

Questions

philosophy for young people

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Please join us at the next [PLATO conference](#) on June 24–25, 2022, at the University of Washington, Seattle. Registration details will be available on our website soon.

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Editor's Note

Welcome to our 21st edition of *Questions*! In response to the pandemic and the upheavals of our lives, our theme for this issue is hope. This is a rich concept full of cognitive import and emotive power. It is future directed, a consideration of what might be or should be, rather than simply accepting whatever is facing us at any present moment. In the Greek myth of Pandora's Box, the curious Pandora opens a forbidden box and unleashes all the evils into the world but slams the lid shut in time to keep hope inside. And that is what we see demonstrated around the world as we all struggle to overcome the pandemic and the many other ills that beset us human beings. Hope keeps us going and ultimately represents the shining potential of the human being to overcome. But hope can also be futile and in some cases work against our taking action if it leaves us in a state of quiescence anticipation that something or someone else will fix the "problem."

Our contributors this issue capture the duality of hope as both a force for active engagement and social betterment but also as a danger if it is misplaced, or paralyzes us from taking action ourselves. You will find thoughtful and thought-provoking essays that challenge us to view hope in these possibly conflicting ways. Please use the essays to engage in discussion in your classes, philosophy club, or around the dinner table. We also have a wonderful array of images provided by fifth graders that can spark discussion as these young people share their own vision of hope.

We welcome Bo Hou, a student who just graduated from high school, as a new editor to our editorial board for this issue: As always I am grateful for the dedication and hard work by our editorial board in reviewing the many submissions we received. Sadly we could not accept all of them but we remain so pleased by the overwhelming response and encourage all readers to continue to philosophize and send us your work. I would be remiss if I did not thank the teachers and parents who worked so diligently with their students to write, draw, and discuss important ideas.

2021 has proven to be a year of sadness, loss, but also of hope. You will see this reflected in the poetry, art, essays we include here. Please visit the PLATO website in the fall for an announcement of the new theme for 2022.

—Wendy C. Turgeon

A Year of Crisis: Action in Hope

SOPHIA ARNOLD

Junior, Kutztown Area High School, Kutztown, PA

Philosophy is the ability to think about thinking. I often find myself taking this a bit too far, almost perseverating and restating my thoughts ceaselessly, like an endless monologue in my head. Being able to take apart my own thinking, and look at the world overall, is a peaceful release. Finding hope in that mess, is a whole different thing. Hope can be elusive

Finding hope in that mess, is a whole different thing. Hope can be elusive at times, especially these times.

at times, especially these times. In the poem *"Hope" is the thing with feathers* by Emily Dickinson, the author addresses hope as a little bird, which is a complex way of seeing it. Often, we want to take big ideas and inspiring forces, and turn them into beautiful delicate metaphors, like a sweet bird, or a flower. In my mind, that demeans the concept being described, and makes it seem small in the large scale of life. The bird isn't strong, it's a gentle creature, not a wild beast. The bird is seen as naive at first, a sweet tune in each person's soul. Yet, in the face of the wind, it's strong and pushes through with determination. Being a hopeful person

doesn't make you weak, because when things get difficult, you use hope to get you through. When I read the poem at first, I was mad at the representation of hope as a small bird. Then I realized that the bird making it through the storm is what makes it strong. People draw on hope to survive, to push through the storm. Hope is not just a means to an end, but something to engage with and work towards.

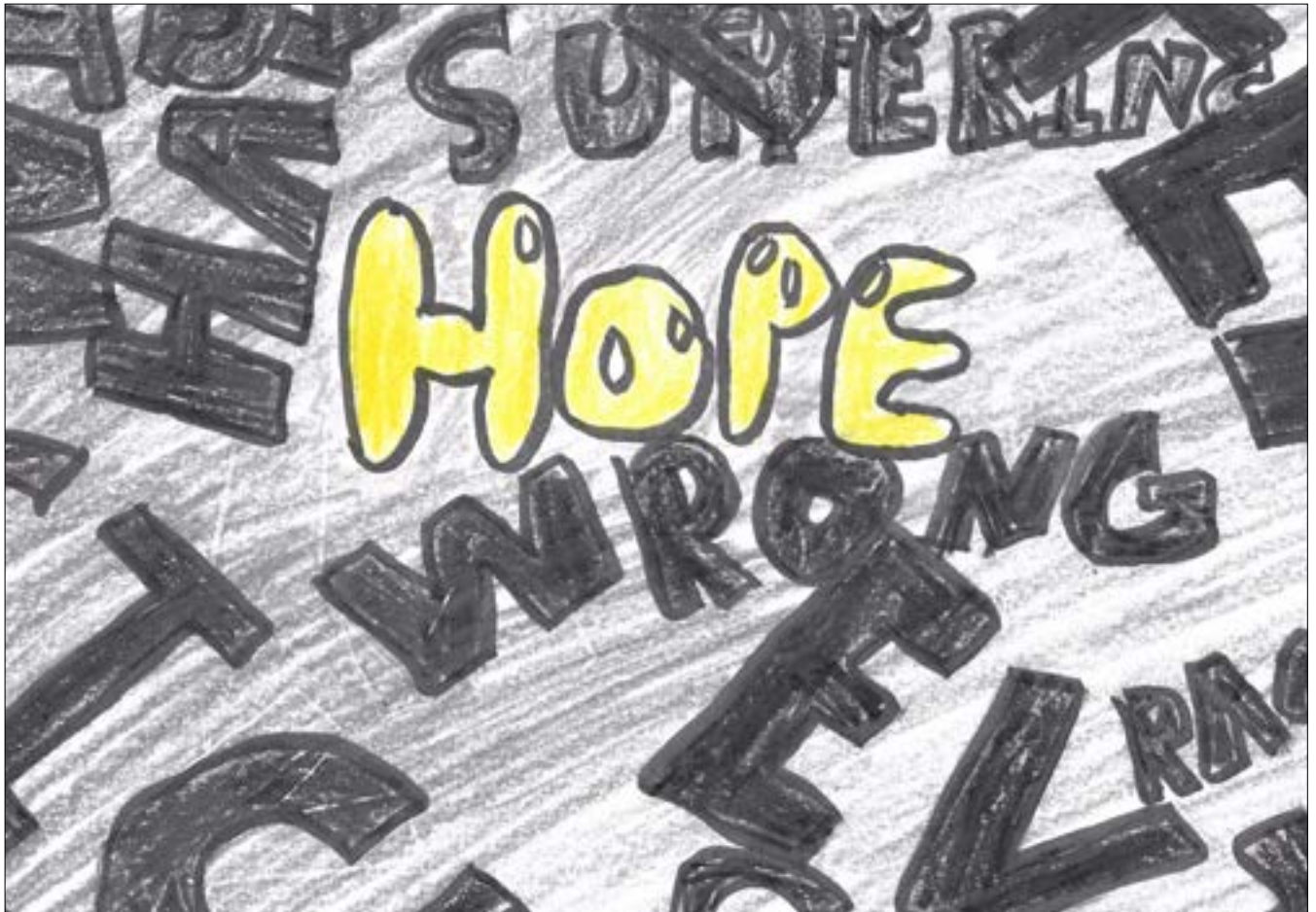
In the familiar Greek Myth of Pandora's box, the box holds all the evil in the world, such as pain, terror, disease, greed, and envy. Pandora is given the box as a gift, told not to open it, but opens it anyway out of curiosity. By the time she gets the box to close, only hope stays inside. It's an interesting story, and a great way to take apart ideas like hope. I believe that if the horrors of the box are left to roam free, while the hope remains in the box, that would mean that we have an unlimited access to pain and fear, but that humanity is ever reaching for hope. It is always present in the box, but we never fully obtain it. A pessimistic view would be that Pandora failed to let Hope out as well. It's easy to assume that she's just an overly curious woman who sorely messed up. An alternate perspective is that hope is left in the box as something to aspire to not to possess, a practice and a difficult lesson to learn. Perhaps Pandora may have left hope on purpose, to make it something to work for.

