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Imaginative Hope

ABSTRACT: *While political philosophers often assume that we need to imagine a better future in order to hope for it, philosophers of hope doubt that hope and imagination are constitutively intertwined. In order to solve this puzzle, the article introduces a particular kind of hope in which we imaginatively inhabit a desired future. Combining insights from the philosophy of hope and of imagination, I unpack what imaginative hope is and why it is particularly significant in political contexts. I contend that in cases where we pursue a goal the realization of which requires collective action over a long time-scale (as it is paradigmatically the case in politics), the imagination has the potential to bolster the practical value of hope, i.e., its power to guide and sustain our agency.*

KEYWORDS: hope, imagination, despair, politics

When legal scholar Maxim Bönnemann visited Kiev together with other members of the NGO Democracy Reporting International in the Fall of 2022, he was struck by the way he was approached by local politicians, activists and civil society actors alike.[1] With Russia's attack on Ukraine in full swing and brutal fights ongoing particularly in the country's Eastern regions, what they preferred to discuss were concrete ideas about post-war reconstruction and reconciliation, constitutional reform as well as Ukraine's future international integration and possible EU membership. Their way to sustain hope in an at times hopeless war with an ostensibly overwhelming opponent, it seemed, was to imaginatively project themselves into a successful version of the (post-war) future.

This observation is consistent with the (often implicit) assumption, widespread among political philosophers, that we need to imagine a better future in order to hope for it. According to Michele Moody-Adams (2022: 226), for instance, hope is "deeply intertwined with imagination", for it depends "on the ability to consider unfamiliar possibilities and perspectives, and to engage in novel reflection on what is actual and familiar". Katie Stockdale (2021: 37) reflects on the nature of hope with which "people living under oppression (and their allies) find themselves as they imagine a more just world". And Mathias Thaler (2022) defends the claim that our ability to sustain hope amidst global warming depends on our ability to map possible futures in which the climate catastrophe has been averted. How precisely hope and imagination are intertwined remains a thorny issue, though; with the notable exception of Humbert-Droz and Vazard (2023),

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[1] See https://verfassungsblog.de/the-ukrainian-wonder/. Thanks to Jan Brezger for pointing this out to me.

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there is very little explicit reflection on the relation between hope and imagination in general. Recent suggestions that the imagination is a constitutive component of hope (Bovens 1999; Calhoun 2018; Kwong 2018) have been met with resistance, in particular because we seem to be able to hope for many (ordinary and everyday kind of) things without imagining them.

My aim in this article is to fill this lacuna by introducing a particular kind of hope that allows us to imaginatively inhabit a desired future. Combining insights from the philosophy of hope and of imagination, I will unpack what *imaginative hope* is and why it is particularly significant in political contexts. My claim is that in cases where we pursue a goal the realization of which requires collective action over a long time-scale (as is paradigmatically the case in politics), the practical value of hope—its power to guide and sustain our agency—is bolstered by an involvement of the imagination. Building on, but going beyond, the rapidly growing philosophical literature on the nature of hope in general, the article thus contributes both to recent attempts to highlight the diversity of hope, and to specifically address its role in political life (e.g., Goldman 2023; Moellendorf 2022; Stockdale 2021).

The argument is structured as follows. In Section 1, I lay out and critique the *constitutive claim,* i.e., that the imagination is a constitutive component of hope. Inhabiting a desired future, I contend, is only one way of foregrounding its possibility. In Section 2, I then go on to lay out why this is particularly pertinent to political contexts. Hopeful imaginings strengthen the *motivational* and *collectivizing* value of hope, and add a distinct *epistemic* dimension. In Section 3, I discuss and (partially) defend imaginative hope against three objections. I conclude that the imagination has the potential to, but is not guaranteed to, bolster the transformative power of hope.

1. The Constitutive Claim

According to the *constitutive claim*, hope generally and necessarily involves the imagination. The latter, in other words, is a constitutive component of the former. In order to unpack this claim, I need to explain recent debates about the "standard account" in the philosophy of hope (originally see Downie 1963). On this account, which has historical precursors in Aquinas and Hobbes, hope is a compound state that combines a *desire that p* with a belief, or at least a presupposition, that *p is possible but not certain*. The belief component distinguishes hope from modally less constrained wishes (I can wish, though not hope, for whatever I like) and more confident expectations (unless I am paralyzed or tied to my chair, it would be somewhat surprising to say that I hope to be able to get up from my chair and walk across the room). The desire component captures the fact that a hoping person takes a pro-attitude toward the hoped-for object; we cannot hope for what we dislike or fear.

On its own, however, the belief-desire combination does not appear to be able to define all instances of hope. On the one hand, there are cases where we desire something and take it to be possible without, however, hoping for it. Luc Bovens (1999: 674) gives the example of Sophie, who shows up late at a party, asking the

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host self-confidently whether he had hoped Sophie might come. Now, the host had indeed believed that Sophie might come and considered her a welcome guest (i.e., had preferred her coming to the party to her not coming to the party). Yet, Bovens maintains that it would be mistaken to say that he had hoped she would come, unless he had devoted at least some mental energy to the question whether she would or not—for instance, by looking at his clock wondering whether Sophie would still come, or by turning his head to check whether Sophie was amongst some newly arrived guests. It seems that hopes command our attention and structure our thoughts and actions in a way that goes beyond a mere belief-desire combination.

