

ARTICLE

Hope in political philosophy

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Abstract

The language of hope is a ubiquitous part of political life, but its value is increasingly contested. While there is an emerging debate about hope in political philosophy, an assessment of the prevalent scepticism about its role in political practice is still outstanding. The aim of this article is to provide an overview of historical and recent treatments of hope in political philosophy and to indicate lines of further research. We argue that even though political philosophy can draw on recent analyses of hope in analytic philosophy, there are distinct challenges for an account of hope in political contexts. Examples such as racial injustice or climate change show the need for a systematic normative account that is sensitive to the unavoidability of hope in politics as much as its characteristic dangers.

The language of hope is ubiquitous in political life. Citizens hope for their cause or candidate to prevail, activists describe their fight against oppression and injustice as bolstered by shared hopes, politicians invoke hope to galvanise support. Yet, even in political discourse the value of hope no longer remains undisputed. Politicians who take on the growing disaffection by invoking hope are readily accused of leading people down the primrose path with empty rhetoric.¹ Citizens wonder which hopes can still be shared in societies characterised by deep disagreement about values and worldviews. And activists engaged in the fight against global warming prefer to instil an unvarnished fear of the imminent climate catastrophe rather than a hopeful outlook that might lead people to lean back complacently.²

While there is an emerging debate about hope in political philosophy, an assessment of the prevalent scepticism about its role in political practice is still outstanding. In this article, we first give an overview of recent debates about the nature of hope in general (Section 1) as well as a number of critiques of hope specifically in political contexts (Section 2). Indicating lines of further research, we then zoom in on three distinct challenges for a systematic

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normative account that is sensitive to the productive role of hope in politics as much as its characteristic dangers: the function (Section 3), objects (Section 4) and normativity (Section 5) of political hope. Throughout this article, we draw on the examples of racial injustice and climate change for illustrative purposes.

1 | WHAT IS HOPE?

There is a burgeoning debate about the nature of hope in analytic philosophy. Most attempts to characterize hope start from the so-called standard definition, according to which a person hopes that *p* if and only if she desires that *p* and believes that *p* is possible, but not certain (see for example, Day 1969). This definition has precursors in the history of philosophy, most notably in Aquinas and the Enlightenment (e.g., Descartes, Hobbes, Hume). While the latter authors assume, however, that we cannot hope for what we take to be very unlikely, contemporary proponents argue that a belief in possibility suffices for hope, while more confident assessments (such as 'p is likely') express optimism.³ This allows them to acknowledge the kind of hope in the face of low odds even as a paradigmatic case ('hope against hope', see for example, Martin 2013).

Most contemporary authors agree, however, that the standard definition does not offer sufficient conditions for hope. For example, it has been argued that the pair of desire and belief fails to distinguish hope from despair (Meirav, 2009). A variety of suggestions have been put forward how to revise or complement it (since the overview in Blöser & Stahl, 2017, several new contributions have appeared, for example, Han-Pile, 2017; Kwong, 2019; Milona, 2018; Milona & Stockdale, 2018). More fundamentally yet, others dispute that hope is even accurately described as a 'compound' state constituted by a desire, belief and possibly a third component, proposing instead to analyse it as a simple state (Segal & Textor, 2015) or concept (Blöser, 2019).

The differences between these approaches to hope must be taken into account when discussing its role in politics, since disagreements about hope's potential and dangers might well go back to disagreements about its nature (see Section 2 below). For instance, authors who assume a conceptual link between hope and a disposition to act (e.g., McKinnon, 2005; Moellendorf, 2006) will be more inclined to laude its motivational role. Furthermore, authors who take hope to involve a cognitive component rather than viewing it as a mere affect are usually more open to the idea that we can, at least sometimes, actively decide to hope (rather than merely cultivating it).

There is yet another understanding of hope which has been deemed to be relevant in political contexts. Some authors doubt that hope necessarily requires an object in the first place. The propositional kind of hope with the structure "hope that *p*" can be contrasted with "basal" hope understood as an anticipatory stance without specific object, a more general sense that the world is open to our intervention (e.g., Bloch, 1986, Marcel, 1962, Lear, 2006, Ratcliffe, 2013, Calhoun, 2018). Jonathan Lear calls such indeterminate hope "radical" and assigns it a decidedly political function in the context of cultural destruction. Interpreting the situation of the Crow Nation, Native Americans who were forced to give up their traditional way of life, Lear argues that radical hope makes it possible to retain a sense of cultural identity, even if all conceivable objects of such identity have been eradicated. Timo Juetten (2019) finds such a conception of radical hope in the work of Adorno.

