THE NATURE OF HOPE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers an analysis of the nature of hope and explicates its significance for and relation to education. This entails distinguishing initially two kinds of hope – absolute and ultimate hope. While absolute hope is an orientation of the spirit which sets no conditions or limits on what is achievable and has no particular ends in view, ultimate hope is an ‘aimed hope’, that is to say a form of hopefulness that entails identifying and struggling to realise in the here and now particular improved states of affairs – for oneself, for others and for society generally. To that extent, ultimate hope, despite efforts to undermine it prompted by despair, relativism, cynicism and fatalism, is a crucial aspect of the educational process. On the other hand, absolute hope, combined with a ‘larger love’ of teaching, provides those educators who have it with a significant personal resource in coping better with the special demands of their work.

Keywords: cynicism, despair, education, fatalism, love, hope

Hope consists in asserting that there is at the heart of being, beyond all data, beyond all inventories and all calculations, a mysterious principle which is in connivance with me, which cannot but will that which I will, if what I will deserves to be willed and is, in fact, willed by the whole of my being. (Gabriel Marcel, 1962, p. 28)

1. HOPE AS A THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE

While it is clear that hope crucially affects people’s thinking, emotions and achievements, it is remarkable that it has not been a centre of either theoretical attention or empirical investigation. My own search for relevant literature in the course of writing this paper, for instance, brought to light only a handful of comprehensive accounts of its nature and signification. As the author of one of
them, Joseph Godfrey, observes, ‘as a topic for study, hope has largely been left to psychologists and theologians. For the most part, philosophers treat [it] _en passant_’ (1987, p. xi). It is also a neglected concept in the academic study of education.

Godfrey reminds us that one of the _historic_ roots of hopefulness is Christian theology – specifically, Pauline ethics. St Paul identified hope, along with faith and love, as one of the three ‘theological virtues’ (I Corinthians, 13:12). Drawing on the ethical philosophy of Aristotle, St Thomas Aquinas (1952, II, I, 62), developing this insight, articulated St Paul’s taxonomy with one of his own – the four ‘cardinal’ or ‘moral’ virtues of temperance, justice, prudence and fortitude, the latter of which he conceived as the necessary means for bringing about the former.

Aquinas’s ancient cardinal virtues have much to teach us about the modern practice of education. Take ‘prudence’, for example. In Aquinas’s scheme, this is not so much to do with being cautious in reaching judgments, but more with working hard to identify the right means to particular ends in specific circumstances. But, before anyone imagines that here we have an ancient theological endorsement of teaching by objectives, Aquinas makes clear that ‘prudence’ is centrally about _ethical_ deliberation – that is, about thinking through and taking counsel about what _ought_ to be done to achieve one’s purposes. Thus ‘prudence’, while it is most assuredly about the business of choosing ends, is chiefly to do with identifying through reflection the most morally justifiable means to achieving them. Its status as a ‘cardinal’ virtue then lies in the fact that it instructs us to find those means that can be defended ethically.

‘Fortitude’ is relevant at this point. According to Aquinas, it teaches us the importance of not being distracted from pursuing our proper and noble ends by the attraction of immediate pleasures or short-term advantage. Translated into the education context, ‘fortitude’, thus defined, offers a warning about the consequences of pursuing quick-fix policies that appear to fit well with an immediate problem, but which may have no enduring merit.

‘Justice’, of course, leavens the whole process. While ‘temperance’ orders us in ourselves, the cardinal virtue of ‘justice’ requires those who follow it to consider the common good of society. Specifically, for Aquinas, it is about rendering what is due or owed to another. As such, it invites educators to think of the wider implications of the decisions they reach and pursue in the course of their work. For school managers, in particular, it may constrain them to take equally into account, or at least more into account, the needs of other schools alongside their own. This has particular relevance

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in settings where competition between schools is being exacerbated as a consequence of local market conditions that disable the capacity of some of them to succeed.

Aquinas’s cardinal virtues are human virtues. ‘Faith’, ‘hope’ and ‘charity’, on the other hand, are supernatural ones insofar as they raise our minds to things that are above nature. ‘Hope’ is a special case here. In Aquinas’s writings, its object is twofold: first, the future good that one desires and, second, the help by which one expects to attain it. As one would expect, God is the object of hope in Aquinas’s philosophy. Moreover, because hope is ultimately only realisable through divine means, it requires a modicum of humility on the part of those that practice it. As Aquinas remarks, ‘hope goes wrong and is mistaken when you rely on your own strengths’.