More importantly yet, the standard account does not allow us to distinguish hope from despair. Think of cases where two people who (by stipulation) equally desire an outcome and both take it to be possible, yet nonetheless find themselves in very different affective states. In Bovens' (1999: 668) 'Shawshank Redemption' scenario (which is based on the Frank Darabont movie of the same name), two prisoners serve a life sentence for murder. They both desire to be free and believe that there is a small chance they will be able to escape. Yet, while one of them is full of hope about successfully breaking free, the other one despairs about the low odds.

Against the background of these two challenges, numerous authors have sought to complement the standard account with a third component in addition to belief and desire.[2] Some argue that hope includes a "cognitive resolve" to act as if the prospect were going to obtain or stood a good chance of obtaining (Pettit 2004), others that hopeful agents view the external factor on which success depends as good or on their side (Meirav 2009), yet others suggest that hope requires that we attend to the outcome in a particular way, namely under the aspect of its possibility (Chignell 2022). In this context, the imagination has been put forward by a number of authors as another potential candidate for the sought-after third component.

Luc Bovens (1999) was the first to argue that what he calls "mental imaging" constitutes a necessary component of hope. Recall his claim that the party host cannot be said to have hoped for the late guest to arrive because he had not devoted any mental energy to the question whether she would arrive. This devotion of mental energy to what it would be like if some projected state of the world were to materialize is what Bovens refers to as 'mental imaging'. Along similar lines, Cheshire Calhoun (2018: 86) argues that hope contains a "phenomenological idea of the determinate future whose content includes success". Notice that this account is not limited to what Calhoun (2018: 70) goes on to call *substantial practical hope* and to which she ascribes a distinct capacity to "sustain practical pursuits under difficult circumstances". I take her claim that "minimally, in hoping, we take ourselves into the future by adopting a preference among several possible temporal unfoldings of events and imaginatively inhabiting

[2] There are alternative strategies, however: Blöser (2019) defines hope as a simple state or concept that cannot be analyzed into further components, Milona (2019) argues that the belief must be incorporated in the desire's 'cognitive base'.

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that preferred future" (Calhoun 2018: 3) is intended to hold for all kinds of hope. Central to her account is the idea that we are future-oriented creatures. As such, we do not only have desires, aims, intentions, and plans for the future, we also live under an idea of the future, i.e., we imaginatively project ourselves into a particular version of it. What characterizes the hopeful in contrast to the despairing agent is that they entertain an idea of the future that contains success.

Finally, according to Jack Kwong's (2018) 'pathways' account, hoping that P requires (in addition to belief and desire) that we recognize a possible way in which the desire can come to be realized. Crucially, a hopeful person is able to see (i.e., to visualize in her mind) a way in which the desired outcome can come about, and she sees that way as a "genuine possibility" (2018: 246). Kwong highlights that imagination and creativity are the crucial cognitive resources in this regard. They enable us to construct the scenarios that allow us to visualize the interim steps (event or series of events) needed for the desired outcome to obtain.

While none of these authors help themselves to insights from the philosophy of imagination, what they generally seem to have in mind are forms of *sensory* or *imagistic* imagination that contain mental imagery, i.e., a perception-like experience that is not caused by any corresponding external stimulus (object or event). That is to say, when hopeful agents imagine a successful version of the future, they visualize it in their minds in a way that allows them to imaginatively inhabit it. The idea of 'inhabiting' a desired future captures an important aspect of the phenomenology of imaginative hope. Imaginatively depicting, rehearsing or getting engrossed in a version of the future – to entertain what it would be like—feels *as though* we were part of it, at least as observers (note that we can also hope for outcomes that do not involve ourselves as participants).

By contrast, Humbert-Droz and Vazard (2023: 7–9) hold that hope typically triggers 'immersive' imagining, a (cognitive) type of imagining that cannot be reduced to mental images (e.g., Moran 1994; Schellenberg 2013). In immersion, we are deeply engaged with a complex scenario or a whole sequence of events—in the way in which, for instance, children or actors are engrossed in characters. Typically, we will fill in the scenario beyond what is explicitly provided, 'trying on' the desired reality as a whole. Given their claim that "imaginative immersion is not a constituent but rather a paradigmatic output of hope" (Vazard & Humbert-Droz 2023: 8), I do not view them as proponents of the *constitutive claim* though. Similarly, Adrienne Martin views "fantasising" a "common manifestation" (2013: 38) though not a necessary condition of hope.

I do not think, however, that the imagination is a promising candidate to complement the standard account. For, it seems that imagining a desired outcome (in addition to belief and desire) is neither sufficient to define hope, nor necessary. As to the former, there seem to be cases where agents imagine a desired outcome or a way of getting there but nevertheless do not hope for it. It is questionable, for instance, whether the despairing prisoner could simply begin to hope by fantasizing about a successful escape (Milona 2020, 104). The despairing prisoner may in fact already have the very same mental images as his hopeful fellow inmate. As to the latter, it is possible to come up with instances of hope that are *not* predicated on imagining a successful future. Take, for example, hopes directed

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at trivial outcomes, such as the hope that there will be chocolate pudding on the cafeteria's menu today; highly episodic hopes that are directed at a single, discrete and imminent event such as the hope that the runaway trolley does not hit the passer-by; or hopes that we take to have high odds of being realized, such as the hope that the sun will rise tomorrow.

