

Social and Political Dimensions of Hope

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1. Introduction

My aim in this article is to demonstrate the importance of a feminist perspective in bringing to light social and political dimensions of hope that have received insufficient attention in the philosophical literature. Feminist theory has helped to make visible the ways in which interrelated systems of oppression structure certain individuals' lives: oppressions based primarily on gender, but also on race, ethnicity, ability status, and other features of social difference. Taking a feminist approach to moral psychology involves attending to the ways in which patterns of privilege and oppression can affect the attitudes, desires, emotions, values, beliefs, and character traits of individuals. Thus, taking a feminist approach to the moral psychology of hope involves attending to the ways in which patterns of privilege and oppression can affect individuals' capacities for hope, the hopes with which they find themselves, and those that are out of their reach.

Many philosophers tend to emphasize commonality rather than social difference in theorizing hope; namely, by pointing out that hope is something universal to nearly all human beings. As Victoria McGeer explains, "to be a full-blown intentional agent—to be a creature with a rich profile of intentional and emotional states and capacities—is to be an agent that hopes" (McGeer 2004, 101). And, as she says rather strongly, "to live a life devoid of hope is simply not to live a human life; it is not to function—or tragically, it is to cease to function—as a human being" (101). Similarly, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev suggests that "hope is a kind of background framework that is crucial for human life: a person is someone with hope—someone 'without hope' is close to the grave" (Ben-Ze'ev 2001, 475). Hope is commonly theorized as something that all intentional agents experience, struggle with, lose, and cultivate as we make our way through the world.

Although hope is common to nearly all human beings,¹ and perhaps other creatures like us, its manifestation in our lives can be incredibly varied. Some people are hopeful about many things in life, while others find it difficult to hope for much at all; some people's hopes are often realized, while other people's hopes are frequently disappointed or lost; and though we seem to share many hopes, we also form hopes for very different things. These differences are not trivial, either. Understanding why we hope differently, and what sorts of things influence how we come to hope, is important to answer normative questions about hope: to what extent people can be criticized for failing to hope, failing to act on their hopes,

hoping too much or too little, or hoping for the wrong things. If, for example, some people's capacities for hope are threatened and damaged by the social, political, and economic circumstances in which they live (as I will argue), then such considerations ought to come to bear on whether they can be criticized for living without hope or living in despair.

To understand these variations in how people hope, I suggest that philosophers move beyond the tendency to focus on commonality in theorizing hope toward an emphasis on human difference—especially, socially situated experiences of the attitude. I argue that a feminist relational perspective on hope—one that attends explicitly to the ways in which selves that hope are developed in relation to other people, social groups, and institutions—helps to reveal social and political dimensions of hope that have received insufficient attention in the philosophical literature. It also opens up space for theorizing the value and risks of hope in an unjust social world.

I begin by exploring the relationship between hope, agency, and the self to bring to light what hope reminds us about the kinds of creatures we are, and what sorts of things influence how we come to hope. I draw upon McGeer's (2004) discussion of the ways in which facing our limitations as agents in childhood leads us to develop the capacity for hope—a discussion that begins to make sense of the ways in which interpersonal relationships shape how we hope. But I argue that, beyond interpersonal relationships, the public relationships in which we exist based on features of social difference such as gender, race, and class can also affect hope. I develop this claim by highlighting the ways in which selves that hope are *relational*: they are socially constituted subjects whose identities, experiences, and opportunities are shaped by the multiple and overlapping relations in which they exist. An important implication of this analysis is that oppression is a *threat* to hope: it creates conditions under which certain people must “hope against hope”² in many contexts if they are capable of sustaining hope at all. I then turn to some challenges for theorizing the value of hope for agents living under oppression, and close by reflecting on the importance of a feminist relational approach to hope more generally.

2. Hope, Agency, and the Self

Much of the debate in the philosophy of hope explores the question of what the attitude of hope consists in. Although philosophers tend to agree that hope involves at least the desire for an outcome and the belief that the outcome's obtaining is possible (but not certain), there is disagreement about what other constitutive features make up the phenomenon of hope beyond belief and desire.³ I remain neutral with respect to this debate here. I am interested not so much in nailing down what exactly hope is, but rather understanding experiences and the potential value of hope in social and political contexts. Doing so requires focusing on the relationship between hope, agency, and the self: specifically, how socially and politically relevant features of the self can affect hope, and what powers

agents might have (or not have) to realize their hopes. As we will see, a shift in focus from theorizing the constitutive features of hope to its social and political dimensions also has implications for some of the traditional debates about the nature and value of hope.

