

Pessimism, Political Critique, and the Contingently Bad Life

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Abstract

It is widely believed that philosophical pessimism is committed to fatalism about the sufferings that characterize the human condition, and that it encourages resignation and withdrawal from the political realm in response. This paper offers an explanation for and argument against this perception by distinguishing two functions that pessimism can serve. Pessimism's *skeptical* mode suggests that fundamental cross-cultural constraints on the human condition bar us from the good life (however defined). These constraints are often represented as immune to political amelioration, leading to the perception that pessimism is intrinsically fatalistic and resigned. Yet pessimism's *critical* function emphasizes the political, economic, and cultural contingency of many sources of suffering and crisis while exhorting us to reject and reimagine the social forces that actively harm our capacity to flourish. It also offers an internal critique of skeptical pessimism's tendency to naturalize and depoliticize the sources of our sufferings. These sometimes contradictory skeptical and critical tendencies should both be grouped under the pessimist banner, and we should see pessimism's critical mode as especially valuable to political critique.

1. Introduction

Philosophical pessimism is justly associated with two stark claims. First, human life is fundamentally and inescapably a condition of suffering, making happiness virtually unattainable. Second, human life is devoid of whatever meaning would satisfy humans—it is an ultimately insignificant, absurd, meaningless enterprise playing itself out amidst the indifferent vastness of the cosmos. Given that happiness and meaning above all else make human life worthwhile, the world's consistent refusal to realize those values makes human life a very bad prospect indeed. These are the days of our lives: squalid birth, meager fulfillment, boundless disappointment, uncompensated and unredeemed suffering, grinding pointlessness, annihilating death. In fact, life is *such* a bad prospect that it is a state of being worse than non-existence. Better never to have been at all.

Could any of that be true? If so, what features of human existence make happiness and meaning unattainable? And if pessimism is true, is it possible to

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make the human condition better? For some, even entertaining these questions gives pessimism more credit than it deserves. Many find pessimism's claims about the "bad news" of human life obviously false, or laughable, or repugnant, or even immoral (all charges, it should be noted, which have also been credibly marshaled against various species of *optimism*).

Yet pessimism deserves more than automatic dismissal. Historically, it deserves a great deal of credit for keeping fundamental questions about human life's justification, value, and meaning on the table during a late modern decline in religious belief and authority (Beiser 2016, van der Lugt 2021). It has much the same function now, in an age where there is a great deal of pressure to think that these questions are pointless, badly formed, or settled by complacent appeals to old religion, New Age spirituality, a relativistic "follow your bliss" self-help industry, technocratic optimism, or simply head-in-the-sand avoidance.

In addition, pessimism can be *useful*. Its attunement to the dark underbelly of existence gives it an ironic sensibility that is valuable to political critique. For example, pessimism is well-placed to observe the mismatch between modernity's self-congratulatory conception of "progress" and the actually existing conditions of human life.

Consider the situation of many of us in the generally materially well-off Global North. Technology, colonialism, and the forces of global capital have largely democratized access to forms of entertainment, leisure, and convenience which (we assure ourselves) would have astonished our ancestors—and yet we're largely bored, anxious, tired, depressed, annoyed, and unhappy. We have never been more free, we assert, coerced by economic necessity into exploitative work we despise while the state, itself captured by the interests of an aggressively anti-democratic elite ruling class, abandons the majority of the world's people to contend with various forms of social precarity and violence. In the midst of patterns of drought, heatwaves, wildfires, floods, and hurricanes that would seem utterly catastrophic less than a century ago, we cling to unsustainable consumption habits and respond to short-term economic incentives while affecting ignorance of the incalculable suffering that anthropogenic climate change has already begun to visit on the most historically disadvantaged groups of people. Scientific innovation will save "us" (or at least those of us already well-placed to benefit from it), we claim, at the same time that the specter of total nuclear annihilation continues to haunt the historical present. It is, I submit, not obviously true that human life is a good bet under these conditions. Just an honest

look at the modern predicament challenges us to say exactly where pessimism speaks falsely.

The idea that pessimism could offer a worthwhile re-evaluation of the “usual” answers to life’s big questions while also providing us with this critical political perspective may seem strange, for two reasons. First, there is a widespread assumption of a necessary connection between pessimism and *fatalism*. Life is going to be bad no matter what, the caricature holds, and so resignation, despair, and other forms of complacency about the sufferings that characterize the human condition are reasonable responses to the badness of the world. Second, defenders and detractors of pessimism alike point to the fact that pessimism is often “a philosophy of personal conduct, rather than public order” (Dienstag 2006: 7), and so incentivizes a retreat from the political sphere into “personal and self-created notions of progress” (Dovi 2017: 229) at the expense of collective participation in the project of making a better world. If pessimism indeed is fatalistic, resigned, and problematically individualistic, what could it possibly offer to the language of political critique? What would it mean to affirm a form of pessimism that speaks truthfully about suffering and the inevitable constraints of human limitation on the one hand while fueling a critical stance that seeks the amelioration of a very bad world on the other?