Hope is a difficult thing to maintain, and we never fully reach it, but hope isn't something simply to collect. To have unbounded hope in something is beautiful but can lead

to a false sense of security. Hopefulness must be balanced out, like anything in life, too much can be a problem. Most people's issue would be not having enough of it, or not engaging with hope. Systems are constantly collapsing, governments lying, corruption grows, Pandemic's hit and trust is revoked. Hope has meaning in action and thought, like creating a club or sharing ideas in a purposeful way. Exercising hope in life can be a challenging task, but it's always necessary. Reaching for hope in yourself, hope in others, and hope in the world around you are what gives hope meaning.

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ELLA SMITS, Fifth-grade student,
Magnolia Elementary School, Seattle, WA

What is hope but a double-edged sword?

BY BRYNN SHAPIRO, 12th grader at Mira Costa High School in Manhattan Beach, CA

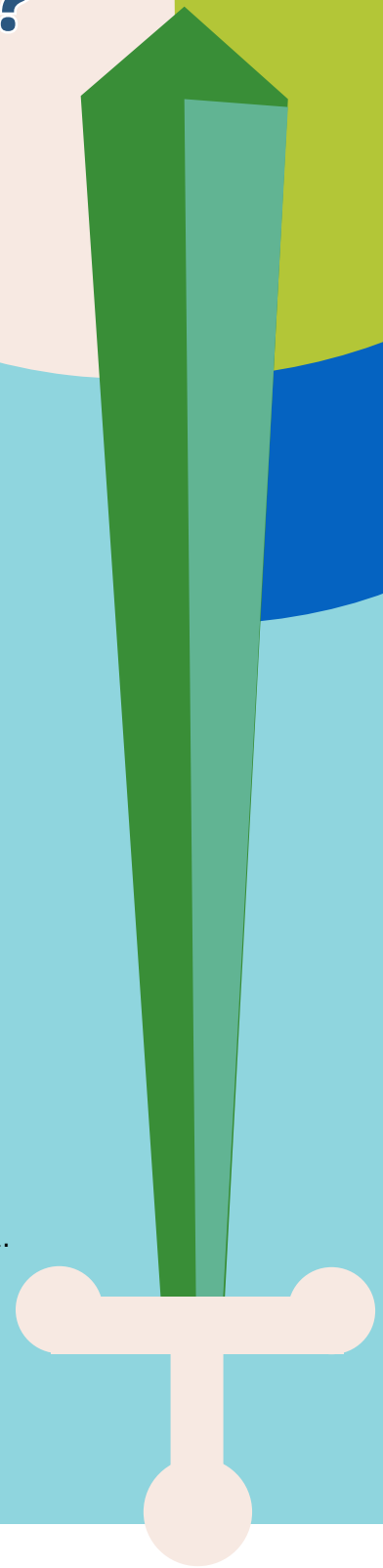
The pillager, the believer, the victor,
Substituting distress and storing excess,
soporific knowledge lies awake.

A savior and sinner, a vice and virtue,
have but one common stress:
For hope reimagines and often ignores
the truth that we choose to negate.

Impossibilities realized, strength gained,
but weakness rears its head,
Hope the serpent,
Hope the steed,
Hope the King of Deceit,
Hope the wings of Icarus' defeat.

A deft sleight of hand,
A magician and man,
Both poison and antidote for those above land.

Dependence given,
Love lost,
Hope's vision.



Can an Animal Hope?



DERIN ERBIN, Sainte Pulcherie French High School,
Istanbul, Turkey

Moriah McLellan

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HOPE ESSAY

Junior, Sante Fe Christian School

Hope is essential in order to live joyfully. Some philosophers believe that hope is a barrier to living a full and joyful life. They argue that waiting expectantly for something that may never happen can be disappointing and take away from the possibility of joy and happiness in your life. For example, Friedrich Nietzsche said that, "Hope in reality is the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torments of man." He believed that if our hope could never be fulfilled, it would only make difficult things harder. However, I disagree. I believe that hope can be a source of joy in our lives. Aristotle said that "Hope is a waking dream" and believed that hope was a good thing. Having hope in your life gives us something to look forward to and a reason to keep going. If you have no hope in your life it can be very easy for depression to take hold. When there is no exciting future to look ahead to, your focus becomes constantly on the here and now, and with the repetitive monotony of everyday life, that can easily become a boring and depress-

ing thing to focus on. But if we have hope, we can switch our focus to an exciting future.

Yes, hope may not live fully up to our expectations, but it does help us to get through the here and now when it is difficult. As believers, we have hope in a future spent with God. This hope is even more powerful than the mere hope that "better days are coming." We believe that when this life is over we will be able to spend the rest of eternity with God our creator. Philosopher and Theologian C. S. Lewis said "Hope is one of the Theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not . . . a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do." When we have hope in a future so glorious, we can live joyfully no matter how difficult our current situation. We know that the difficult times will not last forever, because we have a better future awaiting us. This incredible hope helps us to persevere through hardships with joy.



HOW SHOULD WE DEFINE HOPE?

BY GRANT SHEFT

Throughout this paper, I will refer to hope per Søren Kierkegaard's definition. Hope, according to Kierkegaard, is "to relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of the good."¹ By this definition, we establish a neutralized baseline: "hope" is thus understood or connoted with neither positive nor negative charge. I will highlight the flaws evident in the act of hoping.



CARINA OLSON, Fifth-grade student,
Magnolia Elementary School, Seattle, WA

Why is Hope Flawed?

When individuals hope exclusively for controllable possibilities or outcomes which are necessarily “good” or beneficial, they bar themselves from reality and, perhaps worse, rob themselves of agency. As the author Roxanne Gray said in a *New York Times* op-ed, “[w]hen we hope, we have no control over what may come to pass. We put all our trust and energy into the whims of fate. We abdicate responsibility.”² Similarly, I believe hope diminishes agency, an element essential of personal responsibility. Further, hope is a kind of coping mechanism people employ to tackle and mitigate their fears and problems in times of distress. Hoping alone is merely an immature crutch. One must employ courage to achieve the outcomes for which they hope. Courage, unlike hope, involves action designed to address problems instead of relying on another person or fate to solve them on someone’s behalf.

