

Acting irrespective of hope

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Kant, in 1793, responded to Mendelssohn's denial that the human race has ever made (and will ever make) moral progress with a thesis about motivation: 'hope for better times' is required to do 'something that is profitable for the general well-being' (TP, 8:309/306).¹ Indeed, Kant thinks that Mendelssohn, in publishing his tract criticising the idea of progress, '*must* have counted' on that very hope (*ibid.*; my emphasis). For – Kant's thought seems to be – what could this act of writing have been other than seeking to make the world a better place and how could one do this, irrespective of hoping for better times? This thesis about motivation stands in a wider context (both of the text of which it is part and Kant's critical philosophy more generally), such that, according to Kant, the hope for better times presupposes moral faith in (the possibility of) human progress.² And in this way, Kant takes himself to have revealed a kind of performative contradiction in Mendelssohn's denial of progress – the latter's very attempt at denial relied on presupposing what he aimed to deny.

In this article, I am interested in this thesis about motivation, notably the must-claim just quoted, and its reoccurrence within the Frankfurt School tradition of Critical Theory. A debate about progress is, currently, raging within this tradition (see notably Allen 2016; Allen & Mendieta (eds.) 2018: Ch. 2, 8-10). Still, the issues extend back to its beginnings in the 1930s and in a sense also to the debate between Kant and Mendelssohn in the late 18th century.

My focus is on the thesis about motivation for two reasons. First, it plays an important role in preventing people from accepting the critique of progress espoused by Mendelssohn, Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno (and, more recently, Allen). Even those inclined to accept such a critical perspective on progress, slip back into affirming progress because they think that the very effort by the authors in question to make us think differently about progress – in

a word, to enlighten us about modern Western Enlightenment – presupposes, indeed cannot but presuppose, hope for better times and moral faith in in (the possibility of) human progress as its enabling condition. In this way, even if the theoretical arguments against progress seem convincing, a practical argument seems to trump them (and the thesis about motivation is, crucial, to that practical argument). Second, the thesis about motivation has not been subject to the same level of critical scrutiny as other aspects within the debate about progress (such as, to pick a contemporary example, the relationship between Western Enlightenment and colonialism (McCarthy 2009; Allen 2016)). At the same time, the thesis about motivation deserves (more) critical scrutiny – or so I suggest in this article.

In a word, I aim to dislodge the thesis about motivation that an agent can never act morally without our ascribing hope for better times to them. With the help of a set of examples, I disclose that it is possible to interpret some actions as being done irrespective of, perhaps even without, hope.³ I am not setting out to prove that these actions definitely were done irrespective of hope. Rather, my aim is more modest: to suggest that it is possible to make sense of them that way. If so, this speaks against the must-claim above. I also suggest that there are ethical considerations for refraining from such must-claims.

The article's structure is as follows. In section 1, I propose that Kant's thesis about motivation is at work also within the Frankfurt School research tradition and debates therein about progress. In section 2, I then clarify and specify the thesis and (some of) its possible variants. Then (in section 3), I propose a core example of what acting irrespective of hope would involve. Next, I discuss two major objections against the thesis that such actions are indeed possible and intelligible (section 4). As part of this, I introduce another core example, drawing on the life and work of Améry.⁴ This concludes my case for the possibility of acting irrespective of hope and why we should not foreclose this possibility by commitment to the must-clause Kant and others endorse.

1. A rerun of the Mendelssohn-Kant debate? Benjamin et al. v. Honneth et al.

In ‘On the Common Saying’, Kant reports and quotes Mendelssohn’s 1783 *Jerusalem* as follows:

‘It is, to him, a fantasy “that the whole of humanity here below, should in the course of time always move forward and perfect itself.” “We see,” he said, “the human race as a whole make small oscillations, and it never takes a few steps forward without soon afterward sliding back twice as fast into its former state” ... “... humanity ... regarded as a whole, ..., maintains in all periods of time roughly the same level of morality, the same measure of religion and irreligious, of virtue and vice, of happiness and misery.’ (TP, 8:307f/305).

In effect, what Kant ascribes to Mendelssohn is a *flatlining thesis* about human history: ‘ultimately, despite some temporary oscillations, the level of morality stays the same throughout human history’. There are occasionally steps forward, but these do not have a lasting effect. In contrast, Kant subscribes to the thesis that moral progress ‘will indeed be interrupted from time to time but will never be broken off’ (TP, 8:308f/306). One can formulate it as the opposite of Mendelssohn’s view, as the *progress-always-wins-out* thesis: ‘ultimately, despite some temporary oscillations, the level of morality improves throughout human history’.

The early Frankfurt School can be read as, in one sense, accepting Mendelssohn’s flatlining thesis – namely, in the sense of radicalising it. Consider Benjamin’s late musings on (the concept of) history:

‘There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet’. ([1940], Thesis IX).

The sense in which this accepts but radicalises Mendelssohn’s thesis is that Benjamin – or at least Benjamin’s angel of history – presents history as also flatlining, albeit as ‘one single

catastrophe'. It is a radicalisation because Mendelssohn leaves it open whether 'the same level of morality' that humanity roughly 'maintains in all periods of time' is one of catastrophe or mediocracy (or even excellence short of perfection). Beyond the radicalisation, there are other differences between Mendelssohn and Benjamin, but for the present purpose, it is the parallel that is striking and of interest.

Similarly, for all the differences that exist between Kant, on the one hand, and Honneth, on the other, there is a remarkable parallel when it comes to both the *progress-always-wins-out* thesis and also the thesis about motivation that is the focus of this article. There has been a notable return to Kant's view of history and progress in later figures working in the Frankfurt School research tradition, specifically Honneth, but not just him (see, for example, also McCarthy 2009: Ch. 5).

A key argumentative move by Honneth (2007; 2014: 59) has been the following: in acting in a way that affirms Enlightenment values, we must hope to achieve moral progress – indeed, we cannot but affirm that these values represent moral progress, and, hence, the view that actual progress has taken place. Implicitly, this leads Honneth to this conclusion: Benjamin's negative view of history and Adorno's negative view of our present (as wrong, indeed radically evil social world) cannot be right insofar as their very endeavour of expressing these views – of enlightening modern Enlightenment about its self-destructive tendencies – presupposes that (they must think that) things are not as bad as they say. In a way, this is a variant of the performative contradiction claim made already by Habermas (1982) against the early Frankfurt School: the very act of stating their critique would be impossible if the critique were actually true; and, hence, the stating it implies that something else is true – in particular, that it is true that Western Enlightenment contains enough positive potential, such that it constitutes moral progress, after all.

