

Believing the good is possible

Philosopher
Claudia Blöser
is studying
the nature,
norms and
functions of hope

In her provocative speech before the United Nations, Greta Thunberg insisted: "I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful." A radical rejection of hope! Does hope in a crisis entice us towards deceptive optimism?

Claudia Blöser: One reason for Greta Thunberg's rejection of hope could be that she, like many of us, equates hope with optimism. Well, it's precisely one of philosophy's tasks to suggest how we can distinguish between different concepts. Philosophy mostly characterises optimism as a notion that regards something we wish for as probable. Hope, by contrast, has nothing to do with probabilities. Hope focuses on the possibility of something. We can also hope for something that is extremely improbable. What's more, optimism is also often associated with wrongly assuming a too high level of probability. Our answer to Greta Thunberg could therefore be: It is not probable, perhaps even improbable, that we will get the climate crisis under control and so we should not be optimistic. But it's perfectly reasonable to be hopeful because a good outcome is still possible.

The second assumption behind Thunberg's words: Hope induces passivity, that is, restrains us from taking action.

Hope can indeed lead to passivity. But that is not necessarily connected to the concept of hope. It's instead rather due to the attitude of the hopeful person. If they know that they can and must do something for this hope, then hope even fosters motivation – because hope reminds them of the possibility of being successful.

In times of crisis, people look for a sign of hope. Hope is also at the centre of philosopher Claudia Blöser's research. A conversation with her about the relationship between hope, knowledge and fear and why the concept of radical hope can be helpful in a crisis.





Does this mean that hope needs very precise knowledge as a basis, a reason on which it can build?

Whether hope needs reasons is disputed in philosophy. The consensus, however, is that hope should be consistent with the available evidence. Philosophy is not only interested in the nature of hope and its function of fostering motivation. An important philosophical question is also what is reasonable, that is, “rational” hope. Immanuel Kant considers the normative question “What may I hope?” to be one of the central questions of philosophy. His hypothesis, which is still largely shared today, is that we may not hope for something that we must assume is impossible. Rational hope therefore presupposes that we can clearly see the actual state of affairs. Doubts, however, can

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exist in this context, they are by all means part of the uncertain situation of the hopeful person.

In the coronavirus crisis, some people are drawing hope from the idea that a life in harmony with nature, renouncing capitalism, digitalisation and industrial agriculture, activates their self-healing powers in such a way that the virus cannot affect them. They too evidently assume that their hope is based on knowledge.

As I said, reasonable hope needs clear-sightedness. This also includes taking

into consideration new, relevant evidence that might lead us to question a particular hope. Conspiracy narratives often presuppose a kind of so-called “knowledge” that is inconsistent with our sciences and immunised against new evidence. Hopes founded on this are deceptive because they are accompanied by false assumptions about the virus. False hopes can, however, also be found aside of conspiracy myths: For example, young athletes have reported hoping that their physical fitness will protect them from the virus. This too can quickly prove to be false. In addition, hopes can be criticisable if they lead to actions that harm others or expose them to an unjustifiable risk.

For Kant, hope and knowledge belong together insofar as hope begins at

ABOUT CLAUDIA BLÖSER



Claudia Blöser, born in 1980, has been a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute of Philosophy of Goethe University since 2013. In her post-doctoral research project (Habilitation), she is studying the nature, norms and functions of hope. Her research work centres on practical philosophy, with a historical emphasis on Immanuel Kant and a systematic focus on moral psychology. Blöser studied physics and philosophy at Goethe University and the University of St Andrews (Scotland) and has also

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Anyone wishing to learn more about the philosophy of hope, also in historical development, can consult the following encyclopaedia article:

Blöser, Claudia and Stahl, Titus: “Hope”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/hope/>entries/hope>

the point where our knowledge ends. Hope belongs to the realm of faith, of religious experience. What does this view mean for a non-religious understanding of the world?

People who are not religious share Kant's assumption too: Hope comes into play at the point where we reach our limits, that is, limits of knowledge and of action. It's just that Kant has a specific object of hope in mind, namely a comprehensive idea of justice in which those who act morally are also happy – so where morality and happiness coincide. In his opinion, we can only hope for this state of comprehensive justice if we assume that there is a God who creates this state. God and a firm belief in Him are the foundation underpinning this hope. That is why Kant also speaks of "sure" hope. Nowadays, many people no longer go along with this. For those who do not believe in a firm reason for their hope, hope can flip over into a state of fear again and again. That is why secular hopes are typically fragile states.

Do fear and hope belong together?

Spinoza would have answered: They necessarily belong together because both issue from a situation of uncertainty. Fear, however, focuses on a negative possibility in the future, whereas

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hope gives what is good a chance. Fear and hope are, so to speak, the two sides of the same coin.

