# **Defying Democratic Despair: A Kantian Account of Hope in Politics[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

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Abstract: In times of a prevailing sense of crisis and disorder in modern politics, there is a growing sentiment that anger, despair or resignation are more appropriate attitudes to navigate the world than hope. Political philosophers have long shared this suspicion and shied away from theorising hope more systematically. The aim of this paper is to resists this tendency by showing that hope constitutes an integral part of democratic politics in particular. In making this argument I draw on Kant’s conceptualisation of hope as a psychological condition on action under circumstances where the chances of making a difference are dim. Given that the Kantian agent avoids the threat of despair in the pursuit of political goals by placing trust in her fellow citizens, hope has the potential to positively transform democratic practices.

In times of a prevailing sense of crisis and disorder in modern politics, there is a growing sentiment that anger and despair, or at least fatalism, resignation and apathy, are more appropriate attitudes to navigate the world than hope. Across Western democracies, a once deeply entrenched confidence that institutions are up to meeting the challenges of the present (let alone those of the future) is corroding and carrying with it citizens’ resolve to engage politically. Where politicians try to take on the growing disaffection byinvoking the audacity of hope, they are readily accused of leading people down the primrose path with empty rhetoric (Drahos, 2004).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Political philosophers, certainly those of a more “analytical” bent, have long shared this concern and been hesitant to theorise hope more systematically.[[3]](#footnote-3) My suspicion is that many continue to view hope as expressing a doe-eyed approach to the world, a subconscious bias towards the positive that may be useful as a greeting card sentiment but surely has no place in the context of normative theory. The aim of this article is to resist this tendency by sketching a Kant-inspired conception of hope that is both integral to democratic politics and has the potential to positively transform it.

The argument unfolds as follows. Section 1 develops two desiderata for an account of hope in democratic politics by looking more closely at some of the reasons for political philosophers’ scepticism. Section 2 reconstructs Kant’s notion of hope against the background of recent debates on hope in analytic philosophy. Hope, according to Kant, is a practical attitude that allows us to act under circumstances where the prospects of making a difference are dim. In Section 3, I argue that this is precisely the scenario we frequently confront in democratic politics, and that Kant sketches a compelling way of dealing with it.

The article thus provides a conditional defence of political hope from contemporary criticism by providing a nuanced understanding of Kant’s account of hope. My aim, then, is not to unconditionally commend hope in all contexts and circumstances, but to vindicate a particular understanding of hope as a reality of democratic practice and a significant object of investigation for democratic theory.

# **Lost in Anticipation?**

At the most general level, hope expresses an affirmative attitude towards a future state of affairs that we take to be possible yet uncertain:[[4]](#footnote-4) we do not see the world as completely closed to the possibility of it being the way we would like it to be. As such, hope is frequently invoked not only in our private lives, where we hope for good weather, that our turn at the traffic light will be next or that there is apple pie for desert. It is ubiquitous also in politics: people hope for their cause or candidate to prevail, for an institution or practice to be transformed in line with their ideals, or simply for peace and justice to prevail.

While recently there has been much attention to the nature of hope in analytic philosophy (e.g. Martin, 2013; Meirav, 2009; Pettit, 2004), political philosophers have been slow to pick up on the significance of hope in political life or even commend it.[[5]](#footnote-5) Historical reasons may account for this to some extent, to do with hope’s long-standing religious pedigree on the one hand (Gray, 2004: 12), and its association with teleological philosophies of history that are now widely deemed outdated (Allen, 2016: 1-36), on the other. At this point I shall restrict my focus to possible *conceptual* grounds underlying the view that hope is misplaced in politics. According to the suspicion I want to articulate, political philosophers’ shared worry is that hope distorts or undermines our practical engagement with the world in politically dangerous ways. Hopeful agents often fail to be good political agents because they tend to be led astray in anticipation of a future yet to come.

Let me briefly sketch some versions of this thought. One widespread concern is that hope, which is usually taken to include something like a “phenomenological idea of the determinate future whose content includes success” (Calhoun, 2018: 86), gives rise to unwarranted optimism (e.g. Eagleton, 2015; Ehrenreich, 2007; Scruton, 2010). In cultivating an (ungrounded) confidence that the world is tilting in our favour, hope inclines agents either to complacently lean back or to recklessly disregard risks and perils. Along these lines, for instance, Thucydides (History, 5.103) describes how Athenians’ delusive hopes brought about political disaster:[[6]](#footnote-6) their unlimited confidence bereaved them of the ability to judge “what was possible on the basis of their strengths and what was impracticable and exceeded their means” (Schlosser, 2013: 172), such that they acted in a careless, dangerous and self-destructive manner.

A second line of criticism holds that hope can be disempowering and demotivating. Hopeful agents typically rely on external factors (such as luck, destiny, the laws of nature or other people) for the realization of their desired state of affairs. This is thought to be at odds with the core democratic commitment that citizens are in control of their own future. Particularly in the context of fraught political circumstances, hope may even be put to ideological use: the privileged and powerful can promise, sell and manufacture hope in order to keep members of oppressed groups in their place by assuring them that the arc of history is not theirs to bend.[[7]](#footnote-7) In this context, critics often also point to hope’s motivational inertness. The thought is that darker future-directed orientations such as fear (Shklar, 1989) or even reactive attitudes such as anger or resentment (Srinivasan, 2017; Nussbaum, 2016) are more efficacious in inciting and guiding political action, for they convey a sense of urgency that the relative comfort of hope lacks.

