

Hoping Beyond the Human

A Philosophy of Hope in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT Hope is a complex notion currently attracting a notable degree of scholarly and public attention. In particular, technological and scientific progress is frequently viewed as located somewhere on a continuum between hope and despair. Considering the many ways in which technology and hope are interlinked, in the present article I propose to look at how the latter should be understood in the digital age. In the first part of the analysis, the definition of hope will be discussed. To draw valid conclusions, notions like utopia and optimism will also be taken into account. In the second part, I consider whether the digital space should be thought of as an environment providing conditions for the enhancement of hope—or, rather, for its reduction. In the third part, the notion of “hoping beyond the human” is analyzed in relation to the debate over “sentient” machines and the psychological changes humans undergo in digital spaces. The article is meant to serve as an addition to current publications on hope, given that the focus of the latter is usually on debates surrounding humanism and/or political power. It also aims to demonstrate the necessity of paying critical attention to hope itself within the context of an understanding of technological progress.

KEYWORDS digital; hope; philosophy; utopia

INTRODUCTION

Hope is a complex notion that, given the multiple challenges humanity has had to face in recent decades, is currently attracting a notable degree of scholarly and public attention. In particular, the imminent threat of death—be it mass deaths caused by wars, natural disasters, and pandemics, or potential deaths looming on the horizon as a result of environmental pollution and technological progress—makes humanity fall into polarizing states of either despair or hope, which further become the grounds for shaping individual and collective philosophies, as well as civic attitudes and policies. Transformations of living conditions entail changes in the practice of hoping, and—on a deeper level—changes in how humanity is understood, lived through, and theorized, thus implying transformations in the understanding of hope itself: “the structure of hope is the same as the structure of man” (Godfrey 1987, 2). Publications such as Rebecca Solnit’s *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (2004), or Sarah Bakewell’s *Humanly Possible: Seven Hundred Years of Humanist Freethinking, Inquiry, and Hope* (2023), exemplify a sustained interest in hope as a notion, as well as in its practical application.

In particular, technological and scientific progress is frequently viewed as located somewhere on a continuum between hope and despair. The images provided by Benjamin Labatut in *When We Cease to Understand the World* (Labatut 2020) are illustrative of the deep sense of unrest that scientific developments have produced in the human community: the fear of extinction and the imagining of imminent death. The excessive hopes placed in science and technology are compared by the Chilean author to the death of citrus trees: “they succumb from overabundance,” “their fruits ripen all at once, whole limbs break off due to their excessive weight, and after a few weeks the ground is covered with rotting lemons” (Labatut 2020, 187, 188). This deeply pessimistic book paints a landscape of despair, rather than of hope, claiming, in relation to quantum mechanics, that “it’s as if the theory had fallen to earth from another planet, and we simply scamper around it like apes, toying and playing with it, but with no true understanding” (Labatut 2020, 187). And it is this theory that enables the rise of the space that is frequently seen as utopian, offering the promise of a digital paradise of freedom and equality. While the tenets of this utopian vision are questioned by many, it is undeniable that the increasing technological domination of many aspects of life is creating a new environment that to a large extent alters the ways in which people interact and express themselves—as described, for example, by Davide Sisto, in his *Porcospini digitali: Vivere e mai morire online* (Sisto 2022). Also, the online space is to a certain extent

an intentionally created space of hope—as noted by Shoshana Zuboff in her *Surveillance Capitalism* (Zuboff 2019a)—and an overlay on the conceptual model stemming from American utopianism (Hillis 1999).

Given the many ways in which technology and hope are interlinked, I propose in the present article to look at how hope can be understood in the digital age. The issue is multifaceted, and can be approached from various standpoints. As Godfrey (1987, 33) notes, “a full philosophical account of human hope’s desiring awaits a full philosophical account of human existence,” which would be a daunting task; therefore, only some aspects of the issue can be treated in any one piece of scholarly work. Indeed, in our present times, and given the transformations and challenges humanity is currently facing, it seems essential to consider the basic notions involved, amongst which hope stands out—and, where the latter is concerned, to do so taking into account its many functions and its practical applications.

As far as practical applications are concerned, it is important to begin our considerations with a definition of the notion of hope in the digital age. It is essential to verify how it is most often understood. To answer this question, the first part of the analysis below will seek to establish how hope can be construed in relation to digitalization, taking the literature on that subject as a point of reference. To draw valid conclusions, notions like utopia and optimism will also be taken into account, as they appear more frequently in relation to technological constructs and are related to—though not identical with—the notion of hope.

