

2024

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Recommended Citation

Fife, Maggie. 2024. "The Generative Power of Collective Hope." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 10 (4). Article 1.

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Abstract

In the face of widespread structural injustice, many people feel hopeless. Is hope valuable for political activism, or is it naive, impractical, or even counterproductive? Here I focus on collective hope as opposed to individual hope. I argue that collective hope can both sustain us in our political commitments and generate new commitments; it is therefore particularly valuable for activist movements and should be cultivated. Through the contemporary example of the prison abolition movement, I address pessimistic and pragmatic worries about political hope, show how collective hope motivates political action through activities of shared imagination, and introduce the concept of *holding hope*. In order for collective hope to emerge, some members of a group need to *hold hope* for the collective by sustaining their individual hope and supporting the capacity of other individuals to hope.

Keywords: hope, collective hope, imagination, abolition, prisons, activism, collective action

My aim in this paper is to explore the role of collective hope in activist movements. Most pressing moral issues, from the climate crisis to mass incarceration, are structural in nature. Responding to such structural injustices requires multifaceted and sustained collective political action. If we care about political activism, we should be concerned with how to make it work well. What motivates and sustains commitments within activist contexts? Should we approach political activism with hope as well as determination? Which states of mind are prevalent, which should be cultivated or discouraged, and which, if any, are overemphasized?

Here, I focus on collective hope. Is hope valuable for activist movements? If so, is it valuable because it motivates us, sustains our previously held political commitments, or generates new commitments? Hope, imagination, and collectivity are at the center of activist movements, particularly those that take a “David and Goliath” form—grassroots movements responding to large-scale structural injustice where members may experience a lack of individual hope. The movement for prison abolition fits this form, and prison abolitionists are constantly reiterating the need to

imagine a radically different future. The centrality of hope and imagination to such movements motivates my philosophical investigation of these concepts, and I focus here on the movement for prison abolition. The value of hope in activist movements will depend on its nature—if hope is particularly likely to mislead us, or places an undue burden on individuals, then we should not emphasize or encourage hope when attempting to motivate activism. On the other hand, if hope can sustain us in our political commitments or even generate *new* commitments, then hope is particularly valuable in activist movements and should be cultivated. In this paper, I will focus on both the nature and value of hope: collective hope fares better against the worries of pessimism, pragmatism, and overdemandingness that are levelled against individual hope. More importantly, collective hope is uniquely motivational by way of the activities of shared imagination, which are conceptually distinct from individual hopeful fantasizing. Additionally, I identify and introduce a type of interpersonal hope that is central to activist movements: *holding hope* as a member of a collective. In order for collective hope to exist, some members of a group need to *hold hope* for the collective: they sustain individual hope for the shared political goals, supporting the emergence of collective hope and the capacity of other individuals to hope.

1. Some Problems with Hope

There are a wide range of critiques of hope in the political realm. I will briefly present what I take to be the most pressing worries about hope to motivate shifting our attention to collective as opposed to individual hope. The orthodox view of hope is a desire for the hoped-for outcome along with a belief in the nonzero possibility that the outcome will obtain (Day 1969). Most analytic definitions of hope agree that the orthodox view requires an additional third element that can be generalized as a “positively toned ‘what-if’ attitude” toward a future that contains the hoped-for outcome (Martin 2019, 232). Contemporary views of hope differ from one another in the ways that they construe this third element. Some influential views construe the third element as mental imaging (Bovens 1999), seeing the probability as sufficient to license hopeful feelings and actions (Martin 2014), taking an interest in the future and hoped-for outcome as an agent (McGeer 2008), and the phenomenological idea of living under a positive view of the future with respect to the hoped-for outcome (Calhoun 2018). This, of course, leaves plenty of room for debate over when hoping for a specific outcome is rational.

The first worry about emphasizing hope in politics or social activism is that, all too often, we do not have good reason to hope. While certain smaller-scale political hopes may be reasonable, like hope for a short-lived win, perhaps hope for robust and sustainable social improvement through political struggle is unjustified. When it comes to issues of justice, many philosophers have argued that there is no good

reason to hope for something as utopian as an end to oppression.¹ Kathryn J. Norlock (2019, 7), for example, argues against “hopeful progressivism with respect to great evils”—human evils persist, and history is not arcing toward justice. Informed by nonideal theory, Norlock argues that instead of hoping for an eventual end to evils or oppression, which is certainly a large-scale and utopian hope, we should refocus our efforts on the cultivation of good habits and excellent characters through forward-looking attitudes like perseverance, resilience, and willingness to renew commitments (7). By arguing against hopeful progressivism and reconceiving the objects of hope, Norlock presents a pessimism that is potentially compatible with hope for living well within an oppressive context (7). It is a popular view that hope is not apt for many individuals, particularly those who have lived under oppression or persistent political struggle. There is not sufficient evidence to support a belief that things will improve—a positively toned “what-if” attitude is unjustified, bordering on naive. If we resist under these pessimistic circumstances, we do so not necessarily out of hope that things will improve but out of a commitment to one another, out of the sheer urge to refuse oppression, and in order to develop responsive and resilient character traits.² While more modest objects of hope may be compatible with the range of pessimistic views presented here, given the state of the world and the complexity of systemic moral problems we face, there is no good reason to hope for progress.

