



Global Poverty and Kantian Hope

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Abstract

Development economists have suggested that the *hopes of the poor* are a relevant factor in overcoming poverty. I argue that Kant’s approach to hope provides an important complement to the economists’ perspective. A Kantian account of hope emphasizes the need for the rationality of hope and thereby guards against problematic aspects of the economists’ discourse on hope. Section 1 introduces recent work on hope in development economics. Section 2 clarifies Kant’s question “What may I hope?” and presents the outlines of his answer. Crucially, hope is rational if it is rational to *trust in the structures of reality* on which the realization of one’s hope depends. Section 3 argues that central tenets of Kant’s account of what makes hope rational can be applied to the context of poverty. It becomes apparent that the poor often have good reason to be hopeless since they may not trust fundamental structures that are necessary for realizing their hope. Thus, the insight that the poor need more hope must go hand in hand with a commitment to establishing trustworthy political structures, such that their hope can be rational. Section 4 highlights the relevance of the secular highest good for a better understanding of the justification and scope of our duties to the poor in a Kantian framework.

Keywords Hope · Poverty · Kant · Highest Good · Economics · Agency

In this contribution, I approach the problem of global poverty from a novel perspective that has recently caught the interest of development economists. Since Esther Duflo’s *Tanner Lectures*, economists have suggested that the *hopes of the poor* are a relevant factor in determining whether they are able to escape the poverty trap (Duflo 2012).¹ Correspondingly, she suggests that hope can make a positive difference to the success of developmental aid since hope allows the poor to pursue goals that seem difficult and risky. Travis Lybbert and Bruce Wydick follow Duflo in examining the role of hope in developmental aid and propose a framework for

¹ Kremer, Banerjee, and Duflo won the Nobel Prize in 2019 “for their experimental approach to alleviating global poverty” (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2019/press-release/>; accessed 3rd August 2020).

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conducting empirical research on the impact of “hope interventions” (Lybbert and Wydick, 2018a, b). This approach is in line with the perspective of positive psychology, which emphasizes hope as a resource for sustaining agency in difficult circumstances. While this is also a common view in the philosophical debate on hope, the economists’ perspective on hope runs the risk of *individualizing* the problem of hopelessness. The tendency to individualization has two aspects: First, lack of hope is seen as mainly being a problem of *individual psychology*. To foster hope, economists suggest strategies such as “developing goals and aspirations” and “visualizing pathways from poverty” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018a, 170). Second, while the economists acknowledge that “there must be a tangible basis for hope that stems from reality” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018a, 154), they suggest that this basis can be improved by providing individuals with assets, or by “cash transfer” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018a, 160), thus suggesting that the problem concerns one’s individual economic situation. I do not doubt the importance of these interventions at the individual level. However, on the plausible assumption that there are structural, political factors that are responsible for causing and prolonging poverty, this approach strikes me as incomplete. At the very least, it tends to disconnect concerns about hope from concerns about improving the relevant general, institutional structures. My thesis is that Kant offers an account of hope that allows us to appreciate its relevance to the problem of poverty without individualizing it. Crucial in this regard is Kant’s insight that while we need hope, this hope must be *rational*. This is why he presents the *normative* question “What may I hope?” (A805/B833) as one of the central questions of reason.²

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 1, I introduce recent work on hope in development economics, which focuses on “aspirational hope” as involving a positive view of our powers and a perception of possible pathways that one can pursue to bring about the hoped-for outcome. Section 2 clarifies Kant’s question “What may I hope?” and presents the contours of his answer. Crucially, hope is rational if it is rational to *trust in the structures of reality* on which the realization of one’s hope depends. Section 3 argues that central tenets of Kant’s account of what makes hope rational can be applied to the context of poverty. It becomes apparent that the poor often have good reason to be hopeless since they may not trust fundamental structures that are necessary for realizing their hope. Thus, the insight that the poor need more hope must go hand in hand with a commitment to establishing trustworthy political structures, such that their hope can be rational. Section 4 highlights the relevance of the secular highest good for a better understanding of the justification and scope of our duties to the poor in a Kantian framework.

1 Hope in Development Economics

Traditionally, development economics has focused on improving external conditions such as infrastructure, the health system and education in order to alleviate poverty. More recently, however, there has been an upsurge in literature on the internal, psychological factors that influence economic behavior, such as emotions, confidence and aspirations (Pleeging and Burger 2020).³ Since psychological research indicates that hope has a

² Except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant’s works are cited using the volume and page numbers (volume:page) of the standard Academy edition of Kant’s writings (Berlin, 1900–). The *Critique of Pure Reason* is cited using the A- and B-editions (A/B).

³ While systematic research into poverty along these lines is relatively new, the original idea can be traced back to Adam Smith, who is said to have remarked that “the real tragedy of the poor is the poverty of their aspirations” (quoted in Lybbert and Wydick 2018, 722).

positive effect on a number of desired outcomes, such as well-being, health and productivity, it comes as no surprise that hope has caught the attention of economists as well. Within economics, the field that focuses most on hope is development economics (Pleeging and Burger 2020, 173). While the research on economic decisions in affluent societies focuses mainly on consumer *confidence* and *expectations*, extreme poverty creates a context where many actions aimed at improving one's life involve considerable risk and uncertainty. In such circumstances, hope has been considered relevant, since one can *hope* for that which one takes to be uncertain, even if one cannot *expect* it.