Another of the questions that can be posed is about the perpetuation of hope in the digital age. While Sisto (2022, 80) calls the digital space “*il luogo sacro della Speranza*,” it is open to doubt whether, in such a world, there is still a place for hope. Some authors—and here Zuboff comes to mind—claim that even if it will not disappear, it may be significantly reduced. The conditions for such a reduction, and arguments against that claim, will be discussed in the second part of the analysis.

A question that seems particularly salient to me is to what extent hope in the digital age is being transformed in the direction of “hoping beyond the human.” While such hope can be taken in a religious context as referring to hope vis a vis God, or as a virtue linking the human with the divine, in another, technological context it can be construed as akin to the statement that “in technology we trust,” typical of the strands of techno-progressivism that project religious sensibilities and symbolism onto technology. Also, it can be seen as an attempt to putatively ascribe the act or attitude of hoping to artificial constructs, together with sentience and consciousness, enabling the achievement of complex emotional states and the forming of

moral attitudes, etc. In connection with this point, it is necessary to consider whether the changes humanity is undergoing as a result of technological progress are impacting hope as a human virtue or attitude. These problems will be addressed in the third part of the analysis.

In conclusion, it is expected that the present article will draw attention to one of the fundamental aspects of human existence in the digital age. The positive or problematic orientation of hope is not only a matter of relevance for governments, or those dreaming of a better future, but also for the everyday functioning of humans in their environment, as well as the responsible treatment of non-human actors and the transformations and adaptations brought on by the new experiences we humans live through and the novel conditions we must operate under. It is also meant to serve as an addition to current publications on hope, given that the focus of the latter is usually directed towards debates surrounding humanism and/or political power. The article aims to demonstrate the necessity of paying critical attention to hope itself within the context of an understanding of technological progress.

DEFINING HOPE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Defining hope is notoriously difficult, even though it belongs to the universal and fundamental experiences of humanity. It is a complex notion and fulfils many functions; therefore, it is impossible to reduce it to one or two simple phenomena. It is also vital to underline its links with imagination, which is as notorious as hope when it comes to definition because of its self-referentiality. Thus, whatever can be said about hope will necessarily result in incompleteness and contradiction. Nevertheless, there have been numerous attempts to understand it and grasp how it functions. As enumerated by Godfrey (1987, 15), some of the words that can be used to describe hope are “wishing, dreaming, wanting, willing, needing, and perhaps lacking; words like pressure, drive, impulse, and appetite (the scholastic *appetitus*) might also be included.” These terms relate to an understanding of hope in terms of desire; however, by no means is this the only dimension within which it can be considered. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* asserts that, as a compound attitude, hope is made up of both conative¹ and cognitive aspects: i.e., desire and belief. The scope of these two terms, and the difficulty they pose when it comes to formulating their definitions, speaks volumes about the complexity and opaqueness of hope as a notion.

1. i.e. involving conation, in the sense of the mental faculty of desiring, wishing, or entertaining a purpose.

What is more, as Godfrey (1987, 19) notes, the oft-distinguished kinds of hope, hoping-for and hoping-that, overlap to a large extent: i.e., to say we hope for something is the same as saying that we hope that something will occur that will enable the attainment of the thing hoped for. Hope-in something, on the other hand, concerns situations which challenge the horizons of likelihood and possibility of the outcome that is hoped for. Normally, it is assumed that the thing hoped for is obtainable; however, the outcome is not certain. When we use the phrase “hope-in,” we delimit and shape the incoming data, and segregate it to fit the scenario in which hopes are placed. Also, it involves the affective states of trust and love, which serve as filters for the data while being free from calculative and desiderative components. Thus, it can be seen that the landscape of hope extends from imagination, through desire, calculation and belief, to trust and love, permeating many areas of interest. Where each of these areas is concerned, different features of hope will stand out.

