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Looking Back to Move Forward

Our country is struggling with political despair, cynicism, and fatalism. Some citizens feel left behind and others feel powerless to improve their conditions through democratic means. Democracy stands on shaky ground; as wary citizens grow increasingly distrustful of elected officials and their fellow citizens, they turn to authoritarian alternatives. Citizens may be wondering, "How can I hope?" In response to those conditions, I offer an account of how citizens can hope that arises out of American history and our more than two centuries of democratic experimentation. This chapter lays the initial framework for that account in pragmatist philosophy, a philosophical tradition that developed in the United States in the late twentieth-century and has experienced a recent resurgence in America and abroad. That framework will then be pieced together into a more comprehensive description of hope in the next chapter. For those who are less familiar with philosophy, bear with me through this chapter, as I try to present key philosophical ideas in an accessible way, though recognize it can still be challenging to wrap one's head around. I believe it will be worth your while, for I contend that this pragmatist version of hope is robust enough to sustain us through challenging times and support us as we craft a better American future.

Common and Limited Understandings of Hope

In order to distinguish the unique character of pragmatist hope and its usefulness for addressing current struggles in America, it's worthwhile to first clarify the ways in which hope is more commonly understood. Doing so offers a useful foil for revealing key differences and highlighting what pragmatism has to offer. It's important to recognize that empirical research shows that hope is actually experienced and enacted differently among various populations, drawing on different combinations of affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. In other words, people hope differently, with varying beliefs, emotions, and actions. These differences suggest that hope is socially

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mediated; we shape it by our cultural norms and local practices. As such, hope is capable of being influenced by environment and education.[64]

The first and most significant (mis)conception of hope is that it is often described in individualist terms. It is confined to the feelings, beliefs, or actions of one person, which often play out internally or without impact on others. Hope is only about one person's anticipation, desires, and efforts. This individualist understanding fails to encapsulate the full process of hoping and its potential impact on shared living—elements central to improving our civil and political lives that I will address in the following chapters.

Some people refer to hope as an emotion, a feeling an individual has that motivates her to have a certain outlook on the world. A marathon runner, like me, may think, "I hope to win my next race." That hope entails a feeling of excitement, nervousness, and anticipation within her as she pictures receiving her medal or listening to people cheer as she crosses the finish. As a result, she arrives at the starting line feeling excited and ready to take on the challenge. Yet, many of us also recognize a cognitive element to hope. The cognitive aspects work in coordination with our emotions to help us make calculations about what is likely to happen in a situation and how we can influence the outcome. As we calculate outcomes, we may feel exhilaration and expectancy. Indeed, psychologists have identified the elevated feeling one experiences when surveying the environment and projecting a better future ahead.[65] So, as the marathon runner prepares for the big race, she may think carefully about how far and how fast she should run during her training in order to enhance the possibility of winning the race. She may reflect on the outcomes of prior races and the successes of her competitors to determine whether her chances of winning are good. It is those rational deliberations combined with her emotions that bring her to the starting line confident for the race to begin.

Philosophers have encapsulated this phenomenon within their orthodox definition of hope as desire in the face of uncertainty. They argue that hope is a combination of desire and belief, where one desires a specific outcome, but is uncertain about whether it may be obtained. These desires are for things that we really want to occur or be fulfilled, but are sufficiently uncertain, such that we cannot count or plan on them. This belief-desire model of hope entails both beliefs about what is possible and a reflection of what we value or want.[66] This believing, desiring, and feeling largely happens within one's self. So, even if that marathon runner has won many marathons in the past and she wants to continue her streak, it is uncertain that she will do so. A new and

faster runner may have entered the race or the runner may trip and injure herself midway through, possibilities that keep her from counting on winning even as she is overcome with desire for doing so.

Psychologists, especially those working in the subfield of positive psychology and those studying the educational idea of grit, also point inward to describe hope as an approach to fulfilling clearly stated goals. Positive psychologists focus on helping people achieve happy and flourishing lives. They claim that hope is an individual's use of willpower, a form of mental energy that propels one toward one's objectives, and "waypower," a mental capacity to chart a course to those objectives.[67] Hope, then, drives one's individual actions and is a way of performing our own agency. While they may ultimately be concerned with human happiness, positive psychologists tend to not take into account the actual outcomes of one's deeds, focusing instead on just the practice of hope.