Philosophers also tend to agree about the relationship between hope and agency: that we only hope in contexts in which we judge that our own agency is insufficient to bring about the outcomes we desire. The perceived insufficiency of one's own agency in bringing about the desired outcome is a necessary condition of hope because there is a clear belief constraint on hope: we don't hope when we know that the desired outcome will obtain (instead, we anticipate it), and we don't hope when we know that the desired outcome is impossible (instead, we wish for it). As J. M. O. Wheatley puts the point, "to hope, regarding the future, is in part to expect but not to be sure" (Wheatley 1958, 127). Philip Pettit observes that "just as hope requires that one not rule out the hoped-for possibility, so it requires that one does not rule it in as a matter of absolute certainty either" (Pettit 2004, 153).

This belief constraint on hope implies that our own agency is insufficient to bring about outcomes for which we hope. In other words, our belief in uncertainty with respect to a desired outcome arises in part because we judge that no matter how hard we try, nothing we do can make certain that the desired outcome will obtain. Such things as luck, environmental conditions, and the agency of other people can affect the probability that all our hopes will be realized. Margaret Urban Walker explicitly connects the uncertainty constraint on the belief part of hope to agency. As she puts it, "hope goes to what hovers before us with a sense that all is not decided *for* us; what is not yet known is ... open to chance and action" (Walker 2006, 45).

Hope thus seems to remind us something about the kinds of creatures we are: we are creatures who, because of the constraints we necessarily and contingently face as agents, must depend on factors external to ourselves for many of our desires to be fulfilled. But while hope reminds us that we are limited as agents in our capacities to affect the world, hope also involves engaging one's agency in important ways aimed at hoped-for outcomes. As McGeer says,

Hoping can empower us to acknowledge, explore, and sometimes patiently bide our limitations as agents ... even in cases of extreme limitation, our persisting capacity to hope signifies that we are still taking an agential interest in the world, and in the opportunities it may afford, come what may. Our interests, our concerns, our desires, our passions—all of these continue to be engaged in exploring the contours of what might be. (McGeer 2008, 256)

So although philosophers disagree on what constitutive features make up the phenomenon of hope independently of the belief in the possibility (but not certainty) that a desired outcome will obtain, there is consensus that hope involves some kind of agential engagement aimed at the desired outcome, whether primarily in forms of thinking, feeling, imagining, planning, fantasizing, and so on. But while hoping is *one* potential response to the inherent vulnerabilities and limitations

we face that involves engaging our agency, not all of us respond to constraints on our agency with hope. Some people are more prone to respond to limitations they face with anger, frustration, doubt, or sadness rather than hope. There is thus an important question as to what explains our differential capacities to respond to the world with hope.

McGeer's discussion of how the self develops the capacity for hope is a good starting point for understanding differences. She explains that, in their early experiences, children are constantly confronted with agential limitations leading to responses such as distress, frustration, and anger. Through parents' emotional support of children in the face of challenges that come their way, and through parents' assistance of children in navigating the limitations and potential of their agency in the world, children begin to develop hope as "a fundamental stabilizing and directive force in adult agency" (McGeer 2004, 107). But parental scaffolding is not enough for agents to maintain this capacity to respond to their environments with hope. McGeer points out that even for adult agents "it is others who invest us with our sense of how we can be in the world—who literally make it possible for us to take a hopeful, constructive stance toward the future" (108).

McGeer's discussion tells us something interesting about the self (as well as about hope): we are all born into relationships with other people and continue to exist in relationships with others that affect our capacities for and experiences of hope. Although she does not situate her view within feminist philosophy, McGeer's insights echo feminist philosophers' emphasis on the importance of care-giving relationships to the formation of the self. Some people, in virtue of the supportive scaffolding they receive from parents and peers, are more capable of cultivating and sustaining hope than others whose interpersonal relationships have been less supportive. But McGeer's analysis is, as it stands, incomplete. It is not only interpersonal relationships that affect how hope manifests differently in our lives; the social, political, and economic positions we occupy in relation to others can and do affect how we hope.

I think that we can strengthen McGeer's argument by taking a more explicitly feminist view and understanding selves that hope as *relational*: as subjects whose identities, experiences, opportunities, and choices are all shaped by the interpersonal and public relationships in which they exist. The relationships that constitute our social environments affect the objects, character and strength of people's hopes, the forms of agency they can and do engage in hoping, and their capacities for hope. As we will see, an important implication is that oppression is a threat to hope.

3. Relational Selves: Oppression as a Threat to Hope

Many feminist scholars emphasize the importance of attending to human difference in moral, social, and political thought: particularly, the ways in which systems of privilege and oppression based on such things as gender, race, class, ethnicity, and ability status structure our lives in important ways.⁴ Feminist philosophers who situate their work within relational theory have called attention

to the socially situated nature of persons and the ways in which relationships shape and constrain how people develop, change, deliberate, choose, and act (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Downie and Llewellyn 2012). The understanding of the self as relational is often contrasted with liberal conceptions of the self that are overly individualistic, where the self is conceived as independent, rational, and self-sufficient. As Susan Sherwin explains,

The view of individuals as isolated social units is not only false but impoverished: much of who we are and what we value is rooted in our relationships and affinities with others ... all persons are, to a significant degree, socially constructed ... their identities, values, concepts, and perceptions are, in large measure, products of their social environment. (Sherwin 1998, 35)