2. Absolute and Ultimate Hope

Aspects of Aquinas’s theistic interpretations of hope are capable of secular, including educational, interpretation, in the sense that hopefulness, as experienced by those who have it, entails both anticipating future happiness and trusting in present help to come to it. This is something any good teacher would quickly be able to identify with, in the sense that being such a person entails having both high expectations of a pupil’s potential as well as faith that the educational process will help to realise it. The philosopher Immanuel Kant appeared to recognise this as well. Towards the end of his Critique of Pure Reason, first published in 1781, he states that ‘all the interests of [his] reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the following three questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? And for what may I hope?’ (1978, para. 805). Kant emphasises what is at stake in this last question by claiming, in terms reminiscent of Aquinas’, that ‘all hoping is directed to happiness’ (op cit., para. 806). But, having declared that the concept of hope is central both to his thinking and living happily, Kant nowhere explicitly develops a full-blown analysis of its character. Some of his twentieth-century successors, on the other hand, have given it a fuller treatment, and in roughly similar ways.

For example, central to the thesis developed by Martin Heidegger in his (1962) monumental study Being and Time is the proposition that human existence is temporality. The is here is fundamental. For Heidegger is not suggesting that human beings necessarily exist in time, rather that being human entails, in terms reminiscent of the kind of craft knowledge good teachers are said to possess, the capacity simultaneously to be at once ahead, behind and alongside
oneself. In fact, in Heidegger’s schema, ‘Being’ is literally ‘ecstatic’ – or, as he graphically puts it, a form of ‘self-projective throwness’ in the course of which past, present and future are articulated (espec. see Heidegger, 1962, paras. 329–331). Thus conceived, hope is interpreted not so much as a matter of positively looking forward – though that is a significant part of it – but a way of living prospectively in and engaging purposefully with the present. Something very similar, it seems to me, can be said too about the process of education to the extent that it entails working positively with what is initially given in order to realise something that is immanent and wished for.

This is not an empty optimism, however. On the contrary, frequently the state of being hopeful implicitly involves critical reflection about prevailing circumstances. Indeed, hope often creates discontent inasmuch as one’s vision of, say, a future good makes one dissatisfied with things as they are presently. Usually, discontent of this kind draws attention to a significant absence or gap in how certain things are currently experienced, allied to a wish to change them for the better. Insofar as hope implies that there is, so to speak, an empty space before us that affords us room for action, it is thus inseparable from human freedom; because it is to do with acting differently, it is also closely bound up with adopting particular moral and political points of view (Macquarrie, 1978, ch. 1). Much the same, of course, can be said of the proper practice of education which, because it is premised upon the hope that it will lead to improvement, is often accompanied by frustration that the actual conditions for teaching and learning are inadequate to the task.

Frustration apart, to say that someone is hopeful is to refer to a disposition they have which results in them generally being positive about experience or particular aspects of that experience. Being hopeful also involves the belief that something good, which does not presently apply to one’s own life or the lives of others, could still materialise, and so that something is yearned for as a result. Being hopeful, consequentially, encourages a form of out-goingness as well as openness towards one’s environment, including the people in it. Hope, then, is closely associated with the willingness to experiment, to make choices, to be adventurous. Accordingly, it has a creative role in encouraging the development of imaginative solutions to seemingly intractable difficulties. Specifically, it can visualise a state of affairs not yet existing and, more than this, it can both anticipate and prepare the ground for something new. Jurgen Moltmann (1971), to some of whose other work I will also refer a little later on, makes this same point, observing that ‘unless hope has been
aroused and is alive, there can be no planning’ (1971, p. 178). The resonance here with the education project hardly requires elaboration, other than to remark that the wish to succeed as a teacher is likely to be accompanied by a yearning hope to do well, allied to a propensity to innovate in order to achieve one’s ends.

Godfrey’s (1987) own analysis of hope helps us to make further sense of what I have said about it so far. Drawing on Gabriel Marcel’s (1951, 1962, 1965) ‘metaphysics of hope’, Godfrey distinguishes two kinds of hope: absolute hope and ultimate hope. Absolute hope connects with a particular kind of positive orientation to the world – one that entails an openness of mind or readiness of spirit towards the future. According to Godfrey, a person who has absolute hope is someone who, in hoping, sets no condition or limits – is not ready ultimately to despair in the face of disappointment. While hope needs despair as its opposite (for ‘at the root of . . . hope is the consciousness of a state of affairs which invites us to despair’ [Marcel, 1965, p. 82]), despair itself is the enemy of progress because in the final analysis it lacks a faith in the future. Indeed, despair frequently leads to a form of abject pessimism resulting in the grudging acceptance of the status quo (Nesse, 1999). Consequently, despair almost always compromises radically people’s capacity to act to improve things on behalf of others. Centrally, it can also undermine confidence generally. Looked at from this perspective, absolute hope may be thought of as a vital coping resource in the struggle against despair. Certainly, it can help to galvanise and redouble all our efforts, and not just those of teachers, to overcome negative circumstances that otherwise appear to be beyond reparation. As Marcel says, ‘hope is a spring, it is the leaping of a gulf’ (1965, p. 86).

