

though perhaps understandable given the political gains that Islamic extremism has made in places like the Middle East and Afghanistan. Less understandable is the paucity of direct analysis of these extremisms from the Cartesian perspective that Hassing gives us. He leads us to believe that he intends to take up violent religious extremism, but fails to do so with sufficient rigor. If work doing so is forthcoming, I am sure it will be fascinating since Hassing gives us a number of tools in Descartes to perform such an analysis. As it stands here, however, the turn to the contemporary scene remains a mere gesture.

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### **Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015)**

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Isaiah Berlin famously identified two kinds of thinkers: the fox, who knows many small things, and the hedgehog, who knows one large thing. In *Hope without Optimism* Eagleton tarries with both. In his rapid-fire style Eagleton rarely dwells on a single notion of hope for more than a few lines as the reader is carried through a myriad of fragmented attempts to discern light in the present through art, theology, philosophy, and politics. The book's scope is enormous, ranging from the ancient Greeks to the Stoics, Aquinas, Marx, Kierkegaard, Benjamin, and Bloch. In the midst of Eagleton's critique of those who find our greatest cause to hope in an unrealized future or a humanist project of self-realization emerges a deeper meaning of what it means to hope, one that arises from clear-sighted vision and is not cheaply won. In this sense *Hope without Optimism* is a disquieting book. It forces the reader to face the scattered wreckage of the past in order to salvage a hope grounded on the recognition that, while history is indeed a slaughterhouse, things might be otherwise than they are.

The rapid movement of Eagleton's argument reflects the lecture format of the original text. In the first chapter, "The Banality of Optimism," Eagleton sets out to sever the connection between hope and wishful thinking by showing that optimism, like pessimism, is ultimately a form of "fatalism" (3). One does not choose to be an optimist but is rather "chained" to cheerfulness as a slave to his oar. There is no room for conversation or disagreement with the realist, one who sees history as it is: an unfolding wreckage of civilization scattered with fleeting moments of goodness. Optimists are conservatives, Eagleton informs us, because "their faith in a benign future is rooted in their trust in the essential soundness

of the present" (4). (However, two pages later Eagleton states that it is "liberals who tend to the former [optimism], while conservatives incline to the latter [pessimism].") Bleakness and dissatisfaction are far more powerful goads to reform, he contends, for "authentic hope . . . needs to be underpinned by reasons" (3).

Yet there are plenty of progressives who think that optimism can be rational. Take Matt Ridley's *The Rational Optimist*, for example, which promotes a healthy "faith" in the capacity of capitalist markets to secure the conditions of human flourishing. Eagleton sets out to show that "the doctrine of progress reifies [hope] into an objective reality" (8). He relentlessly attacks Ridley's *The Rational Optimist* as a contemporary theodicy, a text that coldly informs the paraplegic that he should look to the bright side of life, for his injuries might have been worse. Ridley fails "to see not only how damagingly the past is interwoven with the present, but also how it can furnish us with precious resources for a more promising age to come" (24). It is hubris that threatens us, Eagleton claims, "not simply backwardness" (16). Hope need not be coupled with optimism. As Benjamin's revolutionary historical method has shown us, it is "the past that furnishes us with the resources of hope" (32).

In chapter 2, "What is Hope?," Eagleton examines the political dimension of hope in order to refute the contemporary left's suspicion of hope on the one hand and the right's penchant for hope on the other. Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud have shown that, in the past, the left all too quickly turns to the past as a mere prologue to a future in which our desires are truly fulfilled. Such hope is "laced with false-consciousness" (43), for it is too easily won. This thesis sets up Eagleton's sustained critique of Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* in chapter 3, which outlines an undefeatable hope that is divorced from reason. Bloch "absents reality from itself" (104), failing to see that the task of leftist critique is precisely to "excavate the past for the sake of an emancipated future" (106). While the left seeks to break from the past, the right too easily finds within it a redeeming movement toward humanity's betterment.