According to relational conceptions of the self, the people we become, the values we endorse, and the choices we make are all shaped by social relationships: not only *interpersonal* relationships, such as our relationships to family members and friends, but also *public* relationships based on social features of our identities such as the relationship between women and men. These social features are not, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty puts it, “static, embodied categories but ... histories and experiences that tie us together—that are fundamentally interwoven into our lives” (Mohanty 2003, 191). About her own identity, Mohanty says “‘race’ or ‘Asianness’ or ‘brownness’ is not embodied in me, but a history of colonialism, racism, sexism, as well as of privilege (class and status) is involved in my relation to white people as well as people of color in the United States” (191). In other words, social features of our identities place us into relationships with histories, other people, social groups, and institutions; and these relationships all influence who we are and how we interact with the world.⁵

The relationships into which we are born and from which our characters develop will affect our beliefs, desires, perceptions, and ultimately our hopes. Our beliefs and desires are part of who we are, and they, like other features of the self, are formed within the social contexts in which we exist. For example, how we are socialized very much affects the desires we form, including those desires which constitute our hopes. What we learn from our parents, teachers, and peers influences how we think, feel, and value; they affect what we come to see as desirable in the first place, and as worth pursuing.

Beyond the influence of interpersonal relationships, where we are situated within relations of privilege and oppression can affect the hopes we come to form. I understand oppression as a structural or social injustice that confines, restricts, or immobilizes certain people in virtue of their membership in certain social groups (Frye 1983; Young 1990; Cudd 2006). The ways in which oppression operates in individuals’ lives varies, but the oppressed often find themselves subjected to various kinds of injustices such as unemployment, housing discrimination, poor education, lack of access to health care, violence, poverty, incarceration, and cultural dislocation, among other things. Members of oppressed groups often form hopes that arise because they live under the experience or threat of these kinds of

injustices,⁶ such as the hopes to be free from violence, harassment, and neglect. People of color may form the hope that they will not be subjected to violence at the hands of police, a hope they may form in response to the widespread use of excessive force by police against people of color under conditions of racial oppression. Or, women may form the hope that they will not be subjected to sexual violence at some point in their lives, a hope that many women may form in response to the widespread instances of sexual violence against women under conditions of gender oppression. White people in the first case, and men in the second, generally do not need these hopes (*as* white people or men) because their safety is not threatened in virtue of their membership in a certain social group.⁷

And while oppression creates conditions under which members of oppressed groups may find themselves hoping that they will not be subjected to unjust forms of treatment, they may not (for very good reasons) have much hope that they will escape such treatment. History, past experiences, and their knowledge of present conditions may lead them to assign a low probability estimate to the possibility that their hopes will be realized. People of color may decide to avoid police at all costs in part because they do not have much hope that they will be safe in their interactions with police, and women may decide to avoid walking places alone at night because they lack hope that they will be safe alone on dark streets.⁸ Thus oppression can affect not only the objects of hope, but also the *strength* of people's hopes.

Interestingly, it is more common to talk of *fear* in these sorts of cases than it is to talk of hope. People of color tend to fear the police, and women tend to fear men (specific men, as in cases of domestic abuse, or even most or all men, as in cases where women are traumatized by sexual violence in the past). But fear and hope are not always at odds, and sometimes hope is based in a fear. When a woman finds herself hoping that she will make it home safely, her hope is formed largely because she fears for her safety as a woman; and she experiences her hope as a *fearful hope*: a hope tainted with fear, not a hope accompanied by the sorts of pleasant feelings that philosophers have typically associated with the attitude. Of course, hopes formed in oppressive contexts are not the only fearful hopes; a person might fearfully hope to escape death upon finding oneself at gunpoint in a random act of violence. The difference between fearful hopes under oppression and fearful hopes more generally is the systematic nature of fearful hopes in the former case: how one finds oneself fearfully hoping *as* a member of an oppressed social group.⁹

But living under oppressive conditions can render it unlikely for any number of one's hopes to be realized in virtue of the unjust barriers, constraints, and threats such people face—not just the hopes they form in response to their oppression. And because many of us find it difficult to sustain hope in the face of what seems like inevitable failure, oppression can be understood as a *threat* to hope. It creates conditions under which certain people, in virtue of their social, political, and economic locations, must “hope against hope” for many of the outcomes which they desire—if they are capable of sustaining hope at all. Hoping against hope is, as Adrienne Martin argues, “hope for an outcome that, first, amounts to

overcoming or at least abiding some profound challenge to one's values or welfare; and, second, it is an extremely improbable hope" (Martin 2014, 14).