In the context of the digitalization of everyday experience, what is most common is that the word “hope” is used as a synonym for optimism—something which obscures any possible debate that one might wish to initiate in connection with the topic. When pursuing a discussion of hope, it must be made clear that it is very different from the latter. Optimism is generally considered a passive expression of a belief to the effect that things will turn out well and thus do not require any action. What is more, it is frequently naïve, non-collective, and non-universalistic (Bloeser and Stahl 2022; Costello 2020), and therefore tends to involve a glossing over of the question of the common good and the role of human agency there. Hope, on the other hand, requires courage and belief in the common good—as well as in universal values worth fighting for. It ought not to be naïve; rather, it should be backed up with an evidenced conviction as to the rightness of the outcome that is hoped for. Considering these differences, one is tempted to say that the entirety of the debate surrounding digital optimism lacks relevance to any real discussion of hope. At the same time, though, it must be understood that the debate about the optimism invested in the digitalization of the world is to a certain extent also a debate about an instance of hope-in; thus, one should not dismiss the critics of techno-optimism² or too swiftly reject the simplistic hopes-vs-fears polarization advocated in many academic and popular circles. As Seneca claims, in his *Letters from a Stoic*, “Fear keeps pace with hope. Nor does their so moving together surprise me;

2. by which I mean what usually manifests itself as an uncritical embrace of technological solutions as ways to solve problems.

both belong to a mind in suspense, to a mind in a state of anxiety through looking into the future” (Seneca 1969, 8). While hope, as more than simply an emotion, cannot be reduced to a certain happy-go-lucky attitude, wishful thinking, or just the opposite of fear, these considerations surely form a part of what it is or might be.

It is also worth noting that in the discourse surrounding cyberworlds,³ hope is usually present not in the form of stand-alone reflections on that topic, but rather as reflection transposed from some other discourse. A good example here is furnished by articles relating to migration and the raising of migrants’ political hopes, with the digital world constituting a more equal and democratic space for political participation—or their putative increase in both cognitive and conative capacity thanks to the use of new media. In the latter case, it is understood that not only does digitalization provide hope for migrants in respect of gaining the knowledge they need and maintaining affective bonds with their home culture, but the increase in conative capacity also constitutes an enlargement of their capacity to hope, and to build on this hope for a better future (Herz, Lalander and Elsrud 2022; Twigt 2018).

The hope for a better future evokes utopian imaginaries that are inseparably linked to cyber, digital, and virtual worlds. These are part of a bigger trend, techno-utopianism: a supreme example of “hope-in”—in this instance a hope placed in technology, but also one that filters the data to fit a vision of a certain expected outcome. Again, like with optimism, it would be a mistake to use the words “utopia” and “hope” synonymously, even if they are to a large extent interlinked and mutually dependent. A more correct understanding would treat hope as furnishing a precedent for utopia—its foundation and imperative; that does not mean, however, that each hope is utopian, or that, somehow, utopia provides a horizon for hope. As was demonstrated, for instance, by Gabriel Marcel (1952), even terminally ill people may exhibit hope for a future that does not include them—so-called “absolute hope.” This is not so where utopian hope is concerned: survival is key to the imagining of a better future. More broadly, since utopian thinking tends towards collectivism, the survival involved would not be just that of the individual with their hope, but rather that of the whole community, however the latter is defined.

3. I employ this here as general term to signify more or less structured digital and virtual environments, especially those constructed with the aim of human immersion. As such it is related to the notion of “cyberspace,” proposed by William Gibson as a way of referring to digitally interconnected spaces.

Utopian hope should ideally be both rational and radical: rational in respect of its grounding in reality and creation of plausible blueprints for a new society, and radical in terms of its doing away with what one holds to be evil in the present system (Soniewicka 2022). Hope's transformative potential is also to be stressed here. However, there is a far-reaching debate about the possibility of such hope in digital spaces. On the one hand, there are commentators like Andrew Pilsch (2017), with their detailed distinction between "Utopia" (radical change) and "utopia" (ideology) in relation to the development of technology, who argue in defense of the promise of technological development. On the other, there are many who claim that instead of helping to build a new model of society, digital utopias result in just the opposite: some kind of sociophobia (Rendueles 2017), fragmentation, isolation and exclusion (Zuboff 2019a; Sisto 2022).

As we can see, there is an ongoing debate about hope in digital spaces. Nevertheless, it is oftentimes misdirected, unbalanced, or clouded, owing to the use of terms that are related to it but differently charged. The image of hope that emerges from the debate as it currently stands would tend to be a rather negative one, with hope being implicitly naïve and irrational. In more practical contexts, it seems to be reduced to hope of an exclusively political sort. Considering what can be said about it at a general level, it is striking how limited the definition of hope in digital spaces seems to be, if we take as a basis for this how the word and its semantic relatives are used. One could venture the claim that the cause of this misinterpretation of hope is rooted in an imbalance in respect of beliefs and desires that are constitutive of the phenomenon but turn out misshapen, reconfigured, or inflated on entering the digital world. Does the amplification of the number, intensity and quality of emotional states somehow increase the experience of hope? Does the substantial change in how we experience emotions in digital worlds alter the practice of hoping? How does the cognitive uncertainty and multiplicity of data and narratives present in social media impact the cognitive aspects of hoping? Many of these considerations appear in the debate in various contexts; in the next part of the article, they will be related to the question of the transformation of hope as such.