Absolute hope entails a basic, even naïve, kind of faith in the future involving a taken-for-granted belief that it is always better to seek ways of improving things that are not working out rather than to leave them as they are. This is what Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, seems to be inferring in his remark that being hopeful is about ‘retaining our sense of the underlying goodness of the world’ (1997, p. 267). Christopher Lasch (1991), echoing this sentiment, states that hope of this kind implies ‘a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it’ (p. 81). Marcel (1965) concurs, remarking that ‘to hope is to put one’s faith in reality, to assert that it contains the means of triumphing over all dangers’ (p. 82). Thus understood, it is, in Vaclav Havel’s words, ‘an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart . . . It is not the conviction that something will [by definition] turn out well, but the certainty that
something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out’ (1990, p. 181). For Havel, hope is a ‘dimension of the soul . . . [that] . . . transcends the world that is immediately experienced’ (ibid). Similarly, Marcel (1962) sees it as ‘the prolongation into the unknown of an activity which is central – that is to say, rooted in being’ (p. 33). Although Havel and Marcel are here not speaking specifically about the experience of being a teacher, their sentiments connect with it nonetheless. For most teachers are able to appreciate the unpredictable nature of their work, while at the same time acknowledging that, when it is undertaken seriously, it adds up to more than appearances might otherwise suggest. Although few teachers would probably say as much, many would be able to identify with the suggestion that the educational process always transcends what can be directly observed in it to the degree that it adds up to far more than the sum of its parts. This aspect of teaching is probably what people are referring to when they call it an ‘art’, which is partly why, I suppose, when it ‘works’ it can both inspire and uplift all concerned. Confidence of course is crucial to the process. But being hopefully confident does not mean that teachers are therefore excused from ever being sceptical of their abilities. On the contrary, the very ambiguity of the teacher–learner transaction can have the effect of fostering serious self-doubt among those more sensitive practitioners who have particularly reflective approaches towards their work.

While ultimate hope complements its absolute variant, it differs from it in being an aimed hope. That is to say, unlike absolute hope it has an object or, more accurately, a better specific state of affairs in mind. As Godfrey remarks, ‘its simple objectives [may be] one’s own benefit, another’s benefit, or a shared life’ (1987, p. 152). Either way, ultimate hope refracts back on the present, holding up to it the prospect of a better way of life – for oneself, for others and for society generally – while recognising there are likely to be obstacles on the way that will need to be challenged and overcome. Walter Benjamin’s idea of ‘Messianic time’, which he tantalisingly and briefly outlines in his essay Thesis on the Philosophy of History (1973, pp. 255–66), reinforces some of these themes. There Benjamin writes of the importance of ‘establishing a conception of the future as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time’ (p. 266) – in other words, anticipations in the here and now of a better future. More recently, another Benjamin, this one with the first name Andrew, has integrated these analyses into a compelling and fascinating exploration of how we may think philosophically about the present through the leitmotif of hope. Andrew Benjamin’s (1997) Present Hope concludes that hope is best understood, not so much as
an expression of the future, but rather as a vital part of living to the
full in the present – a form of realised eschatology without which it is
not possible to engage either meaningfully or authentically with
one’s immediate life or the contemporary world. These religious
emphases – which in Andrew Benjamin’s case is inflected by a
personal commitment of Judaism – are also manifest in Jurgen
Moltmann’s highly influential *Theology of Hope* (1967) which seeks to
show how Protestant Christian theology can set out from hope and
begin to consider its themes in an eschatological light. A similar
approach, informed interestingly by Heideggerian categories, is
found in John Macquarrie’s (1996) *Principles of Christian Theology*
which concludes that ‘hope belongs to the eschatological dimension
of the Christian life and, from the ethical point of view, provides a
dynamic for action for where we are now’ (p. 451).