Esther Duflo bases her hypothesis that hope can play a significant role in improving the lives of the very poor on the results of a program tested in Bangladesh. The participants were offered assets (such as cows, goats, starting stock for a village shop and sewing machines), a small stipend for a few months and weekly training sessions on how to tend to animals and manage a household. The results were dramatic: People not only earned and ate more, but they also started saving more and explored new lines of work. To explain these results, Duflo draws on Amartya Sen's idea that "poverty deprives individuals of central capabilities" (Duflo 2012, 30), which makes it even harder for the poor to exit poverty. While Sen focuses on health, nutritional status and education, Duflo hypothesizes that what is relevant to explaining her results is mental health. The participants' answers to a questionnaire on mental health confirmed that depression, anxiety and stress had been significantly alleviated. Duflo states: "What we hypothesize, although we cannot directly confirm it using this data, is that this improved mental health is what gave participants the energy to work more, save, and invest in their children" (Duflo 2012, 31). In particular, Duflo formed the hypothesis that *hopelessness* had contributed to keeping the poor in their miserable situation and that "hope and a sense that they had been given a chance may have been what motivated them to succeed" (Duflo 2012, 31).⁴

Duflo's original suggestion that we pay attention to the influence of hope on the agency of the poor has been taken up and developed further by Travis Lybbert and Bruce Wydick, who proceed on the basis of a specific definition of hope and suggest concrete approaches for "hope interventions" (Lybbert and Wydick 2018a). They distinguish "wishful" from "aspirational" hope, which differ mainly in terms of the extent to which they involve the agency of the hoping subject. They characterize *wishful hope* as an optimistic attitude directed towards an outcome that is "determined by influences outside one's control, such as the benevolence of a patron, an inheritance, the rise of a beneficent political leader, or the will of God".⁵ Where this is the case, there is virtually no place for individual agency in promoting the goal ("low agency"). By contrast, *aspirational hope* involves the assumption that the influence of random factors outside the agent's control is low, and thus it involves significant agential effort, coupled with "neutral or slightly optimistic perceptions of the future" (Lybbert and Wydick 2018, 712). One example of wishful hope is expressed in the sentence "Fatima hopes that the village leader will respond to her situation" (ibid.),

⁴ Note that Duflo herself admits that her research "cannot directly confirm" (Duflo 2012, 31) a causal relationship between hope and the overall improvement of her subjects' economic situation. Most importantly, to my mind, we cannot exclude the possibility that improved mental health (like reduced stress) was a *consequence* of economic improvement rather than its cause.

⁵ In the contemporary debate, the term "wishful hope" was coined by Victoria McGeer. Note, however, that for McGeer it is a *normative* notion, designating a form of defective hoping, namely, "a failure to take on the full responsibility of agency and hence to remain overreliant on external powers to realize one's hopes" (McGeer 2004, 110). Lybbert and Wydick, by contrast, use the term descriptively without implying that the assumption of a very low degree of agential power over the outcome is wrong or unjustified.

whereas “Fatima hopes to gain several new customers this month for her small poultry business” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018, 712f.) is an example of aspirational hope. I will return to this example and the question of whether the assumption of high agential control is apt below. Lybbert and Wydick’s focus is aspirational hope, which they understand as “the product of efficacious effort optimistically directed toward an aspiration” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018, 733). That is, they see hope as directed towards particular ends (“aspirations”) that one regards as being within one’s power (at least to a significant degree), such that one “optimistically” directs one’s efforts towards them. This conception corresponds to Charles Snyder’s influential theory in psychology (Snyder et al. 1991). On Snyder’s characterization of hope as comprising goals, agency and pathways, the hoping individual must (a) have specific goals (rather than “goals”, Lybbert and Wydick refer to “aspirations” to connect to research in economics; see Appadurai 2004), (b) “be able to visualize pathways to achieving these goals” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018, 717), and (c) “possess sufficient agency to motivate the necessary investments and make progress along these pathways, even in the face of impediments” (Lybbert and Wydick, 718).

Note that Lybbert and Wydick link hope closely to exercising agency (“making effort”).⁶ This suggests that the hoper has a high degree of agential control not only over the hoped-for outcome (where the influence of external factors is assumed to be low) but also over hoping itself. According to Lybbert and Wydick, it seems that *by making an effort* (which is under the agent’s control), the person *eo ipso* hopes. Insofar as *making an effort* is under one’s control, so is hoping itself. To be sure, the question of whether we (at least sometimes) can control hope is a disputed issue. If hope is (largely) within the agent’s control, she is (largely) responsible for having hope and therefore for improving her situation. If hope is something over which the agent has no control, however, she is not responsible for improving her situation by adopting hope.⁷ Thus, the attribution of responsibility will sound unfair to those who defend a conception of hope according to which it is not under our control. The question of whether the attribution of responsibility for hope is fair will thus be as disputed as the nature of hope is.⁸