This paper argues that we can answer these questions by distinguishing between two separate uses that pessimism has historically had: its *skeptical* function and its *critical* function. In its skeptical mode, pessimism expresses skepticism about the attainability of the good life across the board. The main targets of skeptical pessimism are various theories of well-being, each of which attempts to explain what a good human life consists in. Pessimism holds that human life goes badly *regardless* of which theory of well-being we adopt. In so doing, it advances a modal claim against those theories: perhaps a certain theory of well-being specifies the conditions under which a human life *would* be good and worthwhile, but worldly conditions systematically prevent actually existing human beings from achieving that kind of life.

As we will see, pessimism comes closest to precluding itself from political critique in its skeptical mode, since it often represents the constraints that prevent people from living good lives as fundamental or intrinsic to the human condition. Yet this does not mean that pessimism must succumb to fatalism, resignation, and withdrawal. In its critical mode, pessimism can be a vehicle of cultural and political critique, to the extent that it emphasizes the social contingency of many

of the sources of our suffering.

Section 2 provides some motivation for the skeptical pessimist's claim that "no life is good" (Benatar 2011). My goal will not be to show that pessimism about well-being is true, but to illustrate the reasons behind its global skepticism about the possibility of the good life. Section 3 argues that the appearance of a conceptual connection between pessimism, fatalism, and withdrawal from the political domain is largely generated by this skeptical function. Section 4 introduces pessimism's critical function and explains its role in political critique. Here we will see that pessimism's critical function can even ground a critique of its own potentially depoliticizing skeptical function. In closing, I suggest that while pessimism is certainly a philosophy of regret for our predicament, it offers an ethic of resistance rather than resignation.

2. What is Pessimism?

There is a fair amount of resistance to the idea that pessimism about well-being could possibly be true. To begin then, we should give a deeper description of what pessimism is, and sketch some of the most prominent arguments for the view.

Mara van der Lugt (2021) distinguishes two separate constellations of ideas that go by the name of "pessimism." First, there is *value-oriented pessimism*, "which applies itself to questions such as whether life is worth living, whether the goods or evils weigh out in life, and how to weigh them adequately." Second, there is *future-oriented pessimism*, which has "something to do with our expectations about the future," namely that the future will contain bad things, that things will get worse, or at least that tomorrow will be no better than today (van der Lugt 2021: 11).¹

To date, many of the discussions of pessimism's political utility (or lack thereof) have focused primarily on this future-oriented dimension of pessimism, particularly its skepticism about narratives concerning moral, cultural, and political "progress" (Gray 2002, Dienstag 2006, Dovi 2017, Witlacil 2022). As we will see, I agree that this is an important component of pessimist political

¹ As van der Lugt points out, this characterization of future-oriented pessimism is a popular but distorting representation of how pessimists think about the future. While future-oriented *optimists* do seem to think that things progress and get better, pessimists do not necessarily embrace the claim that things will get worse. As Joshua Foa Dienstag puts it, where the optimist expects good things in the future, "the pessimist expects nothing" (Dienstag 2006:40).

consciousness. At the same time, this paper seeks to focus primarily on the political upshots of *value-oriented* pessimism, which is reflected by pessimism's suspicion that human life is a condition of irredeemable suffering. In my view, the connection between value-oriented pessimism and a potentially liberatory political ethic has been insufficiently explored. In the light of van der Lugt's contention that value-oriented pessimism enjoys both historical and conceptual priority over its future-oriented cousin (van der Lugt 2021: 68-71), it seems especially important to investigate whether the pessimist tradition is compatible with such an ethic.

One pithy summation of the value-oriented pessimist stance is that "the bad prevails over the good" (Prescott 2012: 340). Pessimists often understand the bad to prevail over the good quite globally, as if the balance of bad things in existence defeats the balance of good things. As Arthur Schopenhauer puts it in a famous passage:

If we were to conduct the most hardened and callous optimist through hospitals, infirmaries, operating theatres, through prisons, torture-chambers, and slave-hovels, over battlefields and to places of execution; if we were to open to him all the dark abodes of misery, where it shuns the gaze of cold curiosity, and finally were to allow him to glance into the dungeon of Ugolino where prisoners starved to death, he too would certainly see in the end what kind of world is this *meilleur des mondes possibles*. (WWR I: 325)

Of course, settling the question of whether "the bad prevails over the good" in the universe as a whole is a notoriously difficult enterprise. David Hume's own pessimism was apparently tempered by his empiricism on this point, leading him to deny that this question can be answered decisively one way or the other: "For who is able to form an exact computation of all the happiness and misery, that are in the world, and to compare them exactly with each other?" (quoted in van der Lugt 2021: 190-191). On the other hand, Hume held that we might be able to settle the question of whether particular human lives are worth living by attending to the balance of good and bad things *within* human experience.