3. **Secular Meanings of Hope**

More secular sources for an understanding of the concept of hope
include Elizabeth Stotland’s (1969) study, *The Psychology of Hope*,
which is centrally concerned with the important role it plays in
addressing clinical problems of anxiety and depression. Similarly,
Richard and Bernice Lazarus’s (1994) analysis of the psychology of
the emotions draws attention to the positive impact that dispositions
around hope have for people as they seek ways of coming better to
terms with uncertainty in their lives. Similarly, Lionel Tiger, the
neurophysiologist, argues (1985 and 1999) that hope is a ‘biological
force’ located in the body and in human nature generally. Tiger,
however, draws out more explicitly than other writers the role hope
plays in fostering social solidarity and cohesion. Hope, he says, ‘is not
only necessary for individual people in their various enterprises, it is
also an essential vitamin for social processes. If everybody awoke each
day to announce “It’s hopeless”, there would soon be no plausible
tomorrow and no continuous social arrangements’ (1999, p. 622).

Apart from these sources, the most significant analytical study of
hope this century is provided by Ernst Bloch in his massive two
defies simple description, I will risk one all the same. The first thing
that needs to be said about it is that it is a utopian study – specifically,
an attempt to commend a particular Marxist rendering and reading
of the future. If that sounds like a dull project, it is not when you come
to read it. On the contrary, *The Principle of Hope* is a somewhat poetic,
even romantic, rendition of the future and of hope in particular.
Bloch’s translator, Neville Plaice, puts it like this:
Bloch’s *Principle of Hope* is an encyclopaedia of hope that attempts to catalogue the surplus of utopian thought from early Greek philosophers to the present day. Bloch understands utopia not as an impossible ideal, but as a real and concrete final state which can be achieved politically. He sees the development of socialism as the modern expression of the utopian function which effects this change, the goal towards which the process of history is impelled by utopian thinking . . . Sections of the work have a mystical quality . . . This aspect [lifts it] . . . out of culturally specific historical and philosophical argument on to a very different level of elliptical conceptual and linguistic connection . . . (Bloch, 1986, xxviii, xxx)

A large part of Bloch’s argument consists of an attempt to adumbrate the nature of utopia as a form of ‘anticipatory illumination’ or ‘pre-appearance’, key embodiments of which include elements of religious and bourgeois culture, in particular, in the latter case, the music of composers such as Beethoven and Brahms which, he writes, ‘stands at the frontiers of mankind’ (op cit, p. 1103).

Underpinning Bloch’s utopianism is his analysis of the nature of hope, which is derived by him from an initial distinction made between two kinds of affections: those of ‘society’ (envy, avarice) and those of ‘expectation’ (anguish, fear, hope). While all of the latter anticipate the future, only hope, says Bloch, does so in a positive and liberating way. According to Bloch, hope is ‘the most human of all emotions and only men (sic) can experience it. It is related to the broadest and most luminous horizon’. Hope, like utopia, is a ‘daydream’ projected into the future – the psychic representation of that ‘which is not yet’. But this hope seeks to be clear and conscious. Specifically, it struggles to assume a concrete ‘utopic’ function, mobilising human action in history, rather in the same vein as do visions in schools and other organisations. Like Andrew Benjamin, John Macquarrie and Jurgen Moltmann, Bloch views hope then as a *vital ingredient of the present*. That is to say, in writing about the future, Bloch is not concerned with an idealised world as such, but with demonstrating that a better life and future are *prefigured* in the current conjuncture. For him, the central political task is to realise them in more concrete and therefore permanent form.

### 4. ENEMIES OF HOPE: CYNICISM, FATALISM AND RELATIVISM

Both ultimate and absolute hope articulate awkwardly with modern-day cynicism. A cynic today is not the same person the Ancient
Greeks meant by the term. For them the cynic was a critic of contemporary culture on the basis of reason and natural law – a revolutionary rationalist, a follower of Socrates. My impression is that many contemporary cynics seem unwilling to follow anybody in particular and appear to have no obvious criterion of truth or set of fixed values, other than to be cryptically critical of most things. Of course, there is a role for this, inasmuch as some cynics can draw pessimistic attention in ironic, sometimes humorous, ways to the shortcomings of what for the rest of us are assumed features of the world. Relatedly, being a ‘pessimist of the intellect’ (Gramsci, 1992, p. 12) – that is to say, someone who subjects all significant knowledge claims to critical scrutiny – may be a necessary condition for arguing against conceptions of the future that are dangerously ambitious or narrowly conservative and reactionary. However, cynical expressions of pessimism may undermine hopefulness. The sociologist, Anthony Giddens, has it about right, I think, when he observes that cynical pessimism ‘is not a formula for action, and in an extreme form . . . leads only to paralysing depression’ (1990, p. 137), which I suspect is why Marcel (1962) saw ‘death at its heart’ (p. 43).