As for the question of how much control the agent has over the outcome, it is a common assumption that hope is directed towards an outcome that is at least partly beyond the agent’s powers. To be sure, Lybbert and Wydick acknowledge that hope often contains both “wishful” and “aspirational” elements (Lybbert and Wydick, 713), but their focus on aspirational hope (which combines “efficacious effort” and being “optimistically directed toward” the goal) suggests that they view the hoped-for outcome as largely within the control of the hoper. This assumption may be problematic, however, especially in the context of poverty. In the example of aspirational hope cited above, Fatima hopes to gain new customers for her small poultry business this month. On Lybbert and Wydick’s account, this means that she makes an “efficacious effort” and is “optimistically directed toward” this

⁶ Lybbert and Wydick note that aspirational hope “overlaps” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018, 712) with other action-involving phenomena such as grit, i.e., “high agency in the face of negative shocks that may reduce the agent’s optimism about the future” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018, 711). While this assumption is common in the psychological discourse on hope, which typically follows Snyder’s theory, it is not shared by all psychologists: “[T]hrough hope implies some ‘agentic’ quality, the sense of successful agency is not proper to it. Making this equation deprives hope of its specificity” (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2010, 255).

⁷ This is not to suggest that the poor might not be responsible in any sense for improving their situation. To be sure, they do have some degree of agential control, but perhaps not with regard to whether they hope.

⁸ I cannot solve this dispute here, but note that there are a number of theorists who will take issue with the claim that we can control hope; see (Han-Pile 2017) and (Milona and Stockdale 2021).

end. Conversely, lack of hope would amount to a lack of effort or optimism. However, one might have the intuition that Fatima has *good reason* not to make the effort or be optimistic. The real problem for Fatima—and why she does not hope or make an effort—may have to do with external factors beyond her control, e.g., the fact that the region is severely impoverished and the market is flooded with cheaper meat from large corporations. This is not to say that Fatima does not have any agential control over her situation. Agential control comes in degrees. The problem I see with focusing on aspirational hope is that one runs the risk of overestimating the degree of the agent's control over the hoped-for outcome. In the background lurks the problem of responsibility: If it is largely up to Fatima to realize an outcome by making more of an effort, she is responsible for doing so. However, if Fatima faces circumstances similar to the ones just described, it would be inappropriate to suggest that she needs to make more of an effort or be more optimistic. This would amount to obscuring the real problem, i.e., the unjust external structures and circumstances in which she lives. Rather than changing Fatima's outlook or agential effort, improvement efforts should focus on structural change.

To be sure, Lybbert and Wydick hold that hope is not “substitutionary” but rather “complementary to more tangible interventions in areas such as health, schooling and finance” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018a, 154). That is, they do not advance the implausibly strong claim that more hope alone can solve the problem—promoting hope “should rarely be viewed as a substitute for relieving external constraints” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018a, 175). Still, their approach runs the risk of individualizing the problem. Their concern with hope is primarily a concern about individual psychology. In their example of a “hope intervention”, individuals are trained in “the ‘soft-skills’ of developing goals and aspirations, enhancing self-efficacy, and the practice of visualizing pathways from poverty” (Lybbert and Wydick 2018a, 170). This gives the impression that fostering hope and improving external conditions are two separate tasks, the first dealing with the psychology of individuals, the second with relieving external constraints. Further, it is not clear that external improvements must at least *also* be structural, going beyond providing individuals with credits and assets. A Kantian account may help to clarify the connection between promoting hope and creating better social and political structures.

2 What May I Hope? Outlining Kant's Answer

Even though Kant assigns hope a central place in his philosophical system, he never explicitly says what he takes hope to be.⁹ He asks not what hope *is* but what one *may* hope. Drawing on Kant's account therefore promises to be fruitful, not so much in clarifying the concept of hope as in revealing what makes hope rational. A crucial insight from the Kantian perspective is that what we should promote is not hope *per se* but *rational* hope. Since rational hope, on a Kantian account, is based on rational trust in the relevant structures of reality, one should strive to establish trustworthy conditions, such that the poor *may* hope. In what follows, I will also indicate the limits of applying Kant's account, which are due to the fact that he focuses on *transcendental* objects and realization conditions (most notably the existence of God).

⁹ On understanding Kantian hope as a feeling, see (Zuckert 2018).

In order to understand Kant's answer to the question "What may I hope?", we must first clarify the question itself. As the entry on "dürfen" (may) in Grimm's Dictionary shows, the term had various meanings in Kant's time. Besides being used in the sense of "permission", which is most common today, it also referred to "having grounds" (*Grund haben*).¹⁰ Both senses are relevant to Kant's answer, although the latter is more central. I will discuss both meanings in turn and will then suggest applications in the context of poverty.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant claims that "all hope concerns happiness" (A805/B833).¹¹ Hence, hope is directed towards what the person views as positive—her happiness in general. This is in line with almost all accounts of hope: It is generally assumed that hope aims at what the hoper takes to be good in some respect. However, if this were all that Kant wanted to capture, one's happiness could include morally bad states of affairs or undeserved happiness. Here, the connection to "permission" becomes relevant. Kant focuses on *morally deserved* happiness. He is concerned not with happiness *per se* but with happiness as an object of hope for moral beings. In the first and second *Critique*, Kant holds that what we hope for as moral beings is happiness to the degree that we are worthy of it, i.e., happiness in proportion to our degree of virtue. This is part of what Kant calls the "highest good", i.e., a state in which happiness and morality are combined, or more precisely, a world in which "happiness [is] distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy)" (5:110). Kantian hope is therefore hope for one's own happiness in a world where "perfect justice" (Williams 2010, 49) is realized, where our striving for happiness and morality are in perfect harmony.

