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# Despairing about War: The Democratic Limits of Pessimism

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## Abstract

The realities of modern war provide lots of reasons for pessimism and despair. In this article, I identify ways pessimism cannot only undercut the types of political action needed to end war but also conflict with central democratic norms, e.g. equality and political autonomy. Contrary to the growing literature on pessimism, which stresses its resources for negotiating the moral chaos and disenchantment of modernity, I highlight the democratic costs of relying on pessimism to stop war. To do this, I clarify the meaning of despair, identify two sources of hope, and distinguish three different types of despair.

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> "Democracy rests on a vision. And all visions require hope."
> —Arjun Appadaurai 2007, 29
>
> "Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender. I tend to answer: possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does."
> —Judith Butler 2004, 29

Modern democracies increasingly face wars without any apparent end, what is known in political science as *intractable military conflicts* (e.g. Goertz and Diehl 1993). For instance, Afghanistan is now the United States' "longest war" (Tisdall 2016). The Arab-Israeli Conflict,[1] the Turk-PKK conflict, the civil wars in Sri Lanka and Kashmir all exemplify military conflicts that seemingly defy any peaceful resolutions. What political scientists who study intractable military conflicts know, though, is that nearly all wars end not because the warring parties are incapable of further fighting but because they agree to stop (Wagner 2000). In other words, these wars are unlikely to end without political action. To achieve peace, democracies must ultimately negotiate with their enemies and take active political steps to end war. Increasingly peace is a matter of democratic action, not military might. However, the lack of political will to undertake such political actions and the lack of a consensus about what ought to be done make pessimism seem warranted and optimism naïve.

The durability of war, though, raises questions about the proper relationship between democracy, pessimism, and despair. Do democracies have an obligation to sustain their citizens' hope about potential progress for intractable conflicts? This question is not about whether the state should be citizens' therapists (it shouldn't), but whether democracies should provide real grounds for hope, when possible.[2] In other words, faced with doubts and political uncertainties about what can be done and what will happen, do democratic commitments encourage us to err on the side of optimism?[3] Or are democratic commitments more consistent with pessimism's resources for confronting intractable conflicts and enduring injustices?

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[1] See Sara Roy, 1991. The Political Economy of Despair: Changing Political and Economic Realities in the Gaza Strip. *Journal of Palestine Studies.* 20(3):58-69 or Julie Peteet. *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* Princeton University Press.

[2] By framing my question this way, I temporarily set aside issues about whether democracies should instill false hopes or whether political despair can work in the interests of democratic institutions. Moreover, I recognize that what is considered possible is open to political debate. My focus here is on circumstances when some significant improvement is achievable.

While not every citizen needs to be hopeful about the future, and pessimism can certainly have its place, I maintain that the democratic commitment to *all* citizens' being able to govern themselves generates a democratic obligation to promote real grounds for hope. Because democracies need to resist despair, they must sometimes actively resist versions of pessimism that undermine the belief in achieving progress through political institutions or that encourage writing off the well-being of certain citizens. As I will argue, pessimism's resources for confronting intractable conflicts encourage a personal re-entrenchment: that is, citizens should give up on collective progress for humans generally or for their entire political community in order to pursue their personal commitments and ethical codes. The extent to which pessimism focuses our attention narrowly and often exclusively on personal improvements by giving up on our shared, political lives is the extent to which democracy should actively oppose pessimism.

Much of my discussion will be critical of the literature on pessimism, specifically how it understands the relationship between pessimism and despair. However, the purpose of this paper is *not* to argue for the superiority of either optimism or pessimism. On my view, democratic commitments require attending to how pessimism and optimism interact, specifically on whether those interactions avoid political despair.[4] My main purpose here is to highlight the self-fulfilling nature of pessimism. By encouraging us to aim for personal achievement, it cuts off the political resources vital for sustaining sources of hope, the very sources of hope that prevent personal *and* political despair. Not all kinds, but some kinds of pessimism present us as fools for believing in collective goals and shared fates. As a result, they directly and indirectly prompt us to give up on democratic political and social institutions, the institutional mechanisms of peace. Pessimism's predictions about what democratic institutions can achieve become prophetic and visionary.

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[3] People ascribe different and conflicting meanings to the word "optimism." For some, optimism implies an emotional framework that things will get better and better. For a discussion of different kinds of optimism, see Boden 1966. This progressive expectations are positive and continuous. So optimism is associated with the Enlightenment's progressive sense of history. In contrast, I understand optimism in a more limited way. Like hope, optimism can refer to a particular expectation for a particular outcome. Optimists believe that a desirable outcome is possible.

[4] By political despair, I mean the loss of hope concerning any significant improvement to one's system of governance and the well-being of one's fellow citizens. Those who politically despair no longer possess the subjective belief that things can be better in the social and political arena.