Finally, hope may be taken to misdirect our agency (rather than undermining it altogether). Matt Sleat’s reason for decrying hope as a “malevolent force in politics” (2013: 131), for instance, is that it distracts us from what is to be done ‘here and now’. By inviting us to fantasize about distant possible worlds, hope inflates our ideas of what politics can deliver in a way that is bound to lead to disappointment or even more destructive and politically dangerous sentiments such as disaffection or estrangement. Instead of building castles in the air, we should cultivate a realistic or even pessimistic (Dienstag, 2006) sense of practical possibility and its narrow limits in politics. Proponents of this particular critique often share a more general scepticism about the prospects of radical change in politics. They associate hope with a ‘goal-directed politics’ that seeks to transform society (violently, if necessary) in line with preconceived principles and institutions (e.g. Gray, 2004; Scruton, 2011).

This brief survey provides some insight into political philosophers’ reluctance to embrace hope in politics. They usually articulate worries on two related levels. On the one hand, there is a concern, familiar from wider philosophical debates about hope (e.g. Martin, 2013: 85-97; Bovens, 1999: 678), that hope can inhibit good deliberation and make us prone to wishful thinking. On the other hand, given that the way we relate to our goals is bound to have repercussions for the way we relate to those around us, hope is thought to have detrimental effects on social and political relations. The concern is that hopeful political agents are going to be ineffectual in bringing about positive change (when they are paralyzed in anticipation of a desired future while the present falls apart) or even dangerous (when they become too fixated on hoped-for outcomes). In a nutshell, hope is not an agential stance to be welcomed or even promoted in the context of democratic politics.

I have no intention to deny that some of these worries have bite or indeed that hoping is something we can do more or less well.[[8]](#footnote-8) There are certainly contexts in which political agents cultivate hopes that are irrational, out of place, overblown or damaging. Consequently, my aim in what follows is by no means to unconditionally defend hope. Instead, I want to sketch a particular *kind* of hope that brings to the fore both the indispensability and the productivity of hope in the context of democratic politics.

Taking our lead from this section, in developing such an account it will be critical to keep two dimensions plainly in sight. First, we need to conceptualize how hope engages our agency, that is, lay out how it motivates, guides and frames our practical engagement with the world, specifically as political agents, rather than inhibiting, distorting and preventing it. And second, we have to bear in mind how our proposed framework is bound to play out politically, that is, how agents who hope in the relevant sense relate to their fellow citizens. It is with these two desiderata in mind that I turn to Kant.

# **Kant on Hope**

My brief survey of political philosophers’ reasons for scepticism about hope left us with two sorts of worries concerning the consequences of hope for our practical engagement with the world and with other people, respectively. The corresponding desiderata for an appealing account of hope in politics are that it characterises hope as both an appropriate attitude for action and as a productive attitude for social and political relations. In the remainder of this article, I sketch Kant’s understanding of hope (present section) and show that it fits this bill (Section 3).

## **2.1 Kant’s Third Question**

Hope plays a prominent if not central role in Kant’s philosophical thinking as a whole. Most famously, towards the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR A805-6/B833-4),[[9]](#footnote-9) Kant designates the question *What may I hope*? as one of the tree questions uniting human reason. However, reconstructing his conception of hope turns out to be surprisingly challenging, given that he never explicitly defines or systematically develops it. The most plausible strategy, then, is to take our lead from the two main contexts in which hope is explicitly invoked.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In Kant’s ethics, it is the “highest good” (CPR A810/B839, see also CrPrR 5:108) – a world in which human happiness and moral goodness are in perfect proportion – which we may hope for. We need to will the highest good, Kant argues in the second *Critique*, because as finite beings we cannot repudiate our desire for happiness even though morality with its unconditional requirements seems often to demand that we do. Yet, given that we often see the wicked thrive and the virtuous bear misery, we would be left with a profound sense of practical absurdity or despair in our attempt to “promote” (CrPrR 5:114) such a world unless we are at least able to hope that our efforts contribute to attaining it.

Now, Kant believes that a necessary connection between virtue and happiness is conceivable not in the empirical world of experience but only in the ‘intelligible’ world. Controversially, our hope is thus said to further commit us to accept that there is an afterlife and that God exists. For only if our souls are immortal (such that we can infinitely approach our own complete conformity with the moral law) and if there is an almighty and benevolent God (capable of ensuring the precise harmony between virtue and happiness) may we reasonably hope that our moral efforts will eventually be rewarded (CrPrR 5:107–148). In the end, and despite his emphatic insistence that reason provides the grounds of hope and sets its boundaries, Kant’s moral philosophy seems to fall back onto a transcendent kind of hope for moral salvation that involves traditional religious objects such as God and the afterlife. In the *Religion* (6:171)*,* Kant confirms the prominent role hope plays in our religious lives. There, he argues that we may hope for divine assistance in performing a “revolution of the will” through which we overcome our natural propensity to evil and adopt the moral law as our fundamental maxim.

Yet, there is a prominent instance also of a distinctly “this-worldly” (O’Neill, 1997: 287)and secular kind of hope in Kant that does not depend on these supersensible mechanisms. In his occasional essays on history and politics, it is *historical progress* – the collective progress of the human species towards a more just and peaceful world, conceived as a distinctly shared and historical task, that constitutes the object of our hope (e.g. TP 8:309, IUH 8:29, PP 8:361). While Kant ascribes to each of us an “inborn duty to influence posterity in such a way that it does make constant progress”, without “hope for better times” this duty “would never have warmed the human heart” (TP 8:309). Lest we “succumb to despair” (TP 8:309) in our attempt to fight for peace and justice, we must be firmly committed to the idea that history is at least amenable to human betterment.