Sometimes, those individuals then pursue their own goals with little concern for their impact on other people and sometimes without even rationally acknowledging the constraints of reality. This is too often the case with the much-celebrated idea of grit that is sweeping our schools as a new educational aim, which I address in chapter 5. Returning to the marathon example, a marathon runner may become so fixed on seeing herself as an elite distance athlete that she overlooks or even disregards the impact that extensive hours of training have on the well-being of her young child and husband who depend on her for companionship. While her willpower and waypower may pave the way toward athletic success, they may harm her relationships or deprive her family members of the attention they need to thrive.

Hope is also often invoked in religious contexts. Theologians tend to locate hope in an individual's faith in a deity who will act on his or her behalf.[68] The desire for a better future, perhaps even a glorious afterlife, is then allocated based on the faith, belief, and/or practices of the individual, depending on his religious affiliation.[69] Or, theologians focus on the power of god(s), thereby potentially belittling our agency and leading us to be passive as we wait for god(s) to act. Some theologians and philosophers distinguish ultimate hopes that are focused on particular objectives, like winning a race, from fundamental or absolute hope, which is a more open-ended outlook about the future or the enduring goodness of God. Perhaps we might think of this as a more general spirit of hopefulness.[70]

Sometimes hope is confused with other phenomena, such as wishing or planning. When calculating the outcomes of achieving a goal, if the

likelihood is very high or near certain, then it doesn't make sense to hope for it; rather, one may merely plan on it occurring. If the likelihood is extremely low or when we cannot identify means to achieve our desired ends, then hope is also not the appropriate response; instead, one may engage in wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is more passive, while hoping is an active orientation toward identifying feasible goals, constructing a narrative for why they are valuable, justifying how one will continue to pursue them in the face of obstacles, and actively chasing them.[71]

Sometimes hope is confused with optimism, in part because both are focused on better possibilities in the future. Indeed, many people commonly use the words interchangeably, but their meanings should be distinguished. Like wishful thinking, optimism is passive, certain, and complacent. It holds that things will work out for the best, regardless of our interventions. Sometimes dubbed "blind optimism," it functions as such in that it keeps one from fully seeing reality, including long-standing or significant obstacles that stand in the way of one's desired future. This distorted view of reality can lead one to deceive oneself about what is feasible for one's future. Such optimism then becomes cruel when one can never quite fulfill that vision that seemed so certain.[72] Hope, however, carefully accounts for those obstacles in one's rational deliberations, tempering one's predictions, and recognizing harmful myths that may disguise or perpetuate injustice.[73] It is an active, though uncertain and sometimes discontent, orientation to life and its struggles.

While the theologians direct our attention to deities and psychologists emphasize that we should hope regardless of real-world constraints or problematic implications for others, pragmatist hope, as I will show, is firmly rooted in the real circumstances of life on Earth. Rather than a religious faith, which entails an adherence to God or ideology, pragmatists exhibit faith by being willing to try out ideas and to pursue desired ends even in the face of uncertainty or difficulty. It is a form of courage in human ingenuity and risk taking.[74] While many philosophers, psychologists, and theologians describe hope in individualist terms, a pragmatist notion of hope works to encompass the larger social process of hoping. It connects individuals to other people and can be used not only to pursue our individual goals but also to enrich our experiences in communities and our larger outlook on life in a democracy. Because it is rooted in the real circumstances of our lives, it cannot be disconnected from social and political life.[75] Moreover, pragmatist hope can help us to better face current political struggles and social problems, all the while building a democratic identity together.[76]

Pragmatism, Democracy, and America

It comes as no surprise that hope is a key part of pragmatism given that this philosophical perspective arose largely in the late 1800s in America—a land founded and sustained on hope. While pragmatists were writing in France, Italy, and England by the early 1900s, pragmatism seems to align with the American spirit, if such a thing can be captured. Pragmatism emphasizes facing difficult conditions and responding with inquiry to understand them, ingenuity to experiment with improving them, and vision to craft a better future. Its roots trace to the American revolution, where an outlook of experimentation and dissent was taking hold in our new country. Historian William Goetzmann points to Thomas Paine, who arrived in America and magnified its budding personality. "According to Paine, America was God's country of the future. The spirit of revival, constant regeneration, and future-oriented habits of pragmatic thinking had already become basic to American thought. Paine, as myth-maker, used it to build an intercolonial self-identity intended to bind the colonies together in a common cause and a new utopian nation."[77] In the image of Paine, being an American meant building social and political life anew, breaking away from old routines and their injustices, and seeking to create new and freer ways of living.