The first aim of this paper is to clarify the meaning of despair. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, despair is "The action or condition of … losing hope; a state of mind in which there is entire want of hope …" (Oxford English Dictionary). According to this definition, any loss or lack of hope is sufficient for despair. In contrast, I understand despair as not only a lack of hope but also a lack of the subjective grounds for hope. Despair occurs when humans lack the belief that there are sufficient reasons to think that things will go well. To lack hope is to believe that something desirable is not possible.[5] To lack the grounds for hope is to believe that there are no reasons for thinking that desirable is possible. Despairing humans cannot generate the beliefs and intuitions necessary for experiencing hope. Unfortunately, the literature on pessimism does not adequately acknowledge the need to protect, maintain, or generate subjective grounds for hope. By failing to differentiate the lack of hope from the lack of grounds for hope, they portray having *some hope* as sufficient for showing that pessimism does not necessary produce despair.

My claim is *not* that pessimism is the same as despair. I recognize there are cognitive differences between pessimism and despair. Rather, my argument is that pessimism is more likely to contribute to political despair when it does not adequately recognize the need to protect the subjective grounds for hope.[6] Moreover, the tendency to draw firm conceptual distinctions between pessimism and despair increases that likelihood. For such distinctions downplay the shared substantive beliefs of despair and pessimism. Or to use Wittgenstein's terminology, these firm distinctions downplay their "family resemblance." And just as the interactions among family members can foster dysfunctional behavior, political theorists need to attend to how pessimism and despair interact to undermine the proper functioning of democratic institutions.

This leads to the second aim of this paper—namely, to show how pessimism about war can be in opposition with certain democratic commitments. Democrats do not have the luxury of giving up on human or moral progress, which opposes the political commitment to their fellow citizens' autonomy and political equality. To do so also treats the lives of others as "an academic matter" (*I am not Your Negro*). Consequently, democratic commitments sometimes necessitate opposing the "assumptions" underlying the pessimist tradition, specifically, the assumption that the belief in collective progress is undesirable to have and impossible to achieve.

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[5] Hope is never about certainty. In fact, one cannot logically hope for that which one believes to be certain (Day, 1970, 372). According to Stotland, hope entails "an expectation greater than zero of achieving a goal" (1969, 2). For this reason, one can hope and also have some doubts, fears, and anxieties. My definition of hope resembles strongly J. P. Day's understanding of hope. For Day (1970), hope is comprised of three parts: desire, belief and probability. Darren Webb (2007) maintains that it is important to see hope as a universal phenomenon that has different modes: patient, critical, estimative, resolute and utopian.

[6] In other words, pessimism does not adequately recognize and affirm the contradictions (to be pessimistic about the good prevailing and to be hopeful that pessimism will produce the best possible good) that underlie its resources for resilience. At this point, I am not sure if hope can be charged with the same failure. Regardless of the limitations of hope, my focus here is on pessimism.

More specifically, my work challenges those who endorse relying primarily and exclusively on pessimism for sources of resilience in the face of intractable conflicts and enduring injustices. I call such thinkers "pro-pessimists." Pro-pessimists believe that "the good cannot significantly prevail over the bad." Although they are often ambiguous about the scope and nature of the good that cannot prevail, pro-pessimists approach progress by focusing on *what could go wrong and what has gone wrong* as opposed to on what has gotten better, let alone on what could possibly get better. Pro-pessimists can be hopeful: they maintain that focusing on the lack of significant progress will produce the best possible outcome. Consequently, pro-pessimists prefer highlighting their distrust, worries, and doubts about the possible.

However, focusing on distrust, worries, and doubts can sometimes work against expanding the sense of the possible. For pro-pessimists, optimism is treated as a mode of "wishful thinking" and a naiveté that does not pay sufficient attention to the downsides of any improvement. Such a vision can undercut the sources necessary for creating new political possibilities. Pessimism's failure to adequately recognize the importance of grounds for hope enables certain forms of pessimism to reinforce political despair.[7]

My discussion begins by examining the relationship between pessimism and despair. In particular, I clarify the meaning of despair as, not just the lack of hope, but as the loss of grounds for hope. In particular, I differentiate three different types of despair: *absolute despair, political despair,* and *personal despair*. By differentiating the different kinds of despair, I reveal problems with how the literature on pessimism defends itself. In particular, I argue that the problem with pessimism is *not* that pessimism is incompatible with hope. Rather, pro-pessimists must address how pessimism can undermine the grounds for hope and thereby promote political despair. After showing how pessimism can undercut transcendent and immanent sources of hope, and thereby promote political despair, I reveal why the democratic commitment to autonomy and equality require resisting political despair.

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[7] I am not claiming that pessimism necessarily leads to despair, only that it can. Pro-pessimists' insistence that less ambitious hopes are "safer" than more universal ones fails to recognize the need to generate new hopes regarding others and to sustain the grounds for hope. Thus, pro-pessimist understandings of despair are less likely to be able to resist despair.

## Pessimism and Despair

There is a rich and insightful literature on pessimism (e.g. Prescott, 2012; Dienstag; 2009 and 1999; Harris 2006, Loemker 1967; Sutherland 1981, Hampshire, Vice 2011; Haggard 2014). Despite important differences within this literature, I focus on a general tendency of this literature to insist on a firm distinction between despair and pessimism.  In this way, it downplays how pessimism shares certain substantive commitments and thereby how pessimism can elicit and reinforce despair.  To illustrate this tendency, I turn to Joshua Dienstag's *Pessimism*, one of the literature's most eloquent and thorough defenses of pessimism.

