Stitzlein's Needle: The Labor of Hope

Derek Gottlieb
University of Northern Colorado

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Stitzlein's *Learning How to Hope* deserves significant praise, and in a number of registers. It is not merely the philosophical work of delineating in accessible language the basic elements of pragmatism, nor of the work involved in connecting those to a particular inflection of hope, nor even of sketching the links between these and the political infrastructure around them in order to renew a sense of democracy as a mode of associated living. Stitzlein's commitment to the public good comes out also in her insistence that Oxford publish this book under an open-access agreement, making her work freely available for educators and policymakers alike.

In this response, I want to commend this work for the many commendable things that it does, and also to push on some of the ambiguities it raises, discussing the relevance of these ambiguities for Stitzlein's aims. I will sketch the kind of hope that Stitzlein develops through the book; affirm the contrasts she draws with hope's two cousins, "optimism" and "grit"; and describe the role of schooling in inculcating hope for future generations.

The ambiguities and their importance arise here, as well, in a certain vision of democratic participation predicated on beliefs and constituted by the exchange of reasons. Hope is a set of habits that schools should nurture, says Stitzlein, a set of habits that "motivates citizens to act to improve their lives and, often, those of others."[1] The ambiguity that I want to draw out troubles the link between Deweyan accounts of habit formation and the deliberative democracy it is taken to undergird. And it does so in a peculiar way that allows us to see the thinkers grouped under the label of "Afro-pessimism" as perhaps unexpectedly participating in the democratic hope for which Stitzlein calls.

PHILOSOPHICAL STAKES AND MAIN IDEAS

Stitzlein builds her argument by first linking America's self-conception

to the idea of hope, and then by positioning American pragmatism as the philosophical embodiment of the nation and its aspirations. She covers the major themes and tenets of pragmatism in some detail, including its consequentialist view of truth, its basis in inquiry, its meliorism, and its emphasis on growth and deliberation. In her third and fourth chapters, Stitzlein leans more resolutely on Deweyan accounts of habit formation and democratic practices in describing the role of hope in our personal and public lives. I don't think it is unfair or unkind to say that this is mostly a recitation—as Stitzlein points out, "hope" is an important idea in the writings of canonical pragmatists and their inheritors, including C. S. Peirce and Cornel West, and so linking these ideas and covering the mechanisms by which pragmatism says they operate is not introducing anything radically new.

What *is* new, and what makes the book necessary, comes out in Stitzlein's accounts of the various ways in which a properly pragmatist hope has been misinterpreted or misapplied. These include a discussion of optimism as a pale imitation of genuine hope, as well as a contrast with hope as certainty, which she finds in the writings of Afro-pessimism. But it is when she devotes her fifth chapter to the faddish emergence of "grit" that the shape of her idea of hope—and the utter inadequacy of competing views—fully emerges. When she turns her sustained gaze upon the notion of grit as a pretender to the throne, all of the elements of her conception of democratic hope precipitate from the ether like an avenging god, and woe betide the imposters. For a reader like myself, who both disdains the abject simplicity of grit's self-helpiness and resents its uncritical uptake in education, this chapter is particularly gratifying.

In Stitzlein's account, it is all too easy to reduce hope to one of these graven images. Mere optimism *simply* desires the right outcome, but rejects the role of agency and responsibility bringing it about. To that extent, optimism is an "opiate," she says. It is "cheap."[2] Grit, meanwhile, like optimism, is future-oriented, but also in the wrong way. In its emphasis on persevering in pursuit of a distant goal, grit romanticizes struggle, traffics in self-help ideologies that stymie collective action, and encourages inattention to the emergent conditions of the present as they emerge. In this last facet, the key similarity between grit

and optimism stands out: both forms of addressing a bright future entail a kind of thoughtlessness about present conditions—these are *simply* to be overcome.

