

Brentano's Case for Optimism

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Abstract – Call *metaphysical optimism* the view that this world is the best of all possible worlds. This article addresses Franz Brentano's case for metaphysical optimism. I argue that, although Brentano does not offer any conclusive argument in favour of the latter, he disentangles many related issues which are interesting in their own right. The article has five sections corresponding to five claims, which I argue are central to Brentano's view, namely: (§1) metaphysical optimism is best spelled out as the view that this world is the only good among all possible worlds; (§2) the notion of "correct"—or "fitting"—love offers a criterion of the good and the *test of inverted love* offers a means to identify that which is good; (§3) pessimism has to be distinguished from *pejorism*, viz. the view that the non-existence of this world is preferable to its existence; (§4) there is something good involved in every "bad" thing, to the effect that pejorism is false; (§5) it is wrong to consider the value of something in isolation.

Keywords – Optimism, Pessimism, Value Theory, Metaphysics, Theodicy.

Introduction

Call *metaphysical optimism* the view that this world is the best of all possible worlds. This article addresses Franz Brentano's case for metaphysical optimism. I argue that, although Brentano does not offer any conclusive argument in favour of the latter, he disentangles many related issues which are interesting in their own right. The issues I have in mind include the following: How are we to understand the claim that this world is the best of all possible worlds? What, if any, is the criterion of the good? And how are we to recognize the goodness of something? Does metaphysical pessimism entail that it would be better if this world did not exist? Is there any reason to endorse this last claim? Can the value of something be determined in isolation? How does the value of a part impact the axiological balance of the whole? Etc. In this article I reconstruct Brentano's position by examining the answers he offers to most of those questions. My hope is that the resulting overview could pave the way to a further, more thorough exploration of the optimism problem.

The article has five sections corresponding to five claims, which I argue are central to Brentano's view, namely: (§1) metaphysical optimism is best spelled out as the view that this world is the only good among all possible worlds; (§2) the notion of "correct"—or "fitting"—love offers a criterion of the good and the *test of inverted love* offers a means to identify that which is good; (§3) pessimism has to be distinguished from *pejorism*, viz. the view that the non-existence of this world is preferable to its existence; (§4) there is something good involved in every "bad" thing, to the effect that pejorism is false; (§5) it is wrong to consider the value of something in isolation.

1. The Problem

Philosophical optimism is usually associated with the claim that good outweighs evil—or will eventually do so.¹ This claim is likely to be understood in various ways depending on whether it is applied to the world as a whole, to one's own individual life, or to some specific area of investigation. For the sake of convenience, I shall refer to the first variety of philosophical optimism as unrestricted or *metaphysical optimism*. By my lights, metaphysical optimism should be distinguished from further varieties of optimism, including *metaphilosophical optimism* (the view that scientific philosophy is possible), *epistemological optimism* (the view that knowledge of things in themselves is possible), and *moral optimism* (the view that moral education is possible). It is my contention that Brentano endorses all those varieties of philosophical optimism.² Yet, in this article, I shall confine myself to an examination of his argument for metaphysical optimism.

Historically speaking, metaphysical optimism is often associated with Leibniz's theodicy (1710) and his well-known claim that this world is the best (*optimus*) of all possible worlds.³ By contrast, the overarching opinion in 19th-century German-speaking philosophy had it that the existence of evil and suffering makes the world significantly bad. Arthur Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann are usually considered the main champions of metaphysical pessimism.⁴ In Italy, Adolfo Faggi advocated a similar pessimistic view in the 1890s.⁵

¹ *Factual optimism* (i.e., the view that good outweighs evil) may be distinguished from *prospective optimism* (the view that good will eventually outweigh evil). However, since this distinction won't play any significant role in what follows, I will simply set it aside here.

² Metaphilosophical optimism, especially, might well be the key to a correct understanding of Brentano's philosophical programme. See, e.g., U. KRIEGEL, *Brentano's Philosophical System. Mind, Meaning, Value*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, p. 5.

³ H.D. CARO, *The Best of All Possible Worlds? Leibniz's Optimism and Its Critics 1710-1755*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (edoc-Sever), Berlin 2014; P. RATEAU, *Leibniz et le meilleur des mondes possibles*, Garnier, Paris 2015. The relation between the modal claim that this is the best of all possible worlds and the factual claim that good outweighs evil is far from being clear. In this article I will organise most of the discussion around the modal claim, but I will mention the factual claim in Sections 4 and 5, for it plays some role in the critical discussion of pejorism and pessimism.

⁴ For a detailed reconstruction, see F.C. BEISER, *Weltschmerz. Pessimism in German Philosophy 1860-1900*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016. Beside his *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, von Hartmann wrote an influential book on the history of pessimism. See E. VON HARTMANN, *Zur Geschichte Und Begründung Des Pessimismus*, Duncker, Berlin 1880.