Some interpreters claim that the object of hope, for Kant, is the highest good (Huber 2019, 5). Kant only says this in one passage, however (see 5:129). In general, he tends to describe the highest good as an object of our *striving*—we have a duty to promote it. Since the highest good comprises not only deserved happiness but also virtue, we must not only hope for it but also do our best to promote it. Still, claiming that the highest good is an object of hope is legitimate if one is aware that it is a shorthand expression. It is *in virtue of comprising deserved happiness* that the highest good is an object of hope.

I will now turn to the second meaning of "may", namely, "having grounds", which renders the hope question: "Do I have grounds to hope for morally deserved happiness?" This question arises for Kant since it seems that hope for deserved happiness is impossible to fulfill—neither human agency nor nature can secure the necessary relation between happiness and morality.¹² That is, this question refers to the possibility of the object. The question is whether we can assume that the necessary conditions for the realizability of the hoped-for state of affairs obtain. Kant's answer, in its abstract form, is that we may hope if it is rational to *trust in the structures of reality* that are necessary for the realization

¹⁰ Günther Zöller points this out as well (Zöller 2013, 254).

¹¹ The scope of what we hope for is broader in other writings (e.g., hope for moral improvement in the *Religion*, or hope for moral and political progress in *Perpetual Peace*). This does not affect the conclusions I draw when considering the features of hope for happiness, though. In Section 4, I briefly discuss the contribution of others to the highest good as an object of hope. For an overview of the different contexts in which Kant discusses hope, see (Blöser 2020).

¹² In the second *Critique*, Kant describes the problem in the form of an antinomy: He argues that, on the one hand, the necessary relationship between morality and happiness cannot be synthetic because the natural laws that determine the effects in the world are blind to our moral willing (see 5:113). On the other hand, it cannot be analytic either, because the maxims of morality and virtue are radically distinct (as Kant showed in the *Analytic of the second Critique*). For an exact reconstruction of the antinomy, see (Watkins 2010).

of one's hope. In Kant's account, we need to assume God's existence and the immortality of the soul in order to conceive of the highest good as realizable. Kant further argues that the assumptions of God's existence and the immortality of the soul are *rational*. In a nutshell, the argument is that theoretical reason *permits* these assumptions (since there cannot be evidence proving their falsehood) and practical reason offers a *decisive* consideration, namely, practical necessity (since the assumptions are necessary for conceiving of the highest good as possible, which is necessary for being able to rationally *promote* it). Therefore, even though we cannot have knowledge, we may have faith or trust.¹³ I will later return to an intricacy of Kant's argument, which poses a challenge for its application to the context of poverty.

Note that for Kant, (rational) faith or trust in God's existence makes hope not only *rational* but *psychologically possible*. He illustrates this in the third *Critique*, where he describes "a righteous man (like Spinoza) who takes himself to be firmly convinced that there is no God and [...] no future life" (5:452). Spinoza does not trust that the fundamental structures of reality are such that hope for the highest good can be realized. Kant describes Spinoza as suffering from hopelessness, which has a negative effect on his moral efforts. Spinoza acknowledges his moral obligation,

[b]ut his effort is limited [...]. Deceit, violence, and envy will always surround him, even though he is himself honest, peaceable, and benevolent; and the righteous ones besides himself that he will still encounter will, in spite of all their worthiness to be happy, nevertheless be subject by nature, which pays no attention to that, to all the evils of poverty, illnesses, and untimely death, [...] and will always remain thus until one wide grave engulfs them all together [...] and flings them [...] back into the abyss of the purposeless chaos of matter from which they were drawn. (5:452)

Kant continues by describing two options for Spinoza: Either he will give up the end (the highest good) and "weaken the respect, by which the moral law immediately influences him to obedience, by the nullity of the only idealistic final end [the highest good, CB]" or he will "assume the existence of a moral author of the world, i.e., of God, from a practical point of view, i.e., in order to form a concept of at least the possibility of the final end that is prescribed to him by morality."

What Kant illustrates in this passage is that hopelessness has a demoralizing effect ("effort is limited"; "weaken the respect"). That is, Spinoza's case shares a crucial feature with the case of the poor: For both, hopelessness has a detrimental effect on agency. Kant's account of the *reason* for Spinoza's lack of hope is instructive. He lacks belief in God—as Kant suggests, because he thinks that this belief is irrational. That is, Spinoza

¹³ Kant spells this out in the first *Critique* in terms of belief (*Glaube*) in the section "On having an opinion, knowing, and believing" (A820/B484ff.) and in the second *Critique* in the doctrine of the postulates. Allen Wood points out that Kant sometimes uses the term "trust" to refer to faith (Wood 1970, 162) (see e.g., 27:320f.). In relating Kant's account to the context of poverty, I will use the notion of "trust", since this does not carry the religious overtones connected to "faith". Faith and trust are sometimes equated (e.g., Hobbes says that "[t]o have faith in, or trust to, or believe a man, signifies the same thing" (Hobbes [1651] 1998, 43)). Typically, "faith" and "trust" are used in interpersonal contexts, and "faith" most commonly in religious contexts, i.e., in relation to God. However, "faith" and "trust" are also used to designate attitudes towards propositions and in secular contexts (Faulkner, *ms.*). In the contemporary debate, the similarities and differences between faith and trust are a matter of debate, which I cannot pursue here (see e.g., (McCraw 2015)). For present purposes, I assume, with Kant, that both trust and faith are attitudes of acceptance of a proposition for which one lacks sufficient evidence but which one holds for practical reasons.