Given that the imagination is neither necessary nor sufficient (together with belief and desire) for an agent to hope for an outcome, we should drop the *constitutive claim*. However, rather than making the case for an alternative candidate for the 'third criterion', I would instead like to focus on the underlying idea shared by most accounts. It can be illustrated by the way in which Meirav (2009: 222–23; see also Martin 2013: 23) describes the difference between the despairing and the hopeful prisoner. The former looks at the situation and says, 'I grant you it is possible, but the chance is *only* one in a thousand!', while the latter says, 'I grant you the chance is only one in a thousand, but it is *possible*!'. Crucially, for the hopeful agent, the possibility of the desired outcome (rather than its unlikeliness) is salient or in the foreground. We can think of this as a kind of *gestalt shift*; not unlike Wittgenstein's famous duck-rabbit illusion: what we see depends on how we look at it.

This *gestalt shift model* of hope leaves open what it is that accounts for the possibility's salience in a particular instance—whether it requires, for instance, that we "attend to" (Chignell 2022: 10) or "perceive" (Stockdale 2021: 16–20) the possibility of the desired outcome in a particular way or indeed imagine it. My intention in adopting this ecumenical account is not to avoid a contested issue, but to make space for the diversity of hope as a phenomenon in our practical lives. Notice, moreover, that the *gestalt shift model* is able to accommodate the two objections levelled against the *constitutive claim*. For we can allow for (rare, I believe) cases where the unlikeliness of the outcome remains in the foreground even though we imaginatively inhabit a successful version of the future, and for (not so rare) cases where agents hope without imagining a successful outcome. Palmqvist (2021: 690–91) suggests that there are even cases where agents hope while imagining an unsuccessful outcome. For instance, a terminally ill patient with low odds of recovery and a largely negative outlook on life due to previous experiences may have a phenomenological idea of the future that includes her demise, yet retain some hope.

2. The Political Value of Imaginative Hope

In the remainder of this article, I want to shift away from the attempt to define hope in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and instead ask when and why it needs to involve the imagination. My claim is that *imaginative hope* is particularly significant in political contexts, where the realization of our ends often requires collective action on a large scale and over extended periods of time. Of course, not all hopes that play a role in politics are of this kind: some are trivial (think of a law that hardly affects me), others episodic (think of the moment the election results are announced) or highly confident (think of a parliamentary vote along party lines). What interests me, though, is a *paradigmatic* scenario where what we

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set out to do is transform the social world in fundamental ways; think, for instance, of our hope to successfully combat climate change, to realize a different socioeconomic arrangement such as socialism, or to end global poverty.

There is a distinct way in which these scenarios constitute a challenge to our agency. First, it is hard to muster the resolve to pursue goals that are distant, ambitious and whose realization may even transcend our lifetimes (the *problem of demoralization*). Second, individual efforts alone will not go a long way; success usually requires some form of collective action that is sustained over prolonged periods (call this the *problem of inefficacy*). And third, we may even lack a clear sense of our goal; the future we are trying to realize may be so distant and/or ambitious that we struggle to concretely depict what its realization would even look like (the *problem of disorientation*). What I want to suggest is that by virtue of its distinct motivational (2.1), collectivizing (2.2), and epistemic (2.3) value, imaginative hope has the potential to (help us) meet these challenges and transform our social world in line with our preferred vision(s) of it. Specifically, a focus on the imagination can help us explain *how* hope can have two former kinds of value, and adds a distinct third one.

2.1 The Motivational Value

The *problem of demoralization* emerges because in political contexts we may pursue distant and ambitious goals, the realization of which may even transcend our lifetimes, such that we cannot be certain whether our efforts will make any difference at all. What demoralizes us, I want to suggest, is the gap we conceive between ourselves and our efforts, on the one hand, and the desired outcome, on the other.

Can hope help us to close this *agential gap*, such that we can sustain our resolve? Political activists in particular have recently challenged this idea: instead, they worry that hope makes us passive and complacent. For instance, the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion (with their slogan "hope dies, action begins") argues that hope, unlike alternative attitudes such as fear or panic, fails to convey the kind of urgency required in the face of global warming. It leads us to complacency and to defer to factors beyond our control such as politicians or technological innovations (see, e.g. Thaler 2023).

What this highlights, first of all, is that hope alone is not enough to motivate us to act; it must be combined with particular beliefs about what, given the external circumstances, it would take to realize the desired outcome, and particularly our own role in it. If I believe that the climate catastrophe will be avoided through divine intervention or a sudden breakthrough of solar geoengineering, my hope that the climate catastrophe will be avoided will hardly motivate me to act.