⁵ A. FAGGI, *La Filosofia Dell' Inconsciente Metafisica e Morale. Contributo Alla Storia Del Pessimismo*, Successori Le Monnier, Firenze 1890. Faggi was philosophy professor in Palermo, where Brentano met him during the spring-time of 1899 and 1900.

Brentano himself took stance in this debate by defending a version of metaphysical optimism. He laid down the bases of his own view in three short series of posthumously published notes: “Optimism”, “Optimism and Pessimism”, and “Reply to Faggi’s Book Against Optimism”.⁶ Yet, it is probably not unfair to say that the rejection of pessimism in all its forms was a central concern of his. In his 1894 lecture on *The Four Phases of Philosophy*, for example, he argues against Hieronymus Lorm’s (a.k.a. Heinrich Landesmann’s) book on *Groundless Optimism*,⁷ maintaining that “every single one of the most important philosophers of the ascending periods were [...] optimists” and that “pessimistic anxieties are the most tragic of the nightmares [*der traurigste Alpdruck*] by which mankind is affected”.⁸ In the same lecture, he is positively optimistic about solving the optimism question, pointing out at the existence of many side benefits: “It is clear [...] that the question of optimism is, in its various ramifications, a most complex one. On the other hand, there is no one of the knots in the web of difficulties by which one is here confronted, which cannot be untied. Indeed, untying each knot brings with it new and advantageous discoveries, never before hoped for”.⁹

In the 1930s, the defence of metaphysical optimism was elaborated on by further representatives of the Brentano School, in particular Oskar Kraus and his student, Georg Katkov.¹⁰ In this article, however, I will focus on Brentano’s own contribution to the optimism-pessimism debate. As suggested, my goal is to reconstruct (the various steps of) this contribution in a way which makes it easier to appreciate its philosophical value.

Let’s start with Leibniz’s claim that this world is the best of all possible worlds. The first step to entering the optimism-pessimism debate is to clarify what this claim means. The thought of this world being the best of all possible worlds may suggest that there could be *several good* worlds, among which this one would be the best. Now, Brentano argues, just like among all possible answers to a question there is only one that is true—i.e., worthy of affirmation—, so among all possible worlds there is only one that is good—i.e., worthy of choice from a creator’s point of view, or worthy of love (more on that in Section 2 below). And just like all the other answers are false insofar as they differ from the only correct one and are incompatible with it, so all the other possible worlds are bad insofar as they differ from the only good one and are incompatible with it.¹¹

For similar reasons, Brentano maintains that it would be misleading to wonder whether this

⁶ F. BRENTANO, *Optimismus*, in J. FRANK, H. MINKOWSKI, and E. STERNGLAS (eds.), *Horizons of a Philosopher: Essays in Honor of David Baumgardt*, Brill, Leiden 1963, pp. 35-39; *Optimismus und Pessimismus*, in ID., *Religion Und Philosophie*, ed. by F. Mayer-Hillebrand, Francke, Bern 1954, pp. 167-82; *Antwort Auf Faggis Schrift gegen den Optimismus*, ID., *Religion und Philosophie*, pp. 151-67. The second text presumably is an elaboration of the first one.

⁷ H. LORM, *Der grundlose Optimismus*, Verlag der Literarischen Gesellschaft, Wien 1894.

⁸ BRENTANO, *Die vier Phasen der Philosophie und ihr augenblicklicher Stand*, ed. by O. Kraus, Meiner, Leipzig 1926, pp. 30-31; Engl. transl. by B. M. Mezei and B. Smith, *The Four Phases of Philosophy and Its Current State*, in ID. (eds.), *The Four Phases of Philosophy*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1998, pp. 110-11.

⁹ *Ibi*, p. 30; Engl. transl., p. 110.

¹⁰ See O. KRAUS, *Pessimismus und Optimismus*, «Die Quelle», 1 (1931); G. KATKOV, *Zur Widerlegung des Pessimismus auf metaphysischem Gebiete*, in *Zur Philosophie Der Gegenwart. Vorträge und Reden anlässlich des 8. internationalen Philosophenkongresses in Prag, Gehalten von Mitglieder der Brentano-Gesellschaft*, Veröffentlichungen der Brentano-Gesellschaft 1, J. G. Calve’sche Universitätsbuchhandlung, Prag 1934, pp. 35-42; *Untersuchungen zur Werttheorie und Theodizee*, Rohrer, Brünn-Wien-Leipzig 1937.