Stitzlein's democratic hope differs from these false idols in three important ways. First, the goal to be hoped for is nothing like a distant dream or the product of a decision. Hope rather emerges from "the anxiety that occurs when our habitual ways of doing things fail us."[3] It emerges from *trying,* with only partial success, to live out a certain way of being. Failures, here, throw one's purposes and practices into relief. Second, the ultimate goal is under constant revision in light of emergent conditions in the present. In good Deweyan fashion, democratic hope maintains an ongoing dialogue between making one's way toward a better future and the nature of the better future toward which one works. And third, hope, being a set of habits, has a "structural publicness," as Simon Glendinning calls it, in contrast to the private goals that grit and optimism pursue, which are necessarily less amenable to democratic understandings of the self.[4] This, then, is the work of democratic hope as Stitzlein draws it out: through pragmatist inquiry and habit-formation, and through pragmatist meliorism, we keep ourselves in touch with the world we have, the world we want, and the ones with whom we would share it simultaneously.

TWO TENSIONS REGARDING HABITS AND PUBLICNESS

Habits carry a great deal of weight in this account, because they are publicly shaped (the link to democracy) and because they provide motivation to improve (the link to meliorative action). But two competing views of our relations to our habits appear in this book. I think this exposes a tension in Dewey's work, rather than an inconsistency of Stitzlein's. One view makes democratic hope sound more procedural and less demanding than the other, and this has consequences for what Linda Zerilli calls democratic world-building, particularly where structural inequality is involved.[5]

The tension arises in two of the book's descriptions of a habit's failure. In the previous section, I quoted Stitzlein asserting that hope arises from the anxiety produced when a habit fails. But elsewhere in the book, Stitzlein emphasizes that habits can change only because we hold them tentatively "[w]

DOI: 10.47925/76.4.039

hen we learn to form habits tentatively, as hypotheses about how we might best act in unpredictable future circumstances, habits can become flexible agents of change whose form emerges as situations unfold."[6] But why would the failure of tentatively held habits provoke anything like anxiety? Our tentative hold on them actually ensures that we are not fully invested in our habits, having "rival hypotheses," as Dewey calls them, waiting in the wings.[7] This setup and the anxiety reaction seem mutually exclusive.

But Stitzlein is right about the connection between the anxiety reaction and democratic hope, which suggests a problem with the hypothesis view. The hypothesis account, as I take it, is necessary for Dewey because of a foundational assumption that our pragmatist attachments to the world, our habits, bottom out in beliefs. In order for such beliefs to be non-dogmatic, they must be open to correction, and this means we must hold them loosely. But this excludes a middle ground that pragmatism ought to occupy, a middle ground between unquestioning assurance in the world and perpetual, skeptical distance from it. The fact that the maximum extent of my non-dogmatic contact with the world takes the form of a tentative belief leaves me stranded in a subjectivism that pragmatism resolutely wants to reject.[8]

On this view, my habits become objects of intelligent reflection only in virtue of the tentativeness of my hold on them; otherwise they are immune to change. Stitzlein notes that communicative exchanges can be "sufficient causes for each [participant] to modify their respective responses in turn," but only "when their habits are characterized by openness or are tentatively held."[9] Tentativeness and openness are linked; the implication is that non-tentative investment in our habits amounts to dogmatic closure and precludes our critical capacity. But is this right?

When Wittgenstein comes closest to the pragmatists, it is in his "meaning is use" maxim.[10] His notion of "use," I think, points to the same phenomenon that Dewey denotes with "habits," but the description is quite different. Like Dewey's "habit," Wittgenstein's "use" is constructed via action in public, via communication, via the sharing of a form of life.[11] But unlike Dewey's picture of tentativeness, Wittgensteinian "use" explicitly stakes the self to one's practices

in the world. In his 1930 lectures, Wittgenstein emphasizes that "use" requires "commitment": this differentiates it from either provisionality or simple decisionism.[12] For this reason, "use" cannot take the form of a "hypothesis." But this does not preclude critical reflection.