This insight, I believe, speaks against the idea that hopeful agents are always (i.e. definitionally) motivated to act (e.g., McKinnon 2005: 237; Mason 2021). According to Margaret Urban Walker, hope, unlike wish or fantasy, "somehow engages, encourages, or propels agency; it bends us toward 'making it so'"(Walker 2006: 46). Similarly, Cathy Mason (2021: 525) argues that if one is entirely unmotivated to bring about an end, "then there is no important sense in which one hopes for it". In other words, a person cannot be said to be hoping unless they are

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motivated to do their part in bringing about the desired end. This is a conclusion we should avoid, for it leads us to lose sight of the type of complacent hope that activists are rightly concerned about. For hope to motivate, it must be paired with specific beliefs about the role of our own agency in realizing the desired outcome.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that we can never act without hope. This is what Christopher Bobier (2017) argues. On this view, hope is necessary because it "set(s) the end" for practical deliberation. If you have no hope of getting to work on time because you woke up late, all you can deliberate about are alternative courses of action (e.g., whether to call your boss or your coworker). Bobier is certainly correct to point out that practical deliberation about an end, or indeed rational agency as such, requires a belief or at least a presupposition that this end is possible. That is not to say, though, that it is impossible to act without hope, which requires more than a desire and a belief in possibility. Instead, hope motivates us to act under circumstances where success is unlikely and/or we are confronted with obstacles and setbacks, such that our belief in the realizability of our ends is under threat (Chignell 2022).

What I would like to suggest is that the involvement of the imagination provides one plausible account of *how* hope motivates—and one that is particularly significant in political contexts. The (imaginatively) hopeful agent is able to close the *agential gap* by visualizing what it would be like or how we might get there. They are able to imaginatively inhabit the desired future or project themselves into it, which stabilizes and structures their connection to it. Jack Kwong (2018: 246) nicely illustrates this with the example of Margaret, who struggles with a research paper she is trying to finish. At the cusp of giving up, she attends a lecture in which she unexpectedly learns about the applications of a novel concept to some related problems in her manuscript. Seeing new ways in which she could advance her argument, Margaret regains hope and eagerly sets out to work on her paper again. It is the imagination, Kwong contends, from which she derives this sense of purpose and direction.

What threatens Margaret's motivation is that she cannot see how to get from where she is to where she wants to be. Notice, though, that the goal is largely in her own hands, and its realization is potentially imminent. I have already indicated that, by contrast, many of our political endeavors require collective collaboration over large timeframes, potentially across generations. This means that the *agential gap* is even more threatening: not only are we seeking to realize an outcome that we may not even live to see (i.e., the anticipated future is not our personal future), there are also numerous known and unknown intervening factors that may cast doubt upon the efficacy of our efforts. In this case, imaginative hope motivates by allowing us to understand our action in a particular way; namely, as an action that will not turn out to be in vain but contributes to the desired outcome. The imagination represents a world from the perspective of which our actions have turned out to make a difference.

2.2 The Collectivizing Value

In guarding us against discouragement in the face of obstacles we encounter in pursuing ambitious goals, hope plays an instrumental role. A number of authors

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have warned against reducing hope to this role (e.g., Li 2023). Claudia Blöser and Titus Stahl (2017) in particular argue that *some* hopes also play a constitutive role for our practical identity. According to the Korsgaardian picture they adopt, a practical identity is a set of commitments that an agent has that single out a certain conception of their life as worth living (from their perspective) and certain considerations as reason-giving in virtue of that fact (cf. Korsgaard 2009). Blöser and Stahl highlight that our self-understanding as agents is importantly diachronic: who we are, they argue, is partly constituted by the future we see ourselves in. For instance, "a patient's hope for a full recovery, a political activist's hope for the end of world hunger, or a religious person's hope for life after death" are all examples of hopes that constitute particular practical identities because they "play a crucial role in how that person sees and interprets the world" (Blöser & Stahl 2017: 350). Importantly, these hopes are not instrumental to a particular end the person may have, but constitutive of who they are in the first place.

I want to suggest that this argument can be usefully applied to the collective level. The self-understanding of any group, to the extent that it thinks of itself as persisting across time and pursuing projects that transcend the lifetime of its current members, is importantly diachronic. Who we take ourselves to be, say, as a political community, a political party or a trade union is shaped by our memory of the past and, more importantly, by our hopes for the future. In this case, where a pre-existing collective defines its own identity by negotiating its vision of the future, the role of hope is collectivizing in a 'broad' sense. However, I believe that hope can also collectivize in a more 'narrow' or strict sense, namely when the relevant collective is first constituted by a particular hope that its members share. Social movements, for instance, often have little to feed on in terms of pre-existing commonalities but are first brought together by a common political issue and the shared vision of the future associated with it, i.e., by hoping collectively. As a corollary, once individuals "sink back into their private, unstable, and typically, not very sanguine beliefs [or] come to believe that others have lost hope in that way, or that others have ceased to believe that they retain that hope" (Pettit 2004: 164), the group dissipates and unravels.

The exact nature and phenomenology of collective hope are thorny issues that I am not able to resolve here in a satisfactory manner. What I want to argue, instead, is that we can conceptualize the collectivizing role of hope without supposing that the hoping is in any way done 'by' the group. Surely, the idea cannot just be that individuals hope *alongside* each other for the same object. This would not really do justice to the way in which many activists themselves describe the experience of hoping with others, namely as irreducible to the hopes they each hold individually.[3] However, it is equally problematic to conceptualize a corporate agent as the subject of hope – not only because this might risk presupposing the existence of a "group mind with its own deliberative mechanisms and capability for mental representation or imaginary" (Szanto 2018: 231). If we follow, for

[3] For example, see Richard Aronson's (2017) account of the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, or Katie Stockdale's (2021) discussion of the 'Black lives matter' and 'Me-Too' movements.

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instance, the group agency model influentially put forward by Christian List and Philip Pettit (2013), it would also require a pre-existing corporate agent constituted by commonly agreed procedures and structures.