Dienstag understands pessimism as an undervalued and neglected philosophical tradition.  Pessimism is not an individual psychological disposition or character flaw. Rather, Dienstag understands pessimism as the "negation of theories of progress" (2009, 18) In other words, pessimism retains a linear account of time and history but denies (or at least finds no evidence for believing) that the human condition will get better (2009, 18).

For Dienstag, pessimism is not a relentlessly miserable and negative tradition.  Surveying various theorists of pessimism, such as Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, Dienstag explicitly denies that pessimism necessarily leads to defeatism and resignation. Instead this lost philosophic tradition of pessimism provides valuable resources for confronting the moral chaos and disenchantment of modernity.

In particular, Dienstag claims that pessimism sustains hope by encouraging individuals to give up on human overall progress.  Pessimism is less ambitious and therefore more realizable in terms of what it recommends people to hope for. Pessimism is "a philosophy of personal conduct, rather than public order" (2009, 7). So Dienstag embodies "the good pessimist" in the character of Don Quixote who crafts "a positive ethic of personal conduct for life in a disordered and disenchanted world" (1999, 71). Don Quixote's willingness to pursue his honorable personal commitment and to fight windmills is admirable given the moral chaos of his times.  His personal commitments are in some sense "safer" than hanging onto a full-blown belief in human progress.[8]

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[8] Don Quixote's code of honor inspires others to imitate his actions.  Don Quixote's pessimism enabled chivalrous ideals to be brought into existence.

Dienstag hopes that by giving up on notions of overall human progress, we will be able "to understand better our world and to act within its limits" (1999, 72).

Giving up lofty goals of human progress is necessary because such progress is simply an illusion that accompanies linear notions of time according to Dienstag. This illusion is a problem. Humans are "burdened" by their time consciousness and their awareness of impending death. Pessimism's "answer" to this burden is retreating to the possibility of personal improvements. Lowering one's expectations for "overall" human progress safeguards personal and self-created notions of progress.

Here Dienstag's understanding of pessimism intersects interestingly with other recent treatments of pessimism. For example, Paul Prescott contends that "pessimism claims that it is unrealistic to expect 'the good to prevail over the bad' relative to values and states of affairs in which one is personally vested" (2012, 350). Similarly, Stewart Sutherland understands pessimism as an expectation against "the triumph of the good over evil." So pessimists only expect moral progress "within very narrow limits" (1981, 538). All-encompassing notions of human progress are not only superficial but also impossible. Samantha Vice (2011) summarizes the literature on pessimism as claiming that human agency cannot significantly ameliorate or render the bad bearable. For Vice, "pessimists see numerous changes through history, but do not equate change with overall moral progress" (2011, 5). Pessimism encourages us to lower our expectations about the possible regarding our *collective and joint* moral and political lives. Giving up on overall progress allows us to pursue the "little betters" in our own way.

Among the pro-pessimists, Prescott (2012) most explicitly addresses the relationship between pessimism and despair. Like Dienstag, Prescott places a lot of importance on defining pessimism as not an individual psychological disposition. Prescott goes further, denying that pessimism is a philosophical doctrine. Drawing on the work of Bas van Fraassen, Prescott defines pessimism as a stance—that is, as "a standing place or vantage point" and "an attitude adopted in relation to a particular subject" (2004, 174). By narrowing the breadth of pessimism to a particular subject, Prescott allows us to compartmentalize our pessimism. I can be pessimistic about the weather and optimistic about my baking.

In contrast, Prescott understands despair as a character defect or psychological condition. This admittedly simplistic portrayal casts the despairing as 'clinically depressed' or having 'a melancholic disposition' (Prescott 2012, 347). (Note that pro-pessimists insist that pessimism is not a psychological condition while simultaneously stipulating that despair is one.)

Prescott adopts a very strong sense of despair as "the total abandonment of hope." Such a definition ignores that there may be degrees of and different kinds of despair. Prescott acknowledges that pessimism can contribute to the abandonment of hope and therefore "can lead to despair." But he insists that "something more [than pessimism] is required for a person to arrive at despair" (2012, 347). Again, Prescott never specifies what this "something more" is. It is just not pessimism. Again, the defense of pessimism turns on sharply differentiating pessimism from despair. It downplays the family resemblance between pessimism and despair, preferring to blame other family members such as resignation, cynicism, skepticism, and nihilism as responsible for fostering dysfunctional despair about social and political relationships as opposed to how pessimism can interact negatively with and reinforce despair.

However, the literature's defense of pessimism also rests on a misunderstanding about the nature of despair. Typically, its defense turns on how pessimists possess some hope.[9] They argue that if pessimists have *hope about something,* then it is conceptually distinct from the *total* abandonment of hope characteristic of despair.