Relatedly, there is a worry that emphasizing hope in politics sets individuals up for disappointment, which ultimately demotivates political action. If we get our hopes up too high (perhaps by allowing our desire for a goal to inflate our sense of the odds of success) or find ourselves facing dashed hopes repeatedly, perhaps we are less likely to remain politically active in the future. Matt Sleat (2013, 131) points out that being disappointed in a political outcome is a far more frequent occurrence for all individuals than having a political hope fulfilled. One potential response to this fact is to recommend that we temper our hopes so as to minimize disappointment, which may lead to apathy or demoralization. If repeatedly dashed hopes result in demotivating political action, encouraging hope in politics runs the risk of being counterproductive.

The second worry I’ll consider is that the idealistic element of hope distracts us from more achievable political goals. In emphasizing hope in the political realm, we focus our attention on the utopian at the cost of current pressing issues. Consider the movement for prison abolition. The unabashedly utopian goal of (and simultaneous hope for) ultimately abolishing the prison-industrial complex has been criticized not only for being unrealistic but for diverting efforts from more realistic prison reforms. Of course, this worry is specific to utopian hopes, and a relevant response is that not

¹ For related arguments, see Norlock (2019), Tessman (2009), Bell (1992), Warren (2015), Sullivan (2017), and Sleat (2013).

² This motivation is explored in Tessman (2009) and later in this paper.

all political hopes must be utopian. We can have political hopes for small-scale prison reforms or any practical and relatively achievable political goal. However, a charitable read of this worry is that the emphasis on hope in the political realm is most often aimed at sweeping and often utopian goals. Calls for hope are used to motivate entire movements and inspire cause-based activism. Hope is needed, and therefore invoked, when the path toward a political goal is not obvious and reaching the goal is far from likely. Practical and relatively achievable political goals, such as passing a school levy that has sizable support, don't often elicit calls to hope. Instead, clear-cut and tangible actions are emphasized in such cases.

Third, there is a worry that a normative emphasis on hope places an undue burden on individuals. Not only is it counterproductive, but emphasizing hope is actively harmful to oppressed groups. Encouraging people who are systematically marginalized to cultivate a "positively toned 'what-if' attitude" is adding insult to moral injury. Hope, in politics, amounts to toxic positivity. Rhetoric surrounding hope in American Democratic Party politics is fraught, conjuring images of Shepard Fairey's 2008 Barack Obama poster and the naive promise of a postracial America. Martell Teasley and David Ikard (2010) point out that these empty calls to hope as "symbolic capital" can and have been used for ideological ends by the politically powerful to placate oppressed groups. Similarly, some theorists have argued that a call for hope (specifically hope for racial justice) is not only politically inadequate, misplaced, and distracting but also actively harmful to black Americans (Sullivan 2017). Calvin Warren (2015, 221) endorses "black nihilism" against a politics of hope, because hope (specifically the hope that political struggle can lead to racial justice) functions as a "cruel optimism" that ultimately results in undermining the very goal hoped for, effectively functioning to keep black suffering in place. Instead of being pacified by symbolic change or fruitlessly hoping for racial harmony, individuals in politically oppressed groups should remain clear-eyed and focused on other ways to flourish.

Finally, I worry that emphasizing individual hope is merely an impractical way to motivate political action. Since most activism responds to injustice, it is often motivated by urgency and outrage rather than a sense of hope. The nature and scope of structural injustice results in a sense of hopelessness in most people, who understandably feel powerless and defeated when reflecting on the future of our planet, persistent racialized police brutality, or the rise in mass shootings in the United States. Perhaps talk of political hope is not only out of fashion but also outsized. Focusing too much on the way individuals feel when faced with such structural problems won't get us very far. Structural problems need to be met with varied, persistent, and sustained collective action.

Despite these worries, hope should not be discarded. In the following sections I will argue that *collective* hope (as opposed to individual hope) not only avoids many

of these worries but plays an important motivational role in activist movements. Far from abandoning hope, collective hope should be cultivated in these settings.

2. Collective Hope

What is collective hope, and how does it avoid the myriad worries raised in the previous section? I start by briefly presenting Katie Stockdale’s analysis of collective hope, which provides us with an understanding of how collective hope differs from individual hope. Here I use Stockdale’s analysis of collective hope as a starting point for understanding further benefits of collective hope that she does not explore. First, collective hope (either Stockdale’s view or an adjusted conception) can address the worries against individual hope raised in the previous section. Second, collective hope provides a unique motivational force through activities of shared imagination. Understanding activities of shared imagination is necessary for making sense of and harnessing the motivational force of collective hope.

2.1. A Working Version of Collective Hope from Stockdale

In “Hope, Solidarity, and Justice,” Katie Stockdale (2021) outlines a view of collective hope that arises from group action and solidarity. Collective hope differs from individual or shared hope: the former is limited to one agent, while the latter does not require any joint action in pursuing the hoped-for outcome. Hope is collective, according to Stockdale (2021, 8), when:

- (1) The hope is shared by at least some others;
- (2) The favorable perception of the possibility that the desired outcome might obtain, and corresponding hopeful feelings, is caused (or is strengthened) by activity in a collective setting;³ and
- (3) The reciprocal hopeful expressions of individual group members result in an emotional atmosphere of hope that extends across the collective.