In van der Lugt's words, this is an example of how the pessimistic debate shifts from the "cosmic" to the "creaturely" perspective, from questions about the value of existence as a whole to questions about whether human lives contain

more good than bad. Here we will be focused on pessimism’s “creaturely” perspective on well-being. Pessimism holds that the bad prevails over the good in two domains of human life: 1) suffering prevails over happiness, and 2) meaninglessness prevails over meaning. The dominance of the bad over the good in these domains is acute enough to make non-existence preferable to existence.

2.1 Suffering prevails over happiness

In recent decades, analytic philosophical discussion about “happiness” has largely morphed into a discussion about “well-being.” “Well-being” is a term for that which is “good for” human lives or makes those lives go well, and theories of well-being offer different accounts for what these goods might be. The majority of the literature breaks down into three broad views. Hedonistic theories hold that well-being basically amounts to experiences of pleasure (and perhaps relative freedom from experiences of pain). Desire satisfaction views hold that well-being amounts to having one’s desires satisfied. Finally, objective list theories hold that well-being consists in realizing important values besides pleasure and desire satisfaction, such as friendship, knowledge, love, and a sense of purpose.

The many differences and qualifications between particular hedonistic, desire-satisfaction, or objective list views need not concern us here, because the pessimist’s claim is that well-being is unattainable *regardless* of which particular theory of well-being we prefer. Well-being is unattainable on a hedonistic theory because painful states prevail over pleasurable ones. It is unattainable on a desire satisfaction theory because frustration and dissatisfaction prevail over satisfaction. And it is unattainable on an objective list theory because human lives systematically fail to realize values worth having. Here I will briefly sketch some pessimistic arguments against these three major theories of well-being.

If well-being consists in pleasure, then a human life will go well just in case it involves a greater balance of pleasure over pain. The pessimist contends that 1) no human life actually includes a greater balance of pleasure over pain, and 2) even if there is a greater *quantity* of pleasure in a human life, the *qualitative* badness of even a smaller quantity of pain outweighs even a very great quantity of pleasure.²

² My survey of these pessimistic arguments owes much to David Benatar’s clear exposition of them, but as Mara van der Lugt points out, many of the arguments themselves are prefigured or explicitly made by Pierre Bayle in the 17th century (see van der Lugt 2021: 42-66).

To some, the idea that life contains *more* pain than pleasure may seem strange. After all, many relatively fortunate people may look at their lives and note that health is more common than sickness, that positive or neutral mental states are considerably more common than painful ones, that the painful experiences they do have are not extreme or debilitating, and so on. How could the pessimist be right that the bad prevails over the good on this score?

Optimists and pessimists alike often want to draw a distinction between *thinking* that your life is going well and it *actually* going well. Once we distinguish between *judgments* of the quality of our lives and the *actual* quality of those lives, the question becomes how reliable our generally positive judgments about the quality of our lives are. Pessimists often point out that these judgments tend to skew to the optimistic side of the spectrum: we overestimate how good our lives are and underestimate how bad they are. We're just *biased* in favor of optimism.

According to David Benatar, among these biases are a psychological tendency to recall positive experiences and forget negative experiences, a deep-seated expectation that the future will be as good or better than the past, the tendency to habituate ourselves and adapt to life conditions that are objectively quite negative, and the tendency to focus on our well-being relative to those who we consider worse off rather than our "absolute" well-being (2006: 64-69). These biases prevent us from achieving a suitably objective perspective on just how many "negative mental states" everyday life contains:

[We] tend to ignore just how much of our lives is characterized by negative mental states, even if often only relatively mildly negative ones.... These include hunger, thirst, bowel and bladder distension (as these organs become filled), tiredness, stress, thermal discomfort (that is, feeling either too hot or too cold), and itch. For billions of people, at least some of these discomforts are chronic. These people cannot relieve their hunger, escape the cold, or avoid the stress... in fact, if we think about it, significant periods of each day are marked by some or other of these states. (Benatar 2006: 72)

Of course, in addition to these mundane pains, human lives contain "chronic ailments and advancing age," as well as "guilt, shame, boredom, sadness, depression, loneliness, the ravages of AIDS, of cancer ... and grief and bereavement" (Benatar 2006: 72). Once we take these experiences and biases into

account, it seems less and less likely that human beings generally attain the good life by hedonistic standards.