On his heels, Ralph Waldo Emerson described America as an event that was unfolding in accordance with the visions and actions of its citizens, rather than long-standing foundations of church or nature.[78] Emerson believed that the future of America could be better through people shaping and enacting democracy together—a message that later hit home with twentieth-century pragmatist John Dewey, who called Emerson "the Philosopher of Democracy."[79] Indeed, Emerson's focus on possibility and human agency, without need for firm foundations, seems to have also impacted Dewey's classic pragmatist peers Charles Sanders Peirce and William James.[80] That uncertain and vague future, dependent on our actions, led Americans to invoke hope as they searched for the best ways to create and sustain freedom.[81] In reaction to the Civil War, many Americans sought reconciliation by rejecting divisiveness in favor of a more open and experimental worldview; pragmatism fit the bill. Its embrace of science and change also aligned well with the development of new technology and industry across the country. Pragmatism complemented the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mainstream social imaginary—how we understood ourselves, our relation to each other, and our role in the world. But, importantly, pragmatism also was

not a simple form of idealism; instead, it focused on real constraints. Even as it celebrated human agency and efforts to improve the world, pragmatism calls us to recognize that agency and effort have long been restricted due to factors such as one's social position as a member of a racial minority or one's lack of economic and cultural resources.[82]

Walt Whitman, whom Dewey dubbed the seer of democracy, also influenced the classic pragmatists.[83] Whitman celebrated America because of what it might become and noted our responsibilities to one another as we shape that future together. Whitman's poetry, which put forward visions of what might be, sparked action. Some pragmatists, like James, followed Whitman's aesthetic approaches to breaking down simplistic dualisms that cast people and things in clearly competing categories without the complexity needed to fully understand or transform them. Others, including much more recent American pragmatists like Richard Rorty, picked up on a sense of social hope operating in Whitman.[84] Whitman looked to the future, the consequences of one's actions, and the ideals shaping them to assess their worthiness.

While pragmatists generally followed this formula as they developed their theory of truth, their focus on the future also led to discontent. In other words, seeing that the present world did not stack up to the visions they had in mind, they were led to criticize the status quo and generate new possibilities. American historical essayist Louis Menand explains, "Pragmatism belongs to a disestablishmentarian impulse in American culture—an impulse that drew strength from the writings of Emerson, who attacked institutions and conformity, and from the ascendancy, after the Civil War, of evolutionary theories, which drew attention to the contingency of all social forms."[85] Pragmatism perpetuated the spirit of dissent in the American Founders, encouraging citizens to speak out against unsatisfactory conditions and put forward alternatives. Progressive Era pragmatists later turned the romance of Emerson and the aesthetics of Whitman into a way of life entailing dissent, vision, creation, and action—a burgeoning form of hope.

Pragmatism fell relatively silent in the mid-1900s, as new forms of analytic philosophy took hold. Moreover, the social imaginary of the country was challenged and reshaped, as American optimism was shattered in the face of the atrocities of World War II and Vietnam abroad and racism at home. Following World War II and into the Cold War, some social leaders feared the ramifications of a philosophical practice seen as subversive and activist. At a time when stability and authority were desired, the contingent

experimentation of pragmatism appeared dangerous to some.[86] As those fears declined in the late twentieth century and new thinkers gained the spotlight, pragmatism once again came to the fore, spurred by the work of a few key scholars whom I describe later in this book.

Contemporary pragmatist Colin Koopman rightly concludes, "If pragmatism is American, this is because America, like pragmatism, is an emblematic vision of hope. Pragmatism is thus best understood as a philosophical practice corollary to the experiment of American democracy."[87] While that's not to say that all Americans are hopeful or that hope has been consistently present in America, pragmatism has worked hand-in-hand with hope as a lasting and significant part of our history and national identity.

Key Elements of Pragmatism

Paradoxically, pragmatism has a lot to communicate about hope yet pragmatists actually have said very little about it. While it may seem odd to write a book on hope using philosophers who have not actually said much about it, hope is integral to pragmatism. But, many key pragmatists, especially classic pragmatists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have not discussed hope explicitly or in depth. Inklings of hope can be traced most significantly to John Dewey and appear more recently and more explicitly within the work of Richard Rorty, Judith Green, Patrick Shade, Colin Koopman, Robert Westbrook, and Cornel West. Of the contemporary pragmatists writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries who have more directly considered hope, most have not extended their work on hope to implications for democracy or education, as I do in this book. I build my pragmatist account of hope largely on the philosophy of John Dewey. Notably, Dewey himself does not provide explicit details about hope, even though it underlies much of his work. It was also evident in his own personal and political life as he dealt with the loss of two of his children and his wife, while also facing two world wars and speaking out about the harmful democratic implications of consolidating power among wealthy industrialists.