lacks hope because he lacks trust in the fundamental structures of reality that are necessary for the realization of hope. From Spinoza's case we are given a hint as to how Kant conceives of the possibility of promoting hope. According to Kant, Spinoza could come to see that he *may* hope—and this could be achieved by showing him that it is in fact rational to believe in God. On a Kantian account, the key to adopting hope is the acknowledgement that hope is rational—contrary to what one might think on the basis of empirical evidence. This strategy does not generally seem to be applicable in the context of poverty, however, to which I now turn.

3 Kantian Insights in the Context of Poverty

One might wonder whether relating Kant's account of hope to the context of poverty is promising given the different objects of hope in both cases: While development economists are interested in the poor's hope for success when it comes to particular actions (such as attracting new customers), Kant is concerned with a very general object, namely, hope for morally deserved happiness as part of a just state of affairs. This difference does not preclude relating the two contexts, however. First, one could emphasize a structural similarity. In both contexts, we are concerned with ends that can be promoted through our efforts, on the one hand, but which are not fully under our control, on the other. According to Kant, we *aspire* to realize an end (the highest good), which has aspects that we can only *hope* for (the realization of deserved happiness). Lybbert and Wydick's example of Fatima can be reformulated accordingly: Fatima's end is to earn more money with her small poultry business. She makes an effort to realize this end, e.g., she works hard and advertises her products. However, it is not fully up to her to realize this end. For instance, she does not know whether the corrupt political system will raise taxes that will swallow up her profits, and she cannot expect people to buy more, since many of her neighbors are also poor. Therefore, making more money is not only an object of striving but also an object of hope.

A second way to relate the two approaches is to shift attention in the context of poverty from hopes for particular outcomes to more general hopes, such as the Kantian hope for happiness. The main reason for acknowledging hope as a relevant parameter in development economics is its sustaining role in agency. To be sure, individual hopes for particular ends can sustain the pursuit of these ends. This should not lead us, however, to neglect the role that a more general hope can play. It might well be that demoralization in the context of poverty is in large part due not to a lack of this or that particular hope but to a lack of a general hope that one's life will go well and that one's efforts will take place in circumstances that are not characterized by profound injustice.

In what follows, I will take the second route. While it is related to the economists' approach, it also broadens the scope of thinking about hope in the context of poverty.¹⁴ Further, focusing on general hope instead of hope for particular outcomes allows us to

¹⁴ Esther Duflo (Duflo 2012, 42) and Lybbert and Wydick mention the relevance of general hope. Lybbert and Wydick surmise that particular hopes "together may produce a kind of overarching sense of hope that 'in the end, things will turn out all right'" (Lybbert and Wydick 2018, 713). That is, they see particular hopes as primary and the more general hope as a result of having particular hopes. However, the relation between general and particular hopes is far from clear. Instead—or additionally—it might be that a lack of general hope diminishes the possibility of forming particular hopes and has a negative effect on agency. This is the assumption on which I proceed.

explore a parallel between Kant's view on the rationality of hope and the rationality of hope in the context of poverty. Kant's account of the rationality of hope is tailored to the case of general hope for happiness.

On Kant's account, hope for happiness as part of a just world is rational since we may trust that the world is structured in a way that allows this hope to be realized. What would a Kantian approach to the rationality of hope, with its focus on trust in fundamental structures, look like in the context of poverty? Let us step away from the transcendental structures of the world that Kant envisages and consider structures that have a pervasive influence on life in a given society, such as the quality of one's government, one's health system, education and employment conditions. Trust in these conditions plausibly grounds the hope that one's life will go well in this particular society. Conversely, lack of trust in these conditions might lead to hopelessness, in the form of thoughts like: "No matter what I do, in such a corrupt system I will not improve my situation in any way", or even more generally, "I won't be able to lead a good life in this society".

Duflo points out that, in the context of extreme poverty, trust in fundamental institutions is often lacking—and frequently rightly so. In her first *Tanner Lecture*, she draws attention to the fact that the poor often cannot trust the recommendations of the government, the doctor, the employer, or the teacher. If Duflo's diagnosis that "basic trust in the system is often neither present nor necessarily warranted" (Duflo 2012, 13) is correct, then the hopes of the poor that are based on this kind of trust are likewise unwarranted. The Kantian perspective, which draws attention to trust as a ground for hope, highlights the fact that in many cases the poor *have good reason* to be hopeless.

This means that the strategy for promoting hope that Kant indicates with regard to Spinoza cannot be the dominant strategy.¹⁵ Recall that Spinoza, in Kant's description, does not believe in God because he assumes this to be irrational, and he is therefore unable to hope, since this would be hope for the impossible. The strategy for fostering hope in Spinoza would be to point to or explain the rationality of the underlying assumptions. However, this is not an option if the underlying assumptions are not in fact rational, as is often the case in the context of poverty.

