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HOPE AND THE LONG ARC OF HISTORY

In 1858, over 200 years into the transatlantic slave trade for the sake of which more than 12 million people had been captured, enchained, and exported from Africa, the Unitarian minister and abolitionist, Rev. Theodor Parker, in a speech at the Massachusetts State House offered an enduring proclamation of hope: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight, I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.” Parker was not only aware of the basic facts of slavery, he was deeply repelled by them. The continued support of the institution of chattel slavery provided little reason to be optimistic about humanity. Still, Parker avows hope that moral progress defines the arc of history. Parker’s claim is that the arc of history extends from the past into the future in the direction of justice. His is a claim about the long term trend of history, not merely a comparative claim between today some particular future date. Just as it is consistent with a three month warming trend that it might be colder tomorrow than today, so it is consistent with a trend towards progress that some future date might be worse than some earlier state.

This paper is not a piece of Parker scholarship. As interesting as his biography and thoughts are, I have no interest here in trying to understand the view quoted above in terms of Parker’s other views and his life’s project. My interests are different. When a person hopes that the long term trend of human history is the progressive realization of justice based on the recognition of human equality, I call her hope *Parkerian hope*. The object of Parkerian hope is noble. My interest is in whether such hope could ever be justified. I shall discuss that, but I intend to do so while not addressing a different, but related issue, namely what sort of psychological state or condition hope is. It might folly to think that the certain kind of hope

can be evaluated without being clear on what hope is. I hope not since the question of what hope is would require a lot more attention than I could give it in a paper devoted to the evaluation of a hope.

1.

I am interested in understanding hope as what T.M. Scanlon calls “a judgment sensitive attitude.”¹ These are attitudes for which justifying reasons can be asked and assessed, as are beliefs and intentions to act. There is a presumption of responsibility for one’s judgment sensitive attitudes. Rational criticism is *prima facie* warranted when attitudes are inappropriate. Reasonable hope then depends on our judgment about whether it is justified. And insofar as it does, the person hoping is responsible for her hopes. We may hold people accountable for their hopes in critical discussion of their merits. If hopes are judgment sensitive attitudes, then they can be ill-held.

One way to understand judgment sensitive attitudes better is to understand how they might be appropriately criticized. We can do this by considering the truth of the claims that criticize the attitude. Take the case of belief:

(1) P believes falsely that X.

This claim is true iff P believes that X and it is not the case that X. The direction of fit is from the world to belief. If a belief does not track the world as it is then the belief is false.

Alternatively consider this the following claim:

(2) P believes unjustifiedly that X.

This claim is true iff P believes that X and there is insufficient evidence to justify the belief that X. (1) is fact-relative, and (2) is evidence-relative.

We can distinguish between fact- and evidence-relative norms applicable to hoping.

(3) P hopes falsely that E.

This claim might seem true iff P hopes that E and E fails to satisfy an appropriate probability threshold. Compare that to

(4) P hopes unjustifiedly that E.

This claim might seem true iff P hopes that E and E fails to satisfy an appropriate evidential threshold.

We can illustrate cases of both (3) and (4) even without knowing precisely the appropriate thresholds in each case. Imagine that Shirley hopes that Angela Merkel (the current Chancellor of Germany) will become President of the United States. One way in which hoping can be criticized as false is if the object of the hope is insufficiently likely to come to pass, at the limit if the object of hope is in some way impossible. Although the matter will concern us later, I am not now interested in how likely it must be that the object comes to be. Rather I want merely to highlight that hope like belief in part tracks the world. But unlike belief, hope is not necessarily directed towards what is the case. Rather, hope is directed towards that which might be the case, in particular with that which is sufficiently possible. Because Angela Merkel is not a natural born citizen of the United States, by article of two of the US Constitution she may not become President, barring constitutional amendment, which is no doubt sufficiently unlikely. Whatever the appropriate threshold of probability for the object of hope, that which is constitutionally impossible is unlikely to satisfy it. So, Shirley hopes falsely. And insofar as the evidence of the constitutional requirement of being a natural born citizen is readily accessible, Shirley hopes unjustifiedly.