Moreover, even if subjective experience *is* a reliable indicator of “how much” pain and pleasure life contains, the *qualitative* badness of pain prevails over the *qualitative* goodness of pleasure. Indeed, many pessimists take the negativity associated with experiences of pain to decisively outweigh the positivity associated with experiences of pleasure. “The worst pains seem to be worse than the best pleasures are good. Anybody who doubts this should consider what choice they would make if they were offered the option of securing an hour of the most sublime pleasures possible in exchange for suffering an hour of the worst pain possible,” says Benatar (2011: 62), echoing Schopenhauer: “Whoever would like to briefly test the assertion that pleasure outweighs pain in the world, or that they are at least in equilibrium, should compare the feelings of the animal that devours another with those of the one being devoured” (P&P 2: 263). As a result, a human life could contain a great many pleasurable experiences and relatively few painful ones while still in some sense being dominated by negative experiences.

Much of the pessimist’s argument against hedonism applies to desire-satisfaction theories as well. First, one’s sense of whether one’s desires have been or are being satisfied is arguably even *more* unreliable than one’s assessment of whether one’s life is largely pleasurable or painful, and so judgments about one’s own well-being are even more susceptible to bias and distortion. Second, like our quest for pleasurable experiences, many desires—for health, wealth, or honor—are temporarily or fleetingly fulfilled only after long periods of toil and frustration, and many of our deepest desires remain unfulfilled altogether: “One yearns to be free, but dies incarcerated or oppressed. One seeks wisdom but never attains it. One hankers after being beautiful but is congenitally and irreversibly ugly. One aspires to great wealth and influence, but remains poor and impotent all one’s life” (Benatar 2006: 75). Finally, even the fleeting fulfillment of our desires tends to produce more desires, with the result that we are compelled to strive constantly after new objects of desire, leading to states of dissatisfaction and restlessness ranging from outright pain to numbing boredom. If well-being consists in having our desires fulfilled, then, the world makes the prospects for our own well-being quite bleak.

2.2 *Meaningless prevails over meaning*

Objective list theorists insist that well-being is constituted by more than simply pleasurable experiences or having one's desires satisfied. Rather, well-being involves having one's life realize a broad spectrum of values which do not seem to be reducible to pleasurable experiences or instances of desire satisfaction. Different objective list theories offer different accounts of what values well-being involves, yet goods such as beauty, knowledge, virtue, friendship, and meaning can be found on many lists. Objective list theories are harder for the pessimist to dismiss, precisely because they presume that even a life which does not fare well by hedonistic or desire-satisfaction standards can nevertheless be worthwhile. Human life might be painful and frustrating, the objective list theorist argues, but it may also realize goods that make life worth living after all.

Again, the question of whether a life realizes a certain objective value is separate from the question of whether a life is *subjectively fulfilling*. This underlines the point that our judgments of the quality of our lives do not *settle* the question of how worthwhile those lives are. Consider meaning. I might think that my life is meaningful even if all I do is watch cartoons all day, but perhaps you will agree (not all do) that my being fulfilled by this activity does not *settle* the question of whether my life is truly meaningful. Or to borrow an example from Susan Wolf, the utter pointlessness and meaninglessness of Sisyphus' predicament is not ameliorated if we assume that Sisyphus loves nothing more than rolling boulders up hills, endlessly. While a "happy Sisyphus" might be better off than he otherwise would be insofar as he suffers less, he is worse off in an epistemic or "existential" sense—now he falsely *believes* endless boulder-rolling to be a meaningful activity.³

If well-being consists in realizing some constellation of objective values, we need some account of what those values are, and an assessment of how likely it is that actual human lives will realize them. Once again, we must be careful to avoid the distortions that inherently optimistic cognitive and perceptual biases may introduce into our assessment of the value of "objective" goods such as friendship, knowledge, and love. Our resilient optimism might lead us to overestimate the

³ Interestingly, the largely pessimistic Richard Taylor (1970) disagrees, holding that subjective fulfillment in pointless tasks can confer not only well-being, but meaningfulness. Wolf's (2010) "fitting fulfillment" view of meaning in life is explicitly intended to show against Taylor that a meaningful life involves both subjective fulfillment and the realization of objective value, as well as an appropriate relationship between them.

extent to which these goods are present in our lives. Yet there is also another danger: we might *overvalue* whatever goods we take well-being to involve by regarding them as better than they actually are. The question then becomes, how are we to assess the objective value of the goods that the objective list theorist holds to be constitutive of well-being?

David Benatar suggests that in answering this question, we should think about how good a purported objective value appears from a perspective beyond the parameters that normally constrain human value judgments. For example, from a human perspective, it would be better to live a life full of fulfilling relationships and valuable experiences for 80 years rather than 40 years. The former might be judged a “good life” while the latter would be judged a life tragically cut short. In fact, an 80-year life of this sort is pretty close to the best sort of life humans can expect. Yet from a supra-human perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*, even the goodness of the 80-year life pales in comparison to the value of a 250-year life. Of course, living 250 years is impossible for humans. But that doesn’t change the fact that it would be *better*, all things considered, for the “good life” to be 250 years rather than a mere 80. Similarly, we can acknowledge that objective list theories name many goods which are in fact valuable—e.g. love, knowledge, friendship, virtue, or meaning—while recognizing that human finitude ensures that our access to these goods is all-too-limited. Viewing goods *sub specie humanitatis* might tell us how worthwhile a given life is within the parameters that are possible for humans, but viewing things *sub specie aeternitatis* reveals how impoverished even the best of achievable goods are.