¹¹ BRENTANO, *Optimismus und Pessimismus*, p. 167.

world is “the *worst* of all possible worlds”. The talk of “the worst of all possible worlds” presupposes that there is a finite number of ways a possible world could differ from the good one. Yet, on the analogy with judgement he advocates, this presupposition is false. Just like there is an infinite number of ways an answer can be false, there is an infinite number of ways a possible world can be bad. To make this view more intuitive, consider the judgements “ $2 + 2$ is 5”, “ $2 + 2$ is 6”, “ $2 + 2$ is 7”, etc. All of them are distinct from the truth that “ $2 + 2$ is 4”. As Brentano puts it, they are only “approximately correct, that is, properly speaking, false”.¹² In a sense, they all are *equally* false, for introducing grades of falsity really makes no sense at all.¹³ Still, Brentano maintains that some of them (e.g., “ $2 + 2$ is 7”) are more distant from the truth, hence are “incorrect to a greater extent” than some others (e.g., “ $2 + 2$ is 5”). What blocks the conclusion that one of them is “the most incorrect of all” is the fact that there is an infinite series of incorrect judgements which may be obtained by affirming that “ $2 + 2$ is $4 + n$ ”, with $n \neq 0$. Accordingly, one simply cannot conceive of a judgement which would be distant from the truth to the greatest extent possible. Similarly, Brentano, concludes, one cannot conceive of a possible world which would be distant from the good one to the greatest extent possible.¹⁴

According to this preliminary analysis, the question at issue is whether the world we live in is identical to the only good one or not. A positive answer would be tantamount to saying that the world we live in is the best of all possible worlds: If it is the only good one, then (trivially) it is the best one. A negative answer would be tantamount to saying that the world we live in deviates from the only good one to some extent, hence is more or less bad. Accordingly, metaphysical pessimism and metaphysical optimism may be spelled out as follows:

Metaphysical Optimism

This world is the only good among all possible worlds, hence is the best of them.

Metaphysical Pessimism

This world deviates from the only good of all possible worlds, hence is more or less bad.

Interestingly, Brentano assumes that opting for metaphysical optimism is not just a matter of personal opinion. The optimism question, he argues, may be tackled in a *scientific* way. In fact, it may be located at the intersection of value theory¹⁵ and natural theology. This does not mean, however, that Brentano takes metaphysical optimism to be *provable*. He himself does not offer any conclusive

¹² *Ibi*, p. 171.

¹³ See F. BRENTANO, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, ed. by O. Kraus, vol. 2, Meiner, Leipzig 1925, pp. 154-55.

¹⁴ BRENTANO, *Optimismus*, p. 35; *Optimismus und Pessimismus*, p. 168.

¹⁵ The claim that a psychology-based value theory should enable one to tackle the optimism-pessimism debate in a scientific way is shared, among others, by Oskar Kraus, Georg Katkov and Viktor Kraft. As Katkov puts it: “There are no unscientific problems, there is only an unscientific way of dealing with problems” (KATKOV, *Untersuchungen zur Werttheorie und Theodizee*, p. v). See also V. KRAFT, *Pessimismus und Optimismus*, in *Erkenntnis und Erziehung. Richard Meister zum 80. Geburtstag*, Österreichischer Bundesverlag, Wien 1961, pp. 66-75.

argument for the latter. Yet, as pointed out by Susan Gabriel, he thinks “reasonable to believe” that “the evils in this world are or will be defeated by the good”.¹⁶ In what follows, I shall focus on the value-theoretical considerations he employs in order to reject pessimism, starting with his “table of goods”.

2. The Table of Goods

On a relativist point of view, everyone is entitled to have his/her own personal shopping list of what is intrinsically good in his/her eyes. Yet, if one wants to avoid relativism, some supra-individual *criterion* of the good is needed. Brentano himself proposes such a criterion in his 1889 lecture on *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*. He argues that something is intrinsically good if, and only if, it is the intentional object of a “correct love,” where “correct love” means *a distinctive type of experience*. Basically, it is the attitude of desiring, or feeling oneself attracted by, some object *o* while simultaneously experiencing that this attitude towards *o* is the only one which is objectively appropriate—or “fitting”.¹⁷ On Brentano’s view, this type of experience is best conceived of as the analogon of an evident judgement.¹⁸ Judging is a distinctive attitude type—namely, accepting or rejecting—which we sometimes come to experience as evidently correct. Likewise, loving and hating are distinctive attitude type—namely, feeling attracted or repelled—which we sometimes come to experience as evidently correct as well. Importantly, the same holds true for acts of *preference*: Just like the love of *A* may be experienced as evidently correct, the preference for *A* over *B* (e.g., for a greater pleasure over a weaker pleasure) may be experienced as evidently correct.