An alternative strategy would be to *promote* the trustworthiness of the relevant fundamental structures. While this is not possible regarding God's existence, it offers a promising perspective in the context of poverty. Fundamental structures that ground or undermine hope in the context of poverty are not set in stone. Instead, they can be changed through human activity. Thus, the question of when it is rational for the poor to hope leads to a demand for (political) action. On this picture, the question of what the poor may *hope* for is inseparable from the question of what those who are in a position to help should *do*. The demand for action is directed at those who have the power to establish or strengthen the trustworthy structures that allow the poor to hope.

There are also undeniably also challenges regarding the application of Kant's account to the context of poverty. I will first discuss the worry that Kant's argument reverses the order of explanation needed in the context of poverty and will then point to a disanalogy concerning the fallibility of trust. Both problems ultimately trace back to the fact that Kant focuses on *transcendental*, i.e., non-empirical, structures, while the context of poverty is empirical. As to the first point, I have taken from Kant the idea that it is rational to hope

¹⁵ This is not to say that this strategy will *never* work or be legitimate in the context of poverty. Depending on the assumptions that a particular person makes and the concrete circumstances she lives in, it may be possible to point out to her that the structures are more trustworthy than she thinks.

if it is rational to trust the structures of reality on which the realization of hope depends. However, Kant's argument seems to reverse the order of explanation: Belief in God is rational since we are practically committed to the highest good, which is an object not only of hope but also of duty. By contrast, a practical commitment to one's happiness in the context of poverty (or any other empirical context) does not seem to provide a practical reason to believe that the political structures necessary for realizing happiness are in place. Why does this disanalogy arise? The crucial point is that there can be no proof or disproof of God's existence (so Kant argues in the first *Critique*), and this is why a (categorical) practical reason can turn the balance in favor of trust. By contrast, there can be conclusive evidence that speaks in favor or against the existence of trustworthy political structures, such that practical reason cannot (at least not always) be decisive. This disanalogy notwithstanding, Kant is not simply reversing the order of explanation. Rather, he also puts forward the order of explanation needed in the context of poverty: He holds that it is rational to hope for the highest good only if we assume God's existence and this assumption is rational. However, the rationality of this assumption is not determined independently of our relation to the highest good. That is, Kant's account relies on the *mutual dependence* of the rationality of hope and faith, which does not hold in the context of poverty.¹⁶

This leads to the second disanalogy concerning the fallibility of trust. On Kant's view, trust in God's existence and the immortality of the soul goes beyond any possible evidence: It can neither be justified nor shown to be unwarranted on the basis of empirical evidence. In short, on Kant's account, our trust is infallible. In empirical contexts, however, trust is typically not infallible. Trust in empirical circumstances, e.g., trust in the government, does not go beyond all possible evidence and could in principle be proven unwarranted—our trust can be disappointed. Infallibility would be an unrealistic criterion for the rationality of trust in the context of poverty. While Kantian trust (and hence hope) is rational independently of the evidence (since there cannot be sufficient evidence proving or disproving it), one might think that this is not the case in empirical contexts. A minimal condition for rational trust seems to be the absence of strong evidence of *untrustworthiness*. Even this minimal condition is often unfulfilled in contexts of extreme poverty, where there is ample evidence of corruption, for instance.¹⁷ Beyond this minimal requirement, does there need to be some positive evidence for trustworthiness, or must it be probable above some threshold that trustworthiness is realized? These are legitimate questions that Kant's account does not address. But again, this is to be expected since Kant does not deal with empirical circumstances. Thus, while Kant is merely concerned with whether the object of hope is not impossible, there might be more to be said about how robust the grounds of hope need to be in the context of poverty.

The fact that in contexts of poverty one often encounters (rational) lack of trust in fundamental political structures raises the question of whether it is more important to foster trust than hope in order to promote the agency of the poor. In reply, a Kantian account holds that there is a close relation between hope and trust since rational hope is based on rational trust. Therefore, there is no need to view the two attitudes as alternatives. Rather,

¹⁶ To be sure, Kant's argument is far from transparent. I leave aside here the further worries that Kant does not deliver a convincing argument for why we have a duty to promote the highest good and that even granted this duty, this might only justify assuming the possibility of God's existence, not its actuality.

¹⁷ Rather than discussing the rationality of trust further, I must restrict myself to referring to the contemporary debate on the nature of trust and the relation that trust and evidence must have for trust to be rational (Simpson 2017).

by promoting trustworthy conditions, one is promoting hope. While a detailed comparison of hope and trust is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that the hope Kant is concerned with is future-directed (that happiness *will* be realized and in harmony with morality or justice), while trust refers to structures that are already present (God's existence, or the political system). Here, I have taken as a starting point the assumption, shared by economists, psychologists and most philosophers, that it is *hope* that has a sustaining influence on agency. On the basis of a Kantian account, however, this does not exclude trust's playing a crucial role, since trust is the basis of hope.¹⁸

4 The Secular Highest Good: Duties to the Poor and the Intertwinement of Hopes

In line with the economists' perspective, the main focus of this contribution is hope held by the poor. We can complement this perspective, however, with the perspective of those who help. A Kantian account is especially well suited to this change of perspective, since Kant discusses hope in relation to the highest good, which designates a state of the world including all persons.¹⁹ In this section, I will outline the consequences of the Kantian account of hope (as it relates to the highest good) for our understanding of the *duties* towards the poor and the *hopes* of those who help.