Again, this commits us to a kind of faith – not, this time, in supersensible entities or mechanisms (for the possibility of moral and political progress over the long course of history does not presuppose divine intervention), but in *nature* as arranged in a way that is conducive to our efforts. Briefly, we are licensed to read nature as arranged in a way that allows human activities and efforts to play out so as to contribute to historical progress in the long run. The regulative idea of (human) nature being conducive to our efforts “encourages the hope that after many revolutions […], the highest purpose of nature, a universal cosmopolitan existence, will at last be realised as the matrix within which all the original capacities of the human race may develop” (IUH 8:29). Empirical history “may very well give rise to endless doubts about my hopes”, yet “this uncertainty cannot detract […] from the necessity of assuming for practical purposes that human progress is possible” (TP 8:309).

I want to resist getting further into the exegetical intricacies of these passages. Let me also put my cards on the table: I have no intention to defend the substance of Kant’s account as far as the specific objects of hope are concerned. What I am interested in is the underlying conceptual framework. In order to do so, I will take an indirect route and bring Kant into conversation with contemporary philosophical debates about hope.

## **2.2 The Standard Account of Hope**

What (if anything) unites our hopes for good weather tomorrow, that we will get a paper written in time or that we recover from a serious illness? Recent work in analytic philosophy has tried to answer this question by analysing hope in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. According to the prevalent view, often referred to as the “standard account” (Meirav, 2009: 217; Martin, 2013: 4), hope can be described as a compound state containing at least a conative and a cognitive aspect, i.e., a desire for something (the *desire condition*) that we take to be possible but not certain (the *modal condition*).

The modal component is meant to demarcate hope from modally less constrained wisheson the one hand (I can arguably wish, though not hope, to simply fly away by flapping my arms) and more confident expectations,on the other.[[11]](#footnote-11) While it may not be irrational or impermissible to hope for something we are confident will come about,[[12]](#footnote-12) a ceteris paribus ‘assert-the-stronger’ norm usually leads us to assert the strongest justified attitude that we have toward a state of affairs in order to give others a better sense of our information state (Chignell, 2013: 200). Hence, we rarely speak of hope when we take an outcome to be probable rather than *merely possible.*

While most proponents in this ongoing debate take their cue from this standard account (for an exception, see Segal and Textor, 2015), there is widespread agreement also that the two conditions on their own are too weak to accurately conceptualize hope. The most obvious flaw of the standard account seems to be that it cannot distinguish hope from despair (for further problems with the standard account, see Kwong, 2018: 1-2). Imagine two men, Andy and Red, serving life sentence for murder in an unpleasant prison (Bovens, 1999: 667-9).[[13]](#footnote-13) They both have an equally strong desire to escape the prison and similar estimates concerning the likelihood of success in breaking out (they both think it is possible, though not very likely). And yet, they respond differently to the situation: while Andy lives in the hope of escaping (after all, it is possible that they would make it!), Red despairs of the low odds.

Given that we cannot account for the difference between these entirely contrasting reactions on the basis of *desire condition* and *modal condition* alone, it seems that we need to supplement the standard account with a third component. In addition to the modal condition and a desire that the relevant state of affairs obtain, the idea is usually that hope also requires a certain stance or comportment towards the apparent possibility (call this the *focus condition*).

Just how this third element should be conceptualised continues to be subject to debate. Some argue that we must engage in a kind of “mental imaging” (Bovens, 1999: 674) about the projected state of affairs or the way to reaching it (Kwong, 2018), others that we “orient our agential energies” (McGeer, 2004) towards its chance of occurring, that we resolve to act “as if the desired prospect is going to obtain” (Pettit, 2004) or simply focus on the issue under the aspect of its possibility (Chignell, 2018: 306 fn. 36). The general thought is that the hopeful person somehow inhabits a possible future that they deem desirable or imaginatively projects herself into it. It is this third aspectwhich is said to distinguish hope from despair and thus give us an exhaustive definition of hope. To sum up, according to the emerging consensus, when we hope for something we desire that it come about (*desire condition)*, take it to be possible (*modal condition)* and focus on it under the aspect of possibility rather than unlikeliness (*focus condition*).

## **Kant’s Standard Account**

I will now proceed to use the standard account as a foil to reconstruct Kant’s notion of hope. In so doing, it is important to keep in mind that Kant is not at all in the business of providing a comprehensive definition of hope in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, one that would cover all instances and varieties. Instead, he is interested in a specific type of hope that, as I will argue subsequently, is particularly pertinent to the specific circumstances of democratic politics. In order to illuminate what kind of hope that is, I will look at each component of the standard account’s tripartite scheme from Kant’s perspective.

Starting with the desire condition, we notice that Kant is not interested in just any case where we are attracted to an outcome. Instead, he focuses on scenarios where we (have to) set ourselves an end – the highest good and perpetual peace, respectively. In contrast to desiring (which we can do in a fully passive way), end-setting is intricately tied to action. By this I mean that if we set something as an end we commit ourselves to pursuing it, that is, to reflect on and purposively take up the means required in order to bring it about. Following Kant’s distinction between choice (*Willkür*) and wish (MoM 6:211-213; CRJ 5:178n), the former requires “summoning of all means insofar as they are in our control” (Gr 4:394).[[14]](#footnote-14) We regard the end we have set for ourselves as providing reasons to take steps towards its attainment.