2 | CRITICS OF POLITICAL HOPE

Political philosophers are only beginning to systematically investigate the role of hope in political life. Many view it as a gritty fact of political practice that does not belong in normative theory. Others, however, voice more substantive concerns that lead them to conclude that hope is misplaced particularly in democratic politics. First, hope is often equated with optimism and thus a naïve and doe-eyed approach to politics (e.g., Eagleton, 2015; Ehrenreich, 2007). "Chronic hoppers" (Mencken, 1958) cultivate an ungrounded confidence that the world is tilting in their favour, which leads them to complacently lean back or recklessly disregard risks and perils. Along these lines,

for instance, Thucydides describes how Athenians' delusive hopes brought about political disaster: their unlimited confidence bereaved them of the ability to judge "what was possible on the basis of their strengths and what was impracticable and exceeded their means" (Schlosser, 2013, p. 172), such that they acted in a careless, dangerous and self-destructive manner.

As indicated in Section 1, however, hope and optimism (or confidence) can and should be conceptually distinguished. If we can hope for very unlikely outcomes, hope and pessimism are compatible. Indeed, defenders of hope in certain contexts, for example, the struggle for racial justice, argue in favour of hope instead of a naïve belief in a better future. Cornel West, one of the leading intellectuals of Afro-American origin, claims that "real hope is grounded in a particularly messy struggle and it can be betrayed by naïve projections of a better future that ignore the necessity of doing the real work. So what we are talking about is hope on a tightrope" (West, 2008, p. 5).

Second, hope is frequently said to disempower and demotivate. It is generally agreed that hope matters in scenarios where we rely at least partly on external factors (such as luck, destiny or other people) and success is not fully in our control, which seems to run counter to the basic democratic intuition that citizens are in control of their own future. In the context of fraught political circumstances, hope may even be put to ideological use: the privileged and powerful can promise, sell and manufacture hope in order to keep members of oppressed groups in their place (e.g., Teasley & Ikard, 2010). This concern is especially prominent in the debate about racial injustice, where Calvin Warren (2015) argues that we should embrace 'Black nihilism', because a 'politics of hope' preserves the metaphysical structures that sustain black suffering. Hope, on his account, is nothing but the illusion that we come incrementally closer to what is actually impossible—racial justice. By clinging to this hope, the oppressed remain in and affirm the structures that keep them in their predicament. On the other hand, precisely the struggle against racial injustice may be taken to illustrate that hope can function as a motor for social struggle and foster solidarity among the participants, as Vincent Lloyd (2018) shows drawing on Martin Luther King. As we will argue below, hope can both motivate individual action and have an empowering effect on collectives who share certain hopes.

Third, hope is suspected to misdirect our agency (rather than undermining it altogether). Matt Sleat's reason for decrying hope as a "malevolent force in politics" (Sleat, 2013, p. 131), for instance, is that it distracts us from what is to be done 'here and now'. By inviting us to fantasize about distant possible worlds, hope inflates our ideas of what politics can deliver in a way that is bound to lead to disappointment or even more destructive sentiments such as disaffection or estrangement. Instead of building castles in the air, we should cultivate a realistic or even pessimistic (Dienstag, 2006) sense of practical possibility and its narrow limits in politics. Proponents of this critique often share a more general scepticism about the prospects of radical change in politics. They associate hope with a 'goal-directed politics' that seeks to transform society (violently, if necessary) in line with preconceived principles and institutions (e.g., Gray, 2004; Scruton, 2011). However, while hope is indeed an anticipatory, future directed attitude, it would be a mistake to simply equate it with utopianism. Whether hope expresses an over-ambitious attitude depends on its object, that is, what we hope for. This is an important way in which the question of political hope cuts across debates about ideal and non-ideal theory in political philosophy (e.g., Stemplowska & Swift, 2012).