Instead, I follow Kate Stockdale's (2021: 169–76) suggestion that collective hope emerges alongside collective intentions. The core idea here is that when individuals share intentions such that they hope in a 'we-mode' rather than the 'I-mode', there is a specific (if limited) sense in which the hope belongs to the group. To hope in the 'we-mode' is to share an object of hope that concerns the shared future of a plurality of agents, a fact of which they are mutually aware. The individuals remain the subjects who experience this hope, but their hope cannot be described or made sense of without reference to their involvement in a collective action setting.

Stockdale (2021: 170), illustrates this with reference to the hope of participants in the Me Too movement, which "seems to belong not to each individual who hopes for justice for women but to the group: women and allies who participate in the hope of the movement". On her view, collective hope is also characterized by a specific phenomenology: it results in an emotional atmosphere that extends across the group. I do not necessarily want to commit myself to the claim that hoping collectively *feels* different from merely hoping alongside others. What I want to highlight is that a group of individuals who hope in a 'we-mode' *in so doing* constitute a collective—there is a sense in which the relevant 'we' exists simply by being the object of the individuals' shared intentionality and their mutual awareness that they share this object.

To sum up, hope can help us to meet the *problem of inefficacy* by virtue of playing a collectivizing role: either in the broad sense of equipping an existing collective with a diachronic practical identity, or in the narrow sense of constituting a collective in the first place. In either case, I want to suggest, the imagination plays an important role as a kind of 'experiential vehicle' for hope: a focal point in the form of a clear image of a desired future – one that individuals can communicate, share and discuss with others.

Particularly in democratic societies, the demos' collective identity cannot be taken for granted or given, for instance through thick ethnic or national commonalities. Instead, it is partly constituted by a shared vision of the future—a vision, however, that citizens can contest, negotiate, and revise in the democratic process. The aim of this process is not to eradicate the diversity of views by committing everyone to a given telos; the temporality of democracy is distinctly open-ended. However, in order to be co-authors of our own destiny, we must at least provisionally identify particular outcomes as the objects of shared hope—and the imagination can help us to do so.

In the case of social movements, convergence around a clear image of a desirable future is even more essential. Frequently such shared imaginings are triggered by what Kendall Walton (1990: 21–25) calls "prompters". These can be concrete objects (for instance, murals), stories or pieces of visual art but also actions and speeches by charismatic leaders. Take Katie Stockdale's (2021: 174–75) example of a speech given by a feminist activist. Stockdale describes how both the speech itself (including the content of words spoken, tone, and volume of voice) and the reactions of others (including their facial expressions, verbal responses, and body

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language) feeds back on how the listeners perceive and feel, resulting in a kind of emotional convergence among everyone present. We can think of this speech as a prompter that, by spontaneously eliciting in people a particular imaginative content (Szanto 2018: 232), facilitates collective hope.

It is true that the object of collective hope may tend to be rather opaque in that it lacks much imaginative content. Initially, this may be unavoidable in order to integrate and mobilize a diverse set of individuals around a shared political project. However, once a social movement seeks to formulate concrete political demands and to influence the political process accordingly, its aims must be filled with more concrete imaginative content. Hopeful imaginings can thus serve as a kind of reality check on what may appear to be a common cause, yet upon closer scrutiny, turn out to be diverging visions.

2.3 The Epistemic Value

There is a *problem of disorientation*, recall, insofar as our political goals require that we change our social world in fundamental and systematic ways. Our political goals can be so abstract or distant that we may have a hard time concretely depicting what a world in which they are realized would even look like; often all we have in mind are abstract values or ideals, the concrete political and institutional instantiation of which is severely underdetermined. I want to suggest that hope equips us with a better understanding of the goal we are trying to collectively realize, and it does so by virtue of involving the imagination. Notably, in contrast to the other two kinds of value, the imagination here does not just strengthen a particular dimension of the practical value of hope in general. Instead, hope's epistemic value is *predicated* on an involvement of the imagination.

It may be surprising to ascribe any epistemic significance to the imagination, given that this has been denied by philosophers from Sartre to Wittgenstein. The imagination, after all, is typically under our voluntary control, is not sensitive to the world (rather, it is determined by the imaginer), and seems to be uninformative (providing no new information). Sartre, for instance, drew from this the conclusion that "nothing can be learned from an image that is not already known" (Sartre 1984: 12). And in a contemporary context, Brian O'Shaughnessy calls for the imagination to be taken "out of the cognitive circuit" (O'Shaughnessy 2000: 345).

This view has recently been challenged in the philosophy of imagination. Amy Kind (2016, 2018) in particular has argued that imaginings can play a role in justifying the beliefs they prompt, thus teaching us something about the world. Take the case of a young couple who uses imagination in order to decide whether to become parents (Kind 2016: 145–46). In order to make that decision, they imagine all kinds of scenarios: how they grapple with exhaustion after a sleepless night with a crying baby or how they proudly watch a teenager graduate from high school. In this case, the imagination provides *normative orientation*—it justifies beliefs about what ought to be the case. A little later (and having made the decision), the parents-to-be use the imagination again when they find themselves at their local car-dealer. Trying to decide which model to buy, they

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"imagine themselves getting their child strapped into the car seat in the back, fitting the stroller and other gear in the trunk, and cleaning milk spills and crumbs (or perhaps worse) off the interior" (Kind 2016: 146). In this case the imagination provides *descriptive orientation*—by providing data or opening our eyes to relevant aspects we had not been aware of before, it justifies a belief about *what is the case*.[4]

One may object that rather than using the imagination, the parents would be better advised to solicit evidence by asking other young parents and by simply measuring the dimensions of the car, respectively. Indeed, the thought is not that the imagination is the only or even the best epistemic tool in all circumstances. Yet, particularly when other evidence is hard to come by—as is the case, arguably, in relation to alternative concrete versions of the future—the imagination can play an epistemic role.