In the final chapter, "Hope against Hope," Eagleton argues that hope need not be abandoned. Pessimism, after all, comes as cheaply as optimism. In this final section the strands of Eagleton's study come together around a minimal conception of hope that can be "salvaged, stripped of guarantees, from a general dissolution" (114). Such a hope is exemplified in tragedy, that ancient attempt to find a language adequate to the wreckage of history. Like the Christian narrative of resurrection *through* crucifixion, tragedy plucks "its resilience from an openness to the possibility of unmitigated disaster," and is thus "as remote from optimism as could be imagined" (114–15). Eagleton concludes with a haunting reading of *King Lear* to show that while there is no salvation in human nature itself, humanity remains "hospitable to its own self-transcendence" (126). Art is exemplary to this extent, for it shows that "Nature furnishes the means of its

own transformation.” Through art, language sublimates the sorrows of historical experience into a sphere that is habitable for human life. Politics *can* be another form of sublimation on the condition that it is honest to the historical wreckage on which it necessarily builds. Such hope is a hope “that can falter,” one forged in “fear and trembling” (64). Yet as *Lear* reminds us, it is very much “more than nothing.”

While the breadth of *Hope without Optimism* is refreshing, systematicity is in want. Eagleton tells us at several points that hope is not an experience but rather a “structure of intentionality inscribed into a situation” (57). But precisely what this structure is and how it contrasts with competing theories of hope remains undeveloped. What Eagleton means to show is that hope is not a “one-off event” but rather a “form of life.” In other words, it is not a passing feeling subject to the fulfillment of our personal desires but a transformed relation to our history that opens the future as an uncharted domain. However, the reader is left desirous to know the precise details of this structure and how it affects everyday practice.

This is particularly evident when Eagleton too easily dismisses philosophers who *do* provide systematic accounts of how hope operates as a structure of experience. For example, Immanuel Kant is decried for believing that “nobody can be righteous without hoping for a reward” (84). This representation of Kant is certainly true. Yet Kant’s broader project in his critical work is to show that hope governs the transition from our theoretical knowledge to our practical calling, that is, that intentionality itself requires a picture of nature that is hospitable to freedom. Even if Eagleton finds Kant’s desire for rational confirmation unpalatable, Kant’s general schematization of the structure of hope in intentional action could assist Eagleton to outline a more systematic account of hope as a structural dimension of human agency, and hence not an optional part of one’s taste in politics or ethics. Benjamin suffers a similar fate. While it seems that Eagleton’s reading of Benjamin drives the theoretical approach of the argument, the scattered references to Benjamin’s work leave the reader curious to see how Benjamin could be used to move from pessimism to hope. Benjamin’s “dogged skepticism is in service of human welfare” (6), Eagleton states, and yet his work is also “an overreaction to the idea of progress” (132). I do not doubt that these views can be brought into a compelling reading of Benjamin’s historical materialism, but Eagleton does not (here) provide it.<sup>1</sup>

I raise this criticism only because I fear that the full power of Eagleton’s important work will be overlooked by analytic and continental philosophers alike. Both contemporary analytic and continental philosophy tend toward silence on the matter of hope. While analytic philosophy upholds the exact sciences over and against the practical, continental philosophy’s prickly post-Marxist heritage leaves an uncomfortable silence when it comes to grounding our expectation in a better future. On the one side knowledge is the end of science, on the other side it is critique. One is reminded of Michael Vater’s introduction to Schelling’s *Bruno*,

which insists that without the attempt to salvage hope from within an academic field unreceptive to the practical we come to “the morally absurd (though logically possible) consequence . . . that our understanding and our action belong to flatly different territories, that our science and our self-knowledge simply contract each other, that exact knowledge can have nothing to say to or about what is most important.”<sup>2</sup> Eagleton is quick to show that hope can only run dry “when we could no longer identify cruelty and injustice for what they were” (122), that is, when our practical language is occluded by technical and rhetorical discourses. In Vater’s words, nihilism is nothing other than “the intellect’s silence about the ethical.” Eagleton’s scope spans across the disparate fields of philosophy to show us that the labor of academic research and writing is *always* the search for integration, that language necessarily frames the world as a place to be fought for and salvaged.

While the deepest reflections on hope in the Western tradition too often serve to elevate the philosopher above the herd, Eagleton’s success is displayed in his thrilling respect for the everyday, discerning the presence of hope in normal patterns of life and being. Eagleton’s latest book does not so much provide a final account of hope as open a new conversation about how we might honestly and responsibly discern what history reveals about the human condition while maintaining a genuine openness to the future. For this reason *Hope without Optimism* is essential reading not just for practical philosophers or philosophers of religion, but for philosophers qua philosophers.

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## NOTES

1. See Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 2009).
2. Michael Vater, “Introduction,” in F. W. J. Schelling, *Bruno, or, On the Natural and the Divine Principle of Things*, trans. M. Vater (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 7.