Oppression can threaten and damage hope¹⁰ through either diminishing the likelihood that a person's hopes will be realized, through a loss of desire, or both. For example, a Black teenager's hope to become an engineer might be threatened by sexist messages she receives about her abilities in math and science, and by seeing the white male-dominance of the engineering profession. Her hope is also less likely to be realized if she is living in poverty than if she comes from an affluent family. Individuals' class status, which is affected by other social factors such as race, significantly affects the opportunities available to them. Even if she resists the sexist and racist messages she receives, the impoverished teenager may have no time, resources, social support, or energy to work toward her goal; and her hope to become an engineer may fade. As Walker points out, losing one's sense of agency "can lead to hopelessness, even if there remains some desire and sense of possibility" (Walker 2006, 61). Eventually, the teenager may even give up her *desire*¹¹ become an engineer altogether. She might judge, for example, that there is no point in desiring what she will never obtain. Or, the desire might diminish naturally as the teenager adapts to her stressful and demanding everyday life.¹²

Oppression can also threaten and damage individuals' *capacities* for hope: the very ability to cultivate or sustain hopes for one's own life at all. Cheshire Calhoun calls attention to the ways in which certain background beliefs or attitudes about one's agency, or "frames of agency," must be secured in order for an agent to continue to take an interest in leading one's own life and hence to be secured against conditions such as depression, hopelessness, and despair (Calhoun 2008). These frames of agency include having a sense that one's life has meaning, confidence in the efficacy of instrumental reasoning (or that one's actions will produce their intended effects), and confidence in one's relative security from profound misfortune and harm (Calhoun 2008, 198). In the absence of one or more of these frames of agency, agents might become depressed or demoralized, failing to see any point in engaging in the volitional activities of reflecting, deliberating, choosing, and acting altogether. They might, in other words, lose the ability to function as an agent. And importantly for our purposes, since hope necessarily involves exercising agency in some way, when an agent loses one's ability to function as an agent, one loses the capacity for hope.¹³

Indigenous scholars John Gonzalez, Estelle Simard, Twyla Baker-Demaray, and Chase Iron Eyes demonstrate the damages to indigenous peoples' capacities for hope in North America that result from their experience living on reserves: communities that are plagued with poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, and other social and health issues brought about by colonialism and other forms of oppression. They explain:

Internalized oppression ... exists when indigenous people are *immobilized* and cannot be all that they want to be. This includes fulfilling their purpose in life. ... In a contemporary context, it is one's inability to sustain one's family, and the truly devastating feelings this situation leaves on that person. It is the *powerlessness* when they cannot buy their

child a winter jacket or boots because of the cut-backs to tribal or First Nation welfare programs. It is the *fear* a mother feels when she welcomes her baby into the world, because she knows the reality of child welfare. ... At times, our internalized oppression is the *pain* and *anger* we feel about our situation in life: *We might not have a job, we are dependent on the reserve to make jobs, they give the jobs to non-natives, they have no job training programs, and so on*—all of which negatively exasperate a person's worth as a man or a woman. ... In the end, internalized oppression is the *profound despair* when choosing suicide as the only option. (Gonzalez et al. 2013, 45)¹⁴

This passage suggests that the material and psychological effects of living under oppressive conditions that Indigenous peoples experience can be so severe as to lead to “profound despair” with devastating consequences. The social, political, cultural, and economic realities that Indigenous peoples face can shatter the frames of agency they might need to live on with hope, and in many cases, to live on at all. One's sense of purpose, confidence that what one does will produce one's intended effects, and the belief that one is secure from profound misfortune and harm are often lost under conditions of poverty, colonialism, racism, and sexism—systems of oppression that profoundly shape the lives of many Indigenous peoples.

There is empirical data that reveals the extent of the damages to Indigenous peoples' capacities for hope. In 2015, on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, home to the Oglala Sioux tribe, there were nine suicides and at least 103 suicide attempts by people aged 12 to 24 in a four-month period (Bosman 2015). In Pimicikamak Cree nation in Manitoba, Canada, there were more than 140 suicide attempts in a two-week period and more than 150 students in a local high school were on suicide watch in the spring of 2016 (Baum 2016). In Attawapiskat First Nation in Ontario, Canada, eleven people attempted suicide on April 9, 2016 alone and there were 101 suicide attempts from September to April (Assembly of First Nations 2016). These are striking numbers, and the problem is widespread amongst Indigenous communities across North America and elsewhere in the world. In Canada, suicide and other self-inflicted injuries are the leading cause of death for First Nations people up to forty-four years of age, First Nations youth are five to six times more likely than non-Indigenous Canadians to die of suicide, and Inuit youth suicide rates are among the highest worldwide (Baum 2016).¹⁵

Interestingly, hope features prominently in discussions about what is lacking in these communities, and what is required to remedy the public health crisis. In response to the crisis in Attawapiskat First Nation and Pimicikamak Cree Nation, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Perry Bellegarde, appealed to hope in his call for action. He stated,

We need a sustained commitment to address long-standing issues that lead to hopelessness among our peoples, particularly the youth. And, we need to see investments from the federal budget on the ground in our communities immediately—to support our families to enjoy safe and thriving communities that foster hope. (Assembly of First Nations 2016)

Similarly, in his call for an emergency House of Commons debate to discuss the situation in Attawapiskat, New Democratic Party Member of Parliament Charlie

Angus suggested that “the heartbreaking tragedy” should be turned into “a moment of hope-making ... to start to lay the path forward to give hope to the children in our northern and all our Indigenous communities” (Parliament of Canada 2016).