For Stockdale, the third element of individual hope (added onto the orthodox definition’s belief and desire elements) is a way of perceiving the possibility that the hoped-for outcome will obtain. In instances of collective hope, the “favorable perception” is brought about through collective action. Condition three addresses the

³ Stockdale provides a clear definition of when hope is collective, and she notes that she uses the terms “collective,” “solidary group,” and “movement” interchangeably (8, footnote 6). She does not go into detail about the metaphysics of such social groups but indicates that a solidarity group or collective is a group wherein shared intentions, actions, and, of course, collective hope can arise via joint commitment (10).

unique phenomenology of collective hope, which explains why collective hope is not reducible to the individual hopes of the members of the collective. In moral-political solidarity groups, expressions of hope shared by members create an overall atmosphere that helps explain how a collective, as opposed to individual members, can be said to hope. This felt atmosphere further distinguishes collective hope from shared or interpersonal hope, explicitly specifying that the atmosphere extends across the collective.

In creating an atmosphere of collective hope, individuals can be members of a collective that hopes, as well as participate in collective action without necessarily experiencing individual hope. This can be easily seen in the movement for prison abolition. Many people consider themselves prison abolitionists, in that they share a goal for a world without prisons, and may participate in various organizations or actions aimed at this goal. An activist may, to illustrate several examples, join an abolitionist group and protest to close a local jail, spread awareness of the harms caused by solitary confinement, volunteer to incorporate transformative justice practices in schools, or lobby to have a bill passed that reforms sentencing laws. Participating in any of these actions means they join in solidarity with other abolitionists to chip away at the prison system, motivated by a shared goal. But the activist may not have individual hope that a world without prisons is possible. They could temporarily lose hope due to a pragmatic setback or believe that total prison abolition is not possible yet is still worth fighting for. Rather, they may be motivated out of a sense of duty (“I really should help”), a sense of urgency (“I must do *something*,” “I must resist”), encouragement from others, curiosity, or even a loss of hope in larger institutions.⁴ Despite a lack of individual hope, by working together with others toward a common goal, individuals can be involved in a group that collectively hopes. This point is crucial for two reasons. First, it seems empirically true that not all members of activist movements feel individual hope, either for more immediate pragmatic outcomes or a wide-reaching utopian hope. Second, as I mention in section 1, it may be unfair or harmful to expect all individuals to feel hope. There are many instances in which hope is not justified or is simply impossible to experience even if justified. An individual’s ability to feel hope will be shaped by their life experience, social position, and individual personality, among other factors. Hope is not rational if the subject does not have good reason to believe the hoped-for outcome is possible (even barely possible).⁵ Furthermore, we can imagine that hope may be impossible to

⁴ Stockdale gives the example of the #MeToo movement, and how many individuals are moved to participate out of a loss of hope in the criminal legal system, as it relates to survivors of sexual assault.

⁵ Much work on hope in analytic philosophy centers around rational permissibility. Given the belief and desire elements of the orthodox definition of hope, there are

experience for, or simply too much to ask of, someone who has suffered a great deal of disappointment or trauma in their life. A working theory of collective hope that demands hope from all individuals is neither accurate nor useful.

One objection to Stockdale’s view of collective hope is that this third condition, the felt atmosphere of hope, is too elusive or mysterious to ground collective hope born of solidarity.⁶ However, in my experience, Stockdale is identifying a very real phenomenon felt in some group settings, particularly groups working toward a passionately shared goal. This atmosphere may well be mysterious or hard to analyze, as many felt experiences are. The feeling of shared sentiment, while common, is not easily explained. While the atmosphere of hope may elude explanation, it is clearly identifiable. In this sense, the mysterious nature of the felt atmosphere can be embraced. In order to identify a working definition of collective hope, which in itself is somewhat mysterious, Stockdale isn’t required to explain away every aspect of the concept. That being said, my aim here is not to provide a distinct or adjusted account of collective hope. Instead, I intend to use the strongest philosophical account of collective hope, which is Stockdale’s, to explore further elements of collective hope—namely, its generative power and ability to avoid worries leveled against individual political hope—and to identify a phenomenon central to activist movements: holding hope. We don’t need to fully understand the mechanism by which a collective hopes for the sake of my argument, though it is an important question for further work. Instead, we only need an understanding that there can be a collective that hopes for an outcome even if each individual member of the collective does not have hope. I take this element of Stockdale’s view of collective hope to be crucial, and it helps collective hope avoid some of the major worries raised in section 1 against individual political hope.

2.2. Avoiding the Problems of Individual Hope

Encouraging individual political hope is troubled by the four worries I raise in section 1: (a) we have no good reason to hope, and inevitable dashed hopes will demotivate; (b) hope distracts us from achievable goals with utopian dreams; (c) hope places an undue burden on individuals (particularly oppressed groups); and (d) hope is too scarce to be worth encouraging. Rather than embracing individual political hope, we should embrace and encourage hope at the collective level. How does collective hope avoid these worries?

epistemic limits on when we can rationally hope. For the purposes of this paper, I will only point out that hope is irrational if the subject is not warranted in their belief their hoped-for end is possible. However, there is much more to be said about the conditions under which beliefs, specifically beliefs in political feasibility, are justified.

⁶ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

First, there is the pessimistic worry raised by Norlock (2019) and others that we have no good reason to hope. Grand hopes for a racially just future (Warren 2015) or an eventual end to evil (Norlock 2019) are, indeed, hard for most people to get behind, but I am not arguing that we encourage hope in either one of these ends. In fact, I agree with Norlock that we are “sharing burdens that can’t be put down and must, therefore, be traded” (15). Though some individuals may be able to hope for a racially just future, many of us cannot. Instead, I argue that collective hope is an essential element of political activism aimed at *specific* ends and that the conditions for nurturing collective hope in activist spaces should be encouraged. The specific ends will vary given the political goals of the activists, but since political activism (as opposed to theoretical commitment) is aimed at action (e.g., calling for a ceasefire, striking until labor negotiations are settled, or working toward decarceration by various means), the relevant collective hope will not be as broad as “a racially just future.” Hope need not be sweeping or particularly optimistic. This response addresses the *object* of hope and can serve as a reason why we may have good reason to hope individually or collectively if we modify our scope. However, even if some individuals are correct that they have no good reason to hope, they can still be part of a collective that hopes.