We can also compare hoping when one should not to cases of acting when one should not. The claim that

(5) P acts wrongly when φ -ing

is true iff P φ -s and it is not the case that P may φ . If an action is not (at least) permitted, then it is wrong to do it. Moral standards also apply to hoping. So, the claim that

(6) P hopes wrongly that E

is true iff P hopes that E and E is either an instance of wrong doing or a state of affairs that is morally bad. Presumably many a patriot of the Confederate States of America hoped ardently for the triumph Robert E. Lee's army. Such people hoped wrongly. The criticism is not due the object of the hope failing to meet a probability or evidential threshold, but because the hoped for outcome of the war would have reinforced the deep injustice of chattel slavery. And, of course, the leaders of the Third Reich also had their hopes.

Our hopes are open to criticism, not only when they are false or unjustified, but also when that for which we hope is something for which one should not hope. In light of that someone might be lead to believe that hoping wrongly is just an instance of acting wrongly. I don't think that that's right. In acting wrongly the direction of fit is from us to the world. In acting wrongly we attempt to change the world in way that we should not. Hoping sometimes sustains our ability to act, and it projects into the world an idea of how it should be; but it is not necessarily causal. When Shirley hopes that Merkel will become President she is not contributing to that end. So, the wrongness of hoping wrongly is not simply an instance of acting wrongly. Still, hoping for that which we should not is wrong.

Hoping, then, is a doubly judgment sensitive attitude. Hope is subject to both epistemic and moral norms. The moral norms are those that would govern any action or state of affairs even if it were not the object of a hope. The epistemic norms are my main interests in this paper. Certainly they are less demanding than those governing belief. Whatever the probability or evidence for hope is, it is less than for robustly confident belief. We may hope for that for which we have insufficient evidence to believe. In fact insofar as we may be warranted in believing X, it is no longer an object of hope. Epistemically hope is directed to objects somewhere along a spectrum from those which are barely possible to those which are not yet (or not reasonably believed to be) actual.

2.

Given the object of Parkerian hope, it's not plausible that someone so hoping hopes wrongly. The charge of hoping falsely is also not a plausible in this case since the facts of the case remain unsettled. The future is unwritten. The relevant evaluative question for Parkerian hope is whether it is justified. Whether history bends in the direction of justice cannot be verified simply by the study of history since the claim exceeds the historical record. It might be thought of as an extrapolation from the past into the future, but, if so, it is highly uncertain one. As the disclaimer in the prospectus of a mutual fund warns the potential investor, past trends do not dictate future returns.

People often profess hope for historical progress by casting allegiance to one of two broad outlooks. These are ideal types that are meant only to classify a broad range of views in each case. I don't suppose that they are fully accurate in their details.

Providence. The human progress made thus far from absolutism to liberal democracy and from slave owing societies to free labor is kind of sign that the universe was not created such that humans should be oppressed. Oppression is inconsistent with the will of a divine creator of the universe. So, it must be robustly possible for us eventually to move beyond oppression. This is the progressive hope of monotheism.²

Freedom Mechanism. Historical and evolutionary study reveals evidence that our social nature has been selected for by a biological mechanism, and that at the very least there is no biological basis for oppressive or freedom denying cultural, social, and political norms. Biologically speaking, we are not destined to oppress one another. This is the hope of a natural scientific understanding of human nature.³

Providence and Freedom Mechanism are not necessarily competitors. One could think that Providence works through the Freedom Mechanism. But insofar as people tend to have hopeful outlooks on human progress, they usually are more aligned with one rather than the other of these broad outlooks.

These outlooks are directed towards the condition for the possibility of progress, not the inevitability. In that sense they are the basis of a kind of hope, not a confident belief in progress. Religious faith in a just and loving God is distinct from an epistemically robust and confident belief in such a being. Whatever the objective probability of the latter, it is significantly less than what could support robustly confident belief in the ordinary sense. The thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. perhaps best embodies this outlook of Providence. King was fond of quoting Parker in arguing that hope for desegregation was justified because it was contrary to will of an all loving and all powerful God.⁴ God's will need not be realized in the course of human history, however. So, this not an outlook that supposes that progress is inevitable or even likely, but it is hopeful.