In contrast, I do not understand despair as simply the loss of hope, let alone the total loss of hope. After all, a wide variety of affective dispositions can be consistent with the loss of hope: When we lack hope, we can be cynical. We can be depressed. We can be skeptical. We can be resigned. According to J P Day, "The distinction [between despair and desperation] lies in the different ways in which the Despairing Man and the Desperate Man tend to act" (1970, 373). For Day, the Desperate man in a tight corner will do anything he can to bring about his safety. The Despairing man, who finds himself in that same corner, will do nothing to bring about his safety. Despair produces a kind of lethargy and resignation to one's fate that cuts off possibilities for change, let alone improvement. The difference between the desperate and the despairing show that the loss of hope is not sufficient for despair. The desperate may still have ways of expressing agency and creating choices that lead to their aims. Despair, though, closes off those options.

Despair, as I understand it, involves not only when members of a society widely lack hope but also have lost the grounds for hope. Grounds for hope are the subjective beliefs constitutive of the interpretative frameworks necessary for experiencing the desirable as possible. When we think we're fools for hoping and when we resign ourselves to the grim status quo,[10] then despair has won. With despair, you cannot hope to hope. Despair involves the incapacity to generate the belief in reasons for hoping. Despairing individuals cannot find any evidence for thinking that things will turn out well. For this reason, the absence of some hope is necessary, but not sufficient, for despair. I can despair about my health when I do not experience as justifiable reasons for believing in getting better. I can despair about my health and still consider my marriage as getting better all the time. We can compartmentalize despair, just like we can compartmentalize pessimism and hope.

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[9] Among the pro-pessimists, the nature of pessimism's hope varies. For instance, Sutherland (1981) holds that pessimism's disbelief in overall progress will foster "better" outcomes while Dienstag (2009) holds hope in the ability of humans to create meaning in an otherwise nihilist world.

For the purposes of my argument, it is useful to distinguish three different kinds of despair. For the content and scope of despair can vary. Most pro-pessimists employ an understanding of absolute despair. *Absolute despair* involves the complete and total loss of hope and the grounds for hope for overall human and moral progress. Absolute despair is eternal. In contrast, *political despair* occurs when the loss of hope and grounds of hope has a more limited scope. The lost of hope and grounds of hope is confined to political lives. Those who despair politically do not think their political and social institutions are capable of producing desirable enough outcomes. The leaders are inept. The system is flawed. The people are stupid. Political despair lacks the beliefs that the capacity to act collectively can produce any worthwhile "enough" outcome. Some progress may be possible but it won't make that much of a difference. *Personal despair* concerns the loss of hope and ground for hope about one's own well-being and improvement. The scope of personal despair is limited to the well-being of me and mine. Those who despair personally may experience their prospects for improving as nil while those around them seem to be prospering.

Pro-pessimists defend pessimism by employing a notion of absolute despair. They reason that because pessimism is consistent with some hope, it is conceptually distinct from despair. They downplay how a cognitive belief that things will not get better in our shared collective lives can fortify political despair, eroding faith in the possible gains that could emerge from collective action. While pro-pessimists may be right that pessimism does not *necessarily* produce personal despair, they blur the difference between not believing in overall human progress, not believing in improving collective political and social institutions, and not believing that the personal good will prevail over the bad. The content of the pessimism matters in terms of its deleterious effect on the grounds for hope necessary for staving off political despair.[11]

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[10] To the extent that despair reinforces attitudes that "this is as good as it gets," despair can reinforce the status quo, undercutting the motivations and ethical beliefs that sustain well-functioning democracies and encourage them to better approximate their ideals.

By mischaracterizing despair as simply the loss of hope, the literature on pessimism fails to acknowledge adequately how pessimism can weaken the subjective grounds for political hope. But a belief that "the good will not prevail over the bad" can corrupt individual's cognitive capacity to think about and reflect on possibilities for improvement. Just as a belief that "the house will never be clean"[12] can undermine the motivation to straighten up, so can the belief that "the good will not prevail over the bad" undermine the desire and intention to try to make the political good prevail. What the pro-pessimists downplay is the difference between making things better and things getting worse. For while the house will constantly collect dust and new dishes will have to be cleaned, there will be moments of empty sinks and dusted shelves. But if one stops cleaning, the overall level of cleanliness will decline. Similarly, focusing on the belief that democratic institutions will require constant straightening and battling injustices can undermine the desire to engage in the politics necessary for preventing the worse from happening.

Overlooking the need to sustain grounds for hope (as opposed to the mere existence of a particular hope) is also problematic because it ignores how the loss of grounds for hope in one part of one's life can spread to another. It ignores how political and social institutions affect the prevalence of, as well as the experience, of particular emotions. After all, the amount of despair in a society is partially, but importantly, influenced by how a culture teaches its members to assess the likelihood of the possible and how to properly express their despair. According to Bar-Tal (2001, 605), society provides "the criteria and sensitivity for the selection of information, which in turn evokes emotion." Our culture teaches us how to hope and how to despair. Societal norms can "signal what emotions are appropriate in general and in particular situations, direct how these emotions should be expressed and guide the behaviors performed as reactions to emotions" (Bar-Tal 2001, 606). So different kinds of despair can be elicited by the information citizens receive as well as the norms used to censor the expression of that emotion. For hope (and despair) can be contagious. When we witness the Berlin wall falling, the political transitions of the Arab Spring, or a peaceful transition from South Africa's apartheid, we can become more hopeful about other problems that were previously considered hopeless, e.g. Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Witnessing the rewards resulting from the sacrifices that other people make can have the effect of making anything seem possible.[13] One's sense of possible can expand depending on the actions of others.