Hope arises out of central elements of pragmatism, including pragmatism's notions of inquiry, growth, truth, meliorism, and habits, which I detail in the following sections. I aim to make these philosophically dense concepts more accessible to the reader, as they are important for shedding light on a rich notion of hope. Through this chapter and the next, I will show how the

spirit and approach of pragmatism reflects and enhances everyday life in our country historically and today. Unlike other philosophical traditions, pragmatism is focused on sustaining and improving civil life. It is not merely a way of thinking about the world, but a call to engagement in civil and political life. In this regard, it is well suited for the current needs of our struggling democracy.

Though it is often implicit within pragmatist writings, I will tease out a pragmatist account of hope as a set of habits that lead one to act to improve one's life and, often, the lives of others. Pragmatist hope recognizes the difficulty of current circumstances, but approaches them with thoughtful action, effort, and belief that things can be improved. That is not to say that there are not significant differences among the views of pragmatists, but I focus largely here on what unites them in their understanding of hope. Like Koopman, "I understand pragmatism, and find it at its best, as a philosophical way of taking hope seriously. Pragmatism develops the philosophical resources of hope."[88]

Inquiry

Early pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce limits his discussions of hope largely to his description of inquiry—the way we come to know, question, and improve the world and ourselves. Inquiry is the process through which we investigate the world around us, hypothesize improved understandings or ways of living, and then experiment with them. Hope is a condition that leads us to believe that inquiry is worthwhile and will contribute to new ideas. It helps us to view the world as intelligible to us. For without hope that our questions can be answered, we may never initiate inquiry.[89] And we must have hope in order to view the slow progress of scientific inquiry and experimentation as eventually yielding useful results.

Peirce describes hope as a sentiment and yet celebrates its role in logical thinking.[90] He says,

> We are, doubtless, in the main logical animals, but we are not perfectly so. Most of us, for example, are naturally more sanguine and hopeful than logic would justify. We seem to be so constituted that in the absence of any facts to go upon we are happy and self-satisfied; so that the effect of experience is continually to contract our hopes and aspirations. Yet a lifetime of the

> application of this corrective does not usually eradicate our sanguine disposition. Where hope is unchecked by any experience, it is likely that our optimism is extravagant. Logicality in regard to practical matters is the most useful quality an animal can possess, and might, therefore, result from the action of natural selection.[91]

Elizabeth Cooke rightfully interprets this passage to show that hope alone is not enough, but rather its value depends on how well it is informed by experience and not simply wishful thinking. And, while hope is not rational for Peirce, it is an impulse that can be put to good use to urge us forward in inquiry. Hope is useful because it predisposes us to inquiry and to the testing of ideas in experience. It works, in part through imagination and hypothesis formation, to come up with ideas that extend beyond the current state of affairs or what we know.

For Dewey, hope sometimes arises within the midst of despair, when we have lost our way and are struggling to move forward. We may feel powerless because we aren't sure how to get ourselves unstuck or don't feel able to do so. Dewey describes these moments as "indeterminate situations." He turns to the process of inquiry via the empirical method to help us explore those situations, consider possible courses of action, and test out various solutions. It is inquiry that helps us to understand, act on, and reconstruct our environments and our experiences so that we are able to move forward out of the indeterminate situation. In a richly cognitive and often social practice, inquiry invokes curiosity and problem-solving to move us out of ruts. Indeed, this method combats the stagnation of fatalism by urging us to formulate and test solutions, often alongside others facing similar problems.

Classical pragmatists were committed to scientific inquiry and empirical experimentation, held open to revision through fallibilism, the belief that truth claims could never be certain and were subject to human error. Shared inquiry is a way to solve problems, whether they be personal or social, and a way of living democratically together, thereby further tying together pragmatism with the goals of early America. Deweyan inquiry is well aligned with democracy because it is experimental in nature and invites multiple, and often conflicting, perspectives into deliberation with each other to choose or design a path forward. Within inquiry, the focus is less on what we can know for certain and more on how we can learn and change both our world and ourselves. Classical pragmatists were especially interested in

habits as the key platform for such learning and changing, which I will say more about in the next chapter.

Growth

We grow when we apply what we learn from inquiry into indeterminate situations and create ways to reestablish smooth living that carries us from one activity to the next. As a result of our inquiries, we may discover the need to change our environments or ourselves. Doing so develops physical, intellectual, and moral capacities as we reflect on our needs and those of others around us. Many people wrongly assume, however, that growth necessarily has an end—as if it were "movement toward a fixed goal."[92] We tend to think of growth as only progression toward some specific outcome, such as mastering bicycle riding or graduating from high school. But this way of thinking tends to place the emphasis on the static terminus, rather than focusing on the process of growing as itself educative and worthwhile.