Just how duties to the poor can be justified in a Kantian framework is a matter of debate. A related question concerns the *scope* of these duties, i.e., whether they are *global* or restricted to what we owe our compatriots. My suggestion is that if we conceive of duties to the poor as being entailed by the duty to promote the highest good, it becomes apparent that these duties are indeed global. In principle, there are three possibilities for justifying duties towards the poor: first, conceiving of these duties as duties of justice; second, conceiving of them as duties of virtue, implied by the duty to promote the happiness of others; and third, conceiving of them as implied by the duty to promote the highest good.²⁰

Whether one takes the third possibility to be irreducible to the conjunction of the first two depends on how we answer the question of whether the duty to promote the highest good adds something to the duties presented in the *Metaphysics of Morals*.²¹ The details of the content of the highest good and its relation to duties of right and virtue are contested. Kant's most general characterization of the highest good is that it is the "unconditioned totality of the object of pure reason" (5:108). As mentioned in Section 2, Kant explicates the content of the highest good in terms of a harmonious relation between happiness and morality. According to an influential (Rawlsian) interpretation, Kant abandoned (or at least downplayed) the theological underpinnings of the highest good after the second *Critique* in favor of a "secular" interpretation, where the highest good is a "social ideal" (Reath 1988,

¹⁸ For a contemporary contribution that emphasizes trust as the basis of hope, see (Baier 2010).

¹⁹ To be sure, Kant's doctrine of the highest good is complex. He also speaks of the highest good "in a person" (5:110), but more prominent and central to his account is the highest good as a state of the world.

²⁰ Lucy Allais argues that duties to the poor should be conceived of not as duties of beneficence but as duties of justice (without addressing the problem of *global* poverty) (Allais 2015); Kate Moran argues for an institutional response to "general injustice" while also acknowledging a role for beneficence (Moran 2017). Pablo Gilabert emphasizes that we need to go *beyond* Kant and hold that the highest political good is not (only) perpetual peace but a world without poverty (Gilabert 2010).

²¹ See Beck as the *locus classicus* of the claim that the duty to promote the highest good does not add anything substantial to the duties of right and virtue (Beck 1996, 244f.).

617) that designates a state of the world where our conduct would lead to “the happiness of all” (Reath 1988, 615). On this interpretation, we might conceive of the duty to promote this state as grounding duties to establish social structures that allow the poor to realize their permitted ends. This interpretation is contested, however.²²

What is less controversial is that the ideal state of the world in which the highest good is realized encompasses *all* persons. In his discussion of the ethical community in the *Religion*, Kant is clear that the highest secular good is to be realized globally—it “refers to the ideal of a totality of human beings” (6:96). Rather than being restricted to one’s compatriots, Kant describes the corresponding duty as a duty “of the human race toward itself” (6:97). Hence, if there are duties toward the poor that are implied by the duty to promote the highest good (regardless of their relation to duties of virtue or right), the global character of the highest good points to the fact that these duties must also be global in character.

Connecting back to hope, Kant’s claim that we have a duty to promote the highest good can thus be formulated as follows: We have a duty to provide others with grounds for rational hope (insofar as this is within our power).²³ The duty to promote the highest good implies a duty to eradicate poverty and establish conditions in which all human beings have a chance to realize their permissible ends.

Finally, let us shift perspective to the hopes of those who help. Although Kant claims in the first *Critique* that all hope concerns one’s own happiness, there are also other aspects that are necessary for the realizability of the highest good that exceed our control, chief among them being the cooperation of other people. The goal of eradicating poverty (and many subordinated goals that contribute to realizing this ultimate goal) surpasses one’s individual powers, such that its attainment is an end not only of our striving but also of hope. But do people who are engaged in fighting poverty *need* this hope in order to sustain their struggles? As Andrew Chignell emphasizes with regard to various kinds of political activism where the chances that one’s individual actions will make a difference are slim, maintaining hope is one possible remedy against the danger of demoralization (Chignell 2018). Chignell points out that while hope is not strictly necessary, since there are other ways of dealing with the danger of demoralization, it is a helpful attitude. Kathryn Norlock, by contrast, not only questions the necessity of hope but argues that hope may even be inappropriate and obstructive (Norlock 2019).

²² While the view that Kant abandoned the “theological” version of the highest good in favor of a “secular” one has been very influential in Kant scholarship, it has been thoroughly criticized more recently by Lawrence Pasternack (Pasternack 2017). Étienne Brown follows Pasternack in holding that Kant does not abandon the theological underpinnings of the highest good in his later works, but he points out that Kant nevertheless conceives of it as a political ideal (Brown 2020). Brown’s interpretation allows us to see the connection between the highest good as an object of hope and as a political ideal. When Kant mentions the highest good in his political writings, he does not mention hope, which raises the question of whether Kant’s claims about the highest good as what we should strive for politically and his claims about the highest good as an object of hope in the first and second *Critiques* are really about the same thing. As mentioned in section two, the highest good comprises aspects that are under our control (and that we should strive to realize) and aspects that are beyond our control (and for which we can only hope). That is, striving and hope never refer to exactly the same aspects of the highest good; they are complementary. This is compatible, however, with the view that they refer to complementary aspects in the political realm (instead of hope’s being exclusively directed to the afterlife). This seems to be a natural view on Brown’s interpretation—that there is no separate “secular version” of the highest good, but rather *secular aspects* or *political implications* of the “theological version”.