Other people cannot be relied on to fulfill any desired outcome. For example, with the Black Lives Matter movement that gained momentum this past summer, a key reason the movement’s many protests and demonstrations were so inspirational was directly due to the *actions* of people. Protesters invoked and embodied *agency*, joining together in collective activity that strengthened and emboldened the Black (and Black-allied) community. Movements of this sort are a prime example of the importance of action. When one hopes for change, this change is not guaranteed. However, movements (like BLM) often effect change as they reflect the importance of action and responsibility.

Throughout my own life, teachers and mentors have stressed the importance of *taking action*. When my father developed cancer, for example, he had to manifest hope in his body as well as hope about the treatment he was going to receive from his doctors in order to survive. While that was important, in witnessing his battle, I learned that the *most* important thing,

Other people
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desired outcome.

far beyond hope, was being realistic and taking as much action as possible in order to get better. Although he unfortunately ultimately passed away, the lessons I learned guided me through the global pandemic.

The Importance of Avoiding Hope During the Pandemic

As the coronavirus has ravaged the country, the concept of hope has been prioritized nationwide. But while hope is important to a certain extent, some degree of hope is necessary to have for sanity, hoping is potentially also part of the reason the virus has lasted so long. During the pandemic, an individual is entitled to acknowledge his struggles and to hope for positive possibilities; however, such an attitude often leads to complacency.

Through relying on external forces, such as other people wearing masks or the innovation of vaccines, people have lacked the personal conviction to take responsibility. On June 21st, 2021, Jim Key wrote a blog for a USC-associated website in which he described a study involving 6,000 Americans that stated merely 50% of them wore masks when they were around non-family members.³ A few reasons might have been denial, freedom of expression, or anger at authorities. However, it is reasonable to conclude that many Americans hope that they will be safe, even if they contract the virus. Despite the risk the virus represented, hopeful Americans did not appear to be modifying their behaviors and lifestyle choices. The negative effect of hoping was similarly articulated by philosophy professor Simon Critchley who, in another *New York*

Times article, stated that “[o]ften, by clinging to hope, we make the suffering worse.”⁴ Although we can hope for a virus-free or post-virus world, we can’t control the actions of others.

Hope incapacitates and prevents action. If my late dad’s battle with cancer and our collective struggle this past year have taught me anything, it is that hope can be an emotional aid; however, it can be the enemy of action and the assassin of agency. I have managed to move forward, and I believe that we, as a greater community, can also move forward. However, it will not be due to hope, it will be because of our ability to *do* and take responsibility.

Endnotes

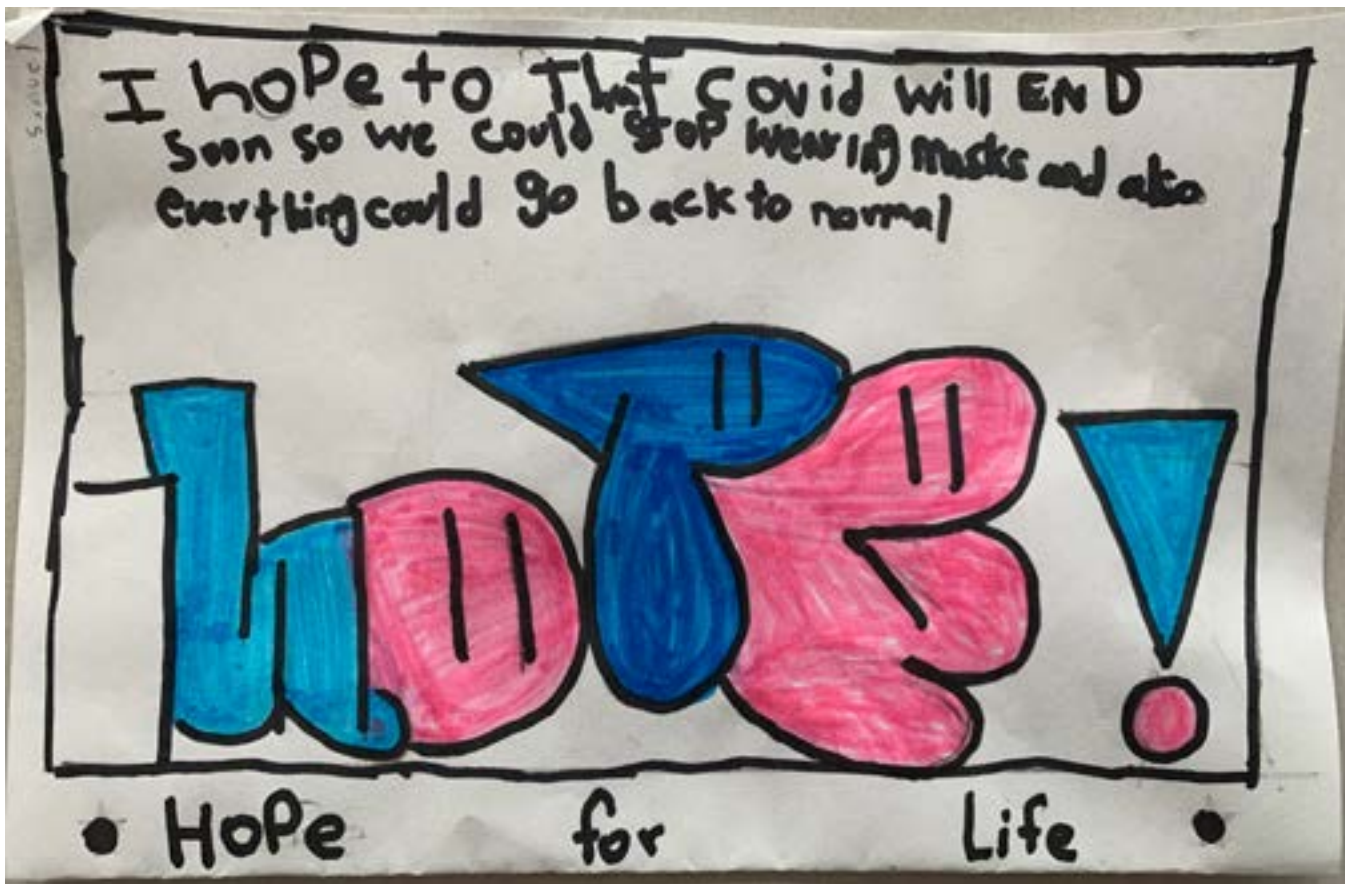
¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*. Translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 248.

²Roxane Gay, “The Case against Hope,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/06/opinion/hope-politics-2019.html>.

³Jim Key, “Half of US Adults Don’t Wear Masks When in Close Contact with Non-Household Members,” *USC Dornsife*, Jan 21, 2021. <https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/3388/understanding-coronavirus-in-america-mask-use-among-us-adults/>.

⁴Simon Critchley, “Simon Critchley on Hope,” *Reason and Meaning*, April 21, 2014. <https://reasonandmeaning.com/2014/04/21/simon-critchley-on-hope/>.

Grant Sheft lives in New York City, where he is a freshman at Horace Mann. He is extremely interested in philosophy!



SAMUEL MEJIA, Fifth-grade student, Magnolia Elementary School, Seattle, WA

Can **Hope** Still be a Virtue, a Good Experience, Even if Unreasonable?

I would say “no,” and here’s why:

NOLAN HAWKINS

For starters, hope is objective—up to the individual. Hope has different meanings, carries different weights, and guides the actions of every person in a completely unique way. By that definition, it would be both irresponsible and unrealistic to make the blanket statement, as a philosophy student, of how beneficial hope is.