There is little doubt that Brentano regarded this criterion of the “correct love” (respectively, “correct preference”) as a major step forward in the clarification of the concepts of *good* and *bad* (respectively, *better* and *worse*) and, subsequently, in the optimism-pessimism dispute. Brentano himself came to endorse a rather liberal conception of what satisfies this criterion. His own “table of goods” includes (i) *moral virtue*,¹⁹ (ii) *pleasure*, (iii) *knowledge*, (iv) *being*,²⁰ and (v) *the having of presentations*.²¹ He offers an a priori argument to the effect that all those candidates satisfy the aforementioned criterion. Call it the *argument from inverted love*.

¹⁶ S. GABRIEL, *Brentano at the Intersection of Psychology, Ontology, and the Good*, in D. FISSETTE and G. FRÉCHETTE (eds.), *Themes from Brentano*, Brill, Leiden 2013, p. 247. See also ID., *Brentano on Religion and Natural Theology*, in D. JACQUETTE (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Brentano*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 251.

¹⁷ This view is the ancestor of so-called fitting attitude theories of value usually associated to T. M. SCANLON, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1998, 3rd ed. 2000. For a general presentation, see D. JACOBSON, ‘Fitting Attitude Theories of Value’, ed. Edward N. Zalta, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2011, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/fitting-attitude-theories/>>.

¹⁸ BRENTANO, *Optimismus und Pessimismus*, p. 170.

¹⁹ On Brentano’s view, *loving what is good*—i.e., virtue—is itself intrinsically good while *loving what is bad*—i.e., vice—is intrinsically bad.

²⁰ See BRENTANO, *Optimismus und Pessimismus*, p. 170.

²¹ BRENTANO, *Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis*, ed. by O. Kraus, Meiner, Leipzig 3rd ed. 1934, p. 23; Engl. transl. by R. M. Chisholm and E. H. Schneewind, *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, Routledge, London, 2009, p. 14. See also ID., *Grundlegung und Aufbau der Ethik*, ed. by F. Mayer-Hillebrand, Francke, Bern 1952, § 55, p. 188; Engl. transl. by E. H. Schneewind, *The Foundation and Construction of Ethics*, Routledge, London 1973, reed. 2009, p. 119: “Each and every idea [*jede Vorstellung*] is of value, taken in itself [*in sich Wertvollen*]”.

For the sake of illustration, let us consider how the argument works in the case of knowledge. Following Aristotle, Brentano insists that knowledge is intrinsically good while error, prejudice, superstition and ignorance are intrinsically bad. His argument rests upon the following thought experiment. Suppose you come across non-human living beings belonging to a species quite different from ours. Unlike us, they show some preference for sensory qualities (smells and flavours, say) we human beings find repelling while they dislike sensory qualities we find pleasant. Compared to ours, their love for sensory qualities is inverted. Now suppose again that, unlike us, they also despise knowledge and love error. This is another case of inverted love—namely, one with respect to cognition. Yet, intuitively, Brentano argues, we would treat those two cases of inverted love as completely different, and rightly so. More precisely, the inversion in the sensory qualities case strikes us as perfectly fine, whereas the inversion in the knowledge case does not look equally fine. This intuitive difference calls for an explanation.

In the case of inverted love with respect to sensory qualities, we might say that value ascription to sensory qualities is “a matter of taste”, thereby meaning that there is no vantage point from which we would be entitled to judge inverted love of sensory qualities as inappropriate. Plausibly, taste is beyond rational justification: *De gustibus non disputandum*. By contrast, Brentano goes on, we would not say that despising knowledge and loving error boils down to a matter of taste. The reason it is so, he argues, is that the attraction we feel for knowledge is not merely instinctive. Rather, it is grounded in the fact that we experience knowledge as something “worthy of love” (*liebenswert*) and error as something “worthy of hate” (*hassenswert*).²² As a result, we experience *our* attitude towards knowledge as *fitting* while we experience the inverted attitude as *unfitting*. This experience is what makes inverted love with respect to cognition quite different from inverted love with respect to sensory qualities. Brentano concludes that, unlike sensory qualities, knowledge is good in itself.

To sum up, Brentano employs the reference to sensory qualities to build up a contrast case. His argument thereby resembles so-called *phenomenal contrast arguments* and may be reconstructed as involving an inference to the best explanation. Here is one way of reconstructing the argument:

1. Inverted love of sensory qualities contrasts with inverted love of cognition (i.e., hate of knowledge and love of error): the former is, while the latter is not, experienced as a matter of taste.
2. This contrast is best explained by assuming that, unlike inverted love of sensory qualities, inverted love of cognition strikes one as unfitting.

Therefore,

²² BRENTANO, *Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis*, pp. 22-23; Engl. transl., pp. 13-14. See also ID., *Antwort Auf Faggis Schrift gegen den Optimismus*, p. 154: “Why not mentioning intellectual evil (errors, prejudices) besides moral evil?”.

3. inverted love of cognition strikes one as unfitting.
4. If inverted love of cognition strikes one as unfitting, then knowledge is intrinsically good.