Consequently, Kant focuses on what is usually called “practical hope” (Calhoun, 2018: 69), where the hoped-for outcome at least partly depends on my own efforts. Practical hopes contrast with speculative hopes, where we hope for a state of affairs over which we have no control or impact – for instance, that a friend recovers from an illness or that the sun will shine tomorrow. What I hope for when I hope practically is the success of my own efforts; I take myself toward the hoped-for state of affairs. Kant memorably highlights this by rephrasing his Third Question as “If I do what I should, what may I then hope?” (CPR A805/B833). Our license to hope is predicated on our own contribution to realising the hoped-for object.

I should highlight also that Kant takes hope to become relevant in very specific practical contexts where we are actively confronted with the limited nature of our agency. On the one hand, he argues that we can only work towards becoming more virtuous within our lifetime if we have grounds to hope that we thereby promote the highest good. On the other hand, we can only invest efforts aimed at the collective moral and political progress of the human species towards a more just and peaceful world if we have grounds to hope that history is at least amenable to human betterment.

In both cases, agents (have to) set for themselves distant and ambitious goals, the attainment of which is not fully in their control, such that they could simply plan or act so as to achieve them. Instead, it depends on a variety of external factors beyond their control. Indeed, the idea that the need for hope arises in our attempt to bring about a future we take ourselves to have (moral) reasons – though limited power – to bring about is a recurring theme also among contemporary philosophers of hope. According to Victoria McGeer, for instance, “hope signifies our recognition that what we desire is beyond our current (or sole) capacity to bring about” (2004: 103). For Kant, hope is a way of acknowledging and coming to terms with our limited capacity to affect the world.

Turning to the modal condition helps us to understand *why* we must hope in these contexts. Here, we must start from an empirical thesis about the effects of perceived inefficacy that I take to be an important though largely implicit component of Kant’s moral psychology. According to what I call the *demoralisation principle,* finite rational beings (such as ourselves) cannot sustain their commitment to act in a certain way if the world persistently refuses to answer to their efforts (e.g. CJ 5:452; Rel 6:5, 6:101; TP 8:309; see also Chignell, 2018; Ebels-Duggan, 2016). The prolonged experience that we do not make a difference will frustrate and paralyse us, slowly chipping away our “moral resolve” (Rel 6:5). Ultimately, we will no longer be able to perform actions that we take to be (morally or otherwise) good or required, or we will at least despair in so doing.

The demoralization principle is an important aspect of what Andrew Chignell (2018: 299) calls Kant’s “consequence-dependent” moral psychology. Of course, Kant famously holds that moral requirements as such are categorical; what matters for the goodness of an action are not the results it produces, but the principle upon which it is based (CrPrR 5:451). Yet, he is acutely aware also that, as beings who are not only free but also finite, we necessarily care for the results of our efforts; we have a need to see our “well-intentioned efforts” (Rel 6:101) at least occasionally fulfilled. Even the most virtuous person will experience a profound sense of absurdity (if not despair) in the performance of duty – and, I would like to add, in the pursuit of any other (non-moral) end they are firmly committed to – if the world persistently refused to answer to her efforts.

In the background of the *demoralisation principle* is a specific view about modal conditions on agency. Kant seems to assume that, for psychological reasons, we can only act and sustain our commitment to action over time if we regard it as at least possible for us to make a difference, i.e., to causally contribute to the realisation of our goals. When the stakes are low or we take success for granted, this conviction is likely to remain implicit or dispositional. However, when it dawns on us that our efforts may be bound to remain futile – because intervening variables mediate our action, or we have evidence suggesting that the circumstances of our pursuit are unfavorable – it is more challenging to uphold this conviction. Hence, in cases where the odds of making a difference are dim, we need hope in order to sustain our commitment to action.

Notice, again, that this is precisely what is going on in Kant’s own examples. While we try to promote the highest good by becoming more virtuous ourselves, we are surrounded by “deceit, violence and envy” (CJ 5:452), such that we may easily come to conclude that what we do remains futile. Similarly, our efforts to help bring about peace and justice face a world of seemingly ineradicable war, poverty and injustice. In scenarios such as these, where the odds of actually making a difference seem vanishingly low, it becomes extraordinarily hard to fend off despair and ultimately even to retain our resolve to act at all. Only hope, Kant argues, can then protect us from demoralisation and keep us going by sustaining the idea of a future hospitable to our agency.

We now have an idea why and under which circumstances hope is required according to Kant: it allows us to keep going when the odds of making a difference are low. This of course leaves open *how* we hope and, correspondingly, what distinguishes the hopeful from the despairing agent. Contemporary versions of the standard account address this question by way of the focus condition. The thought, recall, is that the hoping person focuses, in one way or another, on the possibility of the desired outcome rather than its unlikeliness. In contrast to the despairing agent, they somehow manage to inhabit or project themselves into the successful future, or even to visualize *how* such a future can come about.

My suggestion is that on Kant’s version of the focus condition, how we view the external circumstances of our pursuit is crucial in this respect. Whether we hope or despair in the face of dire prospects of success depends on whether we view the relevant contingencies as enabling or rather detrimental to our efforts. More specifically, the hopeful agent takes a particular epistemic attitude, one of “faith” [*Glaube*], towards the external conditions that stand between them and their success (Chignell, 2007; Willaschek, 2010).