The claim that the right perspective to take on the value of the goods named in objective list theories of well-being is that which is achieved *sub specie aeternitatis* obviously needs argument (see Benatar 2006: 81-86 and Benatar 2017: 51-63 for support). Yet even if we are unconvinced by this claim, the main point that the pessimist is driving at still stands: the goods named by objective list theorists are ultimately valuable *relative to some standard or other*, and objective list theories need to provide an argument for thinking that the standards they presuppose are the *right* ones for assessing the worthiness of these values. Even if it is not possible to transcend our human limitations, it does seem that the objective list theorist should have a response to the pessimistic point that the value our lives realize even under the best *actual* conditions pales in comparison to the value they could realize by these supra-human logically *possible* conditions (even

if that response is, to quote Susan Wolf, “get over it”).⁴

Once we understand this move, it becomes clearer how pessimists might argue that human life is in many respects meaningless, in addition to being a condition of suffering. Benatar argues that human lives can certainly achieve some worthwhile kinds of meaning. For example, if you live a life that you *experience* as meaningful, then your life *is* meaningful, at least subjectively—which is of course compatible with your life being *objectively* pointless (e.g. my quest to watch cartoons all day). Or if your life’s work makes an important contribution to a greater meaningful enterprise (e.g. the case of Martin Luther King, Jr.), your life may have objective significance for the broader human community (which again is compatible with it being *cosmically* pointless). As before, these are examples of various ways that life can be meaningful *sub specie humanitatis*. And yet this is not enough to show that human life can be meaningful *sub specie aeternitatis*. In other words, our lives (and everything else) lack “cosmic meaning,” and they would be better if they could achieve that sort of meaning. Even the best human lives must fail to achieve important goods.

2.3 Pessimism’s skeptical function

Pessimism’s skeptical function thus represents human capacities to achieve the good life as severely and tragically limited. We are finite, fragile, precarious creatures, perpetually vulnerable to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and even the luckiest among us lead lives in which the bad prevails over the good. Whether you think that the good life consists in pleasure, satisfying your desires, getting into a relationship with any number of “objective” values, or some combination of these, pessimism is here to suggest that human life-- *your* life-- fails to meet that standard in a manner severe enough to make it reasonable to regret your existence.

In this mode, pessimism does not so much claim that any particular theory of what makes a good life is false so much as it suggests that the good life (however defined) is unattainable given basic facts about the human situation in the world. Maybe a good human life *would* be one that is happy and meaningful in the right

⁴ Benatar’s own recommendation is to embrace “pragmatic pessimism,” which involves recognizing the inevitability of suffering and meaninglessness while “distracting” ourselves through “projects that create terrestrial meaning, enhance the quality of life (for oneself, other humans, and other animals), and ‘save’ lives (but not create them!)” (Benatar 2017: 211)

kind of way, but pessimism is skeptical that actual human lives can meet that standard. To this extent, pessimism about the possibility of well-being mirrors skeptical arguments about the possibility of knowledge: perhaps a certain theory of epistemic justification accurately specifies the conditions under which one's belief *might* amount to knowledge, but it is impossible to attain that sort of justification in the actual world.

3. Skepticism, Fatalism, and Withdrawal

Pessimism's skepticism about the possibility of the good life invites us to reflect upon the quality of our own lives without illusions and pushes us to justify the value of existence in the face of the badness that the world contains. And yet its tendency to target *all* candidate theories of well-being often drives pessimists to claim that fundamental, cross-historical, cross-cultural constraints on the human condition ensure that human beings systematically fail to achieve the good life. This, I suggest, leads to the perception that pessimism is of no use to political critique.

Consider Arthur Schopenhauer. In some moods, the great pessimist seems to have held that human life is *intrinsically* a condition of pointless suffering. One of his arguments for this conclusion is that “willing and striving” are the “whole essence” of human life, and that we are “destined to pain” on this basis. For Schopenhauer, striving after a goal itself involves suffering, since in striving toward some object of desire, the lack of that object is painful for the striver. What about when we obtain the object of our desire? Things are hardly better: after a vanishingly brief moment of satisfaction or contentment, the striver either must strive after a new object of desire, or find themselves bored, anxious, and adrift. As Schopenhauer bleakly concludes: “Hence ... life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents” (WWR I: 312).