Secondly, although hope puts one at ease and enables them to let their guard down, that isn’t

necessarily a good thing. A large part of the reason why humans are such a dominant species is that we have the capability to reason. That ability to reason keeps us on top of

Hope, however,
puts blinders
on the eyes
of reason.

the other far more primitive species that exist in the world. Hope, however, puts blinders over the eyes of reason—making the partaker either let their guard down completely or abdicate the responsibility to reason altogether. Take swimming in a fish tank with piranhas for example. If someone were to strap their body down with raw chicken and swim with piranhas, they would get torn apart; that is something that everybody knows. That person hoping that the piranhas don’t bite at them won’t stop that from happening; only reason can do that. Only the reasoning

of “I need to get out of here as fast as possible” can save that person.

The final core pillar of this argument is something I would call “the hopeful masses.” This is far more dangerous than individualistic hope, and as a side note: I do not think positive thinking is harmful for it has served humanity in countless ways. An example of this is during the Second World War and the bombing of England. If the thousands and thousands of people sheltering in the subways didn’t have a positive collective mentality, they would all go crazy and as a people, make sporadic actions that could have done serious damage. That, however, is far different from what I am talking about. I see one person, or a small group of people feeding false senses of hope and security to the masses as incredibly



dangerous. One can observe this with what has happened over the past year regarding COVID-19. The American President of the United States at the time, President Donald Trump, had created a false narrative that injecting bleach and hydroxychloroquine could “cure coronavirus.” As most scientists would agree, that is factually false, and that fostering of hope for a cure, drove some people who trusted the word of the President, to die.

Now, this is an extreme example, but the narrative holds true no matter what degree of extremity the circumstance is.

I will conclude my statement with this: positive thinking is great. It has driven, and currently drives humanity to do amazing things, but unchecked hope can do serious damage. It is important both on the individual and societal level to stay positive rather than hopeful.

Nolan Hawkins is a Senior at Fusion Academy in Walnut Creek, California. He will be attending American University in the Fall of 2021.



DREW WONG, Fifth-grade student,
Magnolia Elementary School, Seattle, WA

PERSPECTIVE, PERCEPTION AND

SELIN TUTAN

Hope

What do we hope for and why? Why is that hope has a much deeper and spiritual feeling in comparison to expectations? What is so important we seek that in such darkness we feel like we can overcome anything or vice versa? These were the questions I started with before composing this essay. But I found myself lost and adrift while searching for the definition of hope. It does not correspond with the definitions of words such as: “feeling”, “opinion”, “virtue”. . . So what is hope?

For me hope is simply seeing a probability, a way of exit. When there is no way out we feel hopeless. Accordingly I thought maybe experiences can express the answers I was searching for. Thus asked my friend if he remembers a time in his life that he felt that hope existed, he couldn't come up with answers in fifteen minutes. So we began reflecting on feelings and traumas or past events. We found out that the times he felt a light beam of hope is after he takes a deep dive. When he got lost, left behind, or when he had no one to call in times of need, he got scared. And don't get me wrong he is someone who has a bad memory of recalling accidents and events. But feelings trigger memories. We are keen to avoid the things that will put us in danger, most of us have anxiety when we are in an environment that we cannot recognize. Things that we cannot identify are naturally intimidating. But in the end, to not wait on his own, he pushed

himself on every occasion that he felt lost. He told himself “this should not be the end”. Events like these seem to occur without a chronological order, so naturally we begin to underestimate their occurrence. People who are spiritual or who have certain religious ideologies link these events with a sign from the heavens, while others don't believe that such things exist since it occurs without a sign, typically calling it a random event. It is random mathematically but there is a reason why we notice it and here's why. . . .

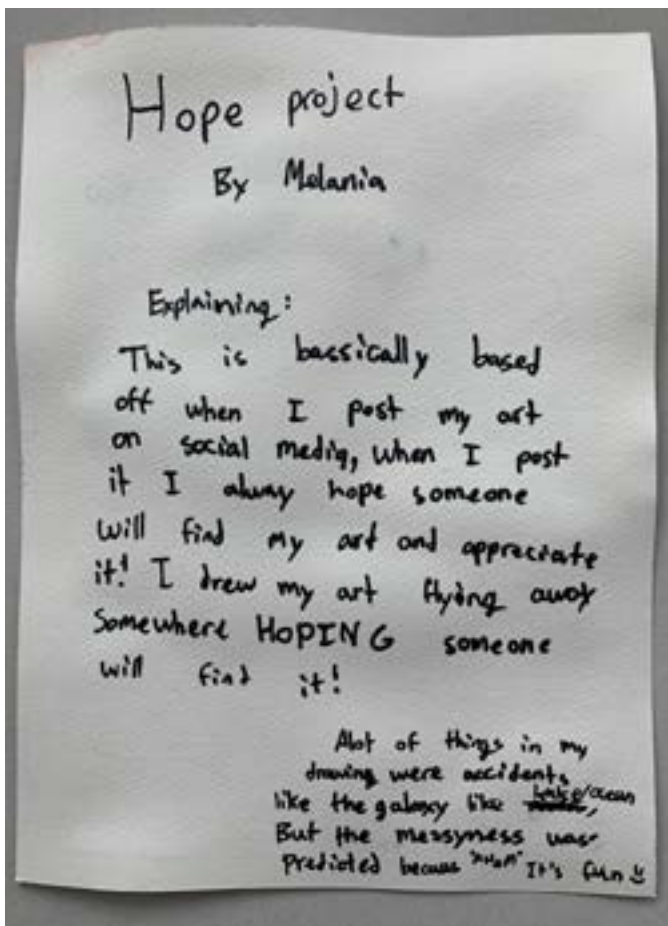
Hope comes with its own problems. We cannot simply define hope as something positive. Being positive and hopeful about an event that has negative outcomes will push you back too. When we read the stories of hope, the darkest caves that people had the chance to get out from, there is always the notion of this “out of nowhere” event that yet we are not able to describe. It is indeed

Hope is simply
seeing a
probability, a way
of exit.

inexplicable in terms of why it happens. Throughout the years people associated hope with stars, with symbols, with notions that have nothing to do with each other. But still, they were intersecting with one another. They believed that seeing a certain star in the sky would bring them a better event. In our days people do the same, we call it sending positive energy and hope to the universe. Countless and countless stories, choose which one you want to believe but there will always be someone who doesn't believe in make-believe stories. Try to experience it on your own, your perspective is peculiar. You may not interpret the same way and

eventually you would portray the same exact story in a different manner. Our perspective can never be the same yet we have so many positive outcomes from such a way of thinking. They achieve this by thinking about positive things. We could say it as preparing your brain for a positive outcome. Who is not spiritual may think that there is no such thing as sending positive energy to the universe. If we know what we search for, it will be easier to identify in a chaos thus easier to find it. So a probability of chance is always there if you want it to be there. So hope for the things you want, and you will be better at seeking and acquiring them.

Selin Tutan is an 18 years old, 11th grade student at Sainte Pulcherie French High School, Istanbul, Turkey.