One important upshot of this move is that we do not need to consider the actual historical evidence as to whether or not there has been moral progress.⁵ Instead – like Kant thought we can do in his reply to Mendelssohn – we can side-step the many ‘doubts [that] may be raised ... from history’ and focus on our moral duty to achieve moral improvements and the thesis that those who do have ‘an earnest desire’ to act morally, must ‘hope for better times’ (TP, 8:309/306), which, in turn, requires faith in (the possibility of) moral progress.

There is, in my view, something deeply objectionable in this Kantian move. It is a form of shoehorning us into a belief in moral progress on the back of our acting to enlighten modern Enlightenment about its destructive tendencies or, more generally, doing something that is profitable for the general well-being. Often, objections to the idea of moral progress focus on the question of whether, for example, the experience of Auschwitz (Adorno) or the entanglement of Western Modernity with colonialism (Allen) means that we should refrain from affirming that moral progress has occurred and/or is possible. While I am sympathetic to these objections, my sense is that commitment to the thesis about motivation at play in the Kantian move makes it difficult for many (not only Kantians) to accept these objections. And it is this commitment that I seek to dislodge in this article. To do so, we first need to get the thesis about motivation better into view, which is the task to which I turn now.

2. The thesis about motivation specified

To recall, Kant claims that ‘hope for better times’ must be present in anyone who tries to do ‘something that is profitable for the general well-being’, and that even those who, like Mendelssohn, publish tracts criticising the idea of progress, ‘must have counted’ on this hope and the faith in (the possibility of) moral progress at its basis (TP, 8:309/306).

In the quoted text, Kant does not support his must-claim in any detail. The one thing he does say is that without the hope in question we ‘would never have warmed the human heart’ to act for the general well-being (*ibid.*).

One immediate response to this rationale for the thesis about motivation could be that it is implausible to think that the human heart always needs ‘warming’ before we can act for the general well-being. Yes, sometimes acting in this way will be difficult for us, and perhaps in those cases hope for better times can help, but to think we always need it, is to presuppose a particular (perhaps Lutheran) claim about the fallen nature of human beings, which it is reasonable to deny. At least those who are virtuous or naturally disposed to be empathetic among us will not need anything to warm their heart – they are already disposed to act for the general well-being anyway.

But perhaps the idea that the human heart needs warming is not capturing what Kant is after – or, at any rate, not what has echoed down the generations to Honneth and others. Perhaps, what Kant is really after is something more like a (purported) performative contradiction: how can we intervene in the world – whether with deeds or words – in a way that stands up for (moral) values like dignity, but not hope that this will make a positive difference? To come back to the historical example, is Mendelssohn not in criticising the idea of progress wanting us to become more enlightened about what is actually the case and is this not committing him then to the hope that we will actually be so enlightened? Why bother writing what he wrote otherwise?

Following this line of thought, we might specify the thesis about motivation in a way that brings out the core idea more: acting in a way that one takes to be morally permitted or laudable – in short, ‘acting morally’ – requires that our so acting has some positive (practical) effect (notably being ‘profitable for the general well-being’), *at least* on occasion or down the line. In a nutshell, the thesis about motivation consists in this claim:

whenever we act morally, we must hope for success of our actions in the sense that the actions will either bring about better times, or contribute to bringing these about, or at least stand in some other suitable relation to such an outcome (like being part of a set of actions, which on occasion (can) bring about better times).

This characterisation requires unpacking in a number of ways.

First, it has to be acknowledged that there are considerably different views of what it is to ‘act morally’. A Kantian will equate it with acting (at a minimum) according to the moral law, but a consequentialist will use a different criterion, and proponents of other viewpoints yet different criteria. But, I think, this is not the end of the discussion regarding the issue at hand. The examples I work with in the next sections are such that it is reasonable to think that the actions in question can be considered as at least morally permitted (and perhaps morally laudable) on most views of what it is to act morally – and specifically on the Kantian views which are the focus of my discussion. Moreover, the above thesis about motivation is subject-centred in a particular way: it is a claim about agents *who take themselves to be acting morally*. (Perhaps this is what Kant means when he writes about ‘*earnestly desir[ing]* to do something profitable for the general well-being’ (TP, 8:309/306; my emphasis).) The agents might be mistaken about what acting morally actually requires (or what truly counts as better times), but if they genuinely take themselves to act morally, then it is required to ascribe hope for (what they take to be) better times to them. Thus, Eichmann might well have been mistaken to think that Kant’s Categorical Imperative required that he did ‘his duty’ in carrying out “the Final Solution”,⁶ but even so, we know – according to the thesis about motivation – that in acting accordingly, he must have counted on hope for success (itself presumably understood in terms of what he took this morality to permit and require).

Second, it is important to note that such hope need not be consciously held before the agents’ mind or explicitly stated by them. On the thesis about motivation in question, we *ascribe* this hope as something the agent must hold, however buried, hidden or in the

background it may have been. Just as time and space are conditions of possibility of experience for Kant and not something that we are consciously aware of, so hope is a condition of possibility for (what the agent takes to be) acting morally.

This is still rather vague. In particular, we might want to distinguish between *causal* conditions of possibility and *conceptual* conditions. For example, it could be claimed that we could not be sufficiently motivated to perform moral actions irrespective (or without) hope; that motivations are a necessary part of the causal nexus of actions; and, hence, it is a necessary causal condition for moral actions that they are based on hope. Alternatively – or additionally – it could be claimed that it is required for something to be intelligible as acting morally that the agent hoped for something or other. (Intelligibility might – depending on the view one has of it – involve causal notions, but it might not. For example, if reasons are construed as different from causes, then the intelligibility of acting morally may require reference to reasons, but not causes.) In both the causal and the conceptual variant, the agent does not necessarily have to be aware of the hope, although it is a judgement about their perspective we are making. The claim is about what we have to ascribe to the agent in order to either (a) have a satisfactory causal account of what the agent did or (b) for it to be intelligible as moral action (or (c) for both (a) and (b) to be the case).