While persistent dashed hopes may impact motivation for political activism, there is a further reason why we may find value in difficult pursuits done as a member of a collective, even if the low odds of success discourage us. Working together with others for a shared goal can be fertile ground for developing various character traits and skills (e.g., empathy, conscientiousness, persistence, organizing tactics, etc.).⁷ Engaging in collective work often leads to developing relationships and making connections within and across communities. Each of these elements can be intrinsically valuable and can make a difficult pursuit and the associated collective hope worthwhile, whether or not one achieves their goal.

The second worry is that hope aims at impossible dreams at the cost of focusing on tangible goals. I will respond to this worry in two ways. First, recall that collective hope, on Stockdale’s view, arises from collective action and solidarity. Thus, it will be directed at a tangible goal, even if said goal is ultimately aiming at a utopian end. Collective hope comes from working together toward a goal in a political context, so it will not be distracting us from the here and now—it is a result of focusing on political reality. Of course, political activists can be out of touch with reality as well and can share a distorted goal, one that has no actual chance of obtaining. We will

⁷ Cheshire Calhoun (2018) points out that when pursuing difficult individual goals, we often value the person we become in the process. While this is true of both individual and collective difficult pursuits, here I am interested in the character traits, skills, and relationships that come from working with others as a collective.

always run the risk of having false hope, but this means that we must be careful and thoughtful with the political causes in which we invest our hopes. The worry here is that hope is distracting us from short-term, achievable tasks with too-lofty visions—but short-term and long-term goals are not zero-sum. Though a movement like prison abolition necessarily involves a utopian hope for a world without prisons, the pragmatic element of the movement will be focused on fighting for this vision with short-term political goals like reforming the bail system. Because collective hope comes from and drives collective political action with others, which involves multiple perspectives, it will include various strategies for working toward political goals. As opposed to political theorizing, political activism necessarily involves tangible, if not necessarily realizable, short-term goals that support a broader vision.

Second, when it comes to utopian hopes like a world without prisons, by their very nature we do not know if they are possible or impossible. Through imagining (as well as other hopeful activities), we partially *determine* what political futures are possible or impossible. We must first imagine a possible future in order to work toward building it. Just as we don't know whether a world without prisons is socially possible, we don't know that it is socially impossible.⁸ Both claims require support. This response likely will not satisfy anyone averse to utopian thinking, but between the other responses to worries about hope and the motivational force I identify in section 3, even pragmatists may be able to see the value of collective hope.

The third worry I raise is that encouraging hope places an undue burden on individuals, particularly those who have faced systemic political and social oppression. Collective hope avoids this worry deftly, because not all individuals who share in collective hope are required to hope individually. Individuals who have faced repeatedly dashed political hopes or acute systemic oppression are not required to hope on this view (doing so may even be irrational given their individual beliefs, desires, and expectations) and therefore are not falling short if they fail to hope. They may resist oppression or fight for justice for reasons aside from hope, some of which I have mentioned above. Lisa Tessman (2009, 10) reminds us of Derrick Bell's (1992, xvi) pessimistic resister Mrs. Biona MacDonald, who resists her sustained racial oppression because she "lives to harass white folks" (Bell 1992, xii). There are reasons to pursue political ends that have nothing to do with hope, and those motivated by these reasons can still be involved in a collective that results in an atmosphere of collective hope without ever feeling individually hopeful themselves.

⁸ In other work (Fife 2022), I define social impossibility as a state of affairs or political aim that, given our current social structure, is so impractical that it is, for our purposes, impossible. This sense of possibility, distinct from logical and nomological possibility, is used loosely in social and political discourse when people say things like "Repealing the Second Amendment is impossible!"

The fourth worry I raise in the previous section is that hope is too scarce a commodity—it is impractical to encourage it because there is so little to go around. Collective hope, by its nature, spreads across many people. Though it does require some people to hold individual hope for the collective, as I'll discuss in section 4, it can also be contagious. Collective hope not only generates new reasons for commitment, as I explain below, but interpersonal hope tends to inspire individual hope. The main benefit of collective hope comes from the fact that not all members of the collective are required to have individual hope. I've argued that this is essential for responding to the first, third, and fourth worries about individual hope. Despite the strengths of collective hope, it could still be misplaced or out of touch with reality. However, it is more difficult to have misplaced collective hope than misplaced individual hope. The mere fact that fallible people can misapply hope, as we can misapply anything, does not show that it should always be discouraged. In what follows, I argue that more important than its ability to respond to worries is collective hope's motivational power.