But it is important to reflect on what it would mean to “make hope” or “give hope” to Indigenous Canadians. While the philosophy of hope can contribute to understanding what, exactly, the mental state of hope is, a feminist relational perspective helps call attention to the ways in which interrelated systems of oppression are responsible for bringing about the sense of despair in many Indigenous communities. It connects philosophical insights to what Indigenous scholars and activists have long been arguing (Talaga 2018),¹⁶ and suggests that if hope is something that individuals and communities need, then what should be offered is *reasons* for hope: not only the provision of culturally appropriate mental health resources with the goal of encouraging individuals to cultivate hope for their well-being, but committed social justice efforts that address poverty, colonialism, racism, and sexism: systems of oppression that are tied to Indigenous people’s psychological and emotional states.

This idea that there can be reasons for hope reflects the fact that hope can be normatively evaluated. Philosophers of hope have been deeply interested in the question of what makes hope rational or irrational, focusing on the relevance of both epistemic and practical reasons for evaluating hope. I now turn to some problems and questions for thinking about the value of hope for individuals whose hopes are threatened by oppression.

4. The Value of Hope

The argument that oppression is a threat to hope is disheartening, considering the literature on the benefits of hope to individuals’ psychological and emotional well-being. Hope is supposedly practically rational because it promises to “lift us out of the panics and depressions to which we are naturally prey and to give us firm direction and control,” preventing us from falling into despair and uncertainty (Pettit 2004, 160). It helps us to remain resilient to setbacks and failures that might otherwise lead us down a destructive path. Hope thus contributes something positive to our lives even if its objects are out of our reach; it “provides for the pleasures of anticipation and respite in trying times” (Bovens 1999, 680).

But not all of us are capable of sustaining hope for practical reasons in the face of barriers that make failure seem certain. When more and more evidence suggests that our hopes are not likely to be realized (and we are epistemically rational in our beliefs about the evidence), many of us lose hope that our desires will be fulfilled despite whatever practical reasons we might have for sustaining hope. If it is true that hope is beneficial to well-being, then many members of oppressed groups’ well-being may be harmed by their losses of hope, and their diminished capacities for hope. Losing hope may also make it more difficult for people to engage in activities that will increase the likelihood that their hopes

will be realized—activities that are already made difficult by the social, political, and economic conditions in which they exist. If, for example, women lose hope that their political efforts will ever bring about the end of sexual violence against women, they may disengage from their efforts and resign to living under the threat of sexual violence. As Walker argues, hope “will press us to actions that further the likelihood of our attainment of what we hope for and will strengthen those attitudes and patterns of attention that fortify our sense that the object of hope is attainable” (Walker 2006, 46). Without hope, members of oppressed groups must look elsewhere for inspiration to continue acting against the injustices with which they live.

Hope thus seems to be practically rational for members of oppressed groups to cultivate in resisting oppression and, at the same time, is something that is itself threatened by oppression. So we might ask: how can individuals resist losing hope under oppressive conditions, and sustain it for practical reasons—that is, as a tool to resist their own oppression? This question is, I think, important; and it flows naturally from commonsense understandings and philosophical literature on the value of hope. But I want to question the notion that hope really is practically rational for members of oppressed groups in resisting their own oppression.

One problem is that, in fraught social and political contexts, hope may be beneficial in the sense that it contributes to individuals’ well-being but, at the same time, counterproductive to the realization of their hopes. Derrick Bell, for example, calls attention to the practical dangers of hope with respect to racial justice in America. In the context of civil rights policy, he argues that “the worship of equality rules as having absolute power benefits whites by preserving a benevolent but fictional self-image, and such worship benefits blacks by preserving hope. But I think we’ve arrived at a place in history where the harms of such worship outweigh the benefits” (Bell 1992, 101). Bell, as I understand him, is suggesting that hope itself might be beneficial to hoppers’ well-being, but is not necessarily beneficial (and is sometimes destructive) to the realization of their hopes related to racial justice. Indeed, the very fact that being hopeful about the effectiveness of formal equality in America is beneficial to individuals’ psychological and emotional well-being can itself result in a dangerous illusion of comfort in a system that is failing. Ben-Ze’ev similarly suggests that “hope may have negative moral value if the hope for a better future makes us ignore present evils” (Ben-Ze’ev 2001, 488). So even if hope enables us to engage our agency towards the outcomes for which we desire, hope’s effects on how we see the world—sometimes, as tilting in our favor when the evidence suggests otherwise—may cause us to become epistemically irrational and *misdirect* our agency, investing ourselves in ways that will ultimately be detrimental to the fulfilment of our desires.