That it is a matter of ascription is particularly evident in the case of Kant's response to Mendelssohn. It is not that Mendelssohn says he hopes for achieving 'better times' (in the sense of moral progress) – just the opposite, he denies that there can be (lasting) moral progress. But Kant insists that in the very act of publicly engaging in the debate about moral progress with a view to convince others that they should endorse (what I called) the flatlining thesis about human history, Mendelssohn 'must have counted on' hope for such progress, after all. Similarly, in Honneth's (more implicit) case against Benjamin and Adorno: their attempts to enlighten modern Western Enlightenment about itself only makes sense if they operated with

a self-understanding, however in the background, that they are agents within a history in which moral progress can be interrupted from time to time but will never be broken off.

Third, it is not straightforward to explicate what is meant by ‘hope’. Still, some basic points are clear: hope, as here understood, has among its necessary conditions that one relates favourably to an outcome that one – however implicitly – takes to be neither impossible, nor certain to occur. (This is only a necessary condition, since, by itself, it does not distinguish hope from despair (and other orientations like fear), whereby we also relate favourably to an outcome that (we believe) is neither impossible, nor certain to occur, but do so in a way that is nonetheless different from hope.) Thus, to say that whenever one acts, one hopes for success is *not* to say that one is *certain* that success will occur. Such certainty is, clearly, not a precondition for acting morally. Instead, the picture in question includes the thesis that acting presupposes, at a minimum, that a successful outcome of one’s action is not (taken to be) impossible and that one relates favourably to such an outcome (where it would need to be spelled out further what such a pro-attitude involves, such as that one desires the outcome to occur, or judges it to be the least bad option, or the like).

Fourth, the thesis about motivation admits of different variants, such as in terms of temporal horizons, that is, when the hoped-for success will occur (I come back to this below in section 4); or in terms of how the individual action undertaken is understood to relate to what is hoped for (as direct cause, as contributing factor, or in some other way); or in terms of how exactly success is understood, such as whether inducing moral respect in others would suffice or wider changes for the better would have to materialise. Moreover, the thesis can be substantiated with more or less extensive claims about the preconditions for the hope. In Kant’s own work, the hope involved in the must-claim appears to involve as its precondition (for making it reasonable) the (moral) faith that a benevolent and all-powerful god exists, and we have an immortal soul. At least some contemporary Kantians have expounded weaker versions,

such that we cannot act morally unless we presuppose the world to be hospitable to human agency in such a way, as to make it possible (albeit not certain) that our actions can yield successful outcomes (notably morally right actions and thereby moral progress), at least sometimes (see, for example, Rawls 2000: Kant, Lecture X, §5). On this variant, there is still a certain hope for success attached to *each and every* action (indeed, there must be at least this basic hope for it to be an action), but this hope is not one about the success of the particular action, but about the possibility that human actions could have successful (moral) outcomes at all. It is, thus, doubly weaker than variant I ascribe to Kant: (a) including less strong preconditions; and (b) being less ambitious in regard to scope.

Before, in the next section, I begin to disclose the possibility of acting irrespective of hope, there is one more clarification that is in order for our particular context: one might think that now that the thesis about motivation is clearer in view, it is also clear that it cannot be Kant's (and, perhaps, it cannot even be Kantian). After all, Kant – at least in his critical period – insisted that acting morally (in the full sense of acting not merely in accordance, but out of the moral law) required that one is *not* keying such acts to the consequences. It is, thus, odd that he ascribes to Mendelssohn – and, I suggested, to anyone who takes her-/himself to be acting morally – hope for what is 'profitable for the general well-being'. Rather than ascribing this hope as something that must be present, Kant should insist – one might think – that it must *not* be present, for otherwise the purity of the motivation would be compromised.

In reply, I think that Kant operated with a more complex picture of agency than the one just utilised in stating the objection to reading Kant (and Kantians) as affirming the specified thesis about motivation. Kant insisted that acting morally in the full sense meant acting out of (not merely in accordance with) the moral law, but he allowed – indeed, insisted – that the fuller account of the agent's perspective would include elements in addition to this incentive [*Triebfeder*] (i.e. the motivating force): beliefs about means, and aiming at specific ends, but

also crucially ‘hope for better times’ and faith in moral progress. Such hope and faith are not permitted to be directly motivational for the act to count as fully moral, but they can still be – indeed, if Kant is right, *must* still be – operative in the background. I do not have the space or occasion here to go into any detail why Kant thought this (or what can be reconstructed about why he may or must have thought it). Still, one key consideration is the following: despite Kant’s insistence on the independence of the moral law from anthropological constraint and on the purity of the moral motivation, he did recognise that we were finite sensible creatures for whom happiness is an unavoidable concern. And this meant for him that we need to make room in our moral psychology for this concern and, indeed, give it its due, albeit without thereby detracting from the purity of the moral law and acting out of respect for it.

The crucial point to take away from this, is that it is perfectly consistent for Kant to insist on the must-clause about hope, while demanding that acting morally in the full sense means having respect for the moral law as the only operative incentive. It is perfectly consistent because his picture of agency includes more than just incentives (more than just what directly motivates us). Hope is one of the (purportedly necessary) background elements – important as perhaps a kind of condition of possibility for human beings, as sensible creatures, to be motivated by the moral law alone; but, in those with (Kantian) moral worth, not thereby the motivation itself.

3. A core example of what acting irrespective of hope would be like

In February 2003, the biggest-ever demonstration in UK history took place in London. It was directed against the imminent decision to take military action against Iraq, debated by the House of Commons (the elected branch of the UK Parliament) and pushed for by the then prime minister, Tony Blair. Those demonstrating took themselves to be acting morally in standing up for important values (like peace and the protection of innocents). It is not

unreasonable to think that their stance was morally permitted, indeed morally laudable and right (including from a Kantian perspective). One key slogan for the demonstrators was ‘not in my name’.

Let us (try to) imagine that there were two types of demonstrators who took themselves to be acting morally. In proposing that both types are intelligible to us as possibilities, my focus is on them qua individual actors who decided to partake in a large, diffuse collective action; not on the collective action as such.