3. Shared Imagination and the Generative Power of Collective Hope

Collective hope avoids many of the strongest worries raised at individual hope. But more importantly, collective hope has a unique motivational power that can generate new reasons for commitment. How does hope motivate in this way, and what makes the motivational aspect of *collective* hope unique? Can hoping create new practical commitments, or does it merely reinforce commitments we already had? Adrienne Martin (2014) and Cheshire Calhoun (2018) present separate answers to this question:⁹ Calhoun claims that hope sustains our practical pursuits by “seconding” our preexisting commitment to the hoped-for end, while Martin argues that hope can generate new commitments, thereby granting a more substantial motivational power to hope. By way of fantasizing about a hoped-for outcome, Martin argues individual hope can generate new beliefs and desires (or change previously held beliefs), which then motivate an agent's actions. In this section, I argue that by way of *activities of shared imagination*, collective hope has a uniquely motivating power that individual hope does not have.

⁹ Martin's incorporation analysis of hope provides a picture of how hope motivates. Martin argues that her incorporation analysis illustrates a dualist account of action: rational motivation captures the fact that a hopeful person “stands ready to offer practical justification for her rational activities,” while subrational motivation appeals to their own attraction to the outcome (2014, 142). In this way, Martin (2014, 96) emphasizes that hope “is not itself a unique kind of motivational force,” but rather that hopeful activities are expressions of other “motivational representations (attraction and end-setting).”

3.1. Activities of Shared Imagination

Collective hope lends itself to a specific way of engaging the moral imagination, which I will call the *activities of shared imagination*. Within activist movements, individuals are likely to engage in imaginative practices together. The movement for prison abolition, for example, involves many people constructing a collective vision—a broad vision of a world without prisons, as well as specific visions of alternative systems that must be built to make a world without prisons possible. Constructing a collective vision requires activities of shared imagination: individuals exploring and creating a possible vision of the future together. These activities of shared imagination are distinct from imagining as an individual and from the type of hopeful fantasizing that Martin (2014, 88–91) describes.

Shared imagination is not limited to activist movements. Whenever two or more individuals engage in a creative collaborative project (e.g., two authors writing a joint article, an architecture firm designing a building, a group of friends planning a party), they share their ideas, visions, and imaginative projections of the end goal, potential obstacles, paths to pursuing their end, and so on. This process becomes shared *moral* imagination when it involves moral concepts, theories, and actions. Shared imagination can result in one specific vision of the future, but it can also result in individuals having varied visions of the future. Not all prison abolitionists have identical views, or even a clear view, of what a world without prisons will look like. (In fact, no one has a full view.) While we don't need a perfectly detailed view of the future, we do need specific ideas for how practices can be improved in order to actively respond to injustice. This balance of realism and idealism is something that many activists try to strike, and it is often overlooked by critics. However, the process and result of shared imagination is central to both the theory and action of the movement.

When we hope, as Martin points out, we are disposed to fantasize (in her words) or imagine the hoped-for outcome. On my view, when hope is collective, we are disposed to engage in the activities related to shared imagination. In imagining with one another and for one another, we can produce new desires and beliefs in a way that mirrors Martin's observations of individual hopeful fantasizing. Martin (2014, 91) argues that individual hope can generate new reasons and commitments by (a) strengthening our sense of agency, (b) generating new beliefs and desires about the outcome through vivid fantasizing, and (c) developing new beliefs about ways to pursue our hoped-for end through fantasizing.¹⁰ The shared imaginative practices

¹⁰ Margaret Urban Walker (2006, 50) makes a similar point in her conception of hope when she notes one effect of hoping is to “drive us to contribute to the desired outcome: to move us to look for openings, imagine alternative routes . . . and thus

inherent in collective hope can be correspondingly generative. First, shared imaginative practices may lead to a strengthened sense of agency. For example, I cannot imagine making much impact as an individual when it comes to a systemic problem like mass incarceration. However, by engaging in shared imaginative activities, I may begin to feel more agency as a member of a collective. Second, shared imaginative practices can lead individuals to new beliefs and desires that shape their commitments. My individual vision of an abolitionist future is likely to be quite narrow, as I have lived only one life from a particular social position. In hearing the visions of others, learning about nonretributive approaches to harm, and collaborating with others imaginatively, I will likely develop new commitments and desires related to the abolitionist movement. Third, through shared imaginative practices, I can envision new routes to working toward decarceration. Shared imagination is necessary for planning action and responding to problems that are likely to arise. Through shared imagination, collective hope can generate and strengthen new beliefs and desires related to a hoped-for outcome. These beliefs and desires motivate individuals to form new commitments, including joint commitments with others.^{11,12}

make what might be barely possible . . . somewhat more likely, and perhaps even within reach.”

¹¹ With the term “joint commitment,” I am making use of Margaret Gilbert’s (2013) view of groups as “plural subjects.” On her view, a plural subject is formed when two or more individuals take on a “joint commitment,” which is a commitment of the will. Gilbert’s joint commitment view of social groups is at work in the background of Stockdale’s account of collective hope as well, but for the purposes of this paper, I will not explore details of collective intention. Rather, I take it to be true that when individuals join a collective, they form various joint commitments.

¹² Additionally, shared imagination can be a motivating factor of its own. Creative activities, whether done with others or individually, are joyful and pleasurable for many people. The joyful and constructive elements of activism are often overlooked, as most activism centers around serious harm and injustice. One notable exception is Adrienne Maree Brown’s (2019) work *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. However, solidarity, collective action, and shared imagination can be joyful, even while difficult or discouraging. Some individuals may be motivated by this potential for shared imagination and creative work born of solidarity, alongside (or even above) a felt duty to respond to injustice. I mention this separately from the discussion of collective hope generating new commitments because the motivating factor in these particular instances may not require collective hope at all.