I would like to suggest that both types of epistemic value, the provision of descriptive and normative orientation, carry over (and are particularly pertinent) to hope that involves the imagination.[5] Take the case of normative orientation first. On the one hand, hope can importantly shape our beliefs about the social world we live in. For, the very contrast with the possibility of a better world can clarify what is wrong or unjust about the present state of affairs. In this context, Mathias Thaler (2022: 74–83) speaks of the "estranging" function of hope. By defamiliarizing us with what we had taken for granted, i.e., establishing a critical distance between what exists and what might come to exist, hope indicates that things could be otherwise; the mere fact that things could be different highlights the contingency of present injustice.

On the other hand, hopeful imaginings can also inform and justify our beliefs about the desired outcome itself. While in some cases, inhabiting a particular outcome may deepen our commitment to it and clarify *why* we are attracted to it, in others it may lead us to question that very commitment. As Humbert-Droz and Vazard (2023: 13–15) argue, sometimes our hope is defeated when, in imaginatively 'trying on' a specific scenario, it turns out to be less appealing after all. For instance, while I had hoped to be chosen to play the role of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as I immerse myself in that scenario I may come to realize that "playing such a tragic role as Blanche is likely to affect my mood and thus my general well-being in a detrimental way [. . .] or that playing this character is not coherent with the feminist values I abide by" (Vazard & Humbert-Droz 2023: 14). Imaginings thus add an important reflexive dimension to hope, for they often elicit a reappraisal of the very desirability of a future outcome we had deemed worthy of our hope.

With regard to descriptive orientation, hope can help us generate a better idea of what it would even mean to realize or institutionalize a particular political ideal or

[4] I thank an anonymous reviewer for noting this.

[5] An anonymous reviewer suggested that there may be an intermediate category between normative and descriptive beliefs that imaginative hope helps us to explore: beliefs about how alternative lower-level ideals can come to fill in higher level ideals: e.g., we want to have a successful career, but in the imaginative exercise of hoping we find different ways in which we can fill in what it is to have a successful career (Bovens 1999: 673, 2021: 11).

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value. It can help us reach what Archon Fung (2007) calls "pragmatic equilibrium" — a state in which a single institutional prescription realizes a particular value or ideal better than any other. This is vital not only to better understand which world we are trying to bring about but also how we might try to bring it about, i.e., which concrete pathways and political strategies we might use and which obstacles and setbacks we might have to overcome along the way. For instance, socialists in political theory have only relatively recently started to reflect on questions of institutional design, i.e., to ask what a socialist economic and political order would concretely look like (recently, e.g. Beggs 2022). In so doing, they acknowledge that the long-standing reluctance in the Marxist tradition to explicate in detail an alternative to global capitalism has ultimately harmed the socialist project (Cicerchia 2022). The detailed descriptions of particular versions of market socialism or economic democracy can effectively be understood as exercises in imagination, aimed to clarify what we hope for when we hope for socialism.

3. The Critique of Imaginative Hope

The upshot of the preceding section is that imaginative hope has the ability to orient and sustain our agency in cases where our goals require sustained collective action (as they paradigmatically do in politics). In that sense, it has what we might call 'transformative power.' I now want to consider three objections that question the transformative power of imaginative hope. This will give us a clearer sense both of its significance and its limits.

3.1 The Objection from Radical Hope

The first objection is levelled by proponents of a kind of hope that is often labelled *fundamental* or *radical* hope. In contrast to the propositional types of hope ("that p") we have focused on so far, this type of hope is not directed at a specific object. Instead, it is a "pre-intentional" orientation or "existential feeling" (Ratcliffe 2013: 597), an anticipatory stance that represents the future as "sufficiently hospitable to our agential efforts" and sits beneath all our specific hopes (Calhoun 2018: 74). In contemporary debates, Jonathan Lear (2006) is usually credited with conceptualizing what he calls 'radical' hope in the context of recounting the story of Plenty Coups, the Chief of the Crow Nation. Plenty Coups leads his tribe through a period of cultural devastation brought about by colonialism by summoning a kind of hope "that transcends the current ability to understand what it is" (Lear 2006: 103). While Lear argues that what he calls radical hope can be *summoned* in extraordinary circumstances, others like Ratcliffe view it as a background orientation that *lingers* when all other (propositional) hopes are lost.

What proponents of fundamental hope agree on is that it provides a distinct kind of orientation and motivation—and one that is particularly recalcitrant in the face of detrimental evidence (Martin 2013: 98–101; Palmqvist 2021: 689). It captures the idea that in some scenarios it may be counterproductive to pin our hopes to specific outcomes. Take the context of climate change again: both activists and theorists have suggested that the prevalent hope that some technological

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innovation will magically solve the crisis has lead us to fatally underestimate the magnitude of the problem, leaving us unable to formulate a plausible way out (e.g., Thaler 2023). Against this background, they argue, fundamental hope is precisely what we need in a context where we cannot (yet) imagine what the good life in a 'warmer' world looks like (Thompson 2009; Williston 2012).