MELANIA RYAZANOV, Fifth-grade student, Magnolia Elementary School, Seattle, WA

Is Hope Unrealistic and a Made up Feeling, or Logical?

EMERY MUNDIS, Junior, Sante Fe Christian School

Hope typically brings light to a circumstance and looks at the glass as half full. For example, when you have a moment of sadness or someone you care about gets hurt, you would hope that you or they would get better. Although hope can be said or used negatively, the general feeling of hope, most would say, is positive. I tend to believe that hope is a rational and logical feeling. Like Frances Bacon came up with the scientific method, hope is just as rational. Hope can actually relate to some rational steps like in the scientific method. In the midst of a tough time, you could evaluate the circumstance, look at options and alternative courses, and then choose the one that seems positive and hopeful. For example, if your friend was in the hospital and theoretically had a 10% chance of dying and a 90% chance of living, you could choose to look at the circumstance with no hope and see sadness and death, or you could look at it with a hopeful attitude because you choose to remain hopeful because scientifically there is no need to worry. This can remain true in many different circumstances. No matter the circumstances or even the science, there is always room for hope. Science can assist in providing you more comforting and reassuring hope, but you can still find hope in any circumstance.

The French philosopher, Voltaire, was seen as a person who had a tendency to pick apart, or criticize many different parts of the church. There are people today who are similar to Voltaire who look to the negative and pick out the parts they don't like about something or a circumstance. I think that even if you see all the shortcomings all the time, there is still hope but you don't notice it. It all depends on your perspective and the way you look at things. You can be like Voltaire and criticize, or look for hope. When you look for the hope

that comes from God, you look at life with a glass half full and you won't be caught up in all of the worries of life.

I think that having faith in God also provides a person with more hope. Since God is one that heals, brings restoration, and is a provider, people of faith often look to Him for help which inspires hope. There isn't a circumstance or future that God is not a part of and that generally gives a person a more positive outlook on life. Also knowing that our time here on Earth is temporary and that we can have an eternal life with God, puts more hope in awful and heartbreaking circumstances. Hope is a logical way of thinking and a great outlook on life. Instead

of someone worrying about the temporary sadness and horrible events, one can hope for a better and brighter future.

I have read bits and pieces of an essay that refers to hope as an active term. They say it can be a "response of the creature to the Infinite Being" (Marcel 1962).¹ I really like this way of viewing hope because it also shows how hope is not part of the human nature. Not something that we can create. Hope shows a natural response to a greater being. Hope can be thought of as a concept that is the greatest, it is very big and has meaning deeper than we realize. This points to the greatest being, God, similar to the ontological argument. The essence of hope is something greater than we could

Hope shows a natural response to a greater being.

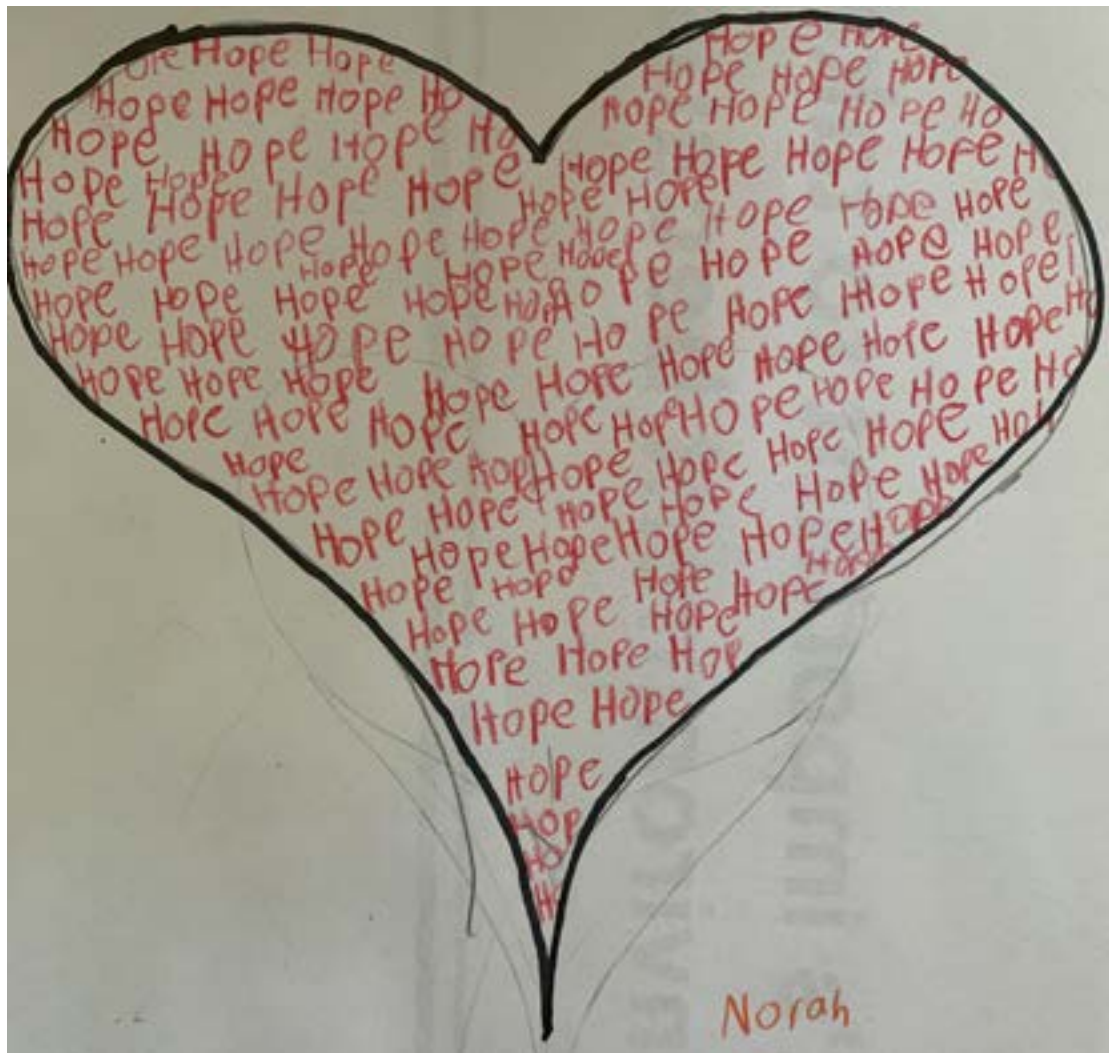
fathom. We have feelings of hope, and as Christians, eternal hope. Eternal hope has many aspects involved that we could only guess. We do not have a full understanding of what this could mean as there are many possibilities.

Hope can be very simplistic like “I hope I get an A on this test.” It can also be a mindset and attitude which affects our everyday living. Living as a person who finds their hope in God and in the greatest imaginable being, changes how we view circumstances. Troubles here on Earth quickly become very temporary and we focus on what greater things are to come. The unknown can allow us to choose to live in a state of hope, or fear. These two terms can contradict each other. Hope is positive and allows you to live in the freedom that believing

in God gives. Fear scares us into living too safe of a life and very attached to what is materialistic. Although, you can also have hope as a fearful person. If someone is sick and you are afraid for them to die, you could say “I hope they live” as a response. This reaction I think points to a greater being who is all knowing who we instinctively pray to. Hope can be seen in many different ways, but it is ultimately something so unimaginably great and fuels a person with freedom and positivity.