Hence,

5. knowledge is intrinsically good.

It is not my intention to critically discuss this argument here.²³ For present purposes, suffice it to say that Brentano uses the same argument to show that *pleasure, being, presentation* and all the other candidates on his list are intrinsically good. For instance, suppose that the same non-human creatures, in addition to loving sensory qualities we dislike and hating sensory qualities we like, love sadness (or suffering) and despise joy (or pleasure). Here again, Brentano argues, we would not say that loving sadness and despising joy is but a matter of taste, for, unlike the love of sensory qualities, the love of sadness strikes us as a “perverse”—that is, unfitting—attitude, etc.

Let me take stock. Metaphysical optimism is the view that this world is the only good (hence the best) among all possible worlds. Brentano himself regards (i) *virtue*, (ii) *pleasure*, (iii) *knowledge*, (iv) *being*, and (v) *the having of presentations* as being intrinsically good. His table of goods is rather liberal in that it contains more items than most traditional lists, which are often restricted to pleasure/pain (as in the case of hedonism) or virtue/vice. As we shall see, this list is crucial when it comes to understanding his arguments in favour of philosophical optimism. Yet, before that, it is still necessary to disentangle two often-related views, namely: metaphysical pessimism and pejorism.

3. Pessimism and Pejorism

What at first sight prevents us from settling the optimism-pessimism debate in favour of optimism is the classical problem of the existence of evil. If there is evil in this world, then it seems the latter cannot be the only good among all possible worlds, since one could always imagine a better world compared to which this world would be worse. In sum, the existence of evil would entail metaphysical pessimism. This seems to be true no matter whether the notion of evil is understood as (i) suffering, (ii) error or ignorance, (iii) vice, (iv) limitation of being. In each case, there seems to be empirical evidence that evil exists in the world and possibly outweighs the good.

One trouble with this line of reasoning is that it is doubtful whether empirical evidence conclusively speaks against the claim that this world is the only good one.²⁴ Another issue with the pessimis-

²³ For contemporary critical discussions on phenomenal contrast arguments, see O. KOKSVIK, *Phenomenal Contrast: A Critique*, «American Philosophical Quarterly», 52, (2015), 4, pp. 321-34; M. FÜRST, *On the Limits of the Method of Phenomenal Contrast*, «Journal of the American Philosophical Association», 3, (2017), 2, pp. 168-88; M. JORBA and A. VICENTE, 'Phenomenal Contrast Arguments: What They Achieve', in *Mind and Language* (2019), pp. 1-18.

²⁴ Among Brentano's students, Twardowski advocates such an 'agnostic' approach to the claim that good outweighs evil. See K. TWARDOWSKI, *Pessimism and Optimism*, in ID., *On Prejudices, Judgments and Other Topics in Philosophy*, Engl. transl. by K. Janeczok, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2014, p. 332.

tic line of reasoning I just mentioned is that philosophers who follow it usually defend a position which comes close to pessimism, and indeed sometimes is referred to under the same name. Yet, on closer inspection, it appears this position does not quite overlap with what I have called metaphysical pessimism. To avoid confusion, Brentano calls it “pejorism” (*Pejorismus*). It is the view that:

Pejorism

The non-existence of this world is preferable to its existence.

The converse of pejorism is “meliorism” (*Meliorismus*), or the view that:

Meliorism

The existence of this world is preferable to its non-existence.²⁵

Presumably, there are some connections between metaphysical pessimism and pejorism on the one hand, metaphysical optimism and meliorism on the other. Yet, it is unclear whether metaphysical pessimism actually leads to pejorism. It only does so, arguably, when combined with the *additional* claim that evil outweighs good. If you are convinced that, all things considered, evil outweighs good, then you might come to think that the non-existence of the world would have been preferable to its existence. Similarly, if you are convinced that, all things considered, good outweighs evil, then you might come to think that the existence of the world is preferable to its non-existence. Now it is far from being clear whether such transitions should be construed as relations of logical entailment or in a looser way. What is clear, however, is that a refutation of what comes in the literature under the head of “pessimism” would not be complete unless it defeats metaphysical pessimism *and* pejorism, since the latter is not always explicitly distinguished from the former. Brentano proceeds with a refutation of both. As far as I can see, his argumentative strategy has two steps: (1) Even if there is (a certain amount of) evil in the world, pejorism is false and meliorism is true; (2) metaphysical pessimism is probably false. Section 4 addresses the first step of Brentano’s argumentation and Section 5 its second step.