Freedom Mechanism is also about the mere possibility of progress. A biological account of our social intelligence would have to allow that it could be overwhelmed by infelicitous circumstances produced by external shocks. Flu pandemics, large scale volcanism, collisions with near-Earth objects, nearby gamma ray bursts, and ecological collapse could all so substantially alter the environment that the fabric of social life would be torn asunder. A proponent of Freedom Mechanism might, however, appeal to the unlikelihood of any given external shock to claim something approaching a confident belief in human progress. There are two problems with this response. First, it is not clear how one should assign an objective probability to these external shocks, and subjective probabilities may be biased by conservative starting premises. Second, Freedom Mechanism, if it is to be at all plausible, has

to allow for at least anthropogenic (or internal) shocks. Freedom Mechanism is implausible if it is inconsistent with major historical downturns such as Stalin's terror, the Holocaust and WWII, and Mao's Great Leap Forward. Any plausible mechanism of progress could only explain general trends over the long course of human history. It has to allow for setbacks. Now, the proponent of Freedom Mechanism might claim that all of these examples simply prove the point that regressions are temporary. But certain anthropogenic shocks such as inter-state nuclear or biological warfare, nuclear or biological attacks from terrorists, unbridled climate change, unchecked population growth, and large scale scientific accidents are such that they could pose risks to human life or civilization as we know it. As technological capacity has grown so has the impact of potential accidents or malfeasance. The possibility of a massive anthropogenic shock has to raise doubt about the likelihood of continual progress caused by any Freedom Mechanism.

Shocks caused either by natural processes or human moral depravity cannot be ruled out. But the objective probability of many external shocks is uncertain. We do, however, have enough historical experience with human depravity that we might wonder if, given the technology now available, we will be lucky to maintain the environmental and social preconditions in which humanity could flourish. Any claim about history continuing to bend toward justice must be subject to a high degree of doubt.

3.

One half of Parker's claims certainly seem right. We "cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure [of the moral universe] by the experience of sight." Still, he claims to "divine by conscience" that it "bends toward justice." I interpret that as a characteristically hopeful claim about justice.

I suggested above that (4) P hopes unjustifiedly that E iff P hopes that E and E fails to satisfy an appropriate evidential threshold. According to that claim whether a hope is justified then requires assessing it in light of an evidential threshold. It might not be possible, however, to state with any precision what that threshold is. Consider the case of belief, how likely must something be for us to confidently believe it? It seems doubtful that we could state a precise probability threshold for justified belief. With respect to hopes we are usually not engaged in any in careful evaluations of the likelihood of their veracity. One short cut to assessing beliefs against an evidential threshold is to assess them in light of where the burden of proof lies. So, consider something similar with hope

(7) Hope for E is not sufficiently supported by the evidence only if there is sufficient contrary evidence.

In this case we judge a hope unjustified only given sufficient counter evidence. The burden of proof favors hoping. Hoping is permissible absent sufficient evidence against its object. In contrast to (7) consider the following claim:

(8) Hope for E is not sufficiently supported by the evidence if there is insufficient supporting evidence.

In this case we judge a hope false in the absence of supporting evidence. Here the burden is shifted against hoping. Hoping is impermissible in the absence of supporting evidence for the object of hope.

The distinction between (7) and (8) turns on the matter of where the evidential burden lies. In thinking about how the merits of either (7) or (8) remember that in any case that the likelihood of the object of hope attaining is assumed to be less than what would warrant confident belief in the object attaining. We are justified in hoping when we are not justified in believing. Indeed, where we confidently believe that X is or will be the case, hope has no place. So it's noteworthy that (8) goes some way toward assimilating the epistemic norms of

hoping to those of believing. According to (8) hoping is rather like believing, except that the threshold of evidence is less. Hope is belief-lite. For practical purposes, at least, we are justified in hoping only if there is some evidence that supports the hope. (7) is more permissive of justified hoping. We may be justified in hoping in the absence of affirmative evidence, just so long as the evidence to the contrary is insufficient. Clear cases are those in which the evidence supports the claim that E is in some way impossible. This would include the evidence that according to the US Constitution it is impossible for Angela Merkel to be President of the US.