Finally, some authors worry that hope is rife with theological remnants from which it cannot be easily detached (e.g., Newheiser, 2019). Indeed, historically hope was conceived by thinkers such as Augustin or Aquinas as a theological virtue directed at the afterlife or God's assistance, and it continues to be prominent in contemporary Christian eschatology (e.g., Moltmann, 1993). Yet, it would need to be shown what exactly it is about the conceptual structure or normative substance of hope that makes it immune to being transferred to contemporary secularised contexts. For instance, contemporary virtue theorists such as Mittleman (2009) or Lamb (2016) fruitfully draw on the Augustinian or Thomistic traditions to investigate the possibility of presenting hope as a distinctly political virtue that allows citizens to pursue democratic goods that are difficult but possible to attain.

Other thinkers replace Christian eschatology with philosophy of history. Ernst Bloch's (1986) Marxist utopia, for instance, prefigures the classless society as the only real, objective possibility and hence the ultimate object of hope. There are certainly reasons to worry that these strongly teleological assumptions are in stark tension with the characteristic sense of the future as genuinely open to human agency, and that this severely limits the applicability of his

framework to democratic contexts in particular. Again, however, it is implausible to assume that hope is conceptually married to teleology. Contemporary Kantians such as Goldman (2012), for instance, fruitfully explore Kant's account of hope for historical progress while bracketing the underlying teleological conception of nature.

To sum up, these authors articulate the worry that hope undermines, stifles or misdirects political agency. While some of them certainly go too far in wholeheartedly rejecting that hope can play a productive role, a systematic account of hope in politics will have to account for the fact that certain hopes can indeed, under certain circumstances, have detrimental effects on political action and community.

3 | THE FUNCTION OF POLITICAL HOPE

A systematic account of hope that neither overemphasizes the potential nor the dangers of hoping is required to clarify why it matters that citizens hope for certain things under certain circumstances. In the subsequent three sections, we take a systematic perspective in order to identify a number of more specific questions such an account would have to answer.

In the present section, we address the *function* of political hope: why and how does it matter, from a perspective of (democratic) politics, that citizens have or adopt certain hopes? Most obviously, hope may be *instrumentally* valuable. First, it may play an important motivating role, allowing citizens to retain their resolve in the pursuit of political goals. This can be seen as a special instance of hope's capacity to sustain our resolve and keep going particularly in adverse circumstances, an idea that is familiar also from historical treatments. Kant, for instance, advances the thesis that we need hope for historical progress in order to contribute to it as individual agents. Among those who adopt this thesis for contemporary purposes (e.g., Goldman, 2012) it remains an issue of contention whether hope is a necessary presupposition for rational action, since we cannot rationally act without believing that our goal is realisable (see O'Neill, 1996), or whether the role of hope is primarily that of a psychological means to sustain us in difficult circumstances (see Huber, 2019). Kant leaves it open, however, why precisely hope is able to perform the function in question. One thought developed in contemporary debates is that hopeful agents visualize pathways towards the hoped-for outcome, such that they are able to represent it as a *genuine* possibility (Kwong, 2019). Another idea is that hope involves a mental focus on the possibility of the outcome instead of its unlikelihood (Chignell, 2018a).

A nuanced account of hope's instrumental role, however, also has to consider negative effects of hope on motivation. Disagreements about the role of hope in the context of climate change mostly go back to its role in motivating action. While some activists (prominently among them like Greta Thunberg and the Extinction Rebellion movement) see hope as detrimental for motivation, defenders of hope (e.g., McKinnon, 2014; Roser, 2019) emphasize its positive function in sustaining action when the ultimate goal—managing climate change—is uncertain. Even if it is granted that the right kind of hope has a positive effect on motivation, however, it is still an open question whether the hope that climate change will be managed is the better means to support motivation than other attitudes, for example, fear that the goal will not be reached. Nussbaum (2018, p. 212) suggests, for instance, that a politics of fear plays into the hands of those who seek to manage things violently. Ultimately, however, this question is empirical; psychological studies are potentially helpful to find the most effective attitudes in given circumstances (see for example, Marlon, 2019).