In my daily life I do not generally perform a habit to see *whether* it will work, as though I am trying to learn something *about* the world. I perform habits because they express my way—our way—of being *in* the world. Precisely for this reason, in fact, when habits *do* fail, it has the effect of a record scratch. It shows me to be unexpectedly out of attunement with the world and with others, uncannily false to myself. This experience is profoundly disorienting, which is what provokes the anxiety that Stitzlein ties to the emergence of hope. At *this* point, habits arise into the foreground for critical reflection. The critical gaze falls upon ourselves, as well, because our habits implicate us personally. Note that this account suggests that we can be *called out* of our habits by their failures without having to constantly maintain a critical distance from them or the world. In fact, the Emersonian shame that *motivates* a transformation of our habits requires that we *not* hold them tentatively, but rather understand our*selves* to be at stake in them.[13]

This distinction matters because of its implications for hope as a democratic habit, a style of democratic living to be taken up in a "spirit of shared fate."[14] This seems to me exactly the right way to imagine the task of democracy, but it's threatened by the ramifications of the hypothesis view of habits. That view seems to risk making the task of sharing fates too impersonal, the substance of communication too thin, the governing ethos of deliberation too, well, Rawlsian.[15] My worry, here, is about a certain *reception* of Stitzlein's Deweyan picture of habit-formation in a post-Rawls, post-Habermas era. This possibility is raised by something like a tonal contrast in competing ways Stitzlein describes public education's responsibilities for establishing the habitual conditions of democracy.

Stitzlein's first description emphasizes the inclusivity and transformational possibility of (Deweyan) communication when she encourages teachers to incorporate communicative practices in the classroom. She says, "[t]eachers

DOI: 10.47925/76.4.039

should strive to provide conditions that spark conversations while modeling and calling for inclusive and transformational communication . . . Teachers of all subjects can craft environments that require communication while focusing the attention of their students on their effectiveness and inclusiveness so that communication can be improved for future endeavors."[16]

In the next paragraph, though, Stitzlein's outline of "effective" communication seems to submerge the transformational potential of communication by rendering "dialogue" as communication's *sine qua non*. "To dialogue effectively," she notes, "students must learn to explain their ideas and to justify their reasoning orally and in writing. They must also learn to actively listen, to understand the speaker, interpret the speaker's emotions, connect with the experiences another person is sharing, and probe the logic of the ideas offered."[17]

As it appears in the second paragraph, "communication" takes the form of exchanging reasons via a process of explanation and evaluation that rests on interlocutors' ability to represent experiences internally (in listening, interpreting, and connecting) and externally (in explanation and justification). I do not say that this is *wrong*, but I worry that it moves too quickly over all the stage-setting necessary to *enter* a space for communication. We perennially underestimate the difficulty of putting ourselves in a position to hear and understand concrete others, and this difficulty grows in proportion to those others' degrees of difference from ourselves. One form of this underestimation comes out in a Rawlsian view of social practices as governed by the set of rules to which we would all (hypothetically) agree, which becomes a "thin universalism" meant to solve those degree-of-difference problems.[18] This necessarily excludes novel forms of communication and novel kinds of injustice claims—precisely where the transformative potential lies. Afro-pessimism is particularly attuned to the tendency of "thin universalism" to reinforce structural forms of marginalization, dampening the possibility of transformation and reducing Deweyan communication to a pale shadow of itself.[19]

DEMOCRATIC HABITS AND STRUCTURAL RACISM

Stitzlein is fantastic at interrogating the relationship between pragmatist

hope and structural racism. She contrasts meliorative approaches like Melvin Rogers's to the "form of political fatalism" she finds in Ta-Nehisi Coates's Afro-pessimism.[20] But it seems to me that this view of Afro-pessimism, which Rogers echoes, misrecognizes Afro-pessimism's meliorative commitment to struggle.[21] Pragmatism and Afro-pessimism seem substantively aligned on the inadequacy of hope construed as optimism.

In Stitzlein's book, Coates's pessimism assumes the form of "urg[ing] his son to struggle not under the false pretense that his son's struggle will convert racists to the ways of justice, but rather [recognizing] that racists and white people who benefit from racism must also 'learn to struggle themselves.'"[22] Far from being hopeless, this seems to describe a method for achieving racial justice. It neither romanticizes struggle for its own sake (like grit), nor denies the responsibility for action (like optimism). It acknowledges the limitations of one's own power, requiring communication, the making common of a struggle across racial lines. Coates's construction only looks hopeless if racist structures—habits—are taken as *the effects* of individual racist *beliefs*. If this is so, then converting other individuals from their racist beliefs becomes a prerequisite for common struggle, and therefore, when Coates rejects that aim, it looks like rejecting the possibility of justice. Here again, the precise relation between habits and beliefs is paramount.