There is a sense too in which cynicism of this sort starts out from the wrong premise. Cynics are fond of telling hopeful people how silly they are to hold on to their aspirations in the face of apparently overwhelming contrary evidence. What they fail to recognise is that out of such hopefulness grows surprising novelty and success. After all, as the philosopher A.C. Grayling (2001) reminds us, ‘most of what has moved the world onwards began as hope; all of what has moved it backwards has involved its death’. Cynics might still argue that, because so much hope realises very little or nothing by way of results, this makes it a form of mere wishful thinking. But this, as Grayling tells us, ‘is to see things upside down. For the value of hope [certainly of absolute hope] is independent of its realisations – it is in significant part an end in itself, allied [after Aquinas’s cardinal virtues] to courage, persistence and imagination’. Consequently, the state of being hopeful can reveal much about a person’s character. Grayling puts this point very well, concluding that ‘you discover more about people when you learn about their hopes than when you count their achievements, for the best of what we are lies in what we hope to be.’

This does not mean, of course, that either absolute or ultimate hope always triumph or even – and here I am conscious of a profound paradox – that either requires optimism for it to enable us to cope better with adversity. For, while both hope and optimism

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stand opposed to pessimism, they also differ radically from one another. Well, not exactly. It is probably more accurate to say that this claim applies more thoroughly to the relationship that optimism has with ultimate rather than absolute hope. Optimism, somewhat akin to absolute hope, is a mood that often misses the ambiguity of the world, with the result that it fails sometimes to consider seriously its negative features. As a result, it can translate quickly into brash, complacent, even insensitive forms of behaviour. By contrast, ultimate hope, because it is an aimed hope, lives in the awareness of the world’s limitations and remains vulnerable to evidences that count against it. Understood along these lines, ultimate hope only lapses into false optimism when its intellectual side abdicates responsibility for criticising the objects it proposes.

Looking at all of this from another angle, there is nothing clearly odd in my remarking that, while I am not overly optimistic of a quick resolution to a current difficulty, I remain nonetheless hopeful that in the long run something will turn up. Indeed, being hopeful in such situations is often fundamentally about seeking a positive outcome because it is right, just and moral to do so, irrespective of the constraints of the current situation that make its achievement in the short-term highly unlikely. But, having said that, it is also important not to persist, either in the short or long-term, in the hopeful pursuit of something that is clearly a lost cause. To do so is a waste both of time and energy, each of which could be more usefully deployed in pursuing more constructive and potentially realisable projects. Much the same can be said of those who seek out soft rather than challenging solutions to problems. As Sophocles is reported to have once said: ‘I have nothing but scorn for the mortal who comforts himself with hollow hopes’. Gerald Grace’s (1994) distinction between ‘complex’ and ‘simple hope’ is relevant at this point, notably for the way in which it draws into the equation the importance of grounding one’s aspirations for the future in a comprehensive analysis of those factors which structurally inhibit reform along particular lines. In pleading caution in this way, Grace is not for one second encouraging conservatism, but rather an intelligent and ‘dialectical’ as opposed to a simplistic and evangelistic engagement with the possibilities of change (pp. 48 and 57).

While optimism is not then a necessary condition for being hopeful, fatalism undoubtedly works against its emergence and consequences. Because it implies a total, or near total, determination of events, fatalism can have the most destructive and corrosive of effects, particularly in the education context, which, as I will argue shortly, relies so much on hopefulness to be able to do its best work.
Fatalism is also profoundly conservative. In Theodore Adorno’s words, ‘it offers the advantage of veiling all deeper-lying causes of distress and thus promoting acceptance of the given. Moreover, by strengthening the sense of fatality, dependence and obedience, it paralyses the will to change objective conditions in any respect . . .’ (1974, quoted in Grint and Hogan, 1993, p. 1).

Despite these negative aspects, fatalism is not unheard of in the school staff room. Usually, it takes the form of a way of speaking that entails teachers cynically rationalising existing or proposed practices and current predicaments that for others appear neither inevitable nor unavoidable. ‘What can you do?‘; ‘It’s just the way things are‘; ‘It didn’t work then, so why should it work now?’ are just a few of the ways fatalism of this sort finds oral expression. Such talk can have very dangerous consequences if inflected along deficit lines, such as in the case of assuming that children from particular kinds of social backgrounds, usually working-class ones, are, by definition, less likely to do as well at school as their middle-class counterparts. Much the same danger rears its head in statements which take for granted that schools serving areas of cumulative social and economic disadvantage are always going to fail to provide a quality education. Such fatalistic and negative expectations are the scourge of an education programme premised on hopefulness.

