

Interrupting Hope

Gert Biesta

University of Exeter

Immanuel Kant left modern philosophy with three questions: “What can I know? What ought I to do? And for what may I hope?” Whereas Kant and many philosophers after him have provided much guidance about the first two questions, the third question has received little systematic attention and has not generated a separate branch of philosophy.¹ While we do have epistemology and ethics, we do not have “elpisology.” The same seems to be true in education where the idea of “hope” also has not been the subject of systematic discussion, with the exception, perhaps, of David Halpin’s *Hope and Education*, and, at a much more practical level, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of Hope*.²

In his essay “A Hope for Hope,” Dror Post provides an exemplary analysis of the concept of hope and offers important insights about the place of hope in education. We learn that hope is an orientation towards the future — “we hope for what we consider not to have at present and we want to have in the future” — and that every hope includes an element of doubt and uncertainty — “We do not hope for what we consider to be evident.” This shows that hope becomes necessary once we have reached the limits of our knowledge — which suggests an interesting link between Kant’s first and third question. It also shows that hope “is an admission that one has no complete power over the situation.” Nonetheless, Post argues that the realm of hope “is the realm of the possible” since “[we] can only hope for what [we] consider to be possible” and not for what we presume to be “out of our reach.”

I agree with most of what Post has to say about the “form” of hope. However, he does not say much about the substance or “object” of hope. Hope is generally presented as something that is positive — although we are reminded that hope is prone to delusion — and as a motivating force. There is, however, an important distinction to be made between what we might call “egoistic” and “altruistic” hope. This distinction shows that whether hope is a good thing crucially depends on what one actually hopes *for*. There is, after all, a real difference between the hope to become rich and famous or the hope that one of one’s enemies will have an accident, and the hope for a more just and compassionate world. While we may see hope as a refusal to accept the current situation as inevitable, this doesn’t mean that any alternative that is hoped for is necessarily better, or at least not that it is better for *others*. This implies that our hopes need to be subjected to some form of ethical evaluation in order to assess what the impact of one’s hopes on others might be — which suggests an interesting connection between Kant’s third and second question.

My second comment concerns the relationship between hope and our actions. Post mentions that hope can be a motivating force. I understand this to mean that as long as we refuse to accept the current situation as inevitable we may feel motivated to act differently and bring about change. As soon as we give up hope, as soon as we become cynical, there is, indeed, no point in even trying. The important question

here, however, is whether hope is connected to a future that can be brought about through our *own* actions, or whether hope is about things that will happen in a way that is not directly connected to what we do. We could say that as long as we can know what the consequences of our actions will be, there is no need for hope. Whereas Post argues that hope is related to the realm of the possible, I am inclined — following Derrida — to link hope to the *impossible*. The impossible is not what is *not* possible, but what cannot be *foreseen* as a possibility. In my view this expresses the “point” of hope more accurately since as long as I can foresee the consequences of my actions there is no need for hope.

This brings us to the discussion about education, because — as Post makes clear — we may hope many different things for our students, but whether any of this will actually happen remains entirely an open question. Education operates in the realm of hope, not in the realm of certainty. Post shows that, when we try to make our hopes concrete by forcing them upon our students, our educational efforts become uneducational — *our* hopes are, after all, not necessarily our students’ hopes. At the same time he argues — and I agree — that if we give up our hopes and adapt to the existing situation, we forfeit our educational responsibility as well. As educators we always operate between the Scylla of total control and the Charybdis of total *laissez faire*.

But Post wants more from teachers than only that they navigate a course between control and *laissez faire*. He wants teachers to bring hope to the classroom, to give hope to their students. On the one hand, this involves the giving of the gift of *techne*, which is the ability to effect change in the world. On the other hand, it involves the giving of the gift of love, which is the ability to have faith in the world and to trust it.

While all this is true, both for how students orient themselves towards the world and for how teachers orient themselves towards their students, it is important to see that the gift of hope is double-edged. Languages like German and Dutch are helpful here because “gift” is both a present and a poison. Post depicts the gift of hope predominantly as something positive. The Promethean aspect of the giving of hope shows us a teacher “who is attentive enough to the given situation in the classroom to be able to identify the *true* needs and *authentic* wishes of his students, and is endowed with enough foresight to recognize the range of future possibilities, where these wishes and needs could meet reality” (emphasis added). The Epimethean aspect shows us the classroom as a place which provides students “with the power to trust [the world and] with the possibility to love it.”

This way of depicting the giving of the gift of hope does, however, leave out an important dimension of the responsibility of the educator. The issue can be stated in terms of the “object” of hope and links again to the distinction between “egoistic” and “altruistic” hope. In my view, teachers who wish to bring hope to the classroom have a task, not only in *supporting* their students’ hopes, but also in *questioning* and *interrupting* them. Of the task of helping their students evaluate their hopes, the most important dimension is *not* to establish whether their hopes are realistic or not, but to find out to what extent their hopes are “compatible” with the hopes of others. This

is a question about ethics and politics, that is, about the role of our hopes in our *public* lives, the lives we live with others.

This suggests a different way to raise the question about hope in education, one that does not focus on our hopes for self-realisation and self-expression, but which connects our hopes to the hopes of others and sees the main educational responsibility as a responsibility to interrupt and “open up” our students’ hopes so as to move them away from an orientation that is egoistic or, as Levinas would put it, “egological.” It is here that I see a certain one-sidedness in Post’s analysis, which mainly focuses on the ways in which individuals engage in a hopeful manner with the world in a technical way, that is, as an object of manipulation. As soon as we see, however, that this world is ultimately a *social* world, a world populated with others who have their own hopes, it becomes clear that our ability to realise our own hopes crucially depends upon the actions of others. That our hopes always have to take the wider social fabric into consideration suggests not only that our hopes are limited in a practical way; but also that they are limited for ethical reasons, most importantly because we can only claim a right for our hopes if we do not deny the right of others to have their hopes as well. Giving the gift of hope can, therefore, not be confined to supporting our students’ hopes for self-expression and self-realisation. Bringing hope to the classroom ultimately means interrupting our students’ hopes by showing them how their hopes are inextricably linked to and dependent upon the hopes of others.

1. With the exception of Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); and Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).

2. David Halpin, *Hope and Education* (London: Routledge-Falmer, 2003); and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum, 1997).