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[11] For example, Milan Svolik (2013) has recently argued how the "trap of pessimistic expectations" can precipitate the breakdown of democracy. Instead of fostering the desire to hold individual politicians accountable, the poor performance of politicians can promote seeing "all politicians as crooks." As a result, politicians no longer have to worry about being accountable, thereby undermining the institutional incentives for improving democratic governance.

[12] I would like to thank Mariana Manriquez for this example.

## Pessimism and Grounds for Hope

So how can certain forms of pessimism undermine political grounds for hope? Here I consider two subjective grounds for hope, what I call "transcendent grounds of hope" and "immanent grounds of hope." My understanding of transcendent grounds for hope is best exemplified in the work of Vaclav Havel.[14] For Havel, "hope is above all a state of mind, and that as such either we have it or we don't, *quite independently of the state of affairs immediately around us*" (Havel 1994, 237, emphasis mine). Havel's description of hope is admittedly unclear. What exactly is the "state of mind we have" when we hope? The substantive content of such a state of mind could surely vary. Some hope as a result of their religious faith (Aquinas's understanding of hope as a theological virtue) while others' hope is tied to normative commitments such as justice or human rights. Havel leaves the substantive content of a hopeful state of mind ambiguous.

Nevertheless, Havel denies that circumstances produce hope. Hope does not depend on the outcomes of events. "Hope, in the deepest sense of the word, does not come from the outside, that hope is not something to be found in external indications simply when a course may turn out well (Havel 1994, 237). Following Havel, transcendent grounds for hope are independent from the changing conditions of this world.[15]

> Hope transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. *I don't think you can explain it as a mere derivative of something here. .* .I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendent (Havel, 1991, 181 from Deneen emphasis mine).

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[13] For a discussion of the importance of having moral exemplars, see Suzanne Dovi (2005).

[14] For an excellent discussion of Havel's understanding of hope, see Patrick J. Denneen's "The Politics of Hope and Optimism: Rorty, Havel, and the Democratic Faith of John Dewey" in *Social Research*, Summer 1999, v 66. p. 577.

[15] While Havel explicitly denies that the transcendent are the only sources of hope, he holds that the transcendent is the only *indispensable* source for hope.

For Havel, humans derive hope, most fundamentally, through their capacity to *abstract away* from the present and to “make sense, regardless of how it turns out” (1991, 181). So in some sense individuals must choose to be hopeful by creating the normative meaning of their actions even in the face of contravening evidence and disastrous aftermath of their actions. So justice is possible by acting justly, not because the outcome is just or even because one’s actions are recognized as just by others. Humans acquire moral resilience from transcendent grounds for hope by acting in accordance with their moral beliefs. Personal integrity and normative understandings of one’s actions produce transcendent grounds for hope.

Notice that by separating the most fundamental ground for hope (transcendent grounds) from “the state of affairs that immediately surround us,” Havel protects the subjective grounds for hope from the actions of evildoers. You cannot prove that hope is wrong by pointing to empirical evidence (past or present). This separation is one reason why Havel’s depiction of hope is attractive. No matter how bad things get, or have been, transcendent grounds for hope are still possible. The extent to which humans can assign normative meaning to their actions is the extent to which they can avoid despair.

It follows that democratic states can promote transcendent grounds for hope could adopt public relations campaigns that emphasizes how eternal ideals, such as justice, God, human rights, or democracy are on their side. The successful promotion of these eternal ideals would provide transcendent grounds of hope. Citizens could learn to understand their actions as just, sacred, law-abiding and democratic. Havel explains that hope requires “awakening a universal sense of responsibility, the kind of responsibility unrepresented in the world of transient and temporary earthly interests” (1994, 242). Transcendent grounds for hope *broaden* ethical commitments, expanding the range of persons to whom one owes ethical treatment. They suggest that even if things do not turn out for this generation, this group, or this town, the next generation, another group, or another town may still benefit.

Note that pessimism’s desire to limit the scope of one’s hopes and to give up lofty notions of human or moral progress undermines the universal foundation that Havel claims is necessary for hope. If grounds for hope are merely directed at a particular person or even at that person’s friends and family, as pessimists sometimes seem to recommend, then such pessimism severs the moral connections among people and thereby the normative meanings of their actions that provide transcendent grounds for hope. If I lower my expectations so that only my family’s fortune matters, then my grounds for hope may die off as my family does.

The second grounds for hope are what I called *immanent grounds for hope.* Such grounds are admittedly more concrete and mundane. Immanent grounds for hope are not only the provision of basic needs, e.g. food and shelter, but also opportunities for everyday moments of calm and possible joy. So immanent grounds of hope are established by being able to get to work on time, to have a cup of coffee, to pray or to reach a hospital, grocery shop, and daycare safely. Immanent grounds for hope come from the successful performance of ordinary activities: they allow the weakened and vulnerable to get *through* the present.