Fate’s ineluctability has consequences not only for how teachers react to the prospects of change, but also for how they relate to the prevailing distributions of authority and hierarchies of power in the schools within which they work, that may themselves be in need of reform if new windows of opportunity are to be opened. The authoritarian male school manager, who seeks to subordinate his staff’s interests to his own, is able to induce quiescence partially through making his exercise of power, and the culture of control to which it gives rise, appear part of the inevitable order of things. Applications of absolute hope, on the other hand, can render such a view problematic, to the extent that its openness of spirit offers up a challenge to the maintenance of the taken for granted.

While fatalism places impossible limits on what can be hoped for, relativism, particularly of the postmodern kind, avoids commitment of any kind and leaves its followers in a quandary about what it is reasonable to look forward to. The central intellectual tenets of the postmodern attitude are the problem here. These entail a three-fold set of rejections (see Flax, 1990, pp. 32–34). Postmodernism, first, rejects all essentialist and transcendental conceptions of human nature; and, in their place, asserts that man is a social, historical and linguistic artifact. Second, it rejects unity, homogeneity, totality,
closure and identity; and, in their place, celebrates fragmentation, particularity and difference. Third, and last, postmodernism rejects the pursuit of the so-called ‘real’ and, relatedly, the possibility of establishing truth and certainty; and, in their place, offers the acceptance of the contingent and the apparent.

In many ways, this intellectual agenda is liberating, even democratizing, in its refusal to acknowledge the dictates of hierarchy and universalism. Certainly, in cultural terms, it has allowed outmoded canons of taste and conservatism to be challenged and abolished. On the other hand, as Kate Soper argues (1993), it has also led to a radical relativising of concepts such as worth in the field of aesthetics, freedom in ethics, and truth and objectivity in epistemology. Also, in the fields of education and politics, if taken to its logical conclusion, postmodernism removes completely any basis for the development of principled positions that might inform action.

However, on the plus side, postmodernism does urge upon us the need to recognise that there is probably no one type of society or education that will serve as an ideal for all people. People are diverse – infinitely so, perhaps, but in any case indefinitely so. They have widely differing preferences and aspirations; their life-styles may be utterly different as well and they may have diverse views of the kind of world they wish to inhabit and the sort of education it should provide. It is for this reason that the philosopher Robert Nozick (1974) provocatively offers a list of thirty-odd diverse people and asks rhetorically whether there is really one kind of life that is best for each of them (p. 310). It perhaps makes the point with sufficient strength to note that three of the names on his list are another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the actress, Elizabeth Taylor, and the comedian, Lenny Bruce. It is surely incredible, writes Nozick, to think that they could be made to agree, with little note of dissent, on particular matters of social policy, which leads him to conclude that there cannot be a single vision of the perfect life, least of all one that is imposed on everyone, but rather a multiplicity of them from which people can choose voluntarily the one that best fits their circumstances.

Nozick is surely right to warn us against seizing on one particular vision and forcing its pattern on society as a whole. Indeed, the history of how socialist ideals have been translated into blueprints for communism – entailing more often than not the suppression of individual freedom linked to modes of dictatorial governance – provides a sufficient reminder of the folly of such an approach. But, equally, Nozick’s warning should not be used as an excuse for claiming that ‘anything goes’ and avoiding as a result all principled positions. That
in fact is not a conclusion to be drawn from his analysis which proceeds to insist on the importance of seeking out common normative standards by which people from diverse backgrounds can come to terms with different ways of life. The search for common normative strands is only likely to be embarked upon successfully in contexts where people feel free to argue about and seek to persuade others of the merits of their value positions and the ways of life upon which they are based and to which they give rise. Thus, rather than surrender to the kind of nihilism evident in some extreme forms of postmodernism, we should instead seek to realise communities in which there is the possibility of the development of a vocabulary of values in which all can share. For, while postmodernism is correct to tell us that there is no final proof, no final end, of what is right and wrong, this does not preclude the need for continuing debate about what each might mean. As David Harvey (1996) has argued, the essential task of critical analysis ought not to be about proving 'the impossibility of foundational beliefs or truths, but [rather about finding] a more plausible and adequate basis for the foundational beliefs that make interpretation and political action meaningful, creative and possible' (p. 2).