I doubt whether it is necessary to construe fundamental hope as a different kind. We can plausibly think of it as a form of propositional hope ranging over very broad content (Stockdale & Milona 2018: 217–19), i.e., as occupying the vague end on a scale of concreteness along which our hopes are located. Setting that aside, I do not deny that fundamental hope can allow us to persevere in extraordinary circumstances, e.g. moments of transition or crisis. However, I believe it is constitutively unstable and at risk of collapsing into resignation, apathy, and despair.[6] As I argued above, hope ultimately needs to be filled with concrete (imaginative) content to become action-guiding in a sustainable way.

The climate change context is a case in point. It is also a "crisis of the imagination" (Buell 1996: 2), which we will arguably only overcome if we manage to picture what it would mean to stop it, or to live well in a world affected by it. The kind of orientation needed for society to act decisively thus seems to require specific propositional hopes that engage the imagination. It is precisely in the face of radical uncertainty that we need concrete visions of an alternative future in order to orient ourselves. This is why even climate ethicists who advocate fundamental hope argue that the idea of a radically open and indeterminate future must be combined "with imaginative excellence in [. . .] re-visioning what counts as a high standard of living" (Thompson 2009: 56).

3.2 The Objection from Negativism

The second objection to the transformative power of hope takes its cue from a long-standing skepticism, permeating the Western Marxist tradition, about any attempt to imagine or describe in detail what a future socialist society might look like. This commitment goes back to Marx and Engels' (2008: 77–81) critique of utopian socialists such as Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen who, according to Marx and Engels, put forward visions of an ideal future that are detached from reality and fail to connect with historical processes. Rather than writing "recipes" for the "cook shops of the future" (Marx 1976: 94–104), they argue we should study the laws of historical materialism as a guide for transformative action. While their critique is explicitly directed at utopianism, it arguably extends to all forms of anticipating the future, including by means of hope. Marx and Engels frequently argue that we must limit ourselves to a purely negative account of current existing society (merely specifying what will vanish) and refrain entirely from saying *anything* positive about what will replace it.

In order to evaluate this case for anticipatory negativism, we need to distinguish three different motivations for it as they are formulated in the *normative*, the

[6] In my (2023), I call this state "fundamental despair". Proposing a different way of delineating hope and despair, Jack Kwong (2023) labels it "hopelessness".

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epistemic, and the *redundancy* argument (see Leopold 2016). First, there is a *normative* argument that to stipulate a particular version of the future as desirable is to infringe on the autonomy of the agents whose future it is (e.g., Crocker 1981; Webb 2000: 24–33). Historical agents, that is to say, have to work out for themselves what their preferred social order should look like; the theorist must not impose their own detailed plan or blueprint of an ideal society on those who are meant to inhabit it. To do so, on this view, would be to foreclose the future and, in so doing, curtail individuals' entitlement to emancipate and determine themselves.

Indeed, if hope is to play the productive role I have ascribed to it, it must not be directed at a kind of blueprint that the theorist sketches at the drawing board and subsequently hands over to agents. In order to guide and orient action, hopes must be questioned and re-aligned with changing circumstances (such as alternative courses of action and epistemic circumstances); and in political circumstances, this process of negotiating and challenging visions of the future must be conceived as a communal project. If that is the case, however, it is not clear why a hopeful anticipation of the future would be undemocratic or normatively problematic in this way; it can contribute to the historical process rather than closing it.

According to the *epistemic argument*, utopian visions are futile because they require a kind of knowledge of the future that is not available in the present (e.g., Avineri 1973; Lukes 1984). The kind of high confidence about the precise nature of a post-revolutionary state of affairs that would be required to initiate and guide transformative social action in the right direction is simply unavailable. However, I believe this misunderstands what we do when we hope for something: hope is not a theoretical attitude (something like a belief, prediction or expectation) but a practical attitude that provides orientation in our efforts to realize a particular version of the future (that we consider possible and desirable). Most importantly, hope does not require the high degree of confidence required for knowledge, but rules it out. If I were highly confident about something, I would *expect* it rather than *hoping* for it.

Now, there is a radicalized version of this argument proposed by Theodor Adorno, who famously advocates a "Bilderverbot" (ban on images). The underlying thought is that the world is so evil that we cannot even *imagine* what a better future would look like (Adorno 2007: 345). Notice that, unlike the kind of epistemic negativism I just discussed, imaginative negativism does indeed rule out hope. For while the epistemic boundaries of hope are wider than those of knowledge (we can hope without a high degree of certainty), they are more narrow than those of the imagination (we can imagine the impossible but not hope for it). And indeed, Adorno seems to assume that our distorted imagination will yield misleading hopes (hopes that prevent us from facing up to the misery of the world).

Yet, I worry that imaginative negativism faces a dilemma. If we lack the conceptual resources to even imagine a better future, it is hard to see how this position avoids despair or inaction. Which avenues for action are even left? Aware of this danger and cognizant of Adorno's own concession that "there is no good without hope" (Adorno 2007: 272), Timo Jütten (2019) has argued that Adorno

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is a proponent of radical hope along Lear's (2006) lines. According to Jütten, Adorno endorses the idea that when we work through the past (and the Holocaust in particular) a new sense of meaning may emerge – and a new horizon for the future, but one that we cannot fill with concrete content. While this answers the worry about despair to some extent, it leaves us with the concerns about the practical value of fundamental (as opposed to propositional and in particular imaginative) hope laid out above.