To understand the importance of immanent grounds for hope, especially for those who have been traumatized during intractable conflicts and enduring injustices, consider Susan Brison's work on rape victims.[16] Brison notes that "the disappearance of the past and the foreshortening of the future are common symptoms among those who have survived long-lasting trauma of various kinds" (2002, 53). Brison substantiates her claim by drawing on the writings of Holocaust survivors. She recounts Primo Levi's description of "the disappearance of the future" in the minds of the prisoners in Auschwitz. Levi (1993, 133) symbolized this disappearance of the future by noting that how one says "never" in camp slang is *Morgen fruh (*tomorrow morning). Being a victim of violent injustice can obliterate an individual's sense of time so that some victims can no longer prevent the past coming into and taking over the present. Simply retelling their stories can result in the victim reliving the trauma. For this reason, some traumas may prevent any return to normalcy, what Brison (2002) describes as the "illusion of permanent hope."

Brison acknowledges how the inability to envisage a safe future (what I have described as the loss of subjective grounds for hope) is a difficult burden for victims of violence. Like addicts, victims of injustice might have to take it one day at a time. Immanent grounds for hope are preferable when they are more suitable to the capacities of those who have suffered directly or indirectly from the violence (e.g. as both victims of intractable conflicts and enduring injustices often do). Brison's analysis suggests that sometimes democratic citizens will need not abstract universal declarations of justice (transcendent grounds for hope), but immediate and tangible evidence of a desirable present. So having a moment of peace or joy, e.g. listening to a beautiful song, seeing a sunset, having a great cup of coffee, becomes a reason for thinking you can endure the future.

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[16] I assume here that victims of injustice often, or even typically, suffer from trauma. I recognize that there are important substantive differences between victims of injustice, holocaust victims and rape victims. For my purposes here, I am primarily concerned with individuals who have suffered directly and indirectly from the violence of political conflicts (the occupation and the terrorism).

Immanent grounds for hope focus the despairing's attention on the present whose limited and bounded nature provide alternative reasons for hoping. To illustrate how the bounded nature of the present can offer hope, consider how the U.S. Air Corps dealt with the hopelessness experienced by the crews of American bombers who flew missions over Germany.[17] Because so many crews did not return each night, some crewmembers believed that it was only a matter of time until they would not return. Their hopelessness about their survival prevented some members from flying. In response to the declining morale, the US Army Corps informed the crews that their tour of duty consisted of forty missions, after which they would be given a safer assignment.

> Although planes were still being downed by enemy action just as before, psychologically the situation altered dramatically… Instead of counting forward (e.g., "today it was this friend, tomorrow it can be me"), the airmen started to count backwards (e.g., "thirty nine to go, thirty eight to go, etc."). Thus, with each new mission their hope of coming out of the experience alive was augmented. Stated differently, by telling the airmen when the danger would be over, their expectations became much more positive, and hope could be introduced into the situation (Breznitz 1999, 305).

According to Breznitz's description of US Army Corps policy, hope was successfully introduced by giving the crews a limit—that is, grounds for believing that the present suffering will not go on interminably. Knowing how and when to draw that limit is a political *techne*.  (The US Army Corps tried to extend and shorten the number of missions to determine the most desirable length of the tour of duty).  Tangible immediate changes, e.g. deadlines, can generate hope.

So the extent to which states can successfully intercede in the present and offer justifiable reasons for citizens to believe routines can be safely accomplished or offer a possible cut-off point for existing forms of suffering, may be the extent to which democracies can foster immanent sources of hope. How democratic citizens experience and think about their everyday activities can be crucial for sustaining the hope of pessimists. To promote immanent grounds for hope, states might have to reframe their political objectives in ways that provide citizens with respites from the centrality of the conflict, facilitate choices that weaken parties' interests in the continuation of the conflict, or even downplay the zero-sum nature of the conflict.[18]

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[17] For a more detailed analysis of this case, see Breznitz, 1999.

Fixing one's attention on immanent grounds for hope is particularly helpful when dwelling too much on the future (or on the past) would prevent hope. In contrast to transcendental sources of hope, immanent sources do not need to get people to believe the right things (the actual probability that they will survive the mission) or matching their ideals to their actions (emphasizing the justness of the cause of the war and thereby their flight missions). States can influence the affective lives of their citizens by providing both transcendent and immanent grounds for hope. The state can influence our understanding of despair by the way it teaches history, the rhetoric it adopts, and the kind of security it provides. Our emotional lives do not occur in a social vacuum. Pessimism's strategy of downplaying the possibility for collective action finds resiliency in personal ethical codes. While it is true that the politically despairing might be able to find some comfort in being a good family member or friend, as some pro-pessimists claim, the longevity of that personal resilience might depend on preventing the loss of grounds for hope, grounds that the political community can provide. Unfortunately, as I have shown, some forms of pessimism cut off the transcendent and immanent grounds for hope that political institutions can provide. Ignoring the importance of grounds for hope, as pro-pessimists do, weakens the very sources of resilience that pessimism can and should provide in the face of intractable conflicts and enduring injustices.