That Kant’s notions of faith and hope are closely related is beyond doubt. Unfortunately, however, interpreters often simply equate the two (e.g. Flikschuh, 2010; Goldman, 2012; O’Neill, 1997). By contrast, my claim is that we should conceive of faith as an important *component* of hope. Generally speaking, faith is a voluntary kind of “assent” [*fürwahrhalten*] that is based on practical grounds rather than the usual epistemic means through which we acquire beliefs about the world, such as perception, memory, or deductive inference (CPR A820/B848–A831/B59). The idea is that when we act in pursuit of a practically necessary end, we are licensed to firmly accept a proposition as long as we lack overriding evidence for or against its truth.

In the present context, Kant argues that specific items of faith function as the “cause [*Ursache*]” of our hope (A809/B837). What he means by this is that our faith provides an account of the (explanatory) grounds of possibility of the hoped-for object (Chignell, 2018: 305). By answering the question *what it is* about the world that sustains, against all odds, the possibility of making a difference, faith gives us something to go on in fending off despair and demoralization. While we may not *know* whether the external circumstances are such that we can contribute to an outcome we take ourselves to have reasons to bring about, we can accept that this is the case on practical grounds. Hence, whether we are able to project ourselves into a successful future depends on the way in which we view the external circumstance of our pursuit. And insofar as there are circumstances in which we can intentionally *decide* to adopt faith, whether we have hope or despair is at least sometimes under our control.

We can see how closely intertwined hope and faith are in Kant by again looking at the two pertinent instances. On the one hand, our hope for the highest good is sustained by a faith in God and our own immortality (CrPrR 5:107–148). While we require an immortal soul in order to infinitely approach our own complete conformity with the moral law, the existence of a being with the power to synthesize happiness and virtue is a condition of possibility of a moral world. Together these ‘postulates’ give us grounds to hope that, by doing our part within our lifetime, we actually promote the highest good.

In Kant’s writings on history and politics, it is the faith in nature as arranged in a certain way (i.e., as conducive to our efforts aimed at contributing to moral and political progress of the human species on the long term), which accounts for our very ability to make a difference in the first place. In both cases, then, Kant vindicates certain assumptions about the external circumstances of our action. In contrast to other conceptions of the *focus condition*, we do not hope by relating in a certain way to the hoped-for state of affairs itself, but to the conditions (other than ourselves) on which its realisation depends.[[15]](#footnote-15)

To sum up, notice that Kant closely intertwines the three components of the standard account. On the one hand, the modal condition species belief conditions on end-setting. On the other, the focus condition is concerned with how the relevant belief can be upheld against the threat of despair in dire circumstances. In conjunction, rather than three separate criteria, Kant lays out the aspects of a comprehensive view of the (psychological) possibility of action under conditions where success is insecure.

# **3. Democratic Hope**

Having reconstructed Kant’s understanding hope, I will now claim that it is fruitful for thinking about the role of hope in the context of democracy. I should highlight, again, that it is really the conceptual structure of Kant’s account to which I will help myself. That is to say, I will detach his account of hope from its first-order objects, which are closely intertwined with an ethical outlook that is full of religious remnants, and a political outlook whose democratic pedigree is contested, to say the least. While this requires that I veer away from the textual level, it allows me to really bring out what it is that we can take from Kant for a theory of hope in democratic politics.

In order to do so, I will take my cue from the two concerns about hope in political contexts identified in the first section. Against the worry that hope distorts our agency, I will point out that hope is indispensable to sustain our resolve to act precisely in the context of democratic life. And in response to worries about the impact of hope on democratic community, I will argue that it has the potential to induce a particular kind of trusttowards our fellow citizens.

## **3.1 Democratic Resolve**

The first objection, recall, was that hope has a distorting effect on our practical engagement with the world in a way that is politically dangerous. Hope can induce complacency, overconfidence or wishful thinking. However, with Kant we saw that there are circumstances in which hope is constitutively intertwined with and hence an indispensable part of our ability to act, rather than undermining or paralysing it: those scenarios, that is, where our ability to make a difference is insecure given that it is contingent on factors outside our control. This, I would like to show, is precisely a structural feature of democratic politics.

My argument to this effect rests on an understanding of democracy as built on the regulative norm that we *act in concert* with others.[[16]](#footnote-16) I mean this not in the sense that citizens are always (or even most of the time) in agreement about the goods they should realise and the values they should promote as a political community. But at least part of what defines democratic practices (as I understand them) is that citizens with a plurality of views about public goods reason and act together with the aim of making laws that aspire to speak in the name of all. I take this characterisation to have wide appeal across liberal, republican and deliberative conceptions of democracy. Admittedly, proponents of a rational choice-based framework, who view democracy as a mere means that serves individuals to most effectively feed their preferences into the political process, may not recognize themselves in it (although even they would hardly deny that we have to get our fellow citizens on board with our aims for them to prevail).

For present purposes, this matters primarily in the sense that we have to enlist our fellow citizens in our pursuits. Unless they come to share our political goals and priorities to some extent, and join our attempt to realise them, our efforts are bound to remain futile. Of course, there is a lot we can do within the institutional channels of democratic will-formation as well as outside of them in order to win over our co-citizens.[[17]](#footnote-17) But as much as we may work to encourage,convince and form coalitions with them, ultimately it is not fully in our hands whether our efforts make a difference. In democratic contexts, hence, there is an important sense in which we rely on the assistance of others for the realisation of our goals. There are of course further factors that stand between us and the realisation of our goals; most importantly democratic institutions, whose lack of responsiveness often further tries citizens’ patience. Here, I focus on our fellow citizens as ‘intervening’ factors in order to highlight the relation between hope and interpersonal relations.