Notes

¹“Defining And Analysing The Concept Of Hope Philosophy Essay.” *UKEssays.com*. www.ukessays.com/essays/philosophy/defining-and-analysing-the-concept-of-hope-philosophy-essay.php



NORAH DONALDSON, Fifth-grade student,
Magnolia Elementary School, Seattle, WA

Here is a

Hopeful Poem

by Jane Nathan

Hope is a wish, stuck?
Hope might save you, hopeless?
Never heard such a thing.
You have a bit of everything in you
including hope,
hope is not powerless;
it makes your *wishing* come true!
Only if you *believe*!
Sure, hope can be used to hope for
bad things, but!
That's legendary!
Everybody wants to hope good! Right?
Hope is like a human, but just one
and only "hope,"
we must use hope the right way,
we all share it.
No matter we use it in, just make sure
it's not "hopeless."

Fifth-Grade Students Thinking About Hope

JANA MOHR LONE,
Questions, Editorial Board Member
Director, University of Washington Center for Philosophy for Children

During the pandemic, I met with a fifth-grade class from Magnolia Elementary School in Seattle every week for online philosophy sessions. In one session, we explored the meaning of hope.

We began by watching this [short film](#) and then we discussed the following questions:

What do you hope for and why?

What is hope? Is it an idea, a feeling, a virtue? Something else?

Is hope necessary for living a good life?

Can art express hope? How?

Can hope ever be a bad thing?

Can it be good to hope even if there's no good reason to do so?

Editor comment: *These are some of the thoughts and ideas they shared. You will find the students' artwork and poems throughout this issue.*

Can it be good to hope, even if there's not good reason to do so?

I believe, well I think it is, IF it makes you feel better—otherwise, why are you hoping? What is the purpose of doing it if you don't have a reason to?

Why are you doing something if you don't have a reason to? (Oh, sorry, that's another topic . . .)

—DEXTER CHINN

Hope is a good thing; it also depends on what you're hoping for. If you have no hope left, then that means you gave up, for example: if you were on a sinking ship, would you hope somebody comes and save you? Or would you be hopeless. Hope can always be a good thing, it's like a wish.

—JANE NATHAN

hope

BY HAZEL FREDERICKS

My hope lies in my mind,
Where I have been hurt.
I do not dwell in the past,
Only the current.

I image the places where I felt lonely.
Alone.

Please stay strong,
It's the only way.
I know you are hurt.
hopeless.
Hang in.
Stay strong.
You are never alone.
I am with you.



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EVA MIRSKY

Can Hope be Bad?

I think that hope can be bad, if you've been hoping for something for a long time, but it never comes/happens. For an example, you're REALLY hoping to buy that book at the store—it looks sooo good! You hope for it every day, until, finally, you give up on hoping for it, and you become drowned in self-pity. Eventually, you won't care about it, so, you won't be 'drowned in self-pity', so I guess that it won't matter, but what matters is, Is it worth hoping for something, even if it might come true—is hoping for something worth having the future of "drowning in self-pity"?

—DEXTER CHINN

What is hope?

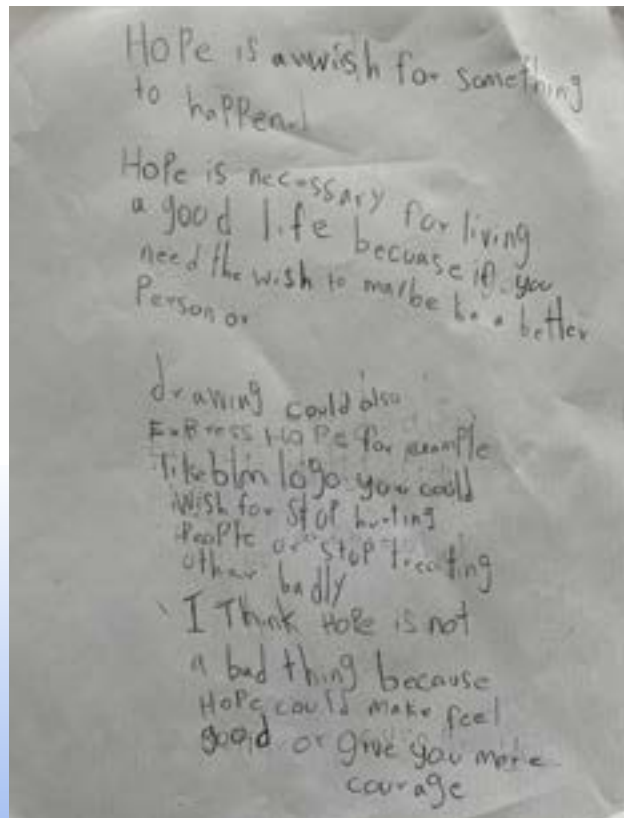
BY JOEY FABELA

It's a feeling that has lasted
since humanity started.

It keeps us together
instead of us scavenging in
pain and sorrow.

It helps us cope through everything.
It's our friend when we don't have any,
so I think hope is our friend.

BY SAMUEL MEJIA



Hope is a wish for something to happen.

Hope is necessary for living a good life, because if you need the wish to maybe be a better person or drawing could also express hope for example, like BLM logo you could wish for stop hurting people or stop treating others badly.

I think Hope is not a bad thing because Hope could make [you] feel good or give you more courage.