3.2. What Is Unique about Shared Imagination?

Collective hope can generate new desires and beliefs in ways that parallel individual hopeful fantasizing, but shared imaginative activity is uniquely motivational and importantly distinct from individual imagining in three ways. First, activities of shared imagination necessarily include multiple perspectives. When imagining collaboratively with others, we are building ideas with individuals who have different lives, social identities, and experiences. This variety of perspectives is creatively beneficial because it results in a greater diversity of concepts, ways of thinking, and methods of problem-solving. In the example of prison abolition, engaging in activities of shared imagination with different people—people who have direct involvement with incarceration, people with knowledge of the legal system, people with organizing experience, people with lobbying experience, social workers, and so on—will result in a much more robust view of alternatives to incarceration and plans for addressing specific abolitionist reforms. The various perspectives involved in activities of shared imagination are particularly prone to sustaining hope because—given a wider variety of voices and, therefore, expertise—imaginative activities are more likely to be detailed and well formed.

Second, activities of shared imagination will likely include built-in disagreement. When imagining with others, as opposed to by ourselves, we are likely to face disagreement about possibility. While this disagreement can sometimes be negative, as I'll explain below, the inevitable disagreement involved in shared imaginative activities can be beneficial: disagreement leads to revision and to building a stronger vision or plan. In any creative endeavor, consistent feedback from those who share some underlying goal or commitment usually helps produce a stronger end product. As I've mentioned above, while prison abolitionists share an underlying commitment and long-term political vision, there is no shared agreement on how to practically move toward a world without prisons in the short-term. While prioritizing steps toward decarceration, New York abolitionist groups like RAPP and The Parole Preparation Project have chosen to invest energy and resources toward lobbying for specific bills that will address elder parole reform.¹³ Internal disagreement and feedback from organizers, lawyers, formally incarcerated individuals, and other activists has helped shape the writing of the bills, the choice of which members of the legislature to focus on, the strategies for gaining public support, and so forth. While

¹³ For example, two bills (Elder Parole [S.15A/A.3475A] and Fair and Timely Parole [S.1415A/A.4346]) sponsored during the New York State Assembly's 2021–2022 legislative session would expand the number of people who are eligible for parole and change the standards of parole such that more individuals might be released from prison, respectively. See the People's Campaign for Parole Justice website for more information: <https://www.parolejusticenyc.com/campaign-platform>.

too much disagreement can slow progress in activist groups, a diverse space for collaboration will necessarily involve disagreement that can be transformed into a strong plan of action.

Third, imagining as a group is more likely to sustain individuals in their political commitments through inspiration and social energy. In section 4, I go into further detail about interpersonal motivation and pressure that can help sustain activism, as well as a related worry. When it comes to prison abolition, imagining a future together can be sustained by the variety of experiences and ideas I identify above, and also by the pressure from others to continuously focus on the problem at hand as opposed to ignoring it. When working alone, we may be tempted to give up or look away from suffering when it becomes too difficult to face. With others, we may be less inclined to do so because they are reminding us, or because we feel some internal shame at looking away. Furthermore, given that my focus here is systemic injustice, activities of shared imagination are more likely to sustain motivation due to the sense that individual activity is not viewed as an effective response to systemic issues. When reflecting upon the injustices surrounding mass incarceration, my individual vision of a different world and my felt sense of efficacy are extremely limited. When I discuss radical political possibilities with others who have been working toward change for a long time, or when I read abolitionist authors thinking through these issues, my ability to imagine further is sustained.

3.3. Potential Hurdles to Activities of Shared Imagination

Some worries arise when emphasizing the importance of activities of shared imagination. Creative, interpersonal, and pragmatic problems might arise when imagining with others. These worries generally map onto the three distinct elements of shared imagination I identify above.

First, though multiple perspectives are generally an epistemic benefit, imagining productively with others across perspectives and experiences will require some level of empathy and knowledge of the other,¹⁴ which is something individuals routinely lack. I acknowledge that this is an area in which activities of shared imagination may face a stumbling block, but the fact that empathy is required to imagine well together is precisely why activities of shared imagination are inherently motivating. When engaging in an imaginative exercise like pragmatic planning, movement-building, or exploring conceptual space with others, at minimum, we have a shared goal. The normative nature of this shared goal leaves space for empathy toward the other in a way that collaborating on a low-stakes professional task may

¹⁴ I'd like to thank the second anonymous reviewer at *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* for raising this line of thought and encouraging me to explore the details of activities of shared imagination in more detail.

not. Additionally, imagining together sows the seeds of empathy, because we learn about our collaborator’s point of view, experiences, and thought process. The more we learn about one another, the more space there is for empathy.

Second, I cite built-in disagreement as a positive element of shared imagination, one that makes imagining done together conceptually distinct from individual imagining. However, it is clear that this can work to demotivate if disagreement goes too far. While conflicting views can lead to revised and improved plans and more inclusive movement-building, too much disagreement and conflict can prevent progress. Like anything done with others, imagining together is difficult, but the potential benefits are great. Managing a productive balance of disagreement among members of a collective who are imagining together is difficult, but the fact that imagining together is difficult does not mean it lacks a particularly motivational power when done well. Determining how exactly to do it well is a further project.

Finally, motivation that comes from the social aspect of imagining together can go too far. If the social pressure of activities of shared imagination creates an undue burden on individuals of the collective, then collective hope does not avoid the worry I raise against individual hope in section 1. I address this worry further in section 4.2, after I identify a unique type of interpersonal hope specific to activist movements like the movement for prison abolition.