The main source of uncertainty, in political contexts, concerns the actions of others. Thus, whether one may hope seems to be intimately bound up with other attitudes towards our co-citizens, most notably trust (Huber, 2019; McGeer, 2004). This leads to a second function of hope in politics: it may contribute to creating a thriving democratic community. For, given that in democracy we rely on others for our political success, hope helps us to cultivate a desirable set of attitudes towards our co-citizens, such as trust, civic friendship (Lamb, 2016) or respect (Pettit, 2004).

Stahl (2020) lays out two further ways in which hope may be politically significant. First, certain hopes may be thought to fulfil a *constitutive* function in the sense of being a precondition for the emergence of the political sphere

in the first place. Stahl draws on Hobbes and Spinoza in order to make this point. Hope figures prominently in Hobbes's explanation both of the features of the state of nature and the possibility of overcoming it. On the one hand, hope to attain one's objects of pleasure is described as a potential source of conflict. On the other hand, hope (grounded in trust that others will cooperate) helps to secure peace itself: it is a principle of reason 'that every man, ought to endeavor Peace, as farre as he has hope of obtaining it' (Hobbes, 1991, p. 92). Similarly, Spinoza points to a positive role of hope for abiding by a social contract in his *Theological–Political Treatise*, suggesting that citizens cooperate with the government because they hope to attain greater goods by doing so. Finally, Stahl argues that hope may play a *justificatory* role in democratic contexts. On the one hand, an institutional arrangement may be justified by pointing out that it promotes certain hopes. On the other hand, citizens may invoke certain shared hopes when they engage in political argument and public justification.

4 | THE OBJECT OF POLITICAL HOPE

One obvious fact about hope in political contexts is that its object is communal, at least in the minimal sense that it is directed at that which concerns us all. But is there anything democratic citizens should hope for in particular? One suggestion is that what we hope for in modern diverse democracies should be constrained by the fact that our societies are characterised by a radical value pluralism, which rules out a consensus at least on questions of the good life. Against this idea, Stahl (2020) makes the case for maintaining our hope that we will one day converge on a more ambitious form of community that goes beyond a mere overlapping consensus on question of justice. By contrast, Rawlsians such as Howard (2019) insist that we have to confine our hopes to that which can be publicly affirmed by all reasonable fellow citizens. She draws on Rawls' concept of a "realistic utopia" in order to reflect on the role of political philosophy in providing people with ideals of justice for which they can reasonably hold out hope.

From American pragmatists we can extract a further proceduralised version of this idea. In the context of John Dewey's (1980) democratic experimentalism, for instance, hope expresses citizens' confidence that together they can make progress in solving shared problems and, as such, constitutes a basic precondition of engaging in democratic action. In this vein, Nancy Snow (Snow, 2018, p. 419) argues that democratic hope simply expresses citizens' commitment to democracy and democratic processes. Similarly, Michael Lamb suggests that our hopes should remain "indeterminate and open-ended, dependent on the democratic deliberation and decisions of a community's members" (Lamb, 2016, p. 317). It remains an open question, however, whether hope can still inspire citizens if reduced to a kind of faith in the success of democratic processes and institutions. And what if a society is deeply divided, for instance along economic, cultural or ethnic lines, such that citizens cannot even agree on a shared commitment to their democratic institutions?

Notice also that whether a particular hope is warranted depends crucially on how we specify its object. The example of climate change nicely illustrates this. The hope "that climate change will be managed", that "warming won't exceed 1,5°C compared to pre-industrial level" or that "my actions will contribute to the mitigation of climate change" express different levels of ambitions and are respectively warranted under different circumstances (McKinnon, 2005).

5 | THE NORMATIVITY OF POLITICAL HOPE

What are the appropriate normative concepts to theorise the role of hope in democratic life? Contemporary debates about hope in analytic philosophy largely focus on the question of *rational permissibility*, that is, the conditions under which we are licensed to hope. Assuming that hope contains at least a desire for something and a belief that this is possible but not certain (see Section 1), many authors take hope to be responsive to both epistemic and practical norms. On this view, a hope is epistemically rational if the relevant belief in the possibility of the outcome is

warranted. On accounts that view hope as a simple state or concept, the rationality of hope is not determined by the rationality of its components. Rather, criteria of rationality can be drawn from ordinary judgments about hope. If one comes to believe that the hoped-for object is impossible, hope is normally given up. This belief-constraint on what we de facto hope for mirrors a rationality constraint: a particular hope should be given up if one should believe (on the basis of evidence) that its object is impossible. Thus, on both compound and simple accounts of hope, hope is permissible from the perspective of theoretical rationality if it is permissible to withhold the belief in impossibility.