HOPE *REDUX* OR *REDUCTA*?

Considering the above, one is bound to ask the question of whether, in digital worlds, hope is increased or intensified, or, conversely, reduced. Consequently, there are two theses that can be proposed: one, that with the digitalization of desire and belief hope will be enhanced, and the other, that conjoined with those processes it will be reduced. In both cases, we can talk

about hope as such, and the human ability to hope. In the paragraphs below, I will consider these two theses with a view to determining whether the digital space should be thought of as an environment providing conditions for the enhancement of hope, or as exerting, instead, a damaging influence on our abilities and practices in respect of hoping.

The first thesis assumes that the digital space provides better access to information and multiple new ways to express and experience emotions; at the same time, it is something intangible, fulfilling as it does the criterion of difficulty as regards the attainment of the object of hope. Thus, it is prone to generating multiple new hopes, and to strengthening the patterns leading to the formulation of certain hopes, without actually granting their object. Twigt (2018), in an article published in *Social Media and Society*, relates an interesting case, relevant to the present discussion. She studied the mediation of hope via new means of communication within Iraqi refugee households in Jordan. She describes how the refugees combat despair by creating and strengthening transnational emotional connections with their close ones while also learning more about the world outside of Jordan, where this helps to delineate plausible horizons for hope. She stresses that hope is necessarily linked with the imagining of a better future, and juxtaposes this better future with “no future” and the experience of immobility. According to data from 2015, forced migrants on average spend between 20 and 26 years in “prolonged conditions of displacement” (Doná 2015), which can understandably foster despair rather than hope as regards any sort of favorable changes to their situation. However, thanks to such means as Voice-over-IP communicators (e.g., Skype), they can strengthen the digital presence of their relatives in their current households, maintaining a form of digital intimacy with them. Thanks to the Internet and TV, and the testimony of their faraway relatives, they can learn about the realities of the things they desire, and thus build more realistic plans and hopes. The example given in the article is the American Dream, which is sustained rather than challenged by factual evidence pertaining to life in the USA. As much as it can be claimed that the mediation of hope and despair through narratives and special objects (e.g., memory- and identity-holders) is an age-long practice, so the use of digital technologies makes it more multilayered and immediate. Thus, one could venture to assert that digital technologies provide spaces of hope for those who would likely otherwise have lost it.

The enhancement of the cognitive and conative dimensions in digital spaces holds true not only for migrants, but also in many other contexts. The emotional connections we form on social media, and the knowledge we acquire, shape our horizons on an everyday basis. They also alter our

mindscape and our psychologies (see, e.g., Sisto 2022), for better or for worse. Such enhancement and change, while it can be seen as beneficial (as in the above example), need not be so. Neither does it necessarily mean that the enhancement in question signifies an improvement or substantial transformation in respect of our ability to hope. While it provides more space for imagination, and more emotional and cognitive stimuli, the current state of research does not support the claim that hope somehow fares better in digital spaces. If anything, it is more potent in generating its less commendable consequences, like the previously mentioned naïve optimism or wishful thinking. For one thing, virtual intimacy does not really meet the conditions for actual co-presence of the sort furnished by physical intimacy. It is an ersatz phenomenon, which in the end increases longing and suffering and becomes a tool for biopolitical governance (see, e.g., Zuboff 2019a; 2019b; Herz, Lalander, and Elsrud 2022). Under certain conditions, like those of forced migrants, “hope is seen as necessary to survive and maintain an identity in a cruel and dismissive world” (Herz, Lalander, and Elsrud 2022), and digital tools would seem to help prolong hope when other means fail. They also prove more relevant than traditional storytelling or object-keeping. One could say that hope is enhanced only inasmuch as it “promotes rational agency” (Bloeser and Stahl 2022): that is, in contexts where true information is provided, supporting the formation of beliefs and strengthening an understanding of the actual situation, along with emotional connections that are free, or reasonably free, from the ills stemming from the digitalization of interpersonal communication (such as the dispersal of attention between multiple speakers, lack of eye contact, moderated content, etc.).