Dewey's alternative view of growth does not neatly and linearly move toward a fixed goal, perhaps like the ideal "waypower" of some positive psychologists noted earlier. Instead, he describes trajectories that are more complicated, often shifting with the environment. Moreover, holding onto a fixed goal may be undesirable because doing so employs a limited or possibly foreclosed vision of the future. We cannot know the future with certainty, nor do we want to limit ourselves to what is merely likely in the future, so our ultimate goals must remain flexible and open. Instead, as changes occur in the environment, Dewey asserts that people must continually inquire into moments of uncertainty and novel circumstances, develop new hypotheses about those situations, and revise their aims.

Dewey works with what he calls "ends-in-view," which are relatively close and feasible, even if difficult to achieve, rather than overarching goals at some final endpoint in the future. Often, the ends we hope for are some improvement on our current state of affairs, but their pursuit also nurtures our abilities, leading us to value both the end and the means we acquire or employ for achieving it. Those ends-in-view guide our decisions and hypotheses along the way, keeping us resourceful and attuned to present circumstances and the opportunities they present so that we can move toward that desired alternative. That includes recognizing the intrinsic value of the present means to our ends-in-view, which help us to experience fulfillment in the present.[93] And it

includes valuing the larger disposition toward the future and its possibilities that can help to move us forward in the present through challenging times.

Each fulfilled end-in-view sustains our hope by highlighting meaningful headway and directing our further action. Ends-in-view later become means to future ends, working in an ongoing continuum. This sustenance of hope differs from theological accounts, which are difficult to sustain on faith alone, and may leave believers frustrated at an apparent lack of improvement. It also differs from positive psychology and grit literature, which tend to focus on large, far-off, and challenging goals that one holds tenaciously.

Many people think of hope as goal-directed and future-oriented. While objects of hope for pragmatists may temporarily serve as ends-in-view, the practice of hope moves us forward through inquiry and experimentation as we pursue our complicated trajectory. It helps to unify our past, present, and future. Hope, then, is not just about a vision of the future, but rather a way of living purposively in the present that is informed by the past and what is anticipated to come. Sometimes we recognize that people and conditions in our past have supported us as we grow, thereby leading us to appreciate those historical influences and to seek to preserve them in our communities, our actions, and ourselves.[94] The past offers us patterns, examples, and stories of previous successes that can help us shape our present actions. And looking back at history reminds us that the world was different and that the future, too, can be different.[95] Whereas utopian views of what could be may actually immobilize and exhaust one in the present because they are overwhelming, pragmatist hope is always tied to what one *is* doing and feasibly *can do* in the present, especially when equipped with knowledge of the past. Such continuity prevents us from being swept up in wishful thinking, where ends do not arise out of past and present, and means for achieving the desired future are out of reach.[96]

Dewey's ends-in-view process of growth sheds some light onto how pragmatist hope offers a blending of ultimate hope (having specific objectives) and fundamental hope (a general orientation to the future). Ends-in-view give us revisable and flexible goals, but the process of growth is more concerned with our disposition toward the future and its open-endedness as we encounter unpredictability and make our way through indeterminate situations. Goal-focused and overarching hopes may reinforce one another as we connect our past experiences and move into the future, with all of its unpredictability. Whereas despair limits us, hope supports growth. Summarizing Dewey's account of growth and its related contributions to hope, Rorty

concludes: "Hope—the ability to believe that the future will be unspecifiably different from, and unspecifiably freer than, the past—is the condition of growth."[97]

Truth

Peirce was the first to begin to articulate a pragmatist understanding of truth, offering a maxim that his followers picked up and expanded on: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object."[98] While challenging to comprehend, Peirce is saying that when we are trying to determine whether an idea is true, we must look at its effects. We determine the truth of our idea based on its consequences. Central to pragmatist philosophy, ideas become true insofar as they "work" for us, fruitfully combine our experiences, and lead us to further experiences that satisfy our needs. Pragmatists are concerned with the concrete differences in our lived experiences that an idea's being true will make. In other words, they focus on the consequences of our ideas to see if they are useful or improve our lives.