4. The Case Against Pejorism

On Brentano’s view, the claim that something is bad is likely to be understood in four senses only, namely: (i) it involves vice, (ii) it involves error, (iii) it involves pain, and (iv) it involves a limitation of being. This list is supposed to be exhaustive. The pejorist claims that, if the world we live in involves

²⁵ As Brentano writes, pejorism and meliorism may be seen as responses to Hamlet’s well-known question—*to be or not to be?*—applied to the whole universe (see BRENTANO, *Optimismus und Pessimismus*, pp. 168-69). Conversely, Hamlet’s question corresponds to an “individualist” version of those views. For example, if you believe there are more good things than bad things in your life, then you might think that your life is worth living and that it is better to be than no to be. If, on the contrary, you believe there are more bad things than good things in your life, then you might come to think that your life is not worth living. As already said, I shall stick to the unrestricted formulation according to which pejorism and meliorism apply to the universe in its entirety.

more vice than virtue, more pain than pleasure, more error than knowledge, or more non-being than being, then it would have been better that it did not exist at all. Brentano's objection against pejorism is intended to block this consequence. The key idea behind his strategy seems to be as follows: The only case in which it would be legitimate to prefer the non-existence of *A* over its existence is the case in which *A* is *purely* bad, viz. contains no good at all. Such a case, Brentano argues, never occurs, hence there is no legitimate case in which the non-existence of *A* should be preferred to its existence.

To begin with, suppose metaphysical pessimism is understood as the claim that this world involves limited beings. This means that, in the actual world, many possibilities are not realised. For example, we human beings arguably are limited beings, in the sense that there are many properties or powers that we do not have. The same holds true, plausibly, for all living and non-living beings. Does it follow that the non-being of the world would have been better? According to the analysis of the good summarised in Section 1, being is intrinsically good and non-being is intrinsically bad. This claim may be supported by the argument from inverted love: A creature which would love non-being and hate being, Brentano argues, would not just be regarded as expressing a judgement of taste, but as having a strikingly unfitting attitude. Here again, the unfitting character of inverted love with respect to being is not inferred from anything. Rather, Brentano would argue, it is immediately evident. But if it is so, then it is not true that the non-being of the world should be preferred to its present, limited being. The key idea is that *a limited being still is a being, and to that extent is good* and better than mere non-being. Therefore, by contrast with mere non-being, the present, limited state of the world still appears as relatively good, hence better than nothing: "Even when it is thought of in an abstract way, being always is better than non-being",²⁶ where "is better" means that the inverted attitude is unfitting.

A similar line of reasoning, Brentano goes on, holds true if evil is understood as (iii) error, (ii) pain, or (i) vice. An error is an incorrect judgement. Only a being capable of judgemental act can make an error. Now, on Brentano's theory of mental phenomena, an act of judging necessarily presupposes some presentations. The existence of errors is not separable from the existence of presentations. But, as we have seen in Section 1, Brentano takes it that having presentations is itself intrinsically good. In virtue of the argument from inverted love, a creature which would love not having presentations and despise having presentations would be rightly regarded as having unfitting attitudes towards (the having of) presentations. Therefore, the existence of errors is not only compatible with, but presupposes, the existence of something intrinsically good. As a result, incorrect judgements may be said to be bad insofar as that they are a deviation from knowledge, which is good. Yet, to the extent that they involve (the having of) presentations, they nonetheless are good in this respect and better than nothing. As Brentano puts it: "Anyone who is wrong is judging and ranks as such higher than plants and lifeless bodies. He also cannot be wrong without having some presentation, and every presentation as such is not open to error and has some value".²⁷

²⁶ BRENTANO, *Optimismus und Pessimismus*, p. 178.

²⁷ *Ibi*, p. 173. See also BRENTANO, *Grundlegung und Aufbau der Ethik*, p. 184; Engl. transl., p. 116: "No error is to be called a pure evil [*ein reines Übel*], for as judgement it includes a presentation, and every presentation is a good

Similarly, pain and vice are complex mental phenomena which presuppose (the having) of presentations, hence are good in this respect and better than nothing: “Anyone who is in pain is relatively imperfect. Yet he ranks higher than any creature that lacks consciousness, be it only because he has presentations, knowledge, and all this is involved in the act of suffering itself”.²⁸ What about vice? Vice is an act of love directed at something bad, and on Brentano’s theory of mental phenomena, an act of love presupposes some presentation of that which is loved. Therefore, a vice may be said to be bad insofar as it is a deviation from virtue: “Wishing to do something bad is bad, for wishing to do something good is better and incompatible with the former”.²⁹ Yet, to the extent that vice involves (the having of) some presentation, it nonetheless is good in this respect and better than nothing. And not only that, but Brentano also argues that vice presupposes some knowledge of the good, otherwise there would be no sin.³⁰ Now knowledge is intrinsically good. Therefore, to the extent that vice involves some knowledge, it is good in this respect and better than nothing.

