

Comments on Darrel Moellendorf, *Mobilizing Hope*

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Darrel Moellendorf's (2022) *Mobilizing Hope* is an impressive defense of realistic hope in the face of climate change and global poverty. Moellendorf does not just defend hope but shows us where we can find it—identifying real possibilities for averting climate catastrophe based on a clear and comprehensive understanding of the science. *Mobilizing Hope* offers realistic solutions guided by a commitment to alleviating poverty and the right to sustainable development, and it shows us the paths we should take to uphold important moral ideals in getting there. It is essential reading for moral and political philosophers working on related topics, and it is admirably accessible for activists and citizens affected by climate change as well. So in my view, everyone who can, should read it. Yet I was not always sure who, exactly, the *hope* of this book is for. I want to focus on some questions that arose from my uncertainty about whose hopes this book is about (and for). What is hope in this complicated political context? Who, if anyone in particular, can and should hope in the face of climate change and global poverty? And what are the risks and limitations of hope in the pursuit of a just and sustainable world?

Moellendorf's view of the nature of hope is friendly to many plausible theories of hope in the philosophical literature. Hope is an attitude that involves desire in contexts of uncertainty—when we cannot know for sure whether a desired outcome will be obtained. Whereas optimism involves confidence about our prospects (Moellendorf 2022: 31), hope enables us to see *possibility*—even in the face of doubt, and even when we might be pessimistic about the chance of success. Because we can sustain hope when the evidence is not in our favor, hoping does make us vulnerable to disappointment and defeat. But it also can be a source of resilience, enabling us to act in ways that increase the likelihood that our desired ends will be obtained (Moellendorf 2022: 31, 33).

Moellendorf argues throughout the book that to hope in the context of climate change and global poverty is to see

how a way out of our current global situation is *possible*. We cannot be certain, and we cannot be optimistic given the empirical circumstances of our world (Moellendorf 2022: 8), but we still can hope. And Moellendorf argues that hope can even be *realistic* in this context (Moellendorf 2022: 33). We need not engage in wishful thinking or self-deception about the magnitude of the crisis we face. Realistic hope is responsive to evidence, or what Moellendorf refers to as ‘hope-makers’—i.e., features of the world that give us reasons for hope. Hope-makers are ubiquitous and diverse, including empirical facts, normative theories, realistic utopias, and the actions of people and groups that all help to show us real, possible paths toward a just and sustainable world (Moellendorf 2022: 34, 202). Although we are very far from achieving a zero-carbon economy and a world in which hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of extreme poverty, through the mass political mobilization that is already taking place, led by inspirational young climate activists who are committed to radical change, we already have started to mobilize hope for the future.

At times, though, I wondered whether all of the examples Moellendorf offers of ‘hope-makers’ are in fact making hope, and for whom they are making hope. One challenge is that hope-makers are relational. What counts as a hope-maker for me will not necessarily be the same as what counts as a hope-maker for you. There is nothing about an abstract moral theory that makes hope for residents of sinking island nations, and there is nothing about the bare physical possibility of keeping global warming under 1.5°C or 2°C that makes hope for women and girls at risk of violence near resource extraction sites. If, as Moellendorf suggests, hopes are only permissible or rational “if some threshold of evidence supports them” (Moellendorf 2022: 33), then some people’s hopes to escape the devastating consequences of climate change, or to be lifted from extreme poverty, may not be possible or rational due to their social, economic, and geographic locations.

So who can and should hope? I think this question arises when analyses of hope begin with an understanding of hope as a mental state, where the primary subjects of hope are individual people. And there may be a plausible partial answer. For example, we might say that elected officials, scientists, and people with the resources to make

a significant difference can and should hope because they occupy positions of power and authority that make them responsible for promoting a just and sustainable world. Sometimes, Moellendorf writes as if the subject of hope is an individual person like you or me¹, but other times, he seems to be defending a global hope—one that does not seem easily reducible to the mental states of individual people.²

It is a notoriously difficult task to sort out how hope can be ascribed to whole groups, institutions, or a ‘political strategy’ if hope is understood as a mental state. This methodology leads us to ask questions about who, exactly, is hoping and how it is possible to ascribe hope to entities that do not have minds of their own. But as Margaret Gilbert (2002) points out, it is not clear why, in theorizing what it is like to have hope (or guilt, in her case), we must begin with the attitudes of individual people. It is common and seems wholly justified to say things like “our hope is...” or “we hope that...” So why not begin inquiry into hope by asking what hope looks like at the global or collective level? This approach leads us to ask a different set of questions that I think Moellendorf’s defense of a hopeful politics is well-positioned to address.