The first type of demonstrator, let’s imagine, acted the way they did (coming to the demonstration, chanting the slogan, etc.) in the hope that this biggest-ever demonstration would have the outcome that the UK Parliament would oppose the decision to take military action. They shouted ‘not in my name’ as a reminder to their elected representatives that representing them would be to vote against military action. It involved, and required, the hope that the demonstrators would be heard, and their demands acted on. These demonstrators were hopeful of success in the sense specified above: they thought it was not impossible that a big enough demonstration would sway sufficiently many members of parliament (MPs) to block military action which would be (morally) better than passing it, but they were not certain that it would sway the MPs and doubtful that their favoured outcome of the parliamentary vote would occur without their demonstrating in large numbers. If they had been certain that however large the demonstration turned out to be, it was simply impossible to block military action in Parliament, these people would not have acted in the way they did (or, at least, not for the same reasons).

It is, I suspect, uncontroversial that the first type of demonstrators can be imagined, and that it is intelligible that their acts are possible – and, indeed, that many, if not all, actual demonstrators in February 2003 acted this way.

The second type of demonstrator, let’s imagine, acted, at least on the surface, in the same way as the first type of demonstrators did (coming to the demonstration, chanting the

same slogan, etc.).⁷ However, there is an important difference: these demonstrators did *not* shout ‘not in my name’ because they, however implicitly, hoped that doing so would change anything; they shouted it to express something of importance to them (we might call it their value commitments) and/or about them (about their identity). And they did so despite believing success is unavailable. They might have had a realist (some would say ‘cynical’) view of the political situation, realising that, while it was logically possible that MPs would defy Blair, no amount of shouting and demonstrating would actually sway them to do so.⁸ They went demonstrating despite of this – to express that what is going to happen will not be in their name, even though they realised that their expressing this is not going to stop its happening.⁹

The second type of demonstrators, as invited us to imagine them, acted as they did, irrespective of hope for success or even without such hope. Indeed, the way I invite us to imagine them, this is not just true about their own conscious experience of the situation, but it is also the case that we can (and should) refrain from ascribing hope for success to them. The question then is whether it is possible and intelligible (to imagine) that they could exist thus characterised. (I leave aside here whether it is an actual example or merely an imagined one, i.e., whether any and, if so, how many of the demonstrators in February 2003 were of the second type. I am not making an empirical claim about the actual demonstrators, although knowing some of them and their circumstances suggests to me that there were, indeed, demonstrators of the second kind among the 750,000 to 2 million out on the streets of London that day.)

One important clarification: when saying that the second type of demonstrators acted irrespective of the hope for success – specifically, irrespective of the hope that their actions could prevent UK Parliament from approving military action in Iraq – I am not excluding that, as a matter of actual fact, their actions might anyway have led to this outcome. Thus, it may have been the case that, contrary to the expectations of the second type of demonstrators who

merely wanted to express that military action against Iraq was not going to be in their name, the MPs got cold feet because of the sheer number of demonstrators. This would have then been a (welcome) *side-effect* of their action. Hope for this outcome was, however, not thereby a precondition for how the second type of demonstrators acted. To see this, consider that in cases of actions for which hope for success is a precondition (call them ‘hope-based acts’), it is possible, and often happens, that the success does not obtain as an actual matter of fact. This does not change the fact that hope-based actions were done with hope for success and could not have been done without such hope. Indeed, even if, actually, it was either certain or impossible to obtain success, this does not change that agents, as long as they are unaware of this, could have acted with hope for success (indeed, in case of hope-based action, must have acted with this hope). Thus, actual success or even the actual certainty or impossibility thereof are not by themselves decisive for the matter at hand here. What matters for both hope-based and action irrespective of hope is the agent’s perspective prior to the acts.¹⁰

One further clarification: in seeking to dislodge the view that acting morally requires agents to have hope of success, I am not saying that all actions or every case of acting morally could be done irrespective of hope. Indeed, I am not even maintaining that acting morally irrespective of hope (call these ‘merely expressive acts’)¹¹ could completely stand on their own within an agent’s life in the sense that any one agent could lead a life of always acting irrespective of hope. I am agnostic on this matter. What I am seeking to disclose is that it is possible for some agents, that among the class of their actions, there are some – including avowedly and complex cases of acting morally – that are done irrespective of (or even without) hope.

4. Two Objections

One might object in relation to my two-kinds-of-demonstrators example (and general claim) in a number of ways. I here focus on two objections, which I take to be the most important ones.

4.1 First objection

First, while it is, indeed, intelligible that the second type of demonstrators did what they did irrespective of hoping for the immediate success of swaying enough MPs to vote against military action, this does not show that they acted irrespective of hope (or that their acts would be intelligible without ascribing hope to them). Their actions still presuppose hope for success insofar as agents cannot but hope that what they are doing leads to success *at some point* – perhaps not as an immediate outcome, but as an outcome down the line. Such actions may differ from those of the first type of demonstrators in that the hoped-for success is further off than in their case. Thus, the difference between the two types of demonstrator might simply be that the former hopes to achieve a change in other people (the MPs) so as to lead to a particular result in the immediate future, while the latter merely wants to communicate that the MPs when voting for military action are not acting in the name of the demonstrators, where this communication might have some longer term hoped-for outcomes (such as communicating to others that there is enough of a majority to push through anti-war candidates in the next election, which then means sufficient such candidates will present themselves, and so on). Still, despite this difference in the temporal horizon, both involve hope for success at some level – and indeed, must do so.

In reply, the objection relies on misconstruing the difference between the two types of demonstrators. It is *not* that first type hopes for immediate success and the second hopes for success at a later point, being long-term strategists that work (and hope) for eventual success; rather, the first presupposes hope for success (whether immediate or long-term) and the second

does *not*. That involves different kinds of experience, and probably also different kinds of behaviour. To illustrate this, let me introduce a third type of demonstrators: like the first one they are hoping for success, but like the second type of demonstrator they do not believe immediate success is available; instead they are hoping that in the long-run they can enact anti-war policies in the UK. They are, so to speak, playing the long game. Consider the differences between the second and third type of demonstrators. The third type is seeking to build coalitions, but not the second – it may happen that the second type of demonstrators end up building coalitions as a side effect of what they are doing, but they not aiming to do so or experiencing themselves as seeking this. They are experiencing themselves merely as expressing their value commitment against military operations. And this suffices, I submit, to make their actions intelligible, even without ascribing hope to them, not even in the remoter sense of hope that their act will eventually (‘down the line’) lead to outcomes to which they relate favourably. Even if they felt certain that the demonstration will be in vain in the long-term too, they can and do still go through with participating in it – simply to express that the military operation would not be in their name. Naturally, actual people might be, on occasion, mistaken about whether or not acting morally presupposed, after all, their hoping for (eventual) success. They might not always be sufficiently attentive to their actual experiences or motivations or value orientations. But it is unwarranted to assume that one would *always* be mistaken about this, when one purportedly acts irrespective of hope.