Here is a more formal reconstruction of the argument:

1. There are only four senses in which something in this world may be said to be bad, namely: it involves (i) vice, (ii) error, (iii) pain, (iv) limitation of being.
2. Vice is not purely bad, for it presupposes some good.
3. Error is not purely bad, for it presupposes some good.
4. Pain is not purely bad, for it presupposes some good.
5. Limitation of being is not purely bad, for it presupposes some good.

Therefore,

6. Nothing in this world may be said to be purely bad.
7. If nothing in this world may be said to be purely bad, then pejorism is false.

Hence,

8. pejorism is false.

The main lesson seems to be this: All can be concluded from the pessimistic assumption is that perfect, purely good things are outnumbered by imperfect things, viz. things which exhibit an admixture of good and evil.³¹ Now, according to the criterion of “correct preference,” it is self-evidently cor-

as such (...). The man who errs is of greater worth [*steht höher im Werte*] than the man who makes no judgments and who is therefore incapable of error” (translation slightly modified).

²⁸ BRENTANO, *Optimismus und Pessimismus*, p. 175.

²⁹ *Ibi*, p. 174.

³⁰ *Ibi*, p. 179.

³¹ *Ibi*, p. 180.

rect to prefer “an evil with an admixture of good to the same evil in its unadulterated state.” This value-theoretical principle serves as back-up for premise 7: If all “bad” things in this world present themselves as an admixture of good and evil, then the act of preferring their non-existence to their existence should strike us as unfitting. Therefore, Brentano concludes, it is correct to prefer the existence of this imperfect world to its non-existence, and meliorism is vindicated.

5. The Case Against Pessimism

Even if you accept the above-mentioned argument and take for granted that pejorism fails, nothing has been said so far against metaphysical pessimism. I want now to consider the reason why Brentano thinks the latter should be resisted.

Although Brentano wants to tackle the optimism-pessimism debate on the ground of a non-speculative, scientifically-minded value theory, his case against pessimism is hardly separable from his acceptance of theism, viz. the view that this world is created by an infinitely perfect God, which is taken to be absolutely free and virtuous—i.e., good-wanting.³² On his view, no comparison between the various possible worlds could help us settle the optimism-pessimism debate. The only way out is to assume the existence of a benevolent and virtuous creator of the universe.³³ If God is virtuous, then he desires the good, since virtue by definition is the love of the good. Therefore, this world, if it is created by God, is infinitely good. The argument is straightforward:

1. This world is wanted by God.
2. God is absolutely free and absolutely virtuous, viz. wants the good.

Therefore,

3. This world is the only good among all possible worlds, hence it is the best.

As Alfred Kastil puts it, metaphysical optimism is an “inevitable consequence” of theism.³⁴ From a biographical point of view, indeed, it is tempting to see Brentano’s optimism as part of his Christian education. At the same time, he regards optimism as superior to Christianity, which seems to be in his eyes but a version of optimism: If Christianity should disappear, he writes, “whatever replaces it, whatever achieves an enduring victory over it, must be explicitly optimistic”.³⁵ Be that as it may, it is plain that one major challenge for someone wishing to take up the aforementioned line of reasoning

³² On the connection between pessimism and atheism on the one hand, optimism and theism on the other, see, e.g., BRENTANO, *Grundlegung und Aufbau der Ethik*, pp. 230-31; Engl. transl., p. 145.

³³ BRENTANO, *Optimismus*, p. 38; *Optimismus und Pessimismus*, p. 175.

³⁴ A. KASTIL, *Die Philosophie Franz Brentanos. Eine Einführung in Seine Lehre*, Francke, Bern 1951, p. 304. In the words of Kraus: “Our optimism consists in nothing else than in the hope of an infinite progress of the creatures, a hope which is based on the proof of a divine creator” (O. KRAUS, *Die Werttheorien. Geschichte und Kritik*, Rohrer, Brunn 1937, p. 490).

³⁵ BRENTANO, *Die vier Phasen der Philosophie und ihr augenblicklicher Stand*, p. 31; Engl. transl., p. 111.

is to provide some support for premises 1 and 2, which requires no less than proving the existence of God in the first place. Brentano himself rejects the ontological proof of God's existence but advocates a teleological proof based on empirical evidence of teleology in nature. I won't say more about that here.³⁶ Rather, I shall focus on the question of how metaphysical optimism—the conclusion that this world is the only good among all possible worlds—is compatible with the existence of evil. This is the central issue addressed in Leibniz's theodicy.