The pertinent sense of (im-)possibility and, consequently, which kind of evidence (if any) would be required for justified hope, is a further issue of contention. Logical or metaphysical possibility seem to be too weak to justify hope for political goals, which are a matter of practical possibility. While Roser (2019, 205) suggests “to be ecumenical with respect to what possibility requires”, others contend that it is irrational or misplaced to hope for outcomes that are possible though highly unlikely (McFall, 1991; Stockdale, 2017). Recent debates about feasibility in political philosophy could help to inform these questions (e.g., Gilibert & Lawford-Smith, 2012; Jensen, 2009).

Second, the practical rationality of hope can be evaluated along different dimensions: on the one hand, the evaluation can concern the object of hope (e.g., whether it is directed at a morally permissible end), on the other hand, it can concern features of the attitude itself (e.g., whether hoping is beneficial to the agent or has an effect on the likelihood of attaining the desired outcome). Both of these possibilities are instances of practical evaluation; the first concerning the goodness of the object, the second the prudential value of the attitude.

That said, a normative investigation of hope in politics should not be confined to questions of rational permissibility. On the one hand, we may want to criticize political agents who cling on to possible though highly improbable goals instead of changing course and pursuing more realistic alternatives; in other words, there seem to be cases where hope is rational but not commendable. Moellendorf (2020) describes the basis of this criticism in terms of opportunity costs: hoping involves spending energy in terms of feelings and activities, such that hoping for one cause rules out hoping for (or pursuing) alternatives. The question whether or not to hope for an improbable state of affairs if it is considered to be particularly valuable concerns the question how theoretical and practical standards should be weighed (see for example, Martin, 2013; McCormick, 2017).⁴

Yet, there may be cases where even stronger deontic concepts apply. While most authors assume that hoping under the appropriate conditions is permissible but reject the employment of “ought language” (McCormick, 2017) in relation to hope, Howard (2019) ascribes to Rawls the view that reasonable citizens *must* have certain hopes for a just future. Similarly, Darrel Moellendorf (2006) argues that failing to hope renders a person *prima facie* morally blameworthy, given that the requisite “institutional bases” exist. Obviously, a verdict concerning the normativity of hope depends on how one resolves questions about its nature and motivational role. If hope turns out to be necessary for motivating moral action, or if it has more benefits than disadvantages (Roser, 2019), it could be a required attitude.

6 | CONCLUSION

Our aim in this contribution was to give a critical overview of work on hope in political philosophy. While political philosophers can draw in their inquiry on a burgeoning literature in analytic philosophy concerning the nature and rationality of hope in general, it is clear that political contexts raise a number of specific questions and challenges. By zooming in on three dimensions (the function, object and normativity of political hope), we illustrated the need for a complex and distinct theoretical framework that acknowledges the importance of hope in politics as much as its characteristic pitfalls. Hope constitutes one of the most fascinating, complex and multifaceted phenomena of political life and should accordingly be considered as a prominent issue of investigation in political philosophy.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Recall Sarah Palin's sarcastic rejoinder to Barack Obama at a 2010 Tea Party convention, "How's that hopey, changey stuff working out?" (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123462728&t=1564204576533>).
- ² As Greta Thunberg put it in her speech in Davos: "I do not want you to be hopeful. [...] I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act." (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/11/greta-thunberg-schoolgirl-climate-change-warrior-some-people-can-let-things-go-i-cant>; last access June 25, 2019). The activist group *Extinction Rebellion* follows Thunberg in her scepticism about hope and chooses as title of their first book „Hope dies—action begins”.
- ³ On the distinction between hope and optimism, see for instance Eagleton, 2015.
- ⁴ This debate is linked to questions that are prominently discussed in debates about the "ethics of belief" (Chignell, 2018b).

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[Correction added on 29 May 2020, after first online publication: The bibliographical details of 'Meirav, 2009' has been added in this current version.]

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