One way to substantiate this reply is to consider how, in the case of the second type of demonstrator, the action and the expression stand differently to each other than actions and outcomes normally. In a certain sense, the expression is not a hoped-for outcome of the action at all: It is so intimately connected with the action, that to speak of it as an outcome that is separable from the action is to misunderstand what such expressive actions are about. In hope-based actions, the action is also related to the hoped-for outcome, but they are separable. (Just

consider Kant's famous claim that the good will's shines forth 'like a jewel', even if 'stepmotherly nature' had circumvented success in carrying out that good will and nothing was achieved (G, 4:394/50). The good will and the hoped-for effect are separable and separated.) In contrast, in the particular kind of (merely) expressive actions of the second type of demonstrators, the action and the expression of value commitments (and thereby practical identity) are not two separate things, but the action is that expression. (It is still important that it is some kind of action, not just an instance of willing to express something that is not manifested in some form in the world. I come back to this below.)

In a sense, hope is thereby inapplicable: in these cases, the agents take outward success to be strictly impossible, but this is besides the point (for them) because they are not aiming for it; and the expression they are undertaking is not something outward that they aim at and then can (or even must) hope to achieve. Agents thereby neither need hope for success about external outcomes in these acts, nor can they hope that they succeed in acting expressively.

To see better what is going on in this particular kind of (merely) expressive act – in acting irrespective of hope – it helps to consider what Wittgenstein wrote in the context of criticising Frazer's account of rain dances and other rituals:

'Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is obviously not based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at some satisfaction and it achieves it. Or rather, it does not aim at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied.' (Wittgenstein [1931], p. 4).

The same as what Wittgenstein here says about 'belief', holds, I suggest, if we substitute 'hope' for 'belief'. Kant might be right that those actions that aim at certain (separable) ends presuppose the hope that achieving these ends is possible. But he overlooks that sometimes when we act morally,¹² we do so without aiming at anything.

Here another core example will be of help.

4.2 A second core example: Améry's hitting back.

Améry was put 'at the mind's limit' by two sets of events: first, being tortured by the Gestapo and SS in Belgium after being arrested for his resistance activities; and, second, then being interred, with all of the suffering, horror and denial of dignity this involved, in the Buna-Monowitz labour camp (part of the wider Auschwitz network of camps). He survived both in the sense that he outlived them. But the first shattered any trust he had had in the world and in the possibility to appeal to others as moral agents; and the second expunged whatever 'hope for better times' might have been left after the first. As he puts it at the end of his essay on torture:

'Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man was experienced as an antiman remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules'. (1980: 40).

Yet, Améry acted defiantly, both in the camps and in his writing and public appearances afterwards – indeed, possibly even in taking his own life in 1978.

In his writings, Améry relates an episode in which he literally did hit back against one of his tormentors in the Buna-Monowitz labour camp. I think that anyone but the most ardent pacifist would think that this act was morally permitted, even laudable – Kantians in particular would recognise the importance of the moral value of dignity for which Améry stood up.

Let us consider this episode as Améry describes it. His hitting back was an act of defiance expressive of his dignity. Importantly, it was not a mere bodily happening – a mere reflex of a creature no longer in deliberately controlling his movements.¹³ Instead, it was as much a deliberate act as any core cases we consider to be deliberate acts. For example, it involved forethought: Améry realised that acting in this way would make his own survival (even) less likely, but summoned the courage to do it anyway. Also, he grappled with the

difficulty of what it would take to exert his own dignity. He recognised that ‘the merely individual, subjective claim (“I am a human being and as such I have my dignity, no matter what you may do or say!”) is an empty academic game, or madness’ (1980: 89). He came to the conclusion that instead he had to manifest his claim, to objectify it in the world. This was not, I submit, to change his tormentor’s view – he had given up on that kind of possibility long before, when receiving the first blow or (at latest) when suspended from the ceiling when tortured. The act was not even, I further submit, undertaken to change the course of history – at the point of hitting back, there was little to no chance of ever coming out alive from the camp or anyone else’s reporting on what he did, and, thus, little chance that people would even know about, never mind moved to change history. Indeed, by hitting back, Améry made his survival (and, thereby, his ability to report) even more unlikely than it already was. Moreover, Améry did not take himself – or so I propose to read what he wrote about his hitting back – to achieve the outcome of changing the future, however unlikely. Rather, the purpose of the act lay in the act itself and, thereby, in the objectification of the dignity, giving reality to its status as not just a subjective claim, but a categorical value. Here is how Améry describes what he did:

‘My human dignity lay in this punch to his jaw – and that it was in the end I, the physically much weaker man, who succumbed and was woefully thrashed, meant nothing to me. Painfully beaten, I was satisfied with myself. But not, as one might think, for reasons of courage and honour, ... I was my body and nothing else: in hunger, in the blow that I suffered, in the blow I dealt. My body, debilitated and crusted with filth, was my calamity. My body, when it tensed to strike, was my physical and metaphysical dignity. ... In the punch, I was myself – for myself and my opponent’. (1980: 90f).

This description tallies well with what I offered earlier for consideration by way of Wittgenstein’s description of certain acts that do not have a separable outcome – that, in a sense, do not aim at anything – but involve acting and feeling satisfied just with that (‘Painfully beaten, I was satisfied with myself. But not, as one might think, for reasons of courage and honour, ...’). It also tallies well with what I said earlier about the second type of demonstrators:

that their acting morally consists in expressing core commitments, their (practical) identity ('My human dignity lay in this punch to his jaw...'; 'I was my body and nothing else: in hunger, in the blow that I suffered, in the blow I dealt'; 'In the punch, I was myself').