²³ Thanks to Karen Stohr for this incisive formulation.

Norlock's critique is directed toward what one might call "ideal" hopes, which refer to ultimate goals, such as the eradication of poverty. Norlock cites both Rawls "realistic utopia" and Kant's hope for progress as examples of ideal hope. Even if Norlock does not explicitly discuss it, Kantian hope for the highest good also belongs to the "ideal" kind. According to Norlock, there is a theoretical and a practical problem with ideal hopes: The theoretical problem is that these hopes cannot be realized, due to the fallible nature of human beings and the resultant persistence of evil. In other words, it is impossible to fully attain a social ideal such as the eradication of poverty. Hope for the realization of the highest good (and the eradication of poverty) is therefore *inappropriate*—it is directed at an object that is impossible. From a practical point of view, hopes for these ideal states of affairs are not motivating but "destined to result in disappointment and burnout" (Norlock 2019, 15). This view seems to rest on the inappropriateness objection: Since one's hope cannot be realized, one is bound to be disappointed, and one's actions appear futile. As an alternative attitude, Norlock advocates "perpetual struggle", which concentrates on the commitment to fight local, particular evils without hoping for "upward progress" (Norlock 2019, 11).

It seems that Norlock is in general agreement with Kant's diagnosis about the empirical world: Kant, like Norlock, holds that the attainment of the highest good seems impossible without further transcendental assumptions. The difference is that Norlock refuses to make these transcendental assumptions—and hence, hope for the highest good must seem impossible. The consequence of the agreement between Kant and Norlock is that even on Kant's view, promoting the highest good and having the corresponding hope will be bound up with a "perpetual struggle". In light of the difference, the crucial question is whether Kantian hope could still be motivationally or epistemically guiding even if it is directed at an ideal that may not be fully realizable.²⁴

What Norlock's objection reminds us is that improving the fundamental structures of society is a huge task and can often only be realized in the very long run, if at all. Nourishing smaller, more concrete hopes that are directed at particular, more modest goals might be "better than nothing" in non-ideal circumstances.²⁵ Therefore, promoting particular, individual hopes that the economists discuss, such as Fatima's hope of attracting more customers, can be valuable as a complementary project to promoting Kantian rational hope that is based on trust in fundamental structures.²⁶ However, we should also bear in mind

²⁴ This is a question I cannot pursue within the confines of this paper and that is connected to the larger debate about ideal and non-ideal theory in political philosophy, as Norlock also highlights.

²⁵ Norlock's account exhibits a certain ambiguity regarding more modest, particular hopes. She sometimes seems to advocate concrete hopes. For instance, she objects that "modern progressive thinkers were building the wrong hopes" and suggests "that we build different hopes" (Norlock 2019, 15), not for a "fictive endpoint" but for concrete improvements, even in full consciousness of the fact that they might not have lasting effects. In other passages, however, she seems to reject hope altogether—or at least wants to defend "perpetual struggle" even "[w]hen hope is all but gone" (Norlock, 2019, 16). The alternative attitude she recommends is "[n]onideal pessimism" (ibid.). It is worth pointing out, however, that pessimism about moral progress may be compatible with hope, as Samantha Vice argues (Vice 2020).

²⁶ To be sure, even with regard to these concrete hopes, the question of when they are rational arises. While the rationality of Kantian hope for the highest good is an all-or-nothing affair (either it is impossible or we may believe in God and immortality, such that it is possible and thereby rational), the rationality of empirical hopes might be a matter of degree. It at least seems plausible to assume that whether to *rely* on one's hope in one's actions will depend on the probability of the hoped-for outcome (and the value assigned to it). For an account of rational hope that involves probability as a parameter, see (McCormick 2017). Alternatively, on Adrienne Martin's view, what matters for the rationality of one's hope is only that one sees the probability of the outcome *as good enough* to license hopeful activity (which is rational if it promotes one's rational ends) (Martin 2013).

that promoting trustworthy structures need not be understood as an all-or-nothing affair. Rather, creating grounds of hope in the Kantian sense might also consist of small, particular interventions.

5 Conclusion

I have shown that Kant's approach to hope is able to connect the economists' concern with hope as an individual resource for sustaining agency in the struggle against poverty with a concern for the improvement of social and political structures. Realizing hope depends on the "cooperation" of the external world. It is therefore crucial to ask whether the world is constituted in such a way that one *may* hope, i.e., such that one's hope is not unwarranted (Section 2). On Kant's account, hope is rational if we can *trust* in the fundamental structures of reality that are necessary for the realization of our hope. Trust in the fundamental structures of society is often absent and unwarranted in the context of poverty (Section 3). Therefore, the hopes of the poor are often unwarranted as well. In this way, a Kantian perspective reveals that the poor may have a legitimate reason to refrain from hoping, namely, insofar as unwarranted hope is not a good thing to have. In a situation where relevant structures are not trustworthy, it would be inappropriate to ask the poor to "hope more". From a Kantian point of view, the insight that the poor need more hope must go hand in hand with a commitment to establishing trustworthy structures, such that their hope can be rational. These structures are constitutive of the secular highest good—a social ideal in which everyone's hope for happiness is made rational (Section 4). The duty to establish the secular highest good amounts to a duty to provide others with grounds for rational hope.²⁷

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