If such conditions are not met, then the second thesis, which is certainly prevalent in the literature on the subject, would hold true where hope in digital spaces is concerned: that hope is in fact reduced rather than enhanced. This pessimistic vision stems from a broad critique of digitalization and neoliberal governance more generally, where these are seen as interlinked phenomena. One such critique has been carried out by the German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han, in his book on psychopolitics. He differentiates between affects and sentiments, and draws attention to the fact that the latter can be narrated, and that such narratives open new spaces, are durable and amenable to structuring, whereas affects cannot be narrated, are fleeting, exist without structure, and only seek to be discharged. This is an important differentiation when it comes to considering hope in digital spaces, as Han further claims that digital communication fosters affects rather than sentiments. Thus, we can see that the amplification of the

conative part of hope can be regarded as uneven within the digital environment, introducing as it does an imbalance of unstructured desire over emotion that can be self-directed, and so potentially limiting individual agency. This does not mean that the mass of affects generated within digital spaces cannot be governed or guided. Han calls this specific governance of human emotions “psychopolitics,” while Shoshana Zuboff goes so far as to call it the new totalitarianism (“instrumentarianism”). She claims that virtual worlds utilize our need to belong, and the need for “a new home, in which our hopes for the future can nest and grow” (Zuboff 2019a, 5). These hopes, though, seem to be inflated in a dangerous way, as in the above-mentioned case of the Iraqi refugees, who suffer because of the sense of unfulfilled promise, prolonged longing and dispersed absence—instead of any sort of presence that would be such as to allow them to focus on the relations and situation at hand. It is worth noting that according to Zuboff, strong negative emotions, like fear, anguish, pain and suffering, lend themselves especially to being utilized and monetized in digital spaces, fueling online behaviors that are exploitable by large corporations and governments.

Such emotions can be produced by, among other things, acting on the cognitive sphere. While in the example used in the discussion of the first thesis digital spaces provided access to knowledge likely to enhance the practice of hoping, in the era of post-truth and hyper-history (Watkins 2014) there is an abundance of fake news, subjective narrations and alternative facts that do not serve the development of hope. Spinoza argued that people are governed by hope and fear, and consequently are prone to pay heed to false beliefs (Bloeser and Stahl 2022). While hope, in the context of this statement, would probably signify naïve emotionality, which can be differentiated from rational hope, it does draw attention to the fact that an inflating of a particular aspect of hope as an emotion is linked to our susceptibility to the products of post-truth technologies. Again, like with the conative aspect of hope, the general debate here introduces differences between various types of cognitive phenomena—especially information and knowledge—that in digital spaces arguably become indistinguishable because of the impairment to critical thinking that occurs. It has been claimed that the confusion between these two is created intentionally, and ultimately leads to dehumanization (Farrell, Ángel and Vahl 2018). It is also necessary to mention the role of artificial intelligence and semi-autonomous bots that can create a barrage of “facts” and information that is further disseminated by both human users and algorithms driven by the patterns of clickability.

As was mentioned before, for it to be sustained in the digital world the cognitive aspect is very important in shaping actual hope. In cases of high

uncertainty, its cognitive side is very much weakened, as is its link with imagination. The lack of reliable data makes it impossible to imagine plausible scenarios, and the hoping subject can end up in a world of pure fantasy. In contradistinction to imagining and creative thinking, fantasizing does not take into account the reliability of the visions proposed, which can be distorted and inapplicable to reality. The gaps in the data may be filled in with wishful thinking or fears, resulting in deficient cognitive systems and augmenting anxiety rather than assuaging it. On the other hand, the danger underlined by Farrell, Ángel and Vahl (2018) is not necessarily that of a lack of certainty: rather, it is the uncritical acceptance of any piece of information found on the Internet—and so that of excessive certainty. As hope always involves some uncertainty, knowledge—especially fake knowledge based on fake facts—effectively destroys the possibility of hoping. Such an overabundance of information, even if true, would also be likely to impair the creation of a coherent knowledge system of the kind that may itself provide a basis for hoping: not only because of the insufficient capacities of the individual mind to process information, but also because of the lack of time for reflection, evaluation, and internalization of the knowledge to be obtained from those items of information. Thus, regardless of whether digitalization tends towards an increase of certainty or uncertainty, the trend would seem to be for it to more often than not impair the creation of actual hope, while fostering the rise of false hopes and illusions.