Schopenhauer's analysis of striving is controversial. Yet it's worth noting just how *deep* and *central* he takes this source of dissatisfaction to be to human life. In a passage showcasing Schopenhauer at his amusingly caustic best, he suggests that our fundamentally striving nature would render our lives unhappy *even if* worldly conditions were very different from what they are.

Work, worry, toil and distress are indeed the lot of almost all human beings

their whole life through. But if all wishes came true no sooner than they were made, then what would occupy human life and on what would time be spent? Suppose this race were transported to a *fool's paradise*, where everything grew on its own and the pigeons flew around already roasted, and everyone found his dearly beloved and held on to her without difficulty. There some would die of boredom, or hang themselves, but some would assault, throttle and murder each other, and thus cause more suffering for themselves than nature now places on them. Thus for such a race no other venue, no other existence is suitable. (P&P 2: 264)

However odd Schopenhauer's examples may be, the point of this "modal" thought experiment is clear: the constraints that make human life a bad bet are so central to the human condition that they would produce suffering at very distant possible worlds. Even if we humans were to eliminate our current sources of strife and achieve everything we'd ever wanted out of life, our insatiable, restless, striving nature would surely drive us back into the condition of suffering.

Sentiments like this buttress the perception of an essential link between pessimism and fatalism as Paul Prescott defines the term: "the view that human agency is futile with respect to one or more basic constraints upon the human condition" (Prescott 2012: 338). The thought experiment about the "fool's paradise" certainly represents these "basic constraints on the human condition" as *very* basic. Truly ameliorating human suffering would be to make human life something other than what it essentially is. If intrinsic, ineradicable facts about human nature make it the case that human life is going to be very bad regardless of whether we live in the actual world or in the "fool's paradise," what's the point of trying to do anything about it?

Consistent with these sentiments is Schopenhauer's skepticism about the ability of collective political action to alleviate our sufferings. While Schopenhauer's political theory is rather underdeveloped compared to the rest of his philosophy (Beiser 2016: 223), he holds that the state is a contractual entity created by self-interested individuals who see the state as the most efficient way to satisfy their desires. On this roughly Hobbesian picture, the laws and sanctions of the state allow individuals to get some of what they want (e.g. the security to pursue their desires) while avoiding the dangers of social intercourse with other self-interested individuals (e.g. murder, theft, assault). In this way, "the State [is] the means by which the faculty of reason seeks to avoid its own evil consequences

that turn against itself; and then each promotes the well-being of all, because he sees his own well-being bound up therewith.” Schopenhauer then notes that under *ideal* conditions, the state would continue to “make the rest of nature more and more serviceable by the human forces united in it,” until “something approaching a Utopia might finally be brought about to some extent by the removal of all kinds of evil.” And yet, under *actual* conditions, a familiar problem once again rears its head:

But up til now the State has always remained very far from this goal; and even with its attainment, innumerable evils, *absolutely essential*⁵ to life, would still always keep it in suffering. Finally, even if all these evils were removed, boredom would at once occupy the place vacated by the other evils. Moreover, even the dissension and discord of individuals can never be wholly eliminated by the State, for they irritate and annoy in trifles where they are prohibited in great things (WWR I: 349-350).

Schopenhauer seems to grant that political systems can be better or worse depending on how happy and fulfilled they make their citizens, but they can do very little about “those fundamental evils of life that are constant and cannot be eradicated by political means: birth, sickness, age, and death” (Beiser 2016: 225). Even if they could, we would once again find ourselves in the fool’s paradise.

Schopenhauer isn’t exactly wrong about the inevitability of things like suffering and death, but it is fair to question the extent to which these “facts of life” are cause for the ethic of withdrawal he ends up recommending. After all, one might acknowledge the necessity and intractability of *some* sources of our sufferings while recognizing the contingency and malleability of other sources. For example, the fact that we are born, age, get sick, and die might not be up to us, but *how* birth, aging, sickness, and death occur and manifest themselves in our societies very much is. At least part of what birth, aging, sickness, and death *are* in a particular cultural and political moment is determined by specific practices surrounding these events, and these variant understandings have at least some effect on the nature and extent of the suffering associated with these “fixtures” of human life. (Consider, for instance, the differences we might find between a society which delays grieving for the dead by isolating and quarantining the dying

⁵ Emphasis mine.

until survival is deemed impossible, and a society that recognizes a communal responsibility to prepare the dying for the next stage of their spiritual journey as part of the grieving ritual). We will see that this unwillingness to impose a reductive naturalistic categorial uniformity on concepts (like “death”) that are in fact sensitive to the way they are embedded in different cultural and political contexts is an important component of pessimism’s *critical* function (Witlacil 2022).