This contingency, which is endemic to democratic life, confronts citizens with their own agential limitations in a particularly acute way. And it is prone, I would like to suggest, to get in the way of their (necessary) conception of themselves and their actions as being relevant to achieving what they consider to be worthy ends. The benign implication is that democratic agency is always characterised by a distinct and “volatile mix of uncertainty, risk and conviction” (Goldman, 2012: 205). More critically yet, the obstacles that are likely to emerge in the pursuit of our ends may have an incapacitating and discouraging effect, frustrating us not only with our own goals but ultimately also with our institutions.

In democratic contexts, there is thus a particularly urgent need to counter the threat of demoralisation, that is, to take on the psychological ramifications of perceived inefficacy. My suggestion is that hope has the capacity to carry us through. It can equip us with a form of resolve*,* that is, a stable disposition that allows us to endure and overcome difficulties that might otherwise inhibit the pursuit of our goals in democratic contexts by leaving us frustrated and unnerved (Lamb, 2016: 315-319). In giving us the strength to muster the energy and constancy in the face of obstacles, it helps us to pursue democratic goods that appear difficult yet possible to obtain. Hope rescues us from inertia or despair when the prospects of making a difference are dim.

Let me briefly illustrate this idea with two examples from the context of democratic life. The first one pertains to voting as arguably *the* central democratic practice. 20th century political scientists have been much concerned with the question how voting can even be rational given the negligible chances of one’s vote making any real difference in a large electorate (Downs, 1957; Olson, 1965). Even if we assume that a single vote need not be “pivotal” to a certain electoral outcome in order to be seen as causally efficacious, but must merely contribute to it (Tuck, 2008; Beerbohm, 2011), its chances of even being part of such a “causally efficacious” set of votes can be dim, particularly if our own preferences seem to have little appeal within the wider electorate. For present purposes, we can reframe this as a psychological predicament from the perspective of a would-be voter rather than a matter of the rationality of voting: it would seem, then, that such voters can hardly bring themselves to vote for a party, candidate or policy without the hope that this will make a difference.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The second example leads away from formal democratic practices such as voting, to the day-to-day activities in which we engage as democratic citizens. Imagine you want to bring about a structural or systemic change of some kind: transform, say, the industrial food system, the transport system or the garment industry.[[19]](#footnote-19) The size, complexity, lumpiness, and opacityof such systems makes it extremely unlikely that a single consumer’s choice will have any effect, for instance, on workers, animals or the environment. We will thus hardly be able to keep doing what we consider the good or right thing to do – for instance, abstain from purchasing the products of an objectionable system – without the hope that this will have a significant effect. Our resolve to do what we take ourselves to have reasons (moral or otherwise) to do will be threatened by the awareness that the odds of making a positive difference are low. Hence, in order not to be demoralised by the prospect of our possible inefficacy we must hope to get our fellow citizens on board with our attempt to change the respective system.

To sum up, the thought is that hope is most urgently needed in contexts that acutely confront us with our agential limitations (given that our efficacy is contingent on external factors beyond our control); and that democratic life in particular is structured accordingly. Of course, this leaves open whether we should welcome this conclusion: is hope a normatively appealing way to deal with our sense of powerlessness in the face of dependence on others?

## **3.2 Hope and Trust**

Having argued that hope is a way of dealing with the uncertainty endemic to democratic life, I now want to defend the claim that it is a particularly attractive way to do so. I thus take on the second concern about hope in democratic politics, according to which hope is detrimental to a thriving democratic community. My suggestion is that hope is not only indispensable to democratic life but also has the potential to positively transform it.

My argument to this effect has to do with *how* we hope according to Kant. Recall that we hope by adopting certain items of faith that affirm that the world is hospitable to our efforts – that is, we make certain practically grounded assumptions about the external circumstances of our pursuits. Now, notice that the statements to which this commits us do not necessarily have to be of an ontological kind, i.e., claims about existence or about the constitution of the world. In setting an end, we may also be committed to assent to certain normative statements about other agents in the sense of ascribing to them certain properties.

We know this from our daily lives, where we are frequently bound to make assumptions about other people on the basis of practical considerations; simply because we rely on them for many of our pursuits (Longworth, 2017). To illustrate this point, imagine your goal is to find a specific location in a foreign city. Unfamiliar with the place, you ask a random stranger for the way. While you lack sufficient evidence to determine whether that person is actually trustworthy, such that you should follow their directions (i.e., the proposition is *theoretically undecidable*), you are licensed to make this assumption on practical grounds. It will be very unlikely for you to find your way unless the stranger can be relied upon. Your faith that the passer-by is trustworthy allows you to hope that you will eventually reach your destination.

Extrapolating from cases of this kind, which point to an intriguing link between hope (as construed above) and the quality of social relations,[[20]](#footnote-20) I would suggest that our pursuit of goods in democratic contexts requires that we view our fellow citizens in a certain way and treat them accordingly. For, as we have seen in the preceding section, in democratic contexts it is (among other things) our fellow citizens that stand between us and the attainment of our goals. Hence, in order to hope for the efficacy of our political efforts, we must ascribe to them certain normative properties and relate to them accordingly; hope helps us to cultivate a desirable set of attitudes towards our co-citizens.