This issue may be easily solved, Brentano argues, by means of a classical principle called the *principle of summation of the goods*. Roughly speaking, this principle says that the value of a whole—its overall axiological balance—is the summation of the values of all its parts. This implies that, when wondering whether this world is more good than bad or the other way around, one has to consider the world in its entirety instead of considering a part of the world. This injunction has to be understood in a temporal sense. Instead of merely considering the world in its present state, one should take into account the fact that this world is steadily evolving. When talking about God's creation, Brentano writes, "one is not referring to a creation which is now over and completed, but to a limitless continued creation, which thereby is bound to reach, and go beyond, any finite degree of perfection".³⁷

If one endorses this view, then the problem of evil can be dealt with as follows. It is beyond doubt that, at some stage of the creation, this world contains some things which are bad. Although God wanted every past, present, and future situation, his wanting was first and foremost directed at the world as a whole. Since he wants the good, the world as a whole—i.e., the continued creation—is good. It is true that bad things are part of this continued creation, hence are wanted by God. Yet, two things must be taken into consideration here. First, there are various *ways of loving*, or wanting, something. God does *not* want bad things *in the same way* he wants the whole. The whole is wanted immediately insofar as it is good; bad things are wanted in a much more mediated way, inasmuch as they are, say, necessary parts of the whole (in virtue of determinism). Next, bad things are not purely bad when they are considered as necessary parts of the whole, which is good. Indeed, Brentano maintains that "something in the world appears to be bad only provided that it is considered in isolation, and isolation is a fiction; but it is not bad in the context of the whole".³⁸ Leaving theological considerations aside, the key idea here is that the "bad" character of some part of the whole is suppressed and absorbed into the whole, on the condition that the overall axiological balance of the latter is positive.

One main trouble with this argumentative strategy is that it takes the principle of summation for granted.³⁹ Now, in the 1930s, Georg Katkov precisely challenged this principle. Katkov argues that a being with a negative axiological balance (a) is not worthy of existence and (b) makes the whole itself,

³⁶ For an overview, see GABRIEL, *Brentano on Religion and Natural Theology*.

³⁷ BRENTANO, *Optimismus und Pessimismus*, p. 176. See also KASTIL, *Die Philosophie Franz Brentanos*, p. 304.

³⁸ F. BRENTANO, *Übereinstimmende Sätze bei Aristoteles und Leibniz (Diktat am 12. August 1908)*, in J. FRANK, H. MINKOWSKI, and E. STERNGLAS (eds.), *Horizons of a Philosopher: Essays in Honor of David Baumgardt*, p. 41.

³⁹ See, e.g., BRENTANO, *Grundlegung und Aufbau der Ethik*, p. 160; Engl. transl., p. 100.

to which it belongs, unworthy of existence, no matter how many good things are part of the whole.⁴⁰ According to the criterion of correct preference, he writes, it would be unfitting to prefer a whole made up of *A* and *B*, where *A* is entirely good (+) and *B* entirely bad (–), to a whole in which *A* and *B* both exhibit an admixture of good and evil, albeit each with a positive axiological balance (+). On Katkov’s view, what Brentano and the supporters of the summation principle overlook is that the “badness” of *B* cannot possibly be counterweighted by the “goodness” of *A*, and consequently that the so-called law of *bonum progressionis* “only holds for the domain of individual existence”.⁴¹ In other words, the way good and evil are divided *within each individual* has to be taken into account if the overall axiological balance of the whole has to be established in a satisfying way.

6. Conclusion

Admittedly, a full-blown refutation of pessimism would require a “vast work” in the field of value theory.⁴² The proposed reconstruction focused on Brentano’s rather sketchy notes on the optimism-pessimism debate. To conclude, let me recall five main lessons which I think may be drawn from his analyses:

- (1) Metaphysical optimism is best spelled out as the view that this world is the *only good* among all possible worlds, all the other possible worlds being more or less bad inasmuch as they deviate from the latter.
- (2) The notion of “correct love” offers a criterion of the good and the *test of inverted love* offers a means to identify which things are good, viz. things for which hating strikes one as an unfitting attitude.
- (3) Pessimism has to be distinguished from pejorism, viz. the view that the non-existence of this world is preferable to its existence.
- (4) There is something good involved in every “bad” thing, to the effect that there is no purely bad thing in this world.
- (5) It is wrong to consider the value of something in isolation. It might turn out that “bad” things are necessary parts of a good whole, and therefore serve the good in some indirect way.

None of these claims is without its difficulties. However, they certainly pave the way to a more thorough approach to the optimism-pessimism debate.⁴³

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⁴⁰ KATKOV, *Zur Widerlegung des Pessimismus auf metaphysischem Gebiete*, p. 36; *Untersuchungen Zur Werttheorie und Theodizee*, p. 66.

⁴¹ KATKOV, *Zur Widerlegung des Pessimismus auf metaphysischem Gebiete*, p. 38.

⁴² BRENTANO, *Antwort auf Faggis Schrift gegen den Optimismus*, p. 151.

⁴³ I am grateful to one anonymous referee and Davide Bordini for comments on a previous draft of this article.

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