Yet as mentioned, Schopenhauer’s somewhat ahistorical account of the badness of human life famously leads him to recommend withdrawal from the political sphere into an individualistic ethical sphere. In the face of inevitable suffering, we must cultivate *compassion* for our fellow sufferers: “the conviction that the world and therefore also mankind is something that actually should not be, is designed to fill us with forbearance towards one another, for what can be expected of beings in such a predicament?” (PP: 273). To this extent, Schopenhauer’s prescriptions remain at the level of personal conduct, as instructions for how to act with the knowledge of the inevitability of suffering and meaninglessness.

This ethic of withdrawal⁶ certainly seems consistent with pessimism’s skeptical stance on happiness and meaning. Indeed, pessimism’s contention that even the best human lives fail to achieve important goods has considerable overlap with its skepticism about the prospects for collective political responses to suffering. For example, we saw in Section 2 that pessimists need not deny that human lives are meaningful from some perspectives. We may find our lives subjectively meaningful, or our lives can be objectively meaningful insofar as our lives “make a difference” in the world in some way. And yet humans are denied the kind of meaning that *really* matters, namely cosmic meaning. Analogously, pessimists like Schopenhauer can point out that political participation may alleviate *some* problems, but not the problems that *really* matter-- the ones concerning our finitude, fragility, and cosmic insignificance. If that is the perspective we adopt, it might seem wiser to “[lower] one’s expectations for

⁶ In the work of other pessimists, this commitment to apolitical withdrawal is more explicit. Eugene Thacker, for example, claims that pessimism is (or should be) intrinsically apolitical, thus implicitly affirming the primacy of the sphere of personal conduct over the political: “The pessimist can never be political – or, to be more precise, the pessimist can never live up to the political. (Still, one imagines pessimist slogans – “Drop All Causes!” or “Not To Be!”) Resistance, rebellion, revolt, protest, and intervention all fall outside the scope of the pessimist worldview. The pessimist is the most despised of nay-sayers, a stranger even to abstention, refusal, and precious forms of Bartlebyism.” (Thacker 2018: 45)

‘overall’ human progress [and safeguard] personal and self-created notions of progress” by “retreating to the possibility of personal improvements” than to engage in the existential futility of political participation (Dovi 2017: 229).

In explaining the persistence of the gap between what would make human life a good bet and actual human capacities to achieve the good life, skeptical pessimism appeals to fundamental cross-cultural constraints on the human condition. This opens pessimism to the charge of fatalism and resignation (since these constraints are *ex hypothesi* non-negotiable), and detracts from a focus on the more contingent and particular sources of our sufferings, many of which are rooted in specific political, cultural, and economic conditions. Yet historically, pessimism has had more to contribute than skepticism. It also performs an important *critical* function.

4. Pessimism’s Critical Function, or How Pessimism can be Political

As a form of value-oriented pessimism, critical pessimists can agree with skeptical pessimists that human life is indeed a sorry affair—perhaps even sorry enough to make it reasonable to wish one had never been born. The differences between critical and skeptical pessimists lie in 1) their interpretation of the scope and referent of “human life” and 2) their explanations of what makes “human life” a bad bet.

Pessimism’s skeptical mode comes close to endorsing a universal claim about the prospects for human happiness: whoever you are, and wherever and whenever you are born, if you are a human being, your life is a condition of pointless suffering, thanks to fundamental and cross-cultural constraints on the human condition.

Pessimism’s critical mode is wary of endorsing these generalizations, for two reasons. First, critical pessimism seeks to highlight the *contingency* of our sufferings by revealing the relative badness of human life to be largely determined by the social, political, cultural, and economic structures under which those lives are lived. Therefore, where skeptical pessimism speaks of “human life” as an existential condition writ large, critical pessimism speaks of various historically specific *configurations* of human life. Second, critical pessimism interprets static Schopenhauerian and Benatarian generalizations about the badness of human life as a whole as *themselves* symptoms of the extent to which dominant social and political systems have succeeded in alienating humans from their true needs and

naturalizing and depoliticizing their sufferings. Skeptical pessimism is thus *itself* a historically and culturally contingent stance whose rise to prominence requires its own explanation and critical evaluation.

Critical pessimism thus seeks to rein in skeptical pessimism's tendency to group diverse aspects of human experience under the same rubric. Indeed, this tendency toward identification and categorization is both a symptom and enabler of a historically contingent cultural and political status quo that insulates itself from critical alternatives partially through alienating, pacifying, and isolating its members.⁷ From this perspective, critical pessimism underwrites a critique of skeptical pessimism itself.