4. Holding Hope

In section 2 I distinguished collective hope from both individual and shared hope, the latter being a case of multiple individuals hoping for the same outcome. There is another form of hope closely intertwined with collective hope: interpersonal hope.¹⁵ Interpersonal hope is distinct from collective hope but substantially communal. In this final section, I introduce a type of interpersonal hope and a distinct phenomenon integral to activist movements. I call this phenomenon *holding hope*—when an individual holds hope for others as a member of a collective, they hope in the goals of the group, support the emergence of collective hope, and may also support the capacity of others to hope. In holding hope for a collective, *as a member of a collective*, this version of interpersonal hope makes collective hope possible, which serves to sustain and strengthen existing joint commitments. Through the social pressure associated with peer scaffolding,¹⁶ holding hope risks reintroducing the

¹⁵ Martin (2019, 229) defines interpersonal hope as “hope invested by one person in another.”

¹⁶ Victoria McGeer (2004) introduces the concept of scaffolding hope in “The Art of Good Hope.” She argues that hope is an essential feature of human agency and identifies peer scaffolding as an element of hoping well. Peer scaffolding is a mode of engagement with others where “individuals are reinforced in their own sense of

worry from section 1 that political hope creates a burden on individuals.¹⁷ While interpersonal hope may lead to the creation of moral obligations, it is less likely to create an undue burden on individuals because the hopes and associated goals are self-directed. Working alongside others as a member of a collective, hoping, and imagining together are messy endeavors and will likely complicate what we owe to one another. However, this is the case for any worthwhile collective effort and is not a reason to avoid engaging in moral-political solidarity.

4.1. Holding Hope as a Member of a Collective

How is collective hope sustained? Recall that an important aspect of this view of collective hope within activist movements is that not all individuals need to have individual hope for an end, be it as broad as a hope for utopian justice or a more modest hope for a particular reform. However, some number of individuals in the collective *do* need to experience individual hope. It might be useful to think of those with individual hopes as “holding hope” for less hopeful (or unhelpful) individuals. Holding hope is particularly important for activists who are addressing structural injustice; given the daunting and complex nature of structural injustice, individuals within an activist movement may quite often lose individual hope. Some members will need to hold hope for the collective.

Might it be possible for collective hope to arise when *no* individual members have hope? That is, can collective hope arise without anyone holding hope, given that not all members of the collective are individually hopeful at all times? I don’t believe so. On Stockdale’s view of collective hope, the “favorable perception” in the odds of the hoped-for outcome, as well as hopeful feelings, must be born of solidarity and collective action. This still indicates that there needs to be some favorable perception of the odds. A collective cannot perceive; only individuals can interpret possibility in this way. If no individuals in the collective hope, then there is no favorable perception of the odds of the outcome obtaining, and condition two will not be met. Furthermore, if no individuals hope, there will be no “reciprocal hopeful expressions” among members of the collective, which ultimately contribute to the overall atmosphere that illustrates the phenomenological quality of collective hope. Therefore, if no individuals hope, condition three will not be met either. Even if one rejects Stockdale’s view of collective hope due to the mysterious nature of the phenomenological atmosphere of hope, hope at the collective level still must originate from somewhere.

effective agency by having their hopes recognized and respected as critical to that sense of agency” (118).

¹⁷ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this worry.

In order for collective hope to arise, we must “share the load” of hoping, in a way. In activist movements, this seems perfectly natural. Individuals sometimes feel hopeful; sometimes feel defeated; sometimes participate in collective action out of a sense of duty, a brute desire to refuse and resist oppression, or even habit; and other times are motivated by a hopeful vision of the future. Much like we rely on one another to perform tasks when we cannot in a collaborative setting, we may rely on one another within an activist movement to hope when we cannot. In this way, we hold hope for one another *as a member of a collective*.

I mention above that when an individual holds hope for the goals of a group as a member of a collective, they not only support the emergence of collective hope but may also support the capacity of others to individually hope. Hopeful members of the collective can model hope for others, serving as encouragement or a reminder of hope that other members may have lost. Furthermore, we might feel motivated to hope when we witness someone who faces more obstacles than us and is nevertheless hopeful. A prison abolitionist who does not have direct involvement with the system (they were never incarcerated, nor were one of their loved ones) may find the sustained hope of those directly impacted motivational. They might think, “Wow, if they are witnessing this issue firsthand and can still find hope, what excuse do I have to lose hope?” While such comparative lines of thinking can be useful and effective, they can also become psychologically or socially harmful.¹⁸ Finding someone’s hope, resilience, or sustained resistance inspirational is common, but if it results in excessive othering, fetishization, or unhealthy comparison, it is problematic.

4.2. Peer Scaffolding and Social Pressure

When we engage with others through what McGeer (2004, 118) calls *peer scaffolding* of hopes, we recognize and respect their hopes, stimulating the confidence and agency of another and relying on them to do the same for us. When we invest our hope in one another within a collective, we aim to create a relationship that encourages the other to realize their hoped-for ends. Members of an activist movement may invest their hope in one another by hoping that others perform the roles and actions they have agreed to, sustain their commitment to the movement, and continue to believe in the cause. Importantly, when we hope interpersonally within a collective, we often share the same hope—be it a long-term vision of a world

¹⁸ This phenomenon abuts what is referred to as “inspiration porn,” an informal term coined by Stella Young. Inspiration porn is the objectification of disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people, with the purpose of inspiration or motivation. See Stella Young, “I’m Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much,” Filmed in Sydney, Australia, April 2014, TED Talk video, 9:02. https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much?subtitle=en.

without prisons or a short-term goal of passing sentencing reform bill. Here we are not dictating the hopes of others or directing their goals but instead joining with others who share similar hopes and encouraging activities that work toward realizing these goals. Investing hope in one another, particularly within an activist movement, can motivate individuals by adding an element of pressure. If a peer or mentor has invested energy and hope in me, I feel all the more motivated to not let them down. In instances where our internal motivation begins to falter, interpersonal hope may serve as partially external motivation. While this can take the shape of encouraging, I'll note that hope placed in others can sometimes add a harmful or counterproductive type of pressure.