Still, one might think that a variant of the first objection could raise its head here: even if the act of expression itself does not involve hope for success in relation to a separable outcome, what always is going on (and must be going on) in such cases is the hope for success *to be expressive*, to carry out an expressive action. At least in this sense – the objection runs – hope is presupposed, after all.

But this begs the question. One would need an extra justification for ascribing this second-order state of mind to the agent (not just wanting to carry out an expressive action, but relating to this wanting by way of hoping that one succeeded in carrying it out). At least in some cases (like Améry's), no such justification seems plausible. In these cases, we enact our values, our (practical) identity, and we do so, or at least can do so, irrespective of our hoping for anything, not even hoping that our values or identities find expression. We simply act, without aiming at anything, and in doing so express ourselves and find satisfaction in that.

That we need not ascribe hope for successful expression, can perhaps be seen most easily, if we recall that in some situations, we feel a practical necessity to act in a certain way. The situations are so intolerable for us that we cannot continue to put up with them, no matter what may happen (including to ourselves) – woeful thrashing, certain death and all.¹⁴

I am thinking here of 'practical necessity' in Bernard Williams's sense (1981: Ch. 10). According to him, we have certain 'categorical desires' (1981: Ch. 1) which are tied up with who we are (our 'practical identity') and which mean that we cannot but act a certain way – or at least feel that we cannot so act, so that if we happen to act in a different way after all (say because of drunkenness or manipulation by others), then we (feel that we) have lost something

irretrievable, such that suicide becomes the only option (as in Williams 1993's account of Homer's Ajax).

Having this interpretative key available as a way to make sense of actions, we need not invoke the idea of hope, not even the hope for successful expression, and then ascribe it to the agent. We can instead invoke this idea of practical necessity (and related notions, like (the anticipation of) regret) to render these actions intelligible. Depending on the person – on their practical identity – this necessity will manifest itself in different ways. In Améry's case, with his history of resistance activity, it manifested in hitting back after being yet-again mistreated by one of his tormentors in the camp. To return to the first example, it can also manifest itself in demonstrating in certain ways. These actions are intelligible without ascribing hope, concerns with success, or the like to the actors. They are intelligible in light of the combination of both (a) what kind of persons those who carry out these actions are (i.e., what kind of cares and fundamental commitments they have), and (b) what kind of situation they face (notably, what form(s) of exercising their practical identity is open to them).

Here one might vary the first objection further and interject that, clearly, there are some standards of success in play in even the cases I have been describing as cases of acting irrespective of hope. Actions can be more or less apt in expressing values or identities, and this aptness then sets standards of success. For example, Améry would have been less satisfied with himself if the punch would have missed; and he would have been even less satisfied, if no one had seen his attempted punch. And – the objection would continue – where there are standards of success, there is – indeed, must be – hope for achieving it. Thus, instead of hope for some separable outcome, there is a different kind of hope involved – and, indeed, must be involved – and that is the hope in being successful in expressing one's values or identity *well*.

In reply, I am willing to concede that Améry would have felt less satisfied if his punch would have missed his tormentor than he felt satisfied about landing the punch (and also less

satisfied, or perhaps even less satisfied, if he had not been seen even to attempt to punch). Still, the mere hitting out but failing to connect would have already satisfied him somewhat. In the attempted punch, he would have still been himself (and been that at least for himself, and, if seen, also for the opponent or others in the camp). What was essential is that his affirming his dignity found expression at all, not necessarily that it took the form of attempting to hit back or that he would be successful in this attempt. The essential point is that Améry resisted, was defiant, *at all* – there is a difference in kind between not even attempting the punch and not landing it.¹⁵ In the latter case, the fundamental nature of the act would have been unchanged – even a punch that missed would have amounted to resistance and a reassertion of dignity. To understand such resistance and reassertion, we do not need to ascribe hope for success; ascribing a practical identity with certain categorical concerns or value commitment suffices to make the behaviour intelligible as an action (and to explain what motivated it). Sometimes giving expression to that identity is all we are doing – not less (more bodily happening), not more (hope-based action).

4.3 A second objection

Recall the weaker version of the Kantian thesis about motivation: we cannot act morally, unless we presuppose the world to be adequately hospitable to human agency, so as to make it possible (albeit not certain) that our actions can yield successful outcomes, at least sometimes. Here the condition of possibility for acting is said to be not hoping for a particular outcome (or set of outcomes). Instead, the purported condition concerns a more *basic hope*: the hope that the world is at all amenable to positive change by human intervention. This basic hope is one about the world as a whole, and as such does not necessarily imply something for the success of any particular action. Still, the thought is that each and every time we act morally, this presupposes that basic hope, and must do so. While acting morally might not need to presuppose hope for

success in the stronger variant of hope for success of the particular action in question, it does presuppose hope for success in the weaker, more basic variant that acting morally, in general and as such, cannot be (thought by the agents to be) just in vain. The second objection, in a nutshell, is that without the more basic hope, the kind of actions irrespective of hope that I have been suggesting are possible, would not be possible; and, hence, they are not carried out irrespective of hope, after all.

In reply, let me begin by conceding that the basic hope in question might well be presupposed in one sense – namely as *generative* condition of being able now, at some later point in life, to act without hope. Consider again the second type of demonstrators. It might be true of them that it was only possible for them to act in the way they did because in their lives they (beforehand) had also acted in a way that was hope-based in the sense of dependent on the basic hope in question. But this dependency (causal, generative dependency) does not detract from the constitutive features of the action they did in demonstrating in the way they did, that is, it does not detract from their being done *irrespective of hope at the moment in question*. Similar considerations apply to Améry. For him to hit back and, earlier, for him to join the resistance once he arrived in Belgium, might have required a certain kind of upbringing (such as, in his case, twenty years in the Austrian provinces, in touch with nature, and not yet exposed to the exclusions and conflicts brewing in Vienna and elsewhere). But once a certain personality has formed, a life of rebellion against the odds became possible for him, and he could start acting irrespective of hope.