How permissive should we be of the evidential burden for justified hoping? One way to get a handle on this is to consider the role served by a norm of justified hope. What function does a norm of justified hope serve? As an epistemic norm of hoping it serves (at least) as a basis to *sanction* cases of unjustified hope. Sanctioning could involve among other things criticizing the attitude in light of the evidence. This could also include offering reasons to those who have such hopes to abandon them. What value is there in abandoning unjustified hope? Compare hope once again to belief and intention to act. A person who unjustifiably believes has beliefs that are not justified given the evidence and arguments. There is a kind of defect in her capacity that tracks the world. Her belief might be true, but if so that would be wholly accidental. Criticizing the unjustified belief is a way of holding her responsible for the defect in her world-tracking capacity, and perhaps also it serves to help repair that capacity, which is important for its service in acquiring knowledge. A person who acts wrongly fails to conform her action to justified moral norms of action. Criticism of the action holds the person responsible for the wrongdoing; it might also serve to improve her capacity to seek and conform to the right and the good. The true and the right discipline our beliefs and actions. We seek to get the latter right because of the importance of the former.

There does not, however, seem to be anything else of similar importance that would discipline our hoping, such that when our hopes go wrong we are off track with respect something else of similar import. Perhaps, then, it is just less important to get our hopes right than it is to get our beliefs and actions right. In fact, we might even think that generally speaking it is better to err in the direction of too much hope, than too little. If so, then we might be permissive in the burden for evidence that we set for justified hoping. That would support (7) that hope for E is not sufficiently supported by the evidence only if there is sufficient contrary evidence to E. The burden of evidence would then be on those seeking to criticize Parkerian hope. Perhaps all this talk of the burden of evidence simply misses the point of when hope is justified. I shall develop an alternative in the next two sections.

4.

The standards of justified hope are limited at the high end of the evidential spectrum by that which falls just below the lowest point of justified confident belief. That's not a point which can be precisely identified. But as fiction convenient for presentation purposes, I'll say that certainty is 1.0, and confident belief starts there and drops. Hope begins at 0.66. Where does it end? Clearly that for which we have good evidence of being impossible is ruled out. Whether that includes just the logically possible, or also the physically, or that for whatever reasons humans can't accomplish, may depend on the object of possible hope under discussion. How far down towards 0 can justified hope extend? The argument in favor of the permissive burden of proof might also apply here. Because hoping is not disciplined by truth in the same way that believing is, justified hope can probably in principle extend to the highly unlikely.

One worry about the reasons in favor the permissive evidential standard for hope, however, is that it seems to be based on an argument that downplays the importance of hope. I

noted that there does not seem anything else peculiar to hope of the importance of the true and the right that disciplines our hoping. The claim above is that that might be a reason to be a permissive in the evidential standards we should use for hope. But if it is the case that hoping relies on norms associated with belief and action, as I suggested in (3), (4), and (6), perhaps hope is simply redundant.

I suppose that the range of objects of a reasonable hope include our own well-being, the well-being of our family and friends, and the success of the causes of social and political justice. Parkerian hope is directed towards the latter over the long arc of history. Insofar as we have reason to value each one of these, one might think that we have reason to hope that it will be secured and maintained, and that if we are in a position to contribute to its realization or preservation we will so act. Notice, however, that hope is not adding anything valuable to that which we already value. If we did not hope for these things, we would have no less reason to value them. If all the reasons to hope just are the reasons that we have to value and to believe that which we value and which is possible, then perhaps hoping really is redundant. Perhaps hope is something that we could just as well do without. Let us rather live our lives oriented toward the true and justified in our beliefs and the right and the good in our actions; then we'd have no need for hope.