More recently than Bell, Martell Teasley and David Ikard explore the ways in which the rhetoric of hope in politics can give rise to hopes that are detrimental to individuals’ moral and political aims. They suggest that the hope that many American citizens placed in Obama, and the hope that his election was

the beginning of a “post-racial era” in the country, had the effect of masking the worsening economic conditions for people of color at the time (Teasley and Ikard 2010, 420). As Michael Dawson points out, Obama’s election made people hopeful that Americans would be living in a post-racial society in which “one’s life chances were no longer significantly determined by race and neither were the basic contours of politics and society” (Dawson 2012, 670). But this vision of hope for race relations in America distracts from the hard realities of racism and other forms of oppression. It leads us away from serious inquiry into the relationship between racism and social and political problems such as poverty, poor health, and housing and employment discrimination that disproportionately affect people of color.

These scholars of race’s insights suggest that it is perhaps an absence of hope that enables us to see clearly the forces of oppression at work, and consequently, where individuals and institutions need to direct their agency to mitigate oppression conditions. They challenge the common thought that hope really is practically rational for agents to cultivate in resisting oppression, calling into question the overall value of hope in such contexts. What we need, I think, is a framework for evaluating hope that is sensitive to the benefits and risks of the attitude. And I suggest that, instead of asking whether this or that hope is rational or irrational, we again take inspiration from McGeer (2004) and ask whether the person is hoping well.

McGeer begins from the position that hope itself is always valuable, but argues that hoping well requires “being responsive to real world constraints on formulating and pursuing our hopes” (McGeer 2004, 118). People who go about the world maintaining hopes that will never be realized cannot be said to hope well, even if their having hope is a good thing. According to McGeer, it is “characteristic of those who hope well to resolutely shift their target of hope when the world proves adamant with respect to some hoped-for end” (McGeer 2004, 109). Individuals thus might do well to *shift* their hopes in the face of bad odds rather than lose hope altogether.¹⁷ The agent who hopes that sexist oppression will be eliminated in her lifetime need not give up her hope for gender equality. But she would be hoping much better if she hoped that feminist initiatives would make progress toward justice for women down a stretch of road along which there is still a very long way to go.

This way of evaluating hope helps to preserve hope’s practical benefits to individuals’ well-being while, at the same time, encourages only those hopes that are beneficial to one’s ultimate moral and political goals. But I want to raise an important objection to McGeer’s understanding of what it means to hope well that arises from explicit consideration of the social and political dimensions of hope. McGeer argues that hoping well requires recognizing the appropriate role of one’s own agency and the agency of others in realizing one’s hopes. Hoping well, on her view, involves “neither depending too much on external powers for bringing one’s hopes about nor ignoring the critical role others play in supporting

(or thwarting) one's hopeful efforts" (McGeer 2004, 123). What McGeer calls "wishful hope," on the other hand, is hope that involves a failure "to take on the full responsibilities of agency and hence to remain overreliant on external powers to realize [one's] hopes" (110). In wishful hope, individuals passively await, rather than actively work towards, the fulfillment of their desires. McGeer argues that wishful hope is a kind of "hoping badly."

McGeer thinks that parents who indulge their children make them prone to wishful hope, and that such people grow up with "a sense of their own centrality in the universe" that leads them to focus on what they desire rather than what they need to do to fulfill their desires (McGeer 2004, 113). But beyond problematic parenting techniques, there is a drastically different source of wishful hope. Many people are vulnerable to wishful hope not because they are used to getting what they want without effort, but because they are incapable or feel incapable of engaging their agency in ways that will affect the hoped-for outcome. Individuals' social, political, and economic circumstances all combine to affect how much time, effort, and resources (if any) they have to contribute their agency to fulfilling their desires. A single Black mother from a low socioeconomic background working multiple jobs to feed her children may have no time, energy, or resources to contribute to struggles against gender and racial injustice that may increase (however slightly) the likelihood that her hopes for gender and racial equality will be realized.

So I think that McGeer's notion of wishful hope helps us to make sense of situations in which individuals may for good reasons believe that *there is nothing they can do but hope* that things will get better, but we should disagree with McGeer that wishful hope is necessarily a kind of hoping badly. Faced with the options of continuing to hope for an outcome that one cannot do much to affect versus abandoning the hope altogether, siding with hope does not necessarily count against its justification. Evaluating people's wishful hopes requires attending explicitly to their social, political, and economic positions in relation to others, and whether it is reasonable to expect them to engage in activities that may increase the likelihood that their hopes will be realized.¹⁸

But this example also shows that members of oppressed groups are often forced to rely on the agency of members of privileged groups to realize their hopes, a dynamic that results in yet another danger of hope. Because members of oppressed groups often lack the power, resources, time, and energy to engage in activities that will increase the likelihood that their hopes will be realized, individuals and institutions in positions of power can exploit the wishful hopes of individuals living under oppressive conditions.¹⁹ Politicians, for example, can market themselves as symbols of hope for improved social, political, and economic conditions to gain the support of those in powerless positions. When people place their wishful hopes in individuals and institutions in positions of power and buy into the hopeful messages that powerful agents promise, doing so can reinforce power structures that maintain oppressive patterns.