Specifically, there might come a point in one's life, where one – temporarily or permanently – gives up on the background assumption of basic hope that I conceded might have had to be present beforehand. If, at that point in one's life, one's practical identity has already been formed, then the value commitments making up this identity call for being expressed. At least some of us (perhaps those lucky enough to have developed a strong ego)

can actually respond to that call and express these commitments, as a matter of integrity. This is possible and intelligible, I propose, even if one does not hope anymore at this point that the world is hospitable to positive human intervention at all. One's practical identity and value commitments demand expression for their own sake, not for what might be accomplished by doing so, nor even with reference to what is accomplishable by human interventions at all.¹⁶ And this makes it intelligible that we can *then* act irrespective of, or even without, hope.

Indeed, this is a natural way to make sense of what Améry did, when he hit back – both when he literally hit back in the camp and when he wrote about it (and his experiences and perspective more generally).¹⁷ Given the loss of trust in the world that torture meant for him, I think we do him most justice if we no longer ascribe to him even the background assumption of basic hope. By the time he was tortured he had a formed practical identity with clear value commitments – notably to human dignity – for which he had already repeatedly stood up, and this identity continued to call for being expressed, something he was able to do (while others – those Levi called ‘the drowned’ – did and could not express it). A lot of nurturing and hope might have gone into making Améry the person he was, but once he was that person, he could act irrespective of hope, even irrespective of basic hope – or at least it seems possible (and intelligible) that he could have done so.

We do better not to rule this possibility out by making a claim about what he must have counted on, despite what he experienced and wrote. Why and in which sense is refraining from this ascription better?

Let me begin by recalling something about Kant's position I have not yet commented on: while Kant accepts that doubts about the possibility of progress arise from history, he thinks this uncertainty cannot detract from the necessity of assuming ‘for practical purposes’ that human progress is possible (TP, 8:309/306). What Kant does not consider is that the historical record can give rise to *practical* arguments, rather than theoretical ones.

What could such a practical argument be? We get a sense of it from a passage in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*:

'The feeling which after Auschwitz resists every assertion of positivity of existence as sanctimonious prattle, as injustice to the victims; which is reluctant to squeeze any meaning, be it ever so washed-out, out of their fate, has its objective moment after events which condemn the construction of a meaning of immanence, which radiates from an affirmatively posited transcendence, to a mockery.' (1966: 354).

The key point for our purposes in what Adorno is saying here, is that certain claims amount to injustices to, even mockery of, those that deserve respect, i.e., victims of discrimination or atrocities.

One way to appreciate this point is to ask yourself what you would deem (un)acceptable to say to these victims. It might strike one as *already* presumptuous to say to Mendelssohn (who, though familiar with discrimination against persons with Jewish belief or descent, did not suffer anything like the fate Améry and his contemporaries had to endure) that he, Mendelssohn, whether he realises or not, *must* have counted on 'hope for better times' in writing what he did. But now ask yourself what to make of someone's saying this to Améry in relation to his hitting back and his writing and speaking about it? Does it *not* strike you as a mockery and an injustice to ascribe to Améry such hope as something that he must have had to do what he did? Is it not denying him a voice to rule out from the start that it was otherwise? And might this be not one of those occasions, where it is wrong to continue ever further – perhaps beyond the variants I already discussed¹⁸ – in one's attempts to modify the position to (allegedly) accommodate his experiences and perspective into a pre-arranged schema? Should we not rather entertain genuinely the possibility that some people sometimes act irrespective, or even without, hope? Should we not be thankful that this can be so and admire those capable of acting thus for doing so?

Once we leave room for understanding Améry's action as one of defiance irrespective of hope and moral faith in progress, we can also think differently about not just the second type

of demonstrators, but also the early Frankfurt School. Horkheimer advocates doing Critical Theory as

‘... renouncing the belief in the near realisation of the ideas of Western civilisation but nonetheless standing up for these ideas – without [belief in] providence [*Vorsehung*]; indeed, against the [idea of] progress ascribed to providence.’ (1985ff, 5:452; my translation).

Now, we can perhaps see that there need be no performative contradiction in advocating this. We can see that one can refrain from having hope for better times and faith in moral progress but still enlighten modern Enlightenment about its dark side and, more generally, refrain from such hope and faith, but still act morally. One can do this as an expression of the kind of value commitments one holds, as the kind of person one is and seeks to continue to be, even if the circumstances of one’s life are radically unfavourable to doing so and to what is profitable for the general well-being of humankind.¹⁹ In some cases, it might turn out that taking this stance of defiance and integrity will be profitable for humankind, after all – but this, we have seen, is not a precondition for acting in this way, but would be a welcome side-effect of acting irrespective of hope.

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¹ Parenthetical references to Kant's writings give the volume and page number(s) of the Royal Prussian Academy edition (*Kants Gesammelte Schriften*), which are included in the margins of the translations. English translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* and page numbers after the dash refer to these. I use the following abbreviations: G = *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (in Gregor (ed.) 1996: 41-108);

TP = ‘On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice’ (in Gregor (ed.) 1996: 277-309).

One might worry that Kant’s claim is incompatible with his stance on the purity of motivation required for actions to be morally worthy. I address this in Section 2, showing that the must-claim is compatible with this key commitment, after all. Similarly, nothing I ascribe to Kant is incompatible with non-consequentialism. The hopeful concern with better times is a background condition, not the criterion of or motivation for morality.

² I read Kant as (at least implicitly) distinguishing between hope and moral faith, such that it is the latter is required as a precondition for making the former ‘reasonable [*vernünftig*]’. On this reading, we do not hope for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, but our hope for better times presupposes the moral faith in the truth of these ‘postulates’ (as well as in (the possibility of) moral progress).

³ For the purposes of my argument, it is not necessary to decide whether in each case the agent acts “merely” *irrespective of* hope (i.e. they would have acted as they did, whether or not they harboured any hopes) or it is even the case that they acted *without* hopes. Naturally, the latter cases would be clearer cut than the counterfactual judgement involved in the former, but as the crucial issue is (see section 2) whether or not we can (or even must) ascribe hope to agents, it is not necessary to exclude less clear-cut cases.