5. HOPE AND EDUCATION FURTHER EXPLORED

Both ultimate and absolute hope, as we learnt earlier from Aquinas's teaching about fortitude, are attitudes that buffer people against falling into apathy in the face of tough going, which arguably is why educators cannot responsibility abdicate either in their work in schools or elsewhere. They not only need to take them seriously and seek to embody them in their actions, they need also to find ways of fostering each among their students and colleagues, and especially now given that so much in our world, privately, nationally and globally, is characterised by chronic uncertainty. I world go further and assert that to teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralysed by hesitation, is perhaps one of the chief things a good education offers to those who are in a position to benefit from it. Mary Warnock (1986) says much the same in stating that of all the attributes she would like to see in her children or pupils, 'the attribute of hope would come high, even top of my list. To lose hope is to lose the capacity to want or desire anything; to lose, in fact, the wish to live' (p. 182). Indeed, to lack hope is to lack a vital spiritual energy and to run the danger of lapsing into lethargy and indifference.

No small wonder, then, that students with high ultimate hope are
more motivated and committed to their studies than their counterparts with a more pessimistic disposition (see Goleman, 1996, pp. 86f on this). The same, it seems, is the case with teachers. For, as Collinson, Killeavy and Stephenson (1999) reveal in their small-scale comparative empirical study of teacher-motivation, exemplary teachers who have ultimate hope and who can demonstrate it in the classroom are able to motivate even the most disaffected of students. Their analysis explicates well the manner in which the teachers they investigated ‘look for strengths in their students and for a way of helping each one as an individual, to take them from where they are at, as a starting point, and progress from there’ (p. 4). The teachers studied also focus on ‘the possibility and worth of what is hoped for’ – that is, they help their students to learn and experience success. This success, however, is not interpreted in exclusively academic terms, but rather in its broadest educational sense, including the fostering of a positive attitude towards learning for life.

In addition, the exemplary teachers in this study desire simultaneously that they should also do well as teachers. In other words, ‘for these teachers, holding high expectations applies to themselves as well as to the students’ (p. 7). In ways that again connect with Aquinas’s cardinal virtues, tenacity and patience, it seems, are central features of this professional outlook. For, time and again, these exemplary teachers draw attention to their unwillingness to give up in the face of difficulty and, indeed, to model their persistence in this respect so as to encourage a similar attitude among the students they teach. The approach these teachers adopt to their work suggests too that hope can be mediated – maybe even taught – within the educational context via the adoption of cultures of learning that accentuate the positive rather than the negative, most notably through praising effort instead of focusing inordinately on lack of success.

Padraig Hogan (1996), in terms also reminiscent of Aquinas, suggests much the same. Occupying a pivotal position in the list he draws up of the ‘virtues of teaching’ are ‘circumspect honesty, patience and persistence, frankness, originality, a judicious faith in pupils . . . and a categorical sense of care for [them]’ (p. 14). In creating this list, Hogan reaffirms a moral role for the teacher as a significant and influential adult figure dedicated to the business of helping students to realise their full potential through acquiring a hopeful disposition towards both their studies and their lives generally. Although he doesn’t say as much, I would go further and argue that, because education is essentially a future-oriented project concerned to bring about improvement, specifically growth in the
learner’s knowledge and understanding, successful teaching requires its practitioners to teach with hope in mind.

Of course, teaching, as every teacher knows, does not always reflect such a grand purpose, nor turn out well when it does. On the contrary, as David Liston (2000) tellingly says, ‘in many a teacher’s heart there is [today] an enveloping darkness. It is a darkness that may not be as penetrating and pervasive as clinical depression . . . but nevertheless amounts to a devastating sense that the education, teaching and life we have clung to with such hope and promise are losing their grip’. Indeed, for many teachers, ‘the promise of education to transform, ennoble and enable, to create the conditions for new understandings of our worlds and ourselves, have become tired and devalued promissory notes’ (p. 81).

If this is an accurate assessment of what the experience of being a school teacher is currently like for a growing number of its practitioners – and there is some evidence that it is – it raises the question of what can be done to revive the profession’s emerging sense of hopelessness and associated low morale. No doubt improved remuneration and better working conditions would help, but these are surely not sufficient. What may also be needed is an effort of moral will on the part of teachers themselves and their managers, employers and trainers to revitalise that aspect of what it means to be a teacher that connects with the virtues of teaching identified by Hogan earlier, or what Liston configures (following Iris Murdoch’s [1970] Platonic interpretation of ‘God’ and ‘Good’) as the recapturing of ‘the love of teaching . . . [which enables its exponents] to venture [once more] into that space where hope and possibility exist’ (Liston, 2000, p. 94).