Finally, there is what I call the *redundancy argument*. According to this argument, depicting a better society is simply unnecessary, since solutions to crises and conflicts in society will simply emerge from the historical process (e.g., Berki 1983; Ollman 2003: 159). Once a social order has exhausted its contribution to historical progress and particular "objective" conditions (most importantly, a certain level of productivity) are reached, it will simply be replaced by a new order that makes further progress. At no point will we need to design or, importantly, anticipate this new order in thought. For, the new order is not intentionally brought about but develops automatically within the existing order as we work through its internal contradictions.

Unfortunately, this objection rests on a highly dubious conception of the relation between history and human agency that G.A. Cohen (2000: 43) aptly describes as the "obstetric conception of political practice". On this view, human agents act as a kind of midwife tasked to deliver the content of the metaphorical womb of history. All they can do is facilitate, at most perhaps accelerate, the predetermined conclusion of history. However, the idea that socialism emerges automatically from a historical process has not only turned out to be untenable as a prediction, in confining the role of agents to facilitating a preconceived result, it is also normatively problematic. Once we assume that people are truly in charge of their own future by working out for themselves what their preferred social order might look like, we need to acknowledge their need to depict or visualize, by way of imaginative hope, what that future might look like.

3.3 The Objection from Wishful Thinking

The third objection differs from the other two in that it does not deny the significance of imaginative hope per se, but highlights its dangers. The thought is that the very involvement of the imagination exacerbates hope's tendency to turn into wishful thinking. Wishful thinking occurs when a person's desire for something to be true causes them to consider it to be more likely than it actually is (Milona 2019: 726). When my desire to be a great pianist leads me to believe that I am, this is wishful thinking. Here, we are dealing with a form of epistemic irrationality, since the subjective probability assessment of the desirable state is beyond what would be warranted by the available evidence. According to Luc Bovens, "just as it is harder to exercise self-control when the peanuts are within reach, it is harder to remain epistemically rational when one hopes" (Bovens 1999: 678).

This epistemic irrationality also has repercussions on the practical value of hope, i.e., it can inhibit good deliberation and agency. In particular, wishful thinking can lead to fixation, where we blindly pursue a goal at the detriment of alternatives.

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Agents who are fixated on an outcome can be unreflective and perhaps even unscrupulous; they may take unreasonable risks, overlook more realistic paths, and view other agents as mere instruments for achieving their ends. If their hopes are disappointed, then they may be left with little capacity to respond flexibly, given that they have lost the one thing that gives their action meaning and purpose (McGeer 2004: 111).

Bovens explicitly identifies the imagination as the primary culprit in wishful thinking. The problem is that the imagination can obscure the line between reality and mental construction; our visualization of a successful future, as it were, can 'bleed into' our perception of reality. This, in turn, can hamper our ability to form beliefs on the basis of the available evidence. Think of how difficult it can be to distinguish whether images of our early childhood are actually memories or whether they were formed later based on stories we have been told. Adrienne Martin (Martin 2013: 90–91) agrees that those who hope imaginatively risk becoming lost in fantasies about their goal, thus losing touch with reality. For instance, she points to the misleading idea, prevalent in much of the 20th century self-help literature, that we are more likely to get what we want by imagining we already have it (Martin 2013: 94).

Humbert-Droz and Vazard argue that we can guard against the danger of wishful thinking by properly constraining the hope that might give rise to it. This claim is based on their assumption that the relevant imagining is not itself part of the hope, but its "paradigmatic output" (Vazard & Humbert-Droz 2023: 119). Here, the idea is that the imagining 'inherits' the fittingness of the hope which triggers it. So, if the hope is rational or fitting (in particular, based on accurate beliefs about probability), then the resulting imagination will also be rational or fitting.

I worry, however, that this underestimates the problem. For, it cannot account for the possibility that the imagination feeds back into hope, thereby contaminating it. In other words, the dependency between hope and imagination goes both ways. Sometimes, the beliefs involved in a hope will indeed constrain the imagination accordingly. In other instances, however, the imagination may tamper with our beliefs, thus turning the relevant hope as a whole into wishful thinking. In order to keep this feedback mechanism in view, we need to evaluate our beliefs against the evidence, particularly outside or in between imaginative episodes when there is the best chance that the line between reality and mental construction is not obscured.

Conclusion

I started my argument with a puzzle: political philosophers often tie hope closely to the imagination, whereas other philosophers doubt whether the two are constitutively intertwined. In order to solve this puzzle, I asked what imaginative hope is and why it is particularly significant in political contexts. I have argued that by virtue of its motivational, collectivizing, and epistemic value, imaginative hope has a distinct capacity to facilitate and sustain political action under circumstances that call for collective action over prolonged periods of time. This is not to say that imaginative hope always or necessarily impacts our agency in positive ways. The triangulation between ourselves, our ends, and the wider

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epistemic and practical circumstances that are required for justified hope is even more difficult to come by when the imagination is involved, which can compete with our perception of the world. However, given the transformative potential of imaginative hope, particularly in political contexts, my view is that developing imaginative hope is worth the effort.

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