Putting together the arguments connected with the first and second theses, it can be stated that only certain, undesirable kinds of hoping are amplified in digital spaces. This is due to the imbalance in the various constitutive parts of the conative and cognitive aspects of hoping that is introduced along with digitalization. It can lead to the creation of false hopes, and to undertaking actions spurred by these hopes. The greatest threats to the practice of hoping in digital spaces come from a lack of preparedness for dealing with these spaces and their characteristics. Whereas some features of digital spaces—like increased connectivity, access to information, a perspective arrived at from multiple points of view, and alternative safe spaces—can, in fact, promote hope, they are quite demanding when it comes to the conditions individuals have to meet to enjoy this type of digital hoping. Digital intimacy, for example, necessitates the development of affective affordances and their effective management. The abundance of information involved calls for critical thinking skills and digital literacy, more often than not requiring expert knowledge right from the outset. The elements of psychopolitical management deployed in digital spaces calls for a certain immunity to manipulation and aggressive persuasion.

In the end, critics stress that even if hope is increased or amplified, this only serves to amplify a suffering that is never going to be assuaged, as the hopes placed in digital “homes” can only be temporary. In the long run, they hamper both individual and collective agency, and encourage passive attitudes uncharacteristic of hope itself. In consequence, digital spaces, at least as they currently stand, seem rather to reduce than enhance hope, which partially explains the barrage of criticism directed towards digital hoping by contemporary commentators.

HOPING BEYOND THE HUMAN

The sheer multiplicity of co-actors in the digital spaces making up so-called “Society 5.0,” along with their increasing autonomy, prompts many to ask questions about “conscious” or “sentient” machines and the patterns of interaction humans are developing with them. Often, the latter are influenced by animistic or panpsychist views, ascribing to such machines features of human psychology. Sometimes, the actors in digital spaces are deified, as happens in cults like Godhead.⁴ The very human tendency to project one’s own features onto animate and inanimate co-actors in the environment raises questions about hope as an intrinsically human feature. Bearing in mind the components subjected to analysis here—namely, belief and desire—we shall leave aside the question of hope as a virtue. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that hope somehow always points to a reality beyond the human, and motivates the hoping subject to reach out for what lies beyond them. In this sense, it can be said to be more potent than the imagination, as the latter has its limits grounded in sensory experience, whereas we can hope for an experience of something we have not seen. It has much in common with the sense of longing, and with feelings of incompleteness and lack of fulfilment in respect of one’s present situation or condition. Reaching beyond, therefore, would constitute a paradigmatic movement of hope. How this “beyond” is defined frequently depends on the hoping subjects themselves: for example, it may be a longing for the restoration of a prelapsarian state of humans on a path of spiritual development, for fulfilment through reciprocal human love, or a longing to transcend and connect with the non-human environment, as with technology and nature.

As should be clear from the preceding sections, to date, many hopes have been placed in technology, and the digital space has been called a “sacred

4. I am referring here to the Way of the Future, a Silicon Valley-based religion that aims to “develop and promote the realization of a Godhead based on artificial intelligence and through understanding and worship of the Godhead contribute to the betterment of society” (Harris 2017).

place of hope.” It seems natural for the movement of hope to reach beyond the human, or, at the very least, beyond the individual. Still, within the pansychist and animistic interpretations of the development of technology (e.g., Shaviro 2014), as well as with the rise of smart technology, companion bots, deepfakes, artificial friends, and other products that effectively mimic human emotional states, questions are frequently being asked about the ability of these products to achieve emotional states similar to human ones. Time and again, the debate about the emergence of conscious or sentient machines takes on renewed intensity, most recently with the development of large language models (LLMs) (see, e.g., Luscombe 2022) and artificial friends (like those generated by Replika) (see, e.g., Rubio 2021). While we may wonder about the ability of machines to experience complex emotional states, it is not often the case that artificial subjects are asked about their hopes. Rather, in order to gauge whether they possess a sense of transience, they are asked about their fears. If we consider hope to be a compound of belief and desire, then taking into account what has been said in earlier parts of this article, we might claim that artificial subjects are indeed better prepared to deal with the huge amount of information available in digital spaces, at least at the surface level. They can make predictions, and—in a certain sense—“desire” a particular outcome, insofar as this desire has been pre-programmed. An example of such a “hope” would be programming a machine with the “desire” to generate the entirety of the number π , or to diagnose patients in the most effective manner possible, with the least data. Such a design would be rare indeed, as machines are constructed for the sake of the fulfilment rather than lack of fulfilment of a given goal: as their makers we expect them to arrive at an answer, not to pursue the latter indefinitely.