I call the relevant attitude *democratic trust* and think of it as one particularly important form of faith, on which our hope feeds (Longworth, 2017). In order to clarify this notion, notice, first, that all kinds of trust involve judgements about others (McGeer, 2008: 240) – about their character, motivation, competence or disposition to act in a certain way. In line with the framework developed above, in the case of democratic trust we ascribe to our fellow citizens features that sustain our own hope to make a difference to the attainment of our ends. What are these features?

On the most basic level, we are bound to view them as “creatures with whom it is possible to reason and make society” (Pettit, 2004: 164), conversable agents capable of offering, exchanging and adjudicating reasons. We hope, that is, by ascribing to each other the status of moral equals whom we engage on the basis of arguments and “not just carrots and sticks” (Martin, 2013: 122). Moreover, our fellow citizens need not only be *able* but also *willing* to deliberate as equals about what we should do as a democratic community. Hence, we need to recognise and treat them not only as *moral agents* but more specifically as *democratic* *agents* who share our commitment to the idea and practice of democracy as a way of identifying mutually justifiable public purposes and policies.

Notice that ascribing to one’s fellow citizens this kind of good will does *not* require that we do (or will be led to) converge on a shared conception of justice or, indeed, that strangers will turn into friends (Allen 2004). Even hopeful citizens will continue to disagree and argue fiercely about what is to be done. But the trust that hope instils encourages them to do so on the basis of mutuality and respect. For instance, they will be less inclined to explain away the views of their fellow citizens as deluded or ideologically infatuated, but instead ask for (and critically engage with) their reasons. This, in turn, can forge a sense of belonging that binds citizens to each other and their community.

As Michael Lamb argues, hope thus has the capacity to “transform a ‘lifeless’ faith in the democratic system to a ‘living faith’ in fellow citizens, a trust quickened by hope” (Lamb, 2016: 320). A democratic community of hopeful citizens will be one in which people engage one another in good will because they are aware that they must tap into each other’s agency in order to realise their goals. Hope, I suggest, cultivates precisely this awareness.

There is no need to construe the relation between hope and trust as a one-way street, such that we would have to make up our mind whether hope feeds trust (McGeer, 2008) or vice versa (Baier, 2009). Instead, hope and trust usually play out in mutually reinforcing ways (Lamb, 2016: 320/1). On the one hand, the hope that inspires us to keep going amidst the obstacles of democratic life strengthens the trust in our fellow citizens and their assistance. On the other hand, the emerging sense of collective agency that is thereby instilled into a democratic community elicits a sense of shared power and commitment, encouraging citizens to pursue larger goals that seem impossible from a single agent’s point of view. Over time, this may even lead to the emergence of “collective hopes” (Braithwaite, 2004), that is, hopes that individuals hold in common with others and around which they can organise their collective efforts to realise ends that they communally endorse.

How can we characterise the kind of trust I have in mind? Victoria McGeer (2008), who has most systematically addressed this question, notices that hope-based trust is *non-evidential* (see also Jones, 2012; Walker, 2006). That is to say, we do not trust another person on the basis of prior experiences or interactions that we take as evidence for their trustworthiness. Instead, we make the relevant judgment on the basis of practical reasons, renouncing “the very process of weighing whatever evidence there is in a cool, disengaged, and purportedly objective way” (McGeer, 2008: 240). In our case, what constitutes the practical source for seeing others as possessed of the relevant capacities is the need to uphold our hope to make a difference in the face of democracy’s structural constraints.[[21]](#footnote-21)

McGeer, however, seems to be at risk of collapsing hope intotrust. On her account, hope engenders a particular kind of (psychological) ‘scaffolding’ dynamic between trustor and trustee: by hopefully “investing” trust in another person, they are more likely to reciprocate and act in a trustworthy way; our hopeful trust empowers and motivates its addressee. Yet, as Annette Baier (2009: 226) rightly notices, this seems to misconstrue the relation between hope and trust: while trust is always between people (it is a relational attitude), hope resides in the one who hopes and can refer to impersonal states. Of course, the two are importantly connected, for our pursuit of goals sometimes *requires* that we adopt a specific relational attitude, or so I have argued. Yet, hope is not itself situated in the relationship, as is (misleadingly, I believe) suggested in the widespread talk of hoping *in* others (e.g. Lamb, 2016; Martin, 2015: 118-140). As I have construed it, trusting others allows us to hope for our goals to be realized. In the specific structural circumstances of democratic politics, we could not act in furtherance of our goals without the confidence that our fellow citizens are agents with whom we can reason, converse and cooperate in order to find shared terms and collaborate in realising them.

I should close, however, with a word of caution. To say that the hope-based form of trust I have laid out in this section is based on practical considerations is not to deny that it is subject to epistemic constraints. In line with the rationality criteria for Kantian faith (of which democratic trust is a species), the question whether other people are trustworthy needs to be at least ‘undecidable’ on the basis of the available evidence; we cannot have overriding evidence pointing in the opposite direction.