Though peer scaffolding involves supporting the hopes that other people have chosen, external motivation can go too far. Imagine an overbearing sports coach whose hope in another's success becomes unbearable. The coach supports the athlete's hope for success in their specific domain, which is necessary for athletic achievement and can often be grounds for a relationship involving peer scaffolding. Yet we can easily imagine the coach becoming overly invested in the achievement of the athlete such that they take on the achievement as their own, begin to care more about success than the athlete themselves, or exert pressure that is overwhelming or harmful. Temporary buoying of our hopes through the scaffolding and encouragement of others is useful if we still endorse and truly hope for a given end. But if our reasons for hope become based on satisfying the desires of others, or fulfilling perceived obligation to them, then external motivation that began as useful scaffolding is no longer self-directed.

The third worry about individual hope, that it creates an undue burden on individuals, seems to reappear at the level of interpersonal hope. When holding hope as a member of a collective, do we create undue pressure on others to remain hopeful? Do we coerce our comrades to feel or act a certain way when they no longer should? This can certainly happen in a collective, and we should be sensitive to the conditions under which holding hope or peer scaffolding shifts from useful to harmful pressure. Discerning one's reasons for hope, particularly when they are varied, is a difficult endeavor. Doing so will involve examining the desire element of one's hope's closely, as well as evaluating sacrifices that individuals make in difficult pursuits. Interpersonal hoping that creates harmful pressure is not an example of hoping well. However, the pressure created by interpersonal hope does not run the same risk of creating an undue burden as individual hope.

Peer scaffolding within a collective is not the same as holding one another accountable for fulfilling our commitments. Investing hope in another does not necessarily create an obligation, though it may lead to the creation of an obligation. The interpersonal hope I've outlined is less likely to create an undue burden than individual hope due to the self-directed quality of these hopes. Since individuals

usually share similar individual hopes and goals within an activist movement, peer scaffolding encourages another person's confidence in their ability to realize their own *self-directed* hopes. Furthermore, given the shared nature of these hopes, encouraging one's peer often serves to encourage self-confidence in one's own ability to realize the same hopes.

Imagine that a friend and I join RAPP (Release Aging People in Prison), an abolitionist group advocating for reform for elder parole in New York State. Lobbying for elder parole bills is an uphill battle, and one that activists have been pursuing for years. After facing disappointment in the last legislative session by not seeing the bills passed, my friend might (understandably) begin to lose hope. In encouraging her to keep fighting for a cause we are both dedicated to, I may also encourage myself by recalling that collective action can make progress, even in the face of disappointment. Similarly, peer scaffolding is at work in a collective when we encourage one another that *we* can accomplish our shared hopes *together*. In this way, peer scaffolding can strengthen and sustain existing joint commitments within a movement. If new commitments are created through collective hope, they will be self-directed given the shared commitments that unite members of a collective. Though there is still a chance that the pressure (sometimes gentle, sometimes less so) involved in interpersonal hope can go too far, it is necessarily distinct from the undue burden of pushing individual hope on individuals who are not working toward a shared cause. In working together with others, we open ourselves up to the messiness of social and political life: we will inevitably take on responsibilities, form relationships, let down or bolster others, and open ourselves up to be let down or bolstered by them in turn.

McGeer (2014, 125) shares the insight that hoping well is an art, meaning it is both a gift and a skill. I add that as individuals, we may be gifted with the ability to hope easily, rightly lose hope when faced with setbacks, or have to work very hard to feel hope. However, through collective and interpersonal hope, we can develop and hone our skills of hoping. Within a collective, individual hopes may ebb and flow. A further element of collectively hoping well is to balance these fluctuations in a way that is productive.

Conclusion

Collective hope is central to activist movements and should be cultivated. Through the activities of shared imagination, collective hope both sustains political commitments and generates new commitments in the members of a collective. Because not all members of a collective are required to have individual hope, collective hope avoids worries raised by pessimists and pragmatists about political hope. *Holding hope* , a unique form of interpersonal hope essential to activist movements, reintroduces worries of social pressure and overdemandingness, but the benefit of engaging in political work outweighs these risks.

The structural nature of most contemporary problems, from mass incarceration to the climate crisis, makes courses of individual action both unclear and seemingly ineffective. The tangled web of structural injustice and institutional inaction is often demoralizing and demotivating. Many of us feel very little individual hope when we honestly confront large-scale crises. We know we cannot make a dent in these issues as individuals alone and that collective action is needed. However, collective action is built up out of individual efforts. Taking a step, even a small step, to engage in collective action and surround oneself with other individuals doing the same, can inspire individual hope by illustrating how coordinated effort born of solidarity might do what individual action cannot. While collective and interpersonal hope can sustain our joint commitments, working within and hoping as a collective can also encourage individual hope.

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