On HOPE

STEPHEN KEKOA MILLER

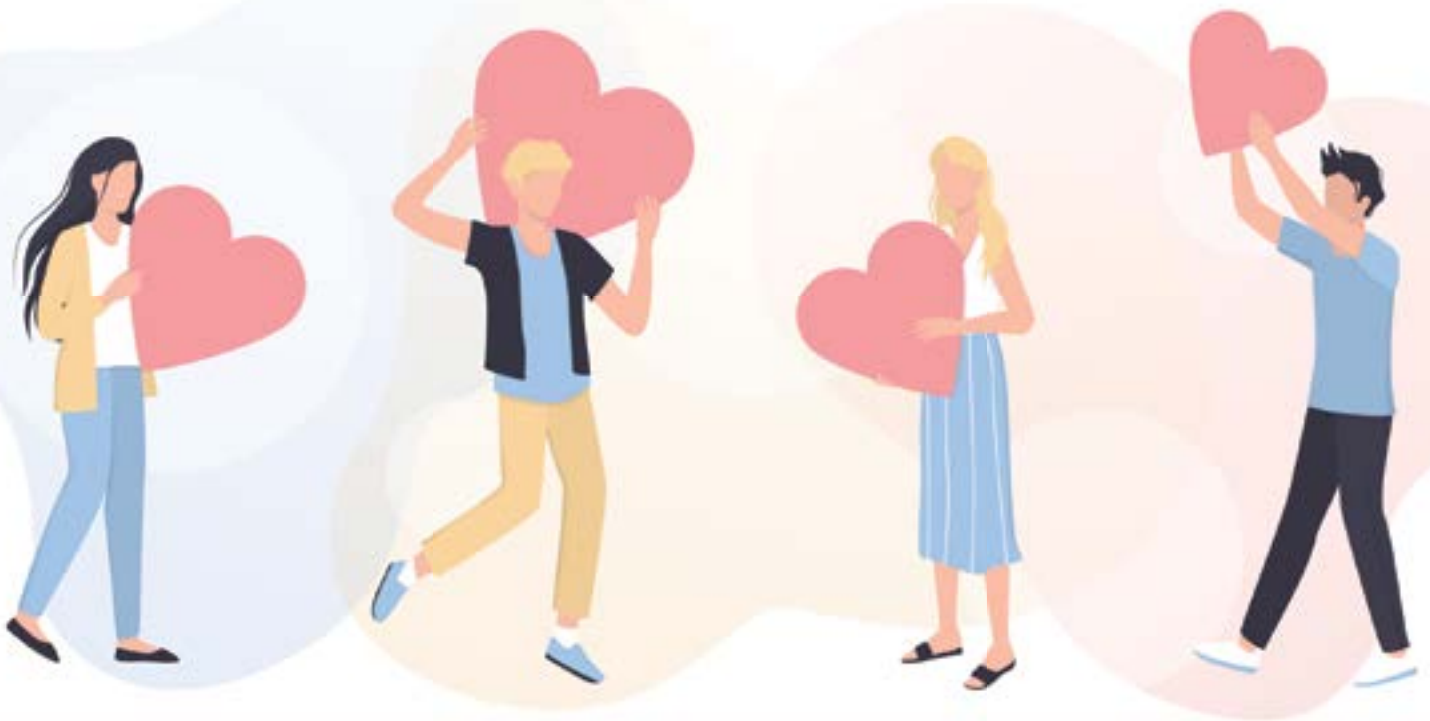
Editorial Board member, Questions

I often think back to one of the moments I was first starting to become a young activist. I saw Jesse Jackson speak quite a few times when I was about 18. He usually ended with the crowd chanting along with him in a refrain that could have come out of a James Brown song due to its insistent repetition: “Keep Hope Alive!” At the time I didn’t really have much conception of why that was important, but a chance encounter with Walt Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* changed that. In this text, Whitman tasks poets with providing a vision of what a better world would look like. In particular, he asks for a precision of

vision, something that could be used to build real change. Whitman’s claim has inspired me ever since, although he got one thing wrong: it’s a job for us all.

Hope unmoored from a specificity of vision does seem destined to dampen action. The particular challenge we face now is that some of the most malign forces in the world do have a specificity of vision. It’s much easier to imagine oppressive, unjust societies dominated by the same groups that oppose change now because those societies have existed and so are easy to think about in vivid detail.





Thus, living at what Jonathan Lear calls the “margins of understanding,”¹ we are often not able to really picture what life would and probably should look like under extremely different conditions. Mere fantasy is not useful and is usually not going to be a responsible way to conduct politics and civic affairs. It’s here that Jonathan Lear’s beautiful book introduces the idea he calls “radical hope,” stating that, “Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.”² What would it be for such hope to be justified? As

¹Lear, Jonathan. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Harvard University Press, 2008, 103.

²Ibid. 105.

we stand at the brink of unimaginable climate change, glimpsing the end of a catastrophic pandemic and desperately trying to articulate what a truly equitable society would be like, I see philosophy as being well situated to be able to help in this regard. With a long history of work towards conceptual clarity, philosophy needs to engage with this project. And given how particularly gifted younger philosophers are at thinking subjunctively, let’s get them on this: the project of rethinking *what is* by animating *what could be* with precision and detail.

SURVIVING **THE ZOMBIE** APOCALYPSE

Improving Student Engagement Through a Zombie Universe

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ANDREW ROGERS

Before the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic, I stumbled across Bryan Hall's book *An Ethical Guidebook to the Zombie Apocalypse*. I was instantly drawn to the "zombified" image of Rodin's *The Thinker* on the cover, and so I made an impulsive purchase on a rainy day. On my return home, I filed it unread on my bookshelf where it lay undiscovered—until the lockdown came.

Stories began to emerge of a changing world, a growing sense of pandemic panic and a readjustment to a new world and a new way of life—and I remembered my zombie book. With time on my hands, I began to read—and the echoes between the zombie apocalypse and COVID-19 grew more vivid and more real. It became harder to tell truth from fiction as I read of a virus that was spreading around the world, causing society to implode, law and order to breakdown and a sense of right and wrong to be blurred.

So, on our return to school, after our lockdown, I was inspired to use the zombie apocalypse as my tool to inspire my 10th-grade Philosophy elective class—most of whom were just beginning their Philosophy studies.

We began the unit using the Philosophy in Schools (P4C) approach and I used the trailer from the TV series *The Walking Dead* to generate inquiry-style questions that the students had about an imaginary zombie apocalypse. I was amazed how quickly they drew parallels with the world of the zombie universe to the lockdown they had just endured, and how keen

they were to identify and to discuss the main Philosophical issues that presented themselves in the stimulus.

Led by the students and their questions, we co-constructed a unit of study that began with Hobbes's state of nature. Did the behaviour of humans in the imaginary zombie apocalyptic universe demonstrate the truth of Hobbes's claim that life would be "poor, nasty, solitary, brutish and short?" Fresh

experiences of fights that broke out in grocery stores over supplies of toilet roll seemed to support Hobbes's claim. If people were prepared to fight over toilet paper, how would they react if more serious supplies such as food and medication were at risk?

As the course developed, the central question in our inquiry became that of the status of the



zombies. To begin our investigation of the issue, I set up a concept game. Together we defined the central terms of “moral agent” and “moral patient.” I also introduced a third category of “neither” to act as an “anchor” to our discussions. Each student was given a picture of a being or an object on a laminated A4 card. They were asked to decide on which category the “being” belonged and to justify their position using a Philosophical argument, and then place their card on the board in the allocated position. I recorded the key aspects of their premises on the board. When all the cards were placed, “challenges” were allowed to be made—which again must be supported with Philosophical argument. The aim was to achieve consensus amongst the group, which would then enable us to determine the moral status of zombies.

The beings and objects on the cards ranged from “a 20 year old woman” (designed to be the benchmark for a moral agent), “a pet dog” (intended to be the benchmark for a “moral patient”) “a rock” (intended to be the benchmark for “neither”) and many “borderline cases” such as “dolphins,” “a human foetus” “a dead human” “a human in a coma,” and “my car.”

This led to an incredibly rich discussion that captured the imagination and intellectual stimulation of the students. Whilst the original placement of the cards was quite quick, the challenges that followed were very deep, considered, and meaningful. With the cards displayed on the board, the students naturally and quickly caught onto the idea of “moral equivalence” in an echo of Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances” as they were able to make links and connections between the beings and objects. For example, discussions were conducted about whether a “human in a coma” had the same equivalence as “a human foetus,” as they both required others to care for them, to help

them reach their potential and so could be seen as morally equivalent.

But the greatest interest and most heated discussion concerned the “dead human.” The student responsible for this “being” placed it confidently in the “moral patient” category under the justification that it needed to be cared for and was therefore of moral value and should therefore be considered to be a “moral patient.” This caused great consternation amongst the students—but under the rules of the game, it could only be moved if and only if the “owner” of the card was convinced by the counter arguments.

