try? Our answer is “not necessarily”. In ordinary cases, promising to try does not invite significant reliance. There may be cases where trying itself brings about some relied upon result, but these are exceptional.

<sup>6</sup> Marušič, 308.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>8</sup> An anonymous reviewer from this journal points out that must be read *pro tanto*. If, for example, your child were afraid to jump from a burning building unless you promised that you would catch her safely (if a promise to try would not persuade her to jump), and her failure to jump would likely entail that she would be trapped in the building, you be justified in promising outright to catch her even if this were against the evidence.

<sup>9</sup> Although an anonymous referee from this journal alerts us to the fact that the standard of due care is equally stringent in some cases where the wellbeing of another will be threatened if we fail to pull through on our intentions and there are more feasible alternatives.

<sup>10</sup> The original example comes from Frank Jackson and Robert Pargetter’s “Oughts, Options, and Actualism,” *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 233-55. In Marušič version, Professor Procastinate promises

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against the evidence rather than against the fact that he actually would not write the review. Neither Marušič's analysis nor ours is intended to commit to a view about actualism or subjunctive conditionals.