If we can, in a certain sense, speak of artificial hope, we might ask why this hope is insufficient to be considered on a par with human hope. This is directly linked to the anthropological perspective assumed in the present discussion. In a simple naturalistic-mechanistic vision of human beings, there is little difference between man and machine; therefore, machines can hope. On another paradigm, differences will appear inasmuch as human beings will be ascribed features that lie beyond any naturalistic-mechanistic vision. The difference between unbound hope and the “bound” hope of machines would be best described with reference to virtual environments such as provide the users with only seeming freedom of movement and action, in that the landscape for this movement and action is limited by prior programming. And since, as has been said, hope has its roots in incompleteness, whatever has been predesigned does not fulfil this criterion. Even if

machines could hope, the horizon of their hoping would for the most part be limited.

There are many more questions that can be raised in relation to the idea of “hoping beyond the human.” One of them might be considerations pertaining to artificial agents as producers of hope. Can a relationship with an algorithm result in an intensification or alteration of hope? Or, by extension, are digital spaces themselves the aforementioned “sacred place of hope”: somewhere in which humanity places its hopes, or in which they are fulfilled? Finally, can hope be extended far enough to lead humans to imagine a world without themselves? Can we hope for a space that does not include us?

Artificial agents can certainly engender hope in their human users on many levels, confronting them with new pieces of information, or fanning their desires. Research into so-called “electronic emotions” (Vincent and Fortunati 2009; Zwart 2017) demonstrates how gadgets are pre-programmed to manipulate their users to feel a certain way, where those feelings subsequently prompt them to act in a certain desired manner. The hope of achieving something (e.g., scoring a certain number of points) is relatively innocuous, but the hope of an emotional investment being reciprocated and the formation of an attachment on the part of a human user might need to be viewed as potentially dangerous—as ending in passivity and suffering, rather than fulfilment. Artificial agents certainly possess the ability to intensify and alter patterns of human hoping, and as such merit closer attention.

Digital space, as a space of hope, presents us with a complex problem. Like in the previous case, we could ask about the quality of the hopes invested in technologically mediated and reproduced environments and relations. Many hopes and dreams are thwarted right from the start—for instance, the dream of digital equality or justice. Digital spaces have the potential to become spaces of illusion and manipulation, affording unhealthy forms of escapism and overstimulation that are difficult to control, synthesize and direct. However, at the same time they can become sites for the transmission and intensification of hope in many other senses. They can become a place of hope inasmuch as they facilitate an encounter with the Other. This is surely not unproblematic, though, as actors in digital spaces are also prone to adjusting this experience so as to avoid actual vulnerability and the unbearable difference that the Other—human or non-human—brings with itself, and so may end up in narcissistic isolation. Still, as long as there remains space for reflection, and as long as humans learn to work on their bonding strategies effectively with the use of new tools, the multiple

ways in which the digital environment stimulates people to reach beyond themselves remains noteworthy.

Given that our hopes somehow take us beyond the hoping subject, it is no wonder that they reach towards different non-human realities, technology included. When it comes to that last issue, there has been ample consideration of the possibility of hoping in desperate situations. Gabriel Marcel writes about the “absolute hope” displayed by people who have no chance of survival. As can be seen, this is very different from how hope would be considered in a political context or in utopian studies: an ideal society that is hoped for cannot exclude the hoping subject. What is fundamental for the hope that appears in a desperate situation is the realization that there are values that live on, even if the life of the individual comes to an end. Empathizing with others, we can hope for the best possible outcome for them—e.g., for subsequent generations—and work for a future we are not going to see ourselves. To be able to hope in such a manner, machines would need to be able to empathize, and so possess a capacity for imagination above and beyond simple reproductive-productive patterns, embracing more complex functions (Kind 2016, 7–9) not limited by the famous three laws of robotics,⁵ which from the start assume the sacrificability of machines.

Humans are not subject to pre-programmed laws, yet they exhibit absolute or heroic hope with respect to other humans. Contemporarily, though, there is also a certain trend in the direction of thinking of a “world without us” (Weisman 2017), which assumes the sacrificing of the human for the sake of the better functioning of the non-human environment. Usually, though, this hope is extended towards the natural environment, not the technological one. Indeed, technology comes to be presented as, if anything, the last resort. According to the ecomodernist vision promoted by the Breakthrough Institute,⁶ humans could be confined to large isolated cities in order to let the environment beyond heal itself. There also exist, in the context of science-fiction, imagined cases of people uploading their minds into the digital sphere, where this is supposed to ensure their survival

5. The three laws of robotics come from the 1942 short story “Runaround” by Issac Asimov; they state that (1) robots cannot injure human beings or cause harm to them through inaction, (2) robots have to follow the orders of human beings apart from when they conflict with (1), and (3) robots should protect their own existence so long as this does not conflict with either (1) or (2).