⁴ I introduce the example of Améry with some trepidation. As Velleman and Pauer-Studer (2011) have pointed out, there is something ethically suspect about using Auschwitz or the Nazis as an easy example to score points in (moral) philosophy. Even beyond avoidance of point-scoring, it might well be ethically suspect to invoke the testimony of those you have been subjected to the unspeakable torment, unless it is employed for the purpose of giving voice to their experiences and perspective. (It might be particularly ethically suspect for someone like me, who is of German descent.) What I attempt to do in this article is to disclose how commitment to a certain thesis about motivation blocks us from even accepting the possibility that Améry’s hitting back was acting *irrespective of* hope for better times and without moral faith in (the possibility of) moral progress. I aim thereby to do justice to his acts – both his act of hitting back with his fist and his acts of writing about his experiences and perspective.

⁵ This is only true of the argumentative strategy Honneth employs. McCarthy’s argumentative strategy is different from Honneth’s insofar as McCarthy does actually attend more to historical events.

⁶ Arendt (1994: 135-6) reports that Eichmann, retrospectively, made a claim to have always followed Kant’s Categorical Imperative, and notes that he had a decent grasp of what this imperative required.

7 It is not straightforward to delineate actions – or action packages like in this example (going to the demonstration, shouting a slogan, etc.) – from each other; and it might even be impossible to do this with exact precision. But I submit that this is a general issue, and not one that causes particular problems for my account.

8 Recall from above that being favourably disposed to an outcome that is neither impossible nor certain is at most a necessary condition for hope, but not sufficient. Notably, I can be in despair, despite knowing that the outcome I favour is not logically impossible.

9 What I mean here is that the acts are expressive of *something*, not necessarily expressing something *to someone (else)*. I mean ‘expressive’ in the sense of ‘instantiate’, ‘exercise’, ‘enact’, ‘materialise’, ‘substantiate’, ‘actualise’, ‘realise’, ‘exemplify’ and the like. I think this sense is (one of the aspects of) what we mean when we say ‘Person P did action A for its expressive value’.

10 When I say that what matters is the agent’s perspective, I do not mean to include only what the agent is aware of when acting. There might be aspects of the perspective that are pre-reflective or subconscious or that need to be ascribed to agents to make sense of them as agents and/or of their behaviour as action. As noted in section 2 above, the thesis about motivation is about ascribing something to agents, whether or not they are aware of it.

11 I call acting irrespective of hope ‘*merely* expressive acts’ because (what I call) hope-based actions will, presumably, *also* be expressive in some sense. The difference is not, then, whether the acts are expressive at all, but whether they are merely expressive or expressive but also hope-based.

12 Acting in this way can still be (taken to be) morally permissible or even laudable because it is expressive of moral values; and I think this is something that Kantians, in particular, would (or should) accept. Such acts can also be ‘profitable for the general well-being’, for making the world a better place, but this might be only as a side-effect (indeed, in acting irrespective of hope, it would have to be that).

13 See also Levi: ‘... he [Améry], *not because of an animal-like reaction* but because of a reasoned revolt against the perverted world of the Lager returned the blow as best as he could’ (2013: 152; my emphasis).

14 Such necessity is different – albeit perhaps not always easily distinguished in practice – from other necessities we feel, like OCD, which – at least in a complicated sense – are alien to the self. Categorical desires, despite the necessity with which they bear on us, are not alien to, but constitutive of us.

15 To say that there is a difference in kind is not to say that it will always be easy or uncontroversial which case fits into one or the other category. There can be differences in kind that admit of borderline cases, i.e., cases where it is difficult to decide on which side of the boundary they respectively fall. One example (from a different context) would be mental capacity as a threshold one has to clear for being granted full liberal rights: having these rights

amounts often to a difference in kind (the state would then not be permitted to impose certain things on such a person), but sometimes it will be difficult to determine whether the person has mental capacity in relation to the matter in question.

¹⁶ Such actions might involve some future-directed orientation other than hope, like anticipation of regret. Such anticipation can play a role in deliberation, but such future-directed orientation is not thereby hope. Indeed, it is not – or, at any rate, need not be – even the hope that one would not regret something. Rather, it is a way to express what one values, to express one’s (practical) identity, which can take the form of asking oneself whether one would come to regret in the future, if one did not act in a certain way on this occasion.

¹⁷ Améry’s writing can be considered as a form of hitting back. Indeed, Levi suggests as much in his essay on Améry (‘The Intellectual in Auschwitz’, in Levi 2013: 141-67; see esp. 151-3.).

¹⁸ A reviewer for this journal suggested that my argument misses its target insofar as the ‘must’ in Kant’s claim might not be one of causal or conceptual necessity (as I have presented the matter so far), but rather of rational commitment or requirement. Thus, Kant’s claim would be that any moral agent who is serious in their concern for morality is rationally committed to an ultimate moral end, namely the highest good (a world where everyone is as happy as they morally deserve); and this commitment implies belief in the possibility of practically achieving the highest good and, thus, in (the possibility of) moral progress. If this is Kant’s claim, it would be compatible with accepting that people can act morally irrespective (or without) hope, but such acts would then involve a kind of hidden irrationality.

In reply, I note, first, that the same reviewer accepts that, if Kant’s claim is taken to be about causal or conceptual necessity, my examples demonstrate that the claim is mistaken. I submit that such a demonstration is already of some use and potential interest to readers – indeed, even Kantians should welcome the result of having this disclosed, if only to make sure they provide an alternative reading in defending Kant’s claim. Second, let me hint at a substantive reply to the objection that on the different reading (where Kant’s claim is about hidden irrationality), this claim would stand unscratched by the examples I provided. Specifically, I would like to ask the reader whether the ethical point I am making in the main body applies here too. Ask yourself: Is it not an injustice or even mockery to say to someone like Améry that they either must not have been serious in their concern for morality or they must have been practically irrational in hitting back without (however implicitly) affirming the possibility of achieving the highest good and moral progress? Do we not want to say instead that they acted morally with integrity and were not lacking in anything practical (be it rationality or virtue)? Is it not so much the worse for Kant’s conception of practical rationality that according to it we have to

ascribe to Améry a hidden irrationality when he hit back irrespective of (or even without) hope for and faith in moral progress? Should we not, on this occasion, revise the conception (or the significance we attach to it), rather than how we view the case (or what would be (un)acceptable to say to Améry)?

¹⁹ For critical comments and suggestions, I am thankful to various audiences and individuals, including Gordon Finlayson, Howard Williams, and the above-noted reviewer. Special thanks are due to Polona Curk and Matteo Falomi.