So—many students attempted to use their reason to convince the card owner to move the “dead human” to the “neither” category, where it would sit along with “a rock” and “my car.” The reasons put forward included “it is not alive, therefore it cannot be a moral patient.” “It *used* to be a moral patient when it had a sense of awareness and was impacted by decisions that others made around it—but it is no longer a moral patient as it is now just an object with no feelings.”

Regardless of how strong a position was put forward, it was either countered or rejected outright by the student who “owned” the card. At this stage, as frustration amongst the students was starting to build, I was considering intervening to avoid a conflict arising—but then I realised that while the student’s rejections were building frustration, they had a more meaningful reaction in that it forced those holding the opposing position to go back and reformulate and improve their arguments to be more convincing. The student concerned managed to valiantly fend off all challenges—and at the end of the lesson she stayed back to ask my opinion. She then confessed that she had been of the belief that the “dead human” belonged in the “neither” category all along and that she had been playing “devil’s advocate” to see what would happen!

We would be appalled if someone were to suggest killing a person with Alzheimer’s disease because they were too much of a drain on medical resources.

This taught me a valuable lesson and showed the value of this student's methods. Usually when I teach using the concept game method, it is enough for me to hear one counter argument (and possible rebuttal) before we move on. I think the usual time constraints are the key player here—the curriculum limitations are such that we usually only have one lesson to complete the concept game or we will run out of time to complete the required syllabus points and assessments. However, the beauty of this elective subject is that there is no mandated curriculum and so we can take our time to fully explore issues. Realising how the students responded to the need to improve their arguments showed the value of this technique—and this is definitely a method I will be returning to in the future. I have a picture of Harvey Specter from the Netflix TV show *Suits* on my classroom wall with the phrase “Don’t raise your voice—improve your argument.” This was a great example of that mantra in action.

Now that we had clearly established our three categories of “moral agent,” “moral patient” and “neither,” supported with definitions and the implications considered, it provided the timely opportunity to introduce the concept of a zombie. How would this fit into the equation? I made the decision to introduce the status of “a virus” at this point too, as it was a question of status as to whether the zombie was a being in its own right—or whether it could be regarded as being controlled or manipulated by the virus.

Once again, the results from the students were surprising. One of the earliest responses was that the virus should be regarded as a “moral patient” in that it was deserving of respect—if we didn’t “look after it” then it would cause significant problems. This proved to be the consensus position—as it had no ability to “think” it could not be regarded as a “moral agent” and there was more substance to it than existing simply as a mere object such as a rock. This position had clear implications—does it mean that a virus can be destroyed? Or does it possess rights in the same way as other living beings like a dolphin?

What then of the zombie? Some students started from a position that began with the im-

plications. They clearly remembered the “*Walking Dead*” stimulus material that we began the unit with, and wanted to argue that we could treat a zombie how we liked (i.e., kill them!) as it had no moral status, and so belonged in the “neither” category.

However, whilst understandable, this position was swiftly challenged. As the zombie was being controlled by a virus, isn’t that like an illness? A comparison was made to a human in a coma and a human suffering from Alzheimer’s disease—is there a moral equivalence here? They contain many similarities—all are living humans. All are suffering from an illness that is changing their behaviours and cognitive abilities. You cannot apportion any moral blame upon the person with Alzheimer’s should any incident happen as the result of their condition—e.g., forgetting where they live while out for a walk. Both the person in a coma and the person with Alzheimer’s are clearly “moral patients” and require looking after, not being treated as objects or commodities. We would be appalled if someone were to suggest killing a person with Alzheimer’s disease because they were too much of a drain on medical resources. Could we therefore say the same for zombies?

One student quickly pointed out that the person with Alzheimer’s and the person in the coma were unlikely to kill you, and so there was a clear moral difference between them and the zombies. This enabled us to explore the question of what made something deserving of moral status—was it their behaviour, or was it something intrinsic to them as a part of who they are? We used the example of the “pet dog” (which was also a “being” on our concept game) to explore this question through the use of a thought experiment.

In our concept game, the dog had been placed



in the “moral patient” category as it was sentient being that was valued as a possession and a member of the family. As a result, it had to be treated with respect and dignity. I asked the students to imagine that the same pet dog had become infected with a disease such as Rabies. The disease is very dangerous to people and can cause death if a human is bitten. How would they then treat the dog? This gave a workable analogy for the students to then develop their reasoning. With both the rabid dog and the zombie, we now have a beloved member of the family who through no fault of their own has now become dangerous. How would we treat them?

The first and immediate concern would be to seek medical attention for the dog. As a moral agent that would be our moral obligation towards such a moral patient. However, what if such medical attention was not available? What if the rabid dog attempted to attack you? Would you then be morally justified in defending yourself with force against such a being? The students were able to recognise the connection between the rabid dog and a zombie attack and they argued that under the principle of self-defence, you would be justified in using whatever force necessary to protect yourself from being bitten and subsequently infected.

We had established the fact that zombies shared a moral equivalence with a human who was suffering from a disease such as Alzheimer's.

However, another difficult moral question arose here—the difference between killing in self-defence and killing for other reasons. I posed the question about other justifications that are given for the killing of moral patients. The students brought up the issues of food, sport (i.e., hunting) and clothing products such as leather or fur. This caused a very sombre moment in the classroom as the realization dawned that this is how our society treats “moral patients” such as farm animals. The inconsistency of the logic that says we are able to eat some “moral patients,” wear the skin of others in the form of leather—and yet enable others to enjoy pride of place on our homes as pets, was a powerful point that resonated with the students.

It took us considerably longer to reach this point—but given the rich depth of discussion and learning, I was very happy. We had established the fact that zombies shared a moral equivalence with a human who was suffering from a disease such as Alzheimer's. In terms of how they should be treated, a zombie should be treated like a pet dog (a beloved member of the family) who has contracted a dangerous illness that threatens the safety of the rest of the family. This means that preventative measures could be taken (ie killing a

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zombie) to ensure that safety—but only when being directly attacked.

My reflections on this unit of work were overwhelmingly positive. The level of learning and engagement that had taken place during this journey was utterly phenomenal. I was aware that I had not used any “outcome” to formally assess the student learning—but in this instance I did not feel it necessary. Again, the beauty of the “elective” model means that there is no expectation for the usual number of assessments. This had the added bonus that we could fully engage in the thinking and the skills and enjoy the process. I was able to provide a formal grade for the reporting process through my assessment of their contributions to the numerous community of inquiries that took place.

But the unit could easily be adapted to provide some formal assessment such as an argument construction in the form of a news article or news podcast as to the status of the zombies and how they should be treated. My original intention was to use this as a gateway to explore ethics (which I intend to explore at a later date)—however in following the students,

it turned into a moral discussion about the status of zombies which had many metaphysical aspects to it. I feel anecdotally as though the pathway it took actually strengthened the student’s confidence and development of their philosophical skill set. The student feedback was overwhelmingly positive as it presented a topic that was engaging, but also paralleled their real-life lived reality in the wake of a pandemic. This was used to improve and develop their thinking and their ability to develop an argument. There aren’t many other units or school subjects that can say that.

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Hope is losing, in a sport's game,
but hoping you can win.

Hope can be hoping that we
can fix the Earth.

So that is what hope can be.



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