6. This is an institute based in California promoting an ecomodernist perspective in environmental studies, where the latter involves embracing technological solutions to ecological issues.

in the wake of the consequences of the climate crisis and/or pollution, or of some natural disaster striking the world. Technology, therefore, seems to be intimately connected with the human hope for survival; after all, it is man-made, and works as an extension of the human mind and human skills in manufacturing.

When reflecting on human hope, talk of a “beyond” touches upon its most essential quality, and can be related to many realities. A simple belief in salvation through technology is tantamount to a misunderstanding in this respect: replacing human relationships and religion with artificial spaces and agents is nothing short of a mistake, resulting from a superficial treatment of the subject. There are reasons why technology can be considered a reservoir of hope for humans—if only because it allows them to dream about extending their existence or experience Otherness in a controlled environment, and to form and maintain bonds. On the other hand, it can be a tool for creating or facilitating hope in humans, and should not be considered an end in itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Summing up these reflections on hope in the digital age, it can be stated that one can indeed expect a transformation of hoping, given the alterations occurring to the cognitive and conative spheres of human life. It is natural to expect some changes—though currently, the overall assessment of these is a rather negative one. This pessimistic view concerns primarily the socio-political, i.e. practical, aspects of hoping. As far as the psychology of hope, or its spiritual aspects, is concerned, not much has been studied to date, as the assessment of the digitalization of human life in these areas is ongoing and the incoming data still relatively new. Thus, the long-term effects remain unknown, and philosophical reflection on hope in the digital age must be considered a work in progress: a work, though, that is necessary and relevant.

The main part of that work, it seems, will consist in defining hope, along with its careful differentiation from terms that are used synonymously in commentaries of a general kind. Subsequently, the conative and cognitive aspects of hope, already widely discussed, should be related to the possibility of human hoping. Of particular relevance will be questions raised by psychopolitics, with its distinction between desires and affects, and the balance between certainty and uncertainty in digital spaces. Finally, the topic of hoping beyond the human, which forms a part of the broader discussion surrounding the possible sentience of artificial constructs, should also be rendered more inclusive of questions pertaining to the formation

of bonds and expectations connected with the spiritual and psychological aspects of human beings. Today, what we are witnessing is a trend in the direction of replacing, perhaps all too easily, human contact or religion with technology, which probably should only be seen as an intermediary. The mediation of contact, and the mediation of experience, are important as such, as they impact the ultimate quality of hope itself. “Beyondness,” rather than a replacing of one reality with another, may therefore prove to be one of the key features that stands out in the debate over hope in the digital age.

So how should we define hope in relation to that context? Considering it from the point of view of psychology, as was done in the above discussion, we could state that hope can be seen as hope-in, in the sense of entertaining a belief in technology and digital spaces as solutions to numerous crises humanity is facing, and as an expression of the insufficiency of other perspectives. One is tempted to say that this insufficiency resonates with the echoes of disappointment with tangible solutions, and—more broadly—with naturalistic and materialistic visions of the world. Digitalization seems to be located in between the tangible and the intangible. Some features of this space enhance hoping, but make it difficult to control and direct. In particular, this holds true for the tendency to indulge in fantasies based on the illusions the digital world offers. Hope in digital worlds can be seen as unbalanced, and as calling for an ability to undertake more discrete forms of analysis, as well as many other competencies, that ought to be developed for the purpose of functioning in digital environments. Bearing that in mind, it would be interesting and worthwhile to try viewing hope as a virtue. Such considerations, while not within the scope of the present article, would nevertheless constitute an essential continuation of it, bringing into play at the same time a broader theoretical background.

It is true that only after the process of digitalization is over will its more rounded assessment be possible. Even so, along with the existing tendency to debate such profound philosophical questions as death or personhood in the context of digitalization, a discussion about hope seems like a necessary addendum to reflections on the changing human condition. The technological developments that are ongoing may incline one to think in terms of beyondness, of incompleteness, and of uncertainties— notions naturally linked to that of hope. Thus, we might say that even just by virtue of their quality of being “under construction,” digital spaces invite and fuel an interest in the philosophy and practice of hoping, teasing the imagination to reach out towards this concept that is so hard to define—yet also, somehow, familiar to everyone.

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