Even if hope were redundant, however, we would not necessarily have a general reason to criticize it since it nonetheless could be benign. The case for dispensing with hope would be stronger if there were costs attached to hoping. Adrienne M. Martin argues that fantasizing is a common way in which hope manifests in persons hoping. Others include praying for the outcome, pleading with the universe for it, anticipating it, and engaging in hedged reliance on it.⁵ She takes fantasizing; however, as a paradigmatic manifestation of hoping, which involves an imaginative narrative structure of what it would be like if the object of hope were realized.⁶ Victoria McGeer claims that hope involves agential

investment.⁷ And Philip Pettit suggests that hope can lead to action as if the object of hope were going to obtain.⁸ Any of these activities of hoping, ranging from fantasy to action will rule out doing other things. That raises the issue of the opportunity costs of hoping.

By hypothesis the object of hope is not very likely, not likely enough for justified confident belief. If the attention to the object of hope detracts one from planning for its non-fulfillment, then the costs could be quite high. Think of the very ill person who fantasizes about recovery, rather than planning her estate. And, sometimes one's well-being would be better served by coming to accept one's circumstances rather than fantasizing about the future in which they are different. Think again of that same person, who could perhaps achieve some enjoyment by focusing on the activities she enjoys, conversation with family and friends, gardening, reading, painting and so on rather than entertaining the distraction of a better future that will probably never come to pass. Alternatively, the pursuit of the object of hope might foreclose opportunities to pursue much more likely goods. Imagine a political activist who might reject attainable modest, but real reforms because these would take away from planning and building support for some even better more thorough-going, but far less likely, change. In all of these cases there would be real opportunity costs to hoping.

If hoping characteristically involves agential investment, it is doubtful that the costs are always justified. But it would be wrong to take this argument as counsel for despair. The case for despair and anxiety is made too easily by supposing that they are simply the absence of hope. John Dewey seems too willing assume that when he writes that "We live forward...Success and failure are the primary 'categories' of life; achieving of good and averting of ill are its supreme interests; hope and anxiety...[are the] dominant qualities of experience."⁹ But hopes, of course, can be adjusted in light of their opportunity costs without falling into despair. And one can sometimes live less pronouncedly forward in something more like acceptance, than in either hope or despair.

The opportunity costs argument, however, cannot be used against hoping in general because it rests on weighing up the costs of hoping against the gains. That calculation will vary with the circumstances. The recognition that the opportunity costs of hoping do not necessarily count against it is the basis for responding to the more general challenge of the redundancy of hope. When there are gains from hoping, gains sufficient to outweigh the opportunity costs, then there would be a loss to living our lives oriented merely to true beliefs and right action. We would be forgoing what hope has to offer.

5.

What does hope have to offer? What good is there sometimes in involving ourselves in the unlikely success of that which we have reason to value? The object of Parkerian hope requires us to act. If a world of social and political institutions based upon human equality is to come to pass it will happen because people over time produce it. There's no other way. Hope might serve that aim.

Suppose a choice between just the following two courses of action in which pursuing one course of action forecloses pursuing the other:

Action A: The benefit of achieving the end pursued is 100, the opportunity costs are 20, and the likelihood of success is 0.3. The net benefits are 80. And the expected utility is 24.

Action B: The benefit is 20, the opportunity costs are 2. The net benefit is 18. and the likelihood of success is 0.7. The net benefit is 18. And the expected utility is 12.6.

Suppose additionally that our justified beliefs track the objective probabilities exactly, although Action A has greater opportunity costs, and is much less likely to succeed, it would

nonetheless be rational to pursue it, rather than Action B. But given the low probability of success and the high opportunity costs one might shrink from pursuit of Action A. One way that hope might be useful is if it were motivating in choices like this in which the low probability of success and high costs might otherwise deter one from doing what is rational. Hope's value would be to insulate against psychological factors that cause us to act irrationally. To recycle and repurpose a term from Joseph Raz, call this conception of the value of hope *the service conception*.¹⁰

Hope might often be of service in the struggles of justice when the odds of victory seem long, but the victory itself would be a great good. That suggests that

- (9) hope for E is unjustified is true if such hope motivates action that is irrational given the value of the outcome, the likelihood of success, and the opportunity costs.