We must consider how to grow and flourish alongside others as we craft our ends-in-view and determine what is truthful in the world. This differs considerably from other philosophical and psychological accounts of hope based on the desire of objects or states of affairs regardless of whether they are good for us or other people. Pragmatic truth expresses "the successful completing of a worthwhile leading."[99] Unlike more common views of truth as a corresponding match between proposition and reality, pragmatist truth is something that occurs when the goals of human flourishing are satisfied—at least temporarily. Built into these criteria is consideration of the well-being of others, for successful leading through experiences almost always requires working and communicating together. Determining truth connects us with others and can present opportunities to share struggles and bear witness to the suffering and successes of others. This is a significant component of pragmatism given that in today's society the suffering of people of color, immigrants, the poor, transgender people, and others is often hidden or ignored. Pragmatism pushes us to consider the well-being of others, urging us to shed light on their struggles and to attend to them in order to bring about greater flourishing for ourselves and others.

Additionally, the differences an idea will make are quite limited, and therefore less truthful, if relevant only to one person. Because of this, we must seek out the perspectives of and impact on others in order to verify truthfulness. Norms regarding equitable and just communication are entailed both in collecting evidence of the consequences of ideas on the lives of others and in deliberating about and determining their usefulness.[100]

Truth as "what works" is that which helps us navigate the world, avoid difficulties, and get out of problematic situations; it is what helps us and others to flourish. In James's words, "Truth *happens* to an idea" as we trace and determine its practical consequences, often through inquiry and experimentation that validates our hypotheses and experiences.[101] Like growth, truth brings together past, present, and future in that it does not merely repeat the past but rather renews it with innovations for the future so that fruitful living can be maintained.[102] That is to say, truth is not merely established once and for all and then carried through time, but rather many ideas must adapt and improve in order to remain truthful as a result of our ongoing assessments of their consequences. Pragmatists then base the content of their hopes on the findings of our inquiry, our knowledge of the past and present, and our predictions about the future. This typically keeps them realistic and feasible.

Yet the pragmatist accounts of growth and truth show that there can be beliefs that are worthwhile to hold even if they aren't based on evidence that bears out in empirical inquiry. For example, having hope for a cure or a better outcome as one faces a life-threatening illness may go against the evidence, yet such a view might still be worthwhile for living out a satisfactory life with a positive outlook on the world as a whole, rather than one plagued by suffering and negativity. Hence, while pragmatism is centrally concerned with evidence and experience that builds informed aims or ultimate hopes, pragmatist hope is open to exceeding the evidence, allowing a larger sense of fundamental hope, or hopefulness.

Unlike his predecessors who rarely mentioned hope, neopragmatist Rorty makes hope more explicit and uses it in a fairly radical way. His late twentieth-century writing ushered in a new generation of pragmatist commentary on and employment of the notion of hope. He introduces hope largely as a foil to the quest for truth that other nonpragmatist philosophers have supported—the belief that we can come to discover and know propositions that reflect a real, objective reality. He said, "substituting hope for knowledge, substituting the idea that the ability to be citizens of the full-fledged democracy which is yet to come, rather than the ability to grasp truth, is what is important

about being human."[103] So, rather than pursuing truth, which can be an unengaging endeavor to objectively determine reality, Rorty insists on the more radical project of aiming for hope in America. This is, in part, because, like earlier pragmatists, he values beliefs insofar as they are useful to us and he sees beliefs based in narratives of hope as especially useful for shaping our lives. Those narratives include everything from novels to journalism to ethnographies. Those narratives are based in the contingency of human lives and experiences, often providing descriptions of past suffering, an opportunity to build solidarity with others, and a vision of an improved future.

The narrative is "an attempt to interpret the situation of the oppressed group to the rest of their society. Such narratives increase human solidarity by expanding the sympathies of persons who are not members of the oppressed group so that they come to see the oppressed 'as one of us rather than as a them.'"[104] This makes it harder to marginalize people and easier to see solidarity with them. Moreover, we come to see, through the study of history, that we have shaped our community, and therefore can continue to have influence over it. Or, in Rorty's words, "Our identification with our community—our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see this community as *ours* rather than *nature's, shaped* rather than *found*, one among many which men have made."[105] Narratives can be used to guide our efforts through employing courage and imaginative experimentation, perhaps more boldly than suggested by some of his pragmatist colleagues.

Like Rorty, contemporary pragmatist Judith Green relinquishes what Dewey called, "the quest for certainty," yet she does not go as far as Rorty in replacing truth with hope entirely. Instead, she champions "a democratic social epistemology."[106] In this regard, Green reflects a more traditional pragmatist account of truth where people determine what works for them together by taking into account their varied experiences with an idea or situation. Green believes that Rorty focuses too much on hopeful narratives that provide solidarity among Americans and a vision of better American life. She contends that his stories tend to too quickly dissolve real harms and injustices experienced by some groups of Americans at the hands of others into a new common story.