To prevent pessimism from undermining other grounds for hope, the immanent and transcendent sources I discussed above, pessimism must be able to compartmentalize its claims against progress. Here pro-pessimists' tendency to disparage hope in progress as naïve and superficial ignores how political despair can grow and spread. Pro-pessimists underestimate the need to restore and create new grounds for hope. By failing to acknowledge the importance of social and political sources of hope, pro-pessimists ignore the need for creating more hope.

## What's Wrong with Political Despair?

To illustrate why political despair is bad for democracy, I focus on two main democratic commitments: autonomy and political equality.[19] Together, these commitments entail the equal treatment of *all* citizens being able to participate and govern themselves. The extent to which democracy is a public ethos that entails a commitment to the good of all citizens is the extent to which democracy will be in tension with pessimism's focus on merely being a personal ethics. So these commitments generate a prior democratic obligation to promote real grounds for hope, when possible.

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[18] Bar-Tel (1998) notes that the centrality, totality, zero-sum nature of a conflict are all characteristics of an intractable conflict.

Let me start with equality. Following many democratic theorists, e.g. Christiano 2008 and Wall 2007, I uphold the belief that equality is constitutive of democratic norms. Of course, the ethics of ordinary citizens do not obligate them to promote progress for *all other* citizens or to spread the cultural conditions of everyday hopes (although I do think there are times when they should do this). Individuals can have prior obligations to family members and friends. However, those who occupy public offices in a democracy are necessarily committed to the well-being of their fellow citizens. Public officials charged with protecting and maintaining a democratic government should be committed to promoting progress and grounds of hope for all citizens. Public officials responsible for sustaining democratic institutions "owe" their fellow citizens more than clientelism, nepotism, and patronage.

A democratic political ethics, therefore, does not have the luxury of writing off the progress, salvation, and happiness of large segments of the population. The commitment to political equality and autonomy places normative burdens on a community's political ethics. They set a moral boundary for the proper obligations of a democratic ethics, namely, to the whole society. To treat some groups or individuals as beyond the "progress" pale violates the universal commitment to all citizens' well-being that a democratic commitment to political equality demands.[20] To the extent that pessimism restricts our expectations of progress to an individual's self-understandings, or to the extent that pessimism encourages us to give up on "significant" improvement for humans, pessimism's sources of resilience oppose democracy's broader commitments.

Now let's turn to the democratic commitment to political autonomy. Recall that a politically despairing society is one whose members have widely lost hope that their political system and well-being will get better as well as the subjective belief that they could justifiably believe improvement to their political lives is possible. By no longer thinking that hope is justified, the capacity to envision and create a better political situation is severely restricted, if not eliminated. Hannah Arendt's discussion of political action is particularly instructive for showing why grounds for hope are necessary for political action.

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[19] Political theorists e.g. Deneen 1999, Mittleman 2009; Schlosser 2012, have offered many important insights into the relationship between hope and democracy. However, my focus here is on how the loss of hope and loss of grounds for hope is antithetical to democratic commitments.

[20] Such a commitment is arguably foundational to democratic theory (see Christiano 2008).

For Arendt, political action is the active engagement of citizens in the public realm.[21] Not only does political action require the creation of a collective political identity, a "we", it also requires the capacity "to make a new beginning" (321). In order to be able to act politically, Arendt claims that humans must be able to imagine things being differently and to start over. The capacity to imagine the world differently is not simply a flight of fancy or irrational, wishful thinking. Rather, imagination gives us a critical distance to the present that allows us to draw connections and to understand our world. Like Havel's claim about the need to abstract away from the world, Arendt understands political agency as depending on human imagination. Arendt explains

> Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. …Without this kind of imagination, *which actually is understanding,* we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have. (emphasis mine 1994, 323)

So our moral bearings depends importantly on being able to envision the world differently. Despair devastates political action in general and democratic action in particular because it impairs citizens' capacity to create alternative choices and understand the moral significance of their actions.

In addition, despair undermines autonomy because those who despair politically believe that neither individual action, nor any collective action, can produce any meaningful improvement in their political system or the well-being of fellow citizens. Such beliefs are antithetical to psychological dispositions for engaging in democratic practices (Snyder et al, 1996). The extent to which pessimism denies collective methods of progress are possible (and thereby the means for producing transcendent and immanent grounds for hope) is the extent to which pessimism can reinforce political despair. Perhaps, the main problem with despair is the extent to which it damages collective and individual attempts to create new options.

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[21] For a full discussion of Arendt's notion of political action, see d'Entreves 2014.