According to (9) we do not find hope unjustified by just because they fail to satisfy some minimal threshold of evidence, however the burden is construed. Rather, the relevant question is whether hope is motivating action that it would be rational to pursue. Even if it is unlikely that we will fulfill Parker's hope of robust human equality, we might nonetheless be justified in hoping for it if doing so helps us to pursue it and if that pursuit is better than the alternative.

There may still, however, be something rather disquieting about that justification of Parkerian hope. Strictly speaking, hope is still redundant from the rational point of view. Focus on the question of whether to pursue the activities associated with realizing the object of Parkerian hope. That is answered by calculating the benefits, costs, and probabilities. Nothing more. If we were to live our lives rationally oriented toward the true and justified in our beliefs and the right and the good in our actions, we would seem to have no need for hope. Hope turns out to be of instrumental, remedial value. We need it because we are tempted away from what it would be rational to do given what we have reason to value and to believe.

Perhaps the divination by conscience that gave Parker access to the bend of the arc of history was some sort of awareness of the frailties of human rationality. After all, it is hard to read that passage without thinking that he is exhorting his audience. Maybe he realized that we need to be exhorted to do what we have sufficient of reason to do even without the exhortation.

6.

The service conception holds that hope may have great instrumental value in motivating us to pursue what it would be rational for us to pursue given the value of the outcome, the probability of success, and the opportunity costs. I doubt that that exhausts hope's value generally, and in particular the value of Parkerian hope. The value of hope is, of course, distinct from whether any particular hope is justified, but insofar as the justification of any hope depends on weighing the opportunity costs of pursuing it, a full picture of hope's value is important. I noted that that if the object of Parkerian hope were to be realized it would take significant human effort. It would require mass movements of people asserting their claims to dignity. As we know, that can be costly to the participants.

These considerations speak to another aspect of the value of the hope that motivates such action. Call this conception of hope's value *the dignity conception*. Concerted efforts to overcome injustice by those who are oppressed, even if they are not initially motivated by strong moral self-conception, can produce changes in the self-understanding of those who struggle such that they come to see themselves as morally entitled to institutions that recognize their dignity. This is a familiar theme from Hegel's master-servant dialectic, Marx's insistence that the working class must liberate itself, Rosa Luxemburg's theory of revolution, and Mill's account of the importance of national self-determination.¹¹ Invoking these accounts is not to offer an account of how struggle changes people's self-conceptions. That is an

important philosophical question that I leave unanswered here. I simply assume that it does.

This suggests that

- (10) hope for E is justified is true if such hope motivates action that conduces to persons understanding of themselves as possessors of dignity and if the opportunity cost of so acting are not overwhelming.

The final clause of (10) allows that the opportunity costs of the relevant action could in principal be too high, but it is consistent with (10) that in fact they never or rarely are.

Struggling to overcome oppression can build self-respect. That sense of self-respect is not merely instrumental for the pursuit of Parker's object of hope. It is partially constitutive of it.¹² And insofar as hope motivates such struggle it is importantly instrumentally valuable. Struggle motivated by hope may contribute to self-respect and a sense of agency that is characteristic of people who live under just institutions, people who take themselves entitled to those institutions. It is such self-respecting persons who would greet us were we fortunate enough to find ourselves at the end point of the long arc history.

¹ T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 20.

² MLK Jr.

³ Rorty, Buchanan.

⁴ MLK jr.

⁵ Martin, p. 28.

⁶ Martin, p. 26.

⁷ McGeer.

⁸ Pettit, p. 157.

⁹ John Dewey, *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy*.

¹⁰ Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*.

¹¹ Cite all.

¹² My “Hope as a Political Virtue.”