Is Hope a Virtue?

Hope is not prominent in contemporary discussions of virtue. Its lineage as one of the Christian trio of theological virtues – faith, hope and charity – is widely known, but many people are now inclined to think that hope is not really a virtue. Where hope is groundless, in effect no more than a form of blind or superstitious trust, it is no virtue. In its stead many would now hold that the rational assessment of risk is a more useful and perhaps necessary virtue for facing the future. Should we and can we still think of hope as a virtue, and if so how should we understand it?

The reason why hope – again like blind trust – may seem suspect, is that it apparently flies in the face of experience and expectation. We often have scant reason to hope. The writers of the Old and New Testaments knew this well. A constant theme in both is that the world humans experience is full of evil, suffering and disappointment. The thought that 'the world lieth in evil' is not one that we can doubt in the week when we commemorate Holocaust Memorial day and the 65th anniversary of the liberation of the death camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Yet if it is reasonable to expect evil, suffering and disappointment, should hope have more than a very limited part in human life, that extends no further than rational expectation can justify? The eighteenth century rationalist philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz thought so, and held that it should be calibrated to expectations. He also thought that could expect a lot. He argued that, despite the evidence of our lives, this is the best of all possible worlds, and any evil it contains is an unavoidable if regrettable consequence of the fact that an all knowing and all wise God has created it to run on laws of nature chosen to ensure that all is as good as can be. Any evil is an inescapable corollary of this being a world that is as good as it could be. Optimism – and I think that it is significant that Leibnitz speaks of optimism rather than hope – is therefore rationally grounded, despite all appearances. In the mid eighteenth century, Voltaire satirised Leibnitz' claim that this is the best of all possible worlds in *Candide*, where every disaster – and the tale is filled with dire and hilarious disasters – is interpreted by the Leibnitizian Dr Pangloss and his pupil Candide as contributing in some less-than-obvious way to making this the best of all possible worlds.

Leibnitz took the heroic course of arguing that any evil is excusable because necessary for a world that has been made as good as is possible. The claim *may* not be incoherent, and it is

perhaps possible that even the suffering of the innocent contributes is some way that is incomprehensible to us to the greater good, But this is not much of an argument, and it is hard to see that there are grounds for unmitigated or even for moderate optimism about the future of the world.

Hope is another matter. For hope has been the theme of many writers who have great experience of evil, suffering and disappointment. Hope is not bound to any claims that this is the best of all possible worlds, or even to a claim that there is more good than evil in it.

The Russian writer Nadezhda Mandelstam, whose husband, the poet Osip Mandelstam, was killed in Stalin's purges saw this with clarity. Osip Mandelstam was arrested in 1934 for publishing a poem now known as the *Stalin Epigram* that characterised the terror of the purges and the fear and self censorship they produced:

> *We live, but we do not feel the land beneath us,*
> *Ten steps away and our words cannot be heard,*
>
> *And when there are just enough people for half a dialogue,*
> *Then they remember the Kremlin Highlander*

('Highlander' because Stalin came from mountainous Georgia).

After a period of forced exile Osip Mandelstam was rearrested, convicted of counterrevolutionary activity and sentenced to what was grimly called corrective labour. He died in transit to a camp in Vladivostok. His widow was relentlessly persecuted and lived on the move, constantly fleeing from arrest and committing the poems to memory. She finally returned to Moscow only after Stalin's death some 20 years later. Punning on her own name – *Nadezhda* means *hope* – she wrote an account of events which she titled *Hope against Hope*, a phrase taken from the letter to *Romans* 4:18, where St Paul comments

> *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations….'*

Like Abraham, Nadezhda Mandelstam might well have given up hope. Abraham and his wife Sarah were old, and had no reasonable expectation of children, let alone that he would become the father of many nations. Nadezhda Mandelstam faced a world that offered no rational grounds for expecting the future to go well, that her husband would survive, that she would survive or that his banned work would survive. She could well have echoed the words of despair from our first reading. In some translations I *Chronicles*, 29, v 15 reads:

> *We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope.*

And yet she did not give up on the faint possibility that Osip Mandelstam might live, and that his poems might live. Nor did she give up on the difficult life she had to lead to survive the Soviet purges. She moved from place to place and committed all the poems to memory so that she could, if she survived, preserve them, even if all written versions were destroyed.

I think that it is this *practical* commitment that distinguishes hope from mere optimism, and equally despair from mere pessimism. Optimism and pessimism are *cognitive* attitudes and are irrational if they are not evidence sensitive. In differing situations we can point to reasons for optimism, for guarded optimism, for uncertainty, for mild or for total pessimism. Hope and despair need not be evidence sensitive in the same way. We can hope even in dark times and circumstances, and that indeed is one of the constant themes of the literature of our last dark century. And, notoriously, we can despair in good times.

Hope and despair are not, I think *wholly* insensitive to evidence. We cannot hope for that which we honestly believe to be impossible, though it has sometimes struck me that people can

persist in despair even when they learn that the source of their despair is illusory – they simply revise their accounts of why they despair.

If we are to act in the world at all, we need at least some hope: maybe small hopes that the specific acts we seek to perform can be done, even if they look difficult and daunting; maybe larger hopes that the world can be changed in more momentous ways. It makes no sense to engage in any long term or difficult activity, be it politics or business, research or writing, administration or professional practice, marriage or bringing up children, unless the activity is underwritten with hope that these enterprises are not impossible, and that it makes sense to strive, if need be to struggle, to achieve them. *Chronicles* I, 29 tells us that David and his people had to commit treasure of all sorts if they were to build a temple – an enterprise that must have seemed more than daunting, and expressed their hope for the future. Equally the projects on which we embark require commitments which must be based on hope that what we attempt is not impossible.

We find these thoughts vividly articulated in a famous essay that Immanuel Kant wrote towards the end of the eighteenth century called 'Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View'. He asks what assumptions we have to make if we are

to act in the world. He rejects the thought that what we need is knowledge about the future course of human history, and argues that we cannot tell whether the world as a whole is progressing or regressing, or simply variable. Available evidence underdetermines belief. But if we are to act, we must act *under the hope that action is not impossible*. Kant finished the essay with the striking thought:

> I may thus be permitted to assume [or hope] that… progress may be *interrupted* but never *broken off*. I do not need to prove this assumption … I base my argument upon my … duty of influencing posterity in such a way that it will make constant progress (and I must thus assume that progress is possible), and that this duty may be rightfully handed down from one member of the species to the next.

The assumption that things *may* work out, that hope is *not unreasonable*, does not require certainty because it is grounded in practical rather than theoretical considerations:

> History may give rise to endless doubts about my hopes, and if these doubts could be proved, they might persuade me to desist from an apparently futile task. But so long as they do not have the force of certainty; I cannot exchange my duty … for a rule of expediency which says that I

> should not attempt the impracticable… . And however uncertain I may be and remain as to whether we can hope for anything better for mankind, this uncertainty cannot detract from the necessity of assuming for practical purposes that human progress is possible. (Kant, *Idea of a Universal History*, 1793/1991; 88-9)

Hope remains a virtue: it is an orientation to an uncertain future which attends not to what is likely, but to what is possible. So long as we have incomplete knowledge of what is likely, we have reason to take serious account of what is possible for us, and to act in the light of hope.