Herein lies a significant danger of despair for democracy—it can cause a collectivity to underestimate its ability to solve its problems. A strong indicator of despair is when members of a democratic society start to think about their political lives in ways that undermine attempts to improve those lives. A desperate society, in contrast, can create possibilities for change in spite of the society's hopelessness and its predicament.[22] The desperate push aside their lack of hope and act despite their beliefs about their prospects. The despairing are simply paralyzed.[23]

Political despair also opposes autonomy because of its relationship to the normatively desirable. After all, hope indicates the existence of *desirable* choices—not what citizens will settle for but what they perceive to be morally choice worthy.[24] Here I follow the dominant view of the philosophical literature on hope that hope is comprised of at least two distinct parts: desire and expectation. After all, if Mary hopes to find her biological parents, then Mary has the desire to find her parents. If Mary hopes to find her biological parents, she also has the expectation, however small, that she will be able to find her biological parents. It is important to emphasize that hope is not about the actual probability, e.g. the actual chance that Mary will find her parents. Rather hope reflects Mary's beliefs that finding her parents is possible. Because hope entails a belief in the desirable and possible, citizens who have personal hopes but lack political ones is troubling from a democratic perspective. Politically despairing citizens are worse because they no longer believe that politics can provide the desirable. They are not only unsatisfied with their current range of choices but do not have any reasons to believe better options are available. Their choices aren't good enough to be desired. Moreover, they don't believe they have any chance of getting what they desire. Those who despair do not have any *desirable* options. They may choose in ways that do not reflect their autonomy. Despair signals that our political choices have lost their normative meaning for us. If one's actions are no longer normatively desirable by the person, then those actions do not reflect an autonomous life. To substantiate this claim, I turn to Joseph Raz's discussion of autonomy. For Raz (1988), autonomy is not possible when humans are trapped by necessity—conditions that allow them only to survive. Raz illustrated this point by describing the experiences of a woman who is pursued by a beast on a deserted island. Her life plan is solely focused on escaping the beast. Raz shows that it is wrong to describe those who are terrorized as autonomous. According to Raz's understanding of autonomy, victims of intractable conflicts or enduring injustices would in some sense be terrorized and lack autonomy. For those who despair do not experience themselves as being able to produce choices that are good enough. They are being merely reactive agents to the Beast that is chasing them.

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[22] Both the desperate and the despairing lack hope. But the desperate have the psychological resources that still allow for political action. So sometimes when hope dies, change can be possible. But I would argue that in such cases, people were desperate, not despairing. Desperation is less likely to lend itself to deep reflection on one's options. One has to act *in spite of one's hopelessness.* In this way, the desperate push away his or her despair as a way to facilitate action. The desperate might create a false hope—desiring to act because they don't know what is possible—but I would argue that the desperate often lack the capacity of self-control that I attributed to the possession of hope. Pessimism can promote resources for action if it promotes desperation while avoiding despair.

[23] Pro-pessimists presume that pessimism will fuel the last ditch efforts of the desperate and avoid the acquiescence of the despairing.

[24] Some choices are destructive because they violate one's commitments, priorities, and deep desires to the extent that the person is never the same (Think *Sophie's Choice*). Sometimes, people can be faced with such bad choices that it is wrong to read their relative rankings of preferences as what they *affirm.* Such choices reflect what people might settle for, as opposed to normatively aspire and positively affirm. I would argue that only when these commitments and choices deeply converge can choice have what Heidi Hurd (1996) call the "moral magic" of consent.

Similarly, despairing citizens may act—that is, vote for one party as against another—just as the woman being chased by the Beast may choose to hide in the bushes or the trees—however, they do not in an important sense "own" their choices. For they do not possess the subjective belief that their political actions can make a difference in creating desirable options. They lack the subjective grounds for hope that they can influence and control their political fates. Despair can drain the desire to be self-ruling because self-rule legitimates one's undesirable choices and political action no longer has a point. Despairing citizens can turn to certain political routines and expected ways of behavior (e.g. voting the way their parents did). They become like political automatons, choosing between candidates like the woman chose to hide in the tree as opposed to the bush. Losing the grounds for hope not only prevents self-governance because it creates self-fulfilling possibilities but also because it undermines the ways in which citizens understand their choices as having normative bearings. Despairing democratic citizens will become resigned about their deep commitments and thereby losing transcendental grounds for hope. They will give up on what they truly desire.[25] Despair weakens the normative authority of democratic institutions. As a result, the moral belief that citizens *should* obey democratic authority is weakened. Unlike dictators and soft totalitarian regimes where despair might secure the legitimacy of those in power, by reinforcing compliance, despair holds distinctive costs to the authority of democratic institutions. Overlooking the different kinds of despair and the need to sustain grounds for hope (as opposed to the mere existence of a particular hope), current defenses of pessimism avoid addressing the democratic ramifications of adopting pessimism's sources for confronting intractable conflicts and enduring injustices. To the extent that pessimism can weaken the subjective grounds for hope, and encourage us to hope less, it can undermine democratic commitments and foster political despair. They also ignore how the loss of grounds for hope in one part of one's life can spread to another. So when political and social institutions start conveying to future generations, our political allies, and even our political opponents that the good will not prevail in any significant sense or that human progress is impossible (someone is going to lose), then such pessimism can contribute to and reinforce political despair about what is possible. It undercut the grounds for hope that the political arena can provide and on which pessimism's sources of resiliency can depend. By threatening human's sense of possibilities inherent in political action, pessimism becomes a distinctively *democratic* problem and a problem that undermines the political possibilities of peace. Sometimes, our democratic commitments require us to expand our sense of the possible and to err on the side of optimism in order to avoid self-fulfilling kinds of political despair.

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[25] Of course, Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954) famously claim that hope is tied in an important way to the notion of "internal efficacy"—that "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process."

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