To see what a nuanced critical value-oriented pessimism might look like, let us start with the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Rousseau tells an idealized story of how human beings gradually move beyond the basic desires that can be fairly easily satisfied in the state of nature to more specific and sophisticated desires that can only be cultivated and satisfied by more complex societies.⁸

Complex societies involve goods that are in many respects of higher quality than those available in the state of nature (e.g. culinary diversity, aesthetic experiences, etc.). Yet these come with a hidden cost: "A great deal of leisure" allows people to "furnish [themselves] with many conveniences" which soon become "habitual." But once habituated to these conveniences, they "entirely ceased to be enjoyable, and at the same time degenerated into true needs." As a result, "it became much more cruel to be deprived of them than to possess them was sweet, and men were unhappy to lose them without being happy to possess them." An acquired taste for luxury and convenience leaves us extremely unhappy when we are deprived of those goods, and somewhat under-satisfied even when we do attain them. Hence an ironic relationship: the greater and more available the goods, the more intense our dissatisfaction.

If Rousseau is right, modern human life isn't bad just because humans have desires—it's bad because human beings have developed contingent, *particular* desires shaped and encouraged by the increasing "perfection" and self-regard that modern (European) society cultivates. Human life might not have been so bad if human beings had not developed a thirst for perfection and novelty in the

⁷ See Mary Witlacil (2022), who identifies this suspicion of ontological unity and attendant critique of its social effects as core elements of Theodor Adorno's critical pessimism.

⁸ See Dienstag (2006: 58-63).

deleterious way that modern society encourages them to. Indeed, the state of nature is proof that humans are not always and everywhere condemned to live bad lives. As long as human desires remained relatively simple and the things that fulfilled those desires relatively abundant, individuals were able to live “free, healthy, honest, and happy lives, so long as their nature allowed.”

While scholars disagree on whether Rousseau was really a pessimist or not,⁹ his account outlines three ideas that I take to be central to critical pessimism: 1) our ideals of the good life and the desires we have for them are historically contingent and socially mediated, 2) they are a major source of our sufferings, 3) the relationship between the increasing quality of the objects of our desires and our increasingly powerful capacities to achieve them is *ironic* insofar as these both leave us worse off than we otherwise would have been had we never developed those desires or objects in the first place.

Of course, one need not be a pessimist to endorse 1) – 3).¹⁰ Yet this Rousseauian view can also be found in the work of thinkers who are more naturally associated with the spirit of critical pessimism. For example, Mary Wiltacil points out that Theodor Adorno and Lauren Berlant are each concerned with the extent to which modern capitalism harnesses and directs our desires in stunting ways that actively harm our capacity to flourish. In Wiltacil’s words, Adorno recognizes that “under capitalism, real human needs—such as the needs for safety, love, and human belonging—are manipulated to sell products, thereby cementing one’s *need* to participate in capitalism,” while Berlant recognizes that this distortion of our needs “ensnares us in a cruel cycle of unfulfilled expectation” which she refers to as “the cruelty of optimism” (Wiltacil 2022: 9, 11, Berlant 2011).

For Wiltacil, Adorno’s pessimism in particular is ultimately future-oriented in scope, defined by a healthy skepticism about status quo-serving progress narratives. That view is pessimistic insofar as it recognizes the necessity of critique without the expectation of the “better.” I take it that this is an important component of pessimist political consciousness. Yet how could this perspective

⁹ Dienstag (2006) treats Rousseau as absolutely central to the pessimist tradition, using Walter Starkie’s epithet “patriarch of pessimism” to describe him. Van der Lugt (2021) classifies Rousseau as an optimist overall while noting some pessimistic tendencies in his early work. She notes that this difference in characterization most likely stems from Dienstag’s decision to treat future-oriented pessimism as basic rather than value-oriented pessimism.

¹⁰ As an anonymous reviewer points out, these commitments seem compatible with communism, which does not have a straightforward relationship with pessimism and in many cases self-consciously distances itself from it.

be complemented by a critical *value-oriented* pessimism?

As we have seen, value-oriented pessimism is primarily concerned with the question of whether a particular configuration of human life is *justified*, or whether it “covers the costs,” in Schopenhauer’s words. I suggest that in addition to claims 1) – 3) above, a critical value-oriented pessimist would endorse 4): the sufferings and crises of meaning that characterize a particular configuration of human life are so severe that it is reasonable to regret that this particular configuration ever came into existence (or at least to regret that one was born into *this* particular configuration of human life).

How could an attitude of regret towards (one’s situatedness in) *this* particular configuration of human life avoid the problems we have laid at the foot of skeptical pessimism? And how could it possibly be of use to political critique?

First, it is important to note that unlike skeptical pessimism, this negative evaluation and corresponding attitude of regret is not directed toward “existence” or “human life” as a whole, but toward a *manner* of existing that is historically contingent. Because skeptical pessimism holds that life’s unhappiness and meaninglessness is anchored in a basic universal human condition from which there is no escape, the value of human life must be compared (unfavorably) to the value of *non-existence*, or the prospect of never having been born at all (Benatar 2006). Yet in its critical mode, pessimism is alive to the possibility that bad prevails over the good because of contingent socio-historical mechanisms