Using this methodology, we might ask: what does hope for humanity and the future of our planet look like? Moellendorf defends a realistic utopian ‘vision’ (Moellendorf 2022: 9, 31, 185) characterized by global prosperity and sustainability—one that is possible in our world through such things as international cooperation, and breakthroughs in technology and poverty-eradicating development (Moellendorf 2022: 187). But while Moellendorf argues that this vision supports hope, or gives us hope, I think it *just is* political hope. If this is right, then the idea that ‘we’ should hope in the context of climate change and global poverty is about the hope of *humanity*—a global ‘we’ that is not easily reducible to the mental states

¹ Several claims suggest Moellendorf is beginning from a mental state model of hope. For example, he references his own theory of hope involving ‘incorporation’ of one’s desire and probability estimate into one’s reasons for action (Moellendorf 2022: Ch. 1, n. 35). Moellendorf also points out that hope is costly because it rules out other ‘attitudes’ (Moellendorf 2022: 33). And he argues that hope cannot be required of people, but it can be sought and fostered (Moellendorf 2022: 202).

² For example, talk of a ‘hopeful politics’ and ‘hopeful vision’ for which we should strive (Moellendorf 2022: 9, 13, 133).

of every human being on earth or any one of them in particular.

Why is this important?

An irreducible global hope for humanity leaves open the possibility that only some of us are required to keep hope alive; it is both rational and tragic for certain people to be hopeless given their social and economic locations (cf. Blöser 2023), and sometimes the best way to advance the global hope for humanity is to call for panic, fear, and despair about particular outcomes and circumstances. On this reading, mobilizing hope is not (always) about encouraging people to feel hope so they will be motivated to act in the pursuit of a better world. Mobilizing hope just is acting, individually and collectively, to realize our global hope for the future.

But I think there is value in construing ‘hope-makers’ more narrowly than Moellendorf does—limited to *agents*. To ‘make’ is to create something, and facts and theories do not themselves create. Instead, these features of our world might be best understood as instruments of hope—what hope-makers can use to act in the pursuit of a just and sustainable future. ‘Hope-makers’ create and use instruments of hope to show us—as in, those of us who stand ready to interpret the evidence and evaluate the global situation—how averting climate catastrophe and transitioning to a just and sustainable world is *possible*. In some cases, hope-making agents act on possibilities we have now to increase our chance of success (e.g., when governments commit to ambitious climate goals). In other cases, they expand our possibilities (e.g., when scientists work on developing innovative technologies). In both, they are ‘making hope’ by carrying out the global hope for humanity. None of this requires certain people to feel hope in their minds.

So I think Moellendorf’s defense of hope is a helpful starting point for those of us who might be skeptical that theories of hope as a mental state can fully capture the nature and value of hope in politics—especially at a global level. This hope might create, restore, or strengthen individual hopes, but reading *Mobilizing Hope* made me more convinced we cannot just extend existing philosophical theories of hope as a mental state to complicated political contexts.

However we come down on the question of what hope is in this context, Moellendorf argues hope is important (possibly even essential) to overcome climate change and global poverty. He sees hope as a powerful source of motivation—as he puts it, hope is “a tonic against resignation and debilitating anxiety” (Moellendorf 2022: xii). Hope orients us in thought and action toward a possible future worth striving for, and it helps unite us in collective action that further inspires hope that our hopeful vision is within reach (Moellendorf 2022: 9). But I would have loved to see more of an emphasis in the book on defending a politics of hope against its critics. Some scholars and activists worry that hope leads to complacency—particularly for those of us who occupy comfortable positions of privilege from which complacency is already a temptation. If hope gives people comfort and assurance that things will be okay, it might enable us to downplay the urgency of acting in the here and now. And it might dispose us to see the evidence as somehow tilting in our favor when what we really need is to confront difficult truths about how bad things really are.