Now, this is not to say that democratic trust is easily repudiated on evidential grounds, for instance because our fellow citizens occasionally do not display the relevant features and “fail to go with the reasons” (Pettit, 2004; 164). However, in some circumstances the distrust among individual citizens or groups may be so deeply engrained that even practical considerations from hope cannot instil the requisite trust. For instance, a minority group may point to a long-standing (or even ongoing) history of injustice, oppression and discrimination that has left them genuinely unable to conceive of their co-citizens as truly conversable (Allen, 2004). Societies that are so deeply divided along racial, economic, social or ideological lines that its members have lost the basic ability to engage with one another on the basis of good will and an open mindset are “hopeless” from a democratic perspective; citizens have lost confidence that they can win over their fellow citizens for the pursuit of what they deem worthy ends.

Consequently, my somewhat sobering concession is that hope alone cannot motivate the ‘leap of trust’ required in these scenarios, for it remains itself unavailable if people take themselves to have overriding evidence that they cannot rely on those whom they depend on. Democratic hopelessness, then, is a real prospect and threat. How it can be overcome is a hard question that is beyond the purview of this article, if not to the limitations of the framework laid out in it.

# Conclusion

Readers may worry that my argument in this paper was lopsided towards the positive aspects of hope. Particularly in democratic contexts, I argued, hopes of the Kantian practical kind can psychologically sustain our efforts by giving us confidence in our capacity to make a difference. Agents who hope in this way are bound to relate differently to their goals, to the finite nature of their agency and ultimately to other people on whom the success of their pursuits is contingent. A society of hoping agents is one in which people have faith in each other’s capacity to act in concert, for this faith alone sustains their hope to make a difference.

My intention was certainly not to provide an unqualified defense of hope under all circumstances or to deny that it has its own characteristic dangers and pitfalls. Hope can not only lead us astray and compromise our ability to think realistically about our situation by allowing us to desperately cling on to unrealistic goals that it might be wise to give up on. It can also sustain morally objectionable goals. Hence, a more comprehensive analysis must both include more circumstantial and contextual kinds of discernment that are not exhausted by armchair reflection on the rationality of hope, and must be embedded in a wider ethical framework that allows us to tie the merits of hope to the permissibility of its objects. While these tasks will have to wait for another time, they should be worth our while once we recognize the central – and potentially productive – role of hope, particularly in the context of democratic life.

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2. As Sarah Palin put it at a 2011 Tea Party convention in response to Barack Obama’s prominent invocation of hope, “How’s that hopey-changey stuff working out for ya?”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This does not apply to the pragmatist tradition in political philosophy (Rorty, 1999; Shade, 2001; Green, 2008). Further notable exceptions include Bloch (1959); Goldman (2012); Lamb (2016); Mittleman (2009); Moellendorf (2006); Snow (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There are also cases of past-directed hopes, however: the hope that a relative died happily, for instance, or that the bridge on which I am driving was built properly. This indicates, I believe, that the openness of an outcome needs to be epistemological rather than metaphysical – it may be enough not to *know* what happened in the past in order to hope. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For exceptions, see supra note 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I am referring to the edition by Strassler (1996). According to Schlosser (2013), Thucydides’ story about hope is actually more complicated. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On the context of race relations in the US, see Teasley and Ikard (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Given that I view hope as something that can go wrong, I do not frame it as a “political virtue” in a technical sense, which, by definition, is directed toward proper ends in the proper way (e.g. Lamb, 2016; Mittleman, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. All references to Kant refer to volume and page number of the Prussian Academy edition, edited by Allen Wood and Paul Guyer for Cambridge University Press. Abbreviations used are Ant (*Anthropology*), CJ (*Critique of Judgment*), CPR (*Critique of Pure Reason*), CrPrR (*Critique of Practical Reason)*, Gr (*Groundwork*) IUH (*Idea for a University History*), TP (*Theory and Practice*), PP (*Perpetual Peace*), Rel (*Religion*). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For interpretations of Kant’s account of hope, see Wood (1984); Chignell (2013); Zuckert (2018); Cureton (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. While most proponents seem to assume that the modal component actually has to involve a belief in possibility, Markus Willaschek (2016: 240) argues (in a related context) that all we need is a lack of belief in impossibility. While I cannot go into this further, it strikes me that most hopes require at least some kind of positive cognitive attitude towards their object’s possibility – which may very well be a largely implicit kind of ‘taking for granted’ (see also Chignell, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Katrin Flikschuh (2010: 107), by contrast, denies that “hope and expectation – let alone calculation – [are] interchangeably available possible attitudinal stances”. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bovens takes this example from the film ‘Shawshank Redemption’, which is based on a Stephen King novel.  [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wishing is correspondingly defined as “desiring without exercising power to produce the object is wish” (Ant 7:251). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kant’s account thus bears structural similarities with Meirav’s (2009) “external factor” account. Yet, according to Meirav in hoping we relate to the external factor not epistemically but normatively (seeing it as something good).  [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Here I loosely follow Hannah Arendt’s (1970: 44) conception of what it means to “act in concert” with others. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Even if other (e.g., manipulative) ways of trying to control the actions and beliefs of our fellow citizens are conceivable, our normative commitment to democracy constrains us to help ourselves to democratic (e.g. deliberative) means of persuasion. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I am bracketing the (undeniable) fact that citizens often vote with a symbolic or expressive intention, simply to voice their views. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Chignell (2018) on the case of the industrial food system. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Martin (2013: 118-140) also argues that hope impacts interpersonal relations, however, by generating reactive attitudes such as gratitude, admiration and disappointment (rather than, as I shall argue, trust). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. There may of course also be other grounds for regarding our fellow citizens in these ways (i.e., hope is sufficient but not necessary for trust). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)