The use of the word ‘love’ in this context is central to both Liston’s and Murdoch’s vision, as it is to St Paul’s trilogy of theological virtues which articulate faith and hope with love, as significantly does Marcel’s own existential analysis which concludes that ‘hope . . . is a protestation inspired by love’ (1965, p. 87). Murdoch’s thesis, on the other hand, is the more developed, and Liston uses it to brilliant effect to make this point, which is that what is needed in the current juncture is a re-moralising of teaching that ‘places an understanding of the “good” and an orientation to love at [its] very centre’ (ibid). This call to a ‘larger love’ is an appeal to teachers, and all those concerned with schooling, to recover ‘the idea of Good as a focal point of [professional] reflection’ (Murdoch, 1970, p. 69). As Liston concludes, such a ‘larger teaching love . . . attends [fully] to the situation, to the students in their classes, in an attempt to see things more clearly, to find ways to connect students with the grace
of things . . . It looks for the good in students and those teaching settings; it attempts to see students in ways that assume and build up the good’ (p. 97). And it also, following Marcel, seeks to restore ‘a certain living order in its integrity’ (1965, p. 82). A crucial aspect of this project ought to entail an effort on the part of individual teachers to connect their ‘larger love of teaching’ with the pursuit of what the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales (Catholic Education Service, 1997) define as the ‘common good in education’ which they identify closely with ‘promoting the dignity of the human person’ through policies for schools that ‘encourage and help students of all abilities to improve the quality of their work’ as well as a respect for difference and value diversity (p. 8).

But this ‘larger love of teaching’ and the pursuit of the ‘common good in education’ is unlikely to be revived within a context – such as the one largely prevailing at the moment in UK schools – whereby teachers are routinely de-valued and their efforts centrally regulated in ways that suggest a lack of trust in their competence and professionalism. Moreover, the education market-place within which most of them are now compelled to work is arguably antithetical to attempts on their part to pursue educational aims that seek to ensure ‘equitable distributions of resources’ (Catholic Education Service, 1997, p. 17).

In other words, to ‘build up the common good’, teachers need to feel that their best work is valued and their higher motivations applauded and that they are not in competition with their colleagues for resources and students. ‘Naming and shaming’ schools and tarnishing all the profession with a negative brush for the faults of a minority not only frustrate this process, but dangerously inhibit it ever getting started. To that extent, teachers cannot be expected to shoulder the whole burden for restoring their morale – employers, managers and government each have a role to play; and in playing it, the performance must be sincere, rather than grounded in a form of ‘contrived emotionality’ (Hartley, 1999) whose apparent empowering aspects are really a mask for further bureaucratic management and autocratic control.

But even this is unlikely to satisfy those pessimists of the will that hold on resolutely to the belief that teaching is by definition an exercise in futility which is incapable of being restored to the dignity I am suggesting it warrants. On the other hand, such individuals, it seems to me, are not just being fatalistic; they are also working against the grain of the educational process. For, notwithstanding the many factors that sometimes can make it difficult, even seemingly impossible, to teach effectively some students, every good
teacher knows there is built into this transaction the possibility that it will realise something for the better. Moreover, it is this tacit knowledge that spurs on to success the sorts of exemplary teachers reported on earlier who clearly take their work and role as public educators seriously. To be sure, going through the motions with students is always an option for any teacher. But it is an option that has nothing to do with wanting to educate them, least of all with wanting to help them develop a positive conception of themselves and of the future. As Warnock (1986) inspiringly reminds us, ‘education is particularly fitted to [encourage hope] . . . To feel competent, able to act, able to change or control things, or even to create them, these are all aspects of feeling hope . . . To find that today you can begin to do something you could not do yesterday is to begin to hope. For someone to wake up in the morning, thinking ‘Good, I can go on with it’ whatever ‘it’ is, this . . . must be the chief goal of education’ (p. 183). Quite so. In fact, there is a sense in which the identification of any educational aim implies an element of ultimate hopefulness, though, significantly, given what I have written earlier, its realisation entails working out how best to achieve it incrementally in the present, usually lesson by lesson, and (after Aquinas) in a state of humility allied to courage and conviction.

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7. References

THE NATURE OF HOPE


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