There is much work to be done in evaluating hope as we move from the interpersonal to the political, or, perhaps more accurately, when we see that our emotional lives are always bound up with our social and economic circumstances. But beginning normative inquiry from socially situated experiences of hope, rather than the abstract nature of the mental state, opens up space for an ethics and politics of hope that is not yet developed in the philosophical literature.

5. Conclusion

I want to conclude by briefly reflecting on the importance of the present discussion to the philosophy of hope more generally. A feminist relational approach enables us to see the ways in which the absence of hope is influenced by individuals' social, political, and economic locations. Such a framework encourages us to consider where we are situated in the world in relation to others, the opportunities we have and lack, and the desires we form and those that we must depend upon others to help us fulfill. The crucial insight that a feminist perspective brings to the literature is the importance of attending explicitly to patterns of privilege and oppression in understanding both the nature and value of hope. It encourages us to look beyond seeing hope as a feature of human life that is shared by us all, toward seeing hope as a feature of human life that tracks the positions of privilege and oppression we occupy. By attending explicitly to the relevance of features of social difference that have unjustly resulted in privilege for some at the expense of others—gender, race, class, and so on—philosophers will be equipped with new insights for exploring how, and in what ways, hope can be beneficial or detrimental to our efforts to live well, and to our efforts in building a more just world.

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Notes

¹We should be careful about just how fundamental we take hope to be to human life. Human beings with severe cognitive disabilities may not have hopes, or the capacity for hope—though they very much count as “human.”

²As Adrienne M. Martin says, hoping against hope is “hope for an outcome that, first, amounts to overcoming or at least abiding some profound challenge to one's values or welfare; and, second, it is an extremely improbable hope” (Martin 2014, 14).

- ³For example, Luc Bovens (1999) argues that hope involves “mental imaging”: the dedication of some degree of mental energy to thoughts about what it would be like if the desired outcome were to obtain. For Philip Pettit, hope involves a kind of “cognitive resolve” whereby one forms “an overall outlook akin to that which would be appropriate in the event of the hoped-for scenario’s being a firm or good prospect” (Pettit 2004, 674). Martin argues that hoping involves, beyond belief and desire, incorporating hope’s other features—for example, thoughts, feelings, activities, and modes of perception—into one’s “rational scheme of ends” (Martin 2014, 8). My own view is that hope involves a perceptual-like experience of the possibility that the desired outcome will obtain as encouraging, to varying degrees, and hopeful feelings (Milona and Stockdale 2018).
- ⁴As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and many scholars from within, and inspired by, the Black feminist tradition have shown, socially and politically relevant features of the self cannot be considered in isolation; the ways in which Black women experience gender oppression, for example, cannot be understood without reference to Black women’s experiences as *Black women*.
- ⁵A feminist relational approach also helps to address some Indigenous scholars’ and activists’ concerns about and reluctance to embrace feminism. For example, Cree/Métis scholar Kim Anderson notes that “Western feminism is unpalatable because it is about rights rather than responsibilities and because it emphasizes individual autonomy” (Anderson 2010, 82). Feminists who defend relational understandings of the self (as well as relational understandings of agency and autonomy) shift beyond the focus on individual rights and individualistic conceptions of autonomy. They emphasize the importance of persons’ relationships to one another as individuals and as members of communities, their responsibilities that derive from those relationships, and the ways in which people’s choices and actions are bound up with the choices and actions of others.
- ⁶Empirical literature supports this claim. For example, in her *Rebuilding Lives after Domestic Violence: Understanding Long-Term Outcomes*, Hilary Abrahams discusses some of the hopes that women living under conditions of domestic violence form based on interviews conducted over seven years. One woman she interviewed remarked: “I hope I’m going to be strong enough to say ‘too late’” (Abrahams 2010, 19). Abrahams suggests that listening to the “early hopes and dreams” of women who have been subjected to domestic violence demonstrates that they want (and so hope) for “safety and security, to live without fear, to be free to act for themselves, and to be treated with respect and valued—the converse of the situations they had endured previously” (19). Abrahams also documents the connection between women’s choices to go back to an abusive partner and “the hope that they can make the relationship change or that this time will be different or that their partner will have changed” (79).
- ⁷Class, ability status, sexual orientation, and other features of social difference will also influence how people are treated in such cases. For example, a poor man living in a community that suffers from high rates of violence might form the hope to make it home safely at night, a hope that was influenced by his social positionality. But being a man does not by itself lead him to form the hope to make it home safely, whereas being a woman does itself (in many cases) lead women to form such a hope. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for helping me frame how to emphasize this point.
- ⁸This example will not cohere with every woman’s experiences. Not every woman will hope for, or even think about, her safety when she leaves home at night. But these women can imagine how trauma from being subjected to sexual violence in the past, living in an unsafe neighborhood without access to safe transportation, or having knowledge about widespread prevalence of attacks on women in the areas in which they live, and so on, might (understandably) cause many women to form the hope to make it home safely.
- ⁹There is much more to say about the phenomenon of fearful hope: what, exactly, the relationship between fear and hope is. I use this example to highlight just one way in which theorizing hope in contexts of oppression raises new questions for the moral psychology of hope and the philosophy of the emotions more generally.
- ¹⁰Literature in the social sciences supports this argument. See, for example, Sarah A. Stoddard et al. (2011): 278–95 for a discussion of the effects of poverty and violence on hope. On Syrian refugee children’s hopelessness, see Leah James et al. (2014): 42–44. Of nearly 8,000 participants, 26.3%