Instead, Green follows the tragic optimism of Viktor Frankl and James Baldwin, where one's outlook for the future is informed by the harms dealt and endured in the past.[107] Her hope is grounded in the widespread suffering of multiple groups of people and relies on unifying them in working

toward a better future that is informed by the harmful past. She then issues a call to her pragmatist peers to be public philosophers who support and embody democratic social hope. For Green, social hope arises out of experience, endures struggles, brings feelings of safety, and entails creative imagination. Social hope involves being concerned for and engaged with others. Green believes today's circumstances require not just the national call for hope that Rorty voiced, but a global vision of deeply democratic living. This is because when one group (America) puts its efforts toward hope without regarding the hopeful visions of other people, anti-American frustration grows, perpetuating cycles of hatred and fear.[108] Green concludes, "storytelling is a process of moving from fear and loss to vision and hope—a process through which many of us as individuals and all of us as people still must pass in order to bring us to the stage of readiness for cooperative, democracy-deepening transformative action."[109]

Meliorism

Classical pragmatists upheld meliorism, key to the notion of hope, as, in Dewey's words, "the idea that at least there is a sufficient basis of goodness in life and its conditions so that by thought and earnest effort we may constantly make things better."[110] Indeed, when looking at history, we see that America has become more just and freer over time, despite our past and present problems, such as continued racism and sexism, and despite the ways in which injustice has become less visible.[111] For example, while the end of slavery may be a primary example to celebrate, many African Americans remain subject to incarcerated labor that exploits them, though largely behind prison walls and unbeknownst to many Americans. I also recognize that while slavery may have ended, many African Americans continue to live in fear of having their bodies and lives unfairly claimed by police and others wielding societal power. There are certainly significant exceptions to the overall trend toward progress, and progress has not been achieved or distributed equitably to all. Nor has progress itself been constant, for we have faced setbacks and have moved forward in fits and starts. But the opportunity to work to improve the world is nearly always present.

Readers may share skepticism regarding my claim of progress,[112] but I contend the evidence is there to demonstrate improvement, especially improvement that has been hard won by advocates and activists for change.[113]

My life, for example, is freer than it likely would have been a century or more ago. As a result of the efforts of suffragists, I have the opportunity to vote as a woman, even though my state may currently engage in practices that suppress my ability to do so. Unlike early American educators who were banned or socially shunned, I also have the ability to work as a teacher outside of the home while a married mother, even though I may encounter some backlash from a portion of my family and friends who believe I should stay home with my young child. My claim of progress is not meant to suggest that the struggle is over or that justice is complete, nor is it blind to backslides, new forms of injustice that arise over time, or serious and destructive setbacks—even catastrophes—that lay well beyond the reach or influence of people, such as natural disasters that may exacerbate problems in our social and political lives. But I am saying that there is significant evidence to show us that we can make life better. Importantly, though, the conversation about progress should not stop there—with evidence of more or improved outcomes—but rather should ask challenging questions about the future we desire and what changes would count and for whom in order for us to declare progress achieved.[114] This is, in part, where the role of hope comes in, providing us a vision and criteria for determining its successful fulfillment. Hope provides us a direction and a rationale to guide our actions and is grounded in the belief that progress is possible.

Elected leaders, political movements, civil groups, and, importantly, everyday folks have all played a vital role in shaping that trajectory of increasing justice and freedom.[115] Unlike simple optimists, however, pragmatists do not hold that the situation will necessarily work out for the best, but rather they believe people should make efforts to contribute to better outcomes. In the words of contemporary pragmatist Cornel West, "Optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Yet when we know that the evidence does not look good . . . Hope enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles against the evidence."[116] Dewey similarly explains that it would be foolish to believe that there is "an automatic and wholesale progress in human affairs," insisting instead that betterment "depends upon deliberative human foresight and socially constructive work."[117]

Pragmatism acknowledges the complexities and challenges of our circumstances, yet aims to approach them practically, with intelligent inquiry and thoughtful action, believing that those conditions can be improved.[118] It does not believe in inevitable progress, but rather looks at historical evidence

to conclude that there has been a long record of struggle and possibility that reveals the past successes of others who responded with effort and suggests significant likelihood of potential success in the future, though recognizing that it is not guaranteed. The efforts invoked by meliorism are rarely undertaken alone; instead they are typically tied to others who are working together to solve problems. Meliorism is not merely the effort of individuals maintaining the status quo as they seek to improve their own lives, but rather that of civil and political groups, as well as individuals, who work to ameliorate injustice, hardship, and serious social problems.[119] The current of meliorism and its call to collective action runs strongest in the work of Dewey. Robert Westbrook goes so far as to call it "radically democratic meliorism."[120] As such, I draw most heavily on Dewey as I integrate meliorism into my account of pragmatist hope.