In times of crisis, we become aware that life is fragile, vulnerable and uncontrollable. Philosopher Jonathan Lear has developed the concept of radical hope for this – using the example of the Crow Indians, whose way of life and culture were destroyed in the mid-19th century.

Lear thinks about how we can imagine a future when all values and habits valid so far no longer mean anything.

Radical hope is a concept that can guide us in the current situation. The key feature of radical hope is that it has no specific object but is directed towards something that is good, even if we cannot yet say how this might look. Radical hope holds on to the fact that something good is in principle always possible and can transcend our imagination. In the coronavirus crisis, we're having to forego many things that we've considered important for our "good life". Radical hope allows us to be open to the idea that good could show itself in a completely new way in the crisis too.

Hope therefore has something to do with imagining that something is possible even under the most adverse circumstances. Radical hope even considers something entirely new to be possible and gives us the courage to be open to something new.

Definitely! A concrete hope can also be very constricting for us. We could call this a conservative hope, a hope that seeks to preserve. The other kind would be a revolutionary hope, which places its bets on something new that was not expected.

It is possible to consciously decide to be hopeful in a hopeless situation? Is there such a thing as the "courage to hope"?

Some philosophers do indeed assume that a person can decide to be hopeful, and they then also devise their concept of hope in such a way that a decision really is possible. They assume, for example, that you can focus mentally on possibility and not on improbability. And that, of course, also goes hand in hand with the possibility of deciding on what to focus. Others understand hope as a gift that in a way is given to you. I also tend towards this second view. A person with no hope and in despair would choose hope if they could. We can, however, try to cultivate hope. Fellow human beings are often also important for this, with whom we can think together about how what we're hoping for could be achieved.



French writer and Nobel Prize laureate Albert Camus assumes that a person without hope can even be happy. In her book 'Annette, ein Heldinnenepose', the writer Anne Weber translates Camus as saying that the struggle, the constant toil and effort towards great heights is enough to fill a man's heart, and that this is why we best imagine Sisyphus happy. Can we live well without hope?

Camus' message is that there is no "greater purpose" and thus no hope that goes beyond this life – and that we don't need such hope in any case in order to be happy. I find it helpful to see Sisyphus as a metaphor for the fact that we can value activities for their own sake too and are therefore neither dependent on the hope of being successful with our activities nor on the hope that there is an ultimate goal for which all effort is worthwhile.

But it would be rash to conclude that we can manage entirely without hope. Phenomenological approaches in philosophy point out that there is a "pre-intentional" hope, which does not focus on concrete objects but instead gives us an idea, in a mood-like way, of a future which in principle holds some good possibilities. This hope resembles "radical" hope, but it takes the form of an existential feeling that must not necessarily be conscious. That such hope is indeed necessary for a good life can be seen in cases where this hope is lacking, such as depression.

"We can try to cultivate hope."

Assuming that political utopias are also politically formulated hopes: Can hopes be shared?

First of all, hope is an individual phenomenon. Everyone has *their own* hopes. Sharing hopes would mean that several people hope that a certain state will be achieved – and at best also know that they are not alone with their hope. Such hopes have the power to unite. Political utopias are a special example of this; they are blueprints of just societies.

In view of climate change, you might think that today we're only sharing a dystopia – the climate disaster as a threat that is or can be an object of shared *fear*. In relation to the coronavirus crisis too, one could lament a certain hopelessness in the sense that a shared vision of a good future is missing. Is survival really the goal to which everything else should be subordinated – you only have to think of the threatened existence of those working in the cultural sector? Or is the justified hope for other goals not also part of a good life? In my opinion, we're seeing hope glimmering in the background in the coronavirus crisis too that can and is being shared – hope for more solidarity, such as in

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neighbourhood help, for better cohesion, for less consumption, for greater respect of nature. In addition, the coronavirus crisis acts as a magnifying glass for injustices and in so doing draws attention, for example, to the situation of people in precarious employment. We can pin our hopes on this that these injustices will be addressed more resolutely.

You've been dealing with hope in your post-doctoral research for several years now. Are there any findings about hope that have surprised you?

Yes – I hadn't expected it to be so difficult to say what hope actually is. Especially in analytical philosophy, attempts are always made to define concepts and to find the necessary and adequate criteria. However, after careful consideration I've come to the conclusion that searching for such a definition doesn't get us any further. But that doesn't mean that philosophy is unable to say anything enlightening about hope. Not offering a definition only means not reducing hope to simpler constituents. In my work, I'm looking at the irreducible concept of hope in terms, among others, of the norms to which rational and – in a

broader sense – successful hope is subject as well as in terms of the functions of hope in concrete contexts.

The interview was conducted by Pia Barth.

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