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ANDREW CHIGNELL: So I'm not saying philosophy is always the appropriate thing, but I do think that getting clear about what exactly the challenge is, especially in these confusing moments, what sorts of beliefs we're looking to preserve, what we might have to give up — this can have more than a merely philosophical payoff in the seminar room, it can help people cope.

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HOST: Hello and welcome to "We Roar." With coronavirus launching new waves of disruption, we're asking Princetonians everywhere to share how they're living and working through the crisis, how they're adapting to fast-moving developments, and how they're thinking about a post-COVID future. In this episode, we hear thoughts about hope and despair from a professor of philosophy.

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ANDREW CHIGNELL: I'm Andrew Chignell. I'm a Princeton professor in the religion and philosophy departments, also in the Center for Human Values. My research has been largely in the history of Western philosophy, focusing on one of the great Western philosophers, Immanuel Kant. He has this portion of his great book, "The Critique of Pure Reason," where he says the three most important questions in philosophy are: What can we know? What ought we to do? But also, the third one: What may we hope?

And that's an unusual question in philosophy. It sort of elevates hope to the top of this list that philosophers think about, so that it goes beyond mere greeting card sentiments, or political slogans. I've been thinking, following Kant, about hope and related states like optimism and despair and pessimism in my research over the last few years. And naturally, when this thing happened in March and the coronavirus crisis, I started thinking about that in a way informed by my research on hope.

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So I think of the virus as in some sense the product of a bad kind of hope. A hope that the virus would not transmit to humans. A hope that it wouldn't transmit to this part of the world. A kind of hope on the part of various individuals and policymakers that led us to fail to take precautions, fail to follow the rules, fail to respond to data in ways that have now been catastrophic.

I've also been thinking about how another kind of hope can play an important role in our response to this as individuals. How do we cultivate hope in ourselves that will somehow be productive, that will allow us to be in a position to try to make a difference if and when we can. So two sides of hope, both of which I think, have come out really profoundly in the current crisis.

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I think this distinction between bad hope and good hope is really key. And I also think it's particularly key for younger people. It seems like the students that we are teaching now — you know, they're 19, 20, 21 years old. So they were born around or into the 9/11 crisis, the series of wars. They became conscious of the news cycle at the time of the recession. Then there was the financial crisis, and the crash, and unemployment. And then there were a series of controversial elections.

Now there's the pandemic. There's sort of racial strife on the streets. So I feel like these people, their entire lives, we've been in this contested situation. And you look at them, I think there is a sense in which they're used to this pendulum swing between hope and despair.

So what can philosophy contribute? And in some sense, the answer is: We're not empirical scientists, we're not policymakers, but we can bring a certain kind of conceptual clarity — a humility that involves asking questions and seeking for a kind of distinctness regarding what's happening, what we're feeling, that I think can be enlightening. But I do think that getting clear about what exactly the challenge is, especially in these confusing moments — what sorts of beliefs we're looking to preserve, what we might have to give up — this can have more than a merely philosophical payoff in the seminar room, it can help people cope.

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I realize that doesn't sound like much, that in the face of one of the biggest crises we've faced in a generation, philosophers come offering conceptual distinctions. But I think clarity and distinctions can actually bring a kind of existential comfort. The unrest we're seeing now is clearly motivated by pessimism on all sides — understandable, justified pessimism. Systematic racism, grinding poverty, months of quarantine, economy in tatters, and then kindled by this egregious act of brutality against George Floyd — people are robbed of their expectation that things are getting better or even going to return to normal or stay stable.

But some of the protesters, I think, are clearly combining that pessimism with hope. Good hope is realistic. It's refusing to look away from problems and challenges, but it also refuses to let those challenges swing us all the way over into despair. That's because hope doesn't require that you expect anything or think that any good outcomes are really likely. All hope requires is that you continue to think of them as possible and hold on to them as possible.

So hope is not about striding forward with a kind of unearned confidence, but about carefully focusing on what might be the case, no matter how bad things seem. That's how you can be a hopeful pessimist, somebody who's not incapacitated by her pessimism or led into despair or desperation, but stays active and does the things she can do, even if she has very realistic doubts about whether there will be a good

outcome.

I think there is a lot of hope in those daytime protests, even if there is also a lot of pessimism. The pessimism that people feel about the direction we're heading has led to a hopeful explosion of protest against that direction. So they're able to continue to focus on the possibility that things could improve. And then they get out there and demand progress on that front.

Obviously, we're more likely to make a real difference if our hope is shared with others. Group hope can lead to really important collective action. But we also often talk about individuals holding onto hope or hoping against hope, even when it looks like group action is impossible. So what's the point of individual hope like that when hope is socially distant, if you will?

I think the answer here has to do with the idea that hope is a virtue. It's a character trait. It's an ongoing excellence that you cultivate in yourself like courage or temperance or loyalty. So you just have to work on hoping. One thing that this moment of socially distant hoping might offer us is a good chance to practice. So you practice focusing on those things that you long for as possible. You fantasize about them but in a way that engages your agency. You see new features in these outcomes that you're hoping for. You reconceive them in light of current information. I think one of the things that gives you is stronger hoping muscles, but it also may allow us to discover new pathways.

I think this is something that Generation Z is really good at and they'll have to be good at as we go forward. They're the ones who are inheriting a lot of these challenges, a lot of the repercussions of the current crisis. And so learning how to sort of retrench, reconsider, reimagine and then move together when it's appropriate into a new sort of possibility is, I think, their calling, and something that we can all hope they become good at.

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