In “Hope from Despair,” Jakob Huber (2022) discusses climate activists who are wary of hope. Extinction Rebellion, a group Moellendorf cites in the book (Moellendorf 2022: 9), has called for hope to ‘die’ because it obscures the truth and serves as a barrier to radical action, and Greta Thunberg famously declared that she wants people to panic rather than hope. Hope, some activists have worried, can lead to wishful thinking and complacency rather than political action. Moellendorf argues that these young activists are ‘hope-makers.’ But what about the ones who call for *less* hope or the destruction of hope altogether? These activists do not want us, as in you and me, to feel hope; so to say they are ‘hope-makers,’ where hope-makers are features of the world that give us reasons for hope, is to credit these activists as doing the opposite of what they intend. And their concerns about hope are worth emphasizing—hope is at least risky, potentially even dangerous, in the face of our climate crisis. It may be counterproductive to the aim of avoiding the most devastating consequences we are likely to face.

So why side with Moellendorf’s defense of hope despite these concerns?

I actually think that if we construe hope globally, we can mitigate against hope's risks. If hope is an action-guiding vision for the future, then that vision is consistent with a range of emotional attitudes about particular outcomes and circumstances. It is consistent with *despair* about keeping warming under 1.5°C and *grief* over the tragic consequences of this reality. It is also consistent with *anger* in response to corporate and governmental failures to act, *distrust* of powerful actors to do their part, and *courage* to take on necessary risks. Whereas hope is a form of 'prospection' (Moellendorf 2022: 32), these other attitudes respond to the past, and to the here and now. They track different values than hope, making certain features of our environment salient to us and moving us to act in different ways that all may be compatible with a hopeful vision for the future.

Anger, for example, tracks the presence of injustice. When we feel anger, we might be motivated to join in solidarity out of a sense of duty to promote justice—not necessarily from a hope that we can succeed (cf. Stockdale 2021). Despair tracks decisive reasons to give up on a desired end. When we feel despair about, say, keeping global warming under 1.5°C, this is consistent with a revised hope for keeping warming under 2°C. These attitudes can help sustain us (i.e., us as individuals and maybe as groups) in different ways in the fight against climate change and global poverty. They are all consistent with a politics of hope.

I want to mention one final challenge that I am not sure Moellendorf's view as it stands can overcome. The reality is the global hope for humanity and our planet conflicts with very powerful agents' interests in preserving the status quo. In November 2022, The Biden Administration quietly approved the Sea Port Oil Terminal, which will be "the nation's largest oil export terminal off the Gulf Coast of Texas," adding 2 million barrels per day to the United States' export capacity (Baddour 2022). The Maritime Administration estimates that oil processed at this terminal would create greenhouse gas emissions equal to 233 million tons of CO₂ per year. Despite strong public resistance to the project, a unanimous City Council vote in opposition, a letter signed by over 40 organizations asking the Administration to reject the project, a legal petition filed by 290

organizations, and a protest leading to four arrests, the Sea Port Oil Terminal was approved (Earthworks 2021, Earthworks 2022). Moellendorf defends mass political mobilization as a strategy that activists can employ to “produce inconvenience to forces of power” (Moellendorf 2022: 128–130) in cases like this one. But is it right to say that stronger political mobilization in this case would have worked? I am not sure. Though Moellendorf rightly admits social movements require time (Moellendorf 2022: 129), time is not on our side in this fight.

Meanwhile, at COP27 in Egypt, which happened just days before the Sea Port Terminal approval, Biden’s message was one of hope and commitment. He explained that the United States is determined to ensure a cleaner, safer, healthier planet for humanity through a ‘bold agenda,’ and he outlined several steps the country is taking to do its part. Biden, in this instance, was making hope. But seeing the Sea Port Terminal approval, for me, drowned out the positive contributions the United States is making and the hope of Biden’s message. How can we trust that powerful actors will keep their hope-making promises and follow through on their commitments, when conflicting interests often win out over the collective good in the end?

What Moellendorf’s book gives us is a *global hope*—i.e., a hopeful vision for the future of humanity and our planet. That is an impressive achievement. But what we need now is consistent follow through, and I am not convinced a politics of hope gives us enough motivation to build a truly global solidarity in the fight against climate change and global poverty.

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