Pragmatism is also not aligned with pessimism, insofar as pragmatism asserts the possibility of improving our world and our experiences in it, rather than accepting those conditions as fixed or effort as futile. Because the optimist believes the situation will necessarily work out for the best so effort is unnecessary and the pessimist believes that intervention is futile and the outcome is doomed, both optimism and pessimism can be paralyzing. Meliorism, however, stimulates action in order to fulfill the possibility of bettering the world.[121]

The words of Martin Luther King Jr., a champion and practitioner of hope, were enshrined on the rug in Obama's oval office: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."[122] King later explained in a pragmatist spirit of meliorism, "Human progress never rolls on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right."[123] This addition emphasizing the effort of citizens is significant given how many hopes fell flat under the messianic figure of Obama. We cannot wait until we have a clear picture of our final future goals; rather, we must act now in intelligent ways and through inquiry to bring about better conditions and, thereby, truth.[124] And we must be flexible to change and redirect our efforts as they unfold. Meliorism opens up possibilities, collective problem-solving, and the agency necessary for democracy to thrive. For some pragmatists, like Colin Koopman, this meliorism-based hope is "the pragmatist affect par excellence: 'hope is the mood of meliorism,' 'the characteristic attitude of pragmatism is hope.' "[125]

One may not be drawn to a meliorist outlook, though, especially if one's life has been plagued by hardship that makes it difficult to see effort as worthwhile. But such an outlook can be supported with evidence and ultimately fostered. Teachers, religious leaders, and fellow citizens can chart the historical impact of human effort that has demonstrably improved the world. They can reveal goodness and just action even in the midst of or following atrocities of injustice. Meliorism is not Pollyannaish, however, for it acknowledges the lasting blows of moments of despair and the difficulty through which improvement has been won. To showcase the effort and nurture continued hope, people might visit historical locations where significant moments of despair and triumph unfolded, such as the Robben Island Museum in South Africa, where apartheid-era prisoners, such as Nelson Mandela, were held.[126]

While a proclivity to act, pragmatist hope must be cautious and contingent, open to criticism and validation.[127] Because of this, meliorism fits well with democracy as a way of life where our hopes can be nurtured together and where inquiry tests and revises what we believe to be true or desirable. Future-directed meliorism, then, also serves to encourage critique and dissent into problematic ways of being and, through exploring hypotheses about those circumstances, gives rise to action to change them. Additionally, meliorism is aligned with a belief in the agency of people, trusting that they can have significant impact on the world. Their agency is demonstrated not only in the action they undertake to achieve an end-in-view but also in their shaping and revising of the ends-in-view they hold.[128] That said, despite their assertion that people can impact the world, pragmatists must also recognize that there are significant imbalances in who has and can exercise agency and who can influence public policy and practice.[129] Dewey also recognized that action could be inhibited by stagnant and entrenched practices of individuals and culture in a democracy. Certainly, we have witnessed that problem in the cynicism and despair currently growing in America. As a result, Dewey turned to education, arguing that new and more flexible ways of life can be cultivated to fulfill the call to action for improving the world.

Meliorism and Democracy

Meliorism, grounded in inquiry, growth, and truth, unites individuals in social and political hope, as I will detail in the next chapter. Meliorism joins individuals in collective work, which may combat the problems of privatized

hope, overreliance on messianic political leaders, cynicism about the future of our society, and tendencies toward authoritarianism discussed in the opening chapter. Koopman says, "As such, meliorism resonates with the central ethical impulse at the heart of pragmatism: democracy. Democracy is the simple idea that political and ethical progress hinges on nothing more than persons, their values, and their actions."[130] This spirit lingers from the founding days of America. And, like Rorty and Green before him, Koopman calls for citizens to work together today, using their radical imaginations, to create a new and better nation and world.

It is meliorism that builds our skills of cultural criticism and sustains the confidence needed to proceed in continually recreating our democratic way of life. Meliorism brings together humanism, which demonstrates that people can impact the world, and pluralism, which shows that there are many different ways of being contingent on many different realities that shape our experience of the world.[131] This spirit has long been demonstrated in American life, yet we find hope struggling today. Reflecting the early roots and corollary growth of pragmatism and democracy, Koopman warns "that a loss of hope is a loss of America itself."[132] As I will flesh out in detail in the next chapter, I intend to show how pragmatist hope draws on our American past to move us forward in the present. It is such hope that can keep America and its democracy vibrant.