Inheritors of Fanon's work—including Afro-pessimists like Calvin Warren and Fred Moten—often deny this unidirectional cause/effect structure between racist habits and racist beliefs.[23] Indeed, on their accounts, racist structures are prior to our concepts of "individuality," "rights," "freedom," and "belief"; they are built into the conceptual apparatus itself. On Warren's view, in particular, "the free black" can never become the kind of being about whom white people would have either racist or antiracist beliefs because blackness is constitutively included as the ontological "nothing" of white individuality.[24] This strikes me not as an expression of hopelessness about the prospect of achieving racial justice, but as the laying out of necessary—though more difficult—conditions for success. Belief-conversion is not enough; only by *also rearranging the foundations of white individuality* can the notion of the "free black" be realized.

DOI: 10.47925/76.4.039

This is where white people must struggle themselves.

And it returns us to the issue of communication and of democracy as a mode of associated living. In order to achieve an antiracist democracy, schools must not only teach communicative skills of self-expression, interpretation, experience-sharing, etc. They must also, at a much more fundamental level, facilitate experiences of cross-racial, cross-class attachment and solidarity—not only in the classroom, but on the playground and in extracurricular activities, too. Seeing another as a *relevant* other is a precondition for communication, for taking another's experiences seriously, for listening to them. This "seeing-as" is not a form of belief, but it would certainly count as a habit, it seems to me. [25] Transformational methods of habit reform are necessary to Deweyan communication and necessary to the achievement of racial justice. This suggests to my mind a broad overlap between pragmatism and Afro-pessimism, rather than an opposition. It is simply a further task to sort out exactly how "beliefs" fit in. The risk of which I have been wary throughout has to do with rendering Deweyan communication available to co-optation by a kind of "deliberation" predicated on "thin universalism" that overlooks the difficulty of communication's most demanding elements.

This is, then, a "yes-and" response to Stitzlein's incredible book. It is fundamentally *right* in its clarion call to get down to the business of pragmatist hope in schools. All of it is absolutely necessary, and what I've tried to do here is point to some further areas of necessity in order to realize the goal that we—and we all—share.

---

1 Sarah Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

2 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 50.

3 Stitzlein, 97.

4 Simon Glendinning, *On Being with Others: Heidegger, Derrida, Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge,

1998), 103.

5 Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

6 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 42, 67, 112.

7 John Dewey, *How We Think* (Ozymandias Press, 2016), 64.

8 This is roughly Dreyfus and Taylor's criticism of Rorty. Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving*

Realism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 39-42.

9 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 112.

10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker, G. E. M. Anscombe, and

Joachim Schulte (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §197.

11 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §198-199. See also Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of

Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" in *Must We Mean What We Say?* ed. Stanley Cavell (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1976), 49-52.

12 David Stern, Brian Rogers, and Gabriel Citron, eds., *Wittgenstein: Lectures, Cambridge 1930–1933:*

From the Notes of GE Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 90-99.

13 For a fuller version of this view of Emersonian shame, see Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are:*

Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017),

Ch. 5.

14 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 49.

DOI: 10.47925/76.4.039

15 See Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 262.

281; Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

16 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 113-114.

17 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 114.

18 Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 169.

19 Jim Garrison, "A Deweyan theory of democratic listening," *Educational theory* 46, no. 4 (1996): 429-51.

20 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 55.

21 Melvin Rogers (@MRogers097), "Real lives and goods are on the line. Afropessimism is an ethical

and political nonstarter," Twitter, April 5th, 2020, 4:33pm.

https://twitter.com/MRogers097/status/1246929012703756293.

22 Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 55.

23 Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 14; Fred Moten, *The*

Universal Machine (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 192-197; Simone Browne, *Dark Matters*

(Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Gavin Arnall, *The Subterranean Fanon* (Columbia University

Press, 2020).

24 Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 14.

25 Stanley Cavell, "The Touch of Words," in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, eds. William Day and Victor

Krebs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81-100.