reported feeling “so hopeless that they did not want to carry on living” (42). There are many more studies like these.

¹¹Oppression might also cause people to form adaptive or deformed hopes based in “adaptive preferences” or “deformed desires,” such as the hopes of oppressed people who adapt to their social and economic situation by entering into gangs, adopting a subculture, and forming new hopes that are intertwined with their social identities. I owe this example to Alex Esposito.

¹²Of course, oppression is a threat and not necessarily a damage to hope. It is remarkable that some members of oppressed groups sustain hope even when their hopes are not likely to be realized. It is also the case that people who occupy positions of privilege are sometimes less hopeful about their own and others’ circumstances than members of oppressed groups. This difference in how individuals experience the world in which they form hopes can likely be explained by the diversity of human characters, religious affiliations, education, cultures, degrees of social support, and their senses of community, among many other things. But it is equally true that oppressive conditions can and do damage certain individuals’ hopes. As E. J. R. David and Annie O. Derthick point out, “oppression is perhaps the most important sociopolitical factor that influences the entire range of [oppressed individuals’] psychological experiences” (David and Derthick, 2013, 2).

¹³What I am calling a loss of the capacity for hope is similar to what Calhoun in more recent work calls a loss of “basal hopefulness”: hopefulness that consists in taking an interest in the future generally or globally, rather than taking an interest in pursuing particular future outcomes. Calhoun argues that basal hopefulness is a precondition for forming particular hopes; it is the kind of hope that is lost in depression. As she says, “the depressed are not dispirited about this or that bit of the future, but about the future generally. They lose a globally motivating interest in The Future” (117). See Calhoun, 2018.

¹⁴An anonymous referee pointed out to me that one might think of death from suicide as “the only hope for release from suffering.” If this is right, then perhaps oppression is not a threat to the capacity for hope; it rather results in the formation of a particular hope, namely, the hope that suicide will end one’s suffering. With Gonzalez et al. (2013), I understand suicide in these sorts of cases not as an expression of hope for release from suffering, but as a choice that is made out of the conviction that one can *in fact* end one’s suffering through suicide. As one 16-year-old Indigenous girl Karina with suicidal thoughts remarked, “I felt like I had no other option; I felt hopeless” (Randhawa 2017). But even if some people do formulate their suicidal thoughts and actions using the language of hope, we can still understand their capacity for hope as damaged inasmuch as the only particular hope one has left is to end one’s suffering. It is likely that offering hope or encouraging the person to maintain hope for one’s future (in the present life) would not do much good—and this is exactly what a damage to one’s capacity for hope looks like.

¹⁵The crisis is not limited to North America. For example, in Australia, cultural dislocation, trauma, racism, alienation, and exclusion have been found to contribute to the disproportionate numbers of mental health issues, substance abuse issues, and suicides across Australian Indigenous communities (Department of Health 2013). In Brazil, Indigenous people are committing suicide at an average rate of 22 times higher than that of non-Indigenous Brazilians (Nolen 2017).

¹⁶See, e.g., Talaga 2018.

¹⁷Bovens suggests something similar. He argues that the “mental energy” involved in hoping enables reflection on one’s desires and the sorts of things one might actually attain, thus leading to a shift of one’s hopes to be more in line with “more attainable and meaningful pursuits” (Bovens 1999, 676).

¹⁸McGeer might reply by pointing out that, as long as the hopeful person is oriented to take action should the possibility emerge, the person is not hoping badly. I am sympathetic to this idea, but I think we should be careful about attributing responsibility to oppressed people in the abstract to be disposed to act on their hopes. There might be cases where it is reasonable for an oppressed person to wishfully hope without a disposition to act when the object of hope is something to which they are morally entitled from others, and for which they should not have to struggle to attain.

¹⁹Peter Drahos's "Trading in Public Hope" (2004) is a helpful discussion of how corporations use hope to sell their products. See also Martin (2008) for discussion of the ways in which patients' and research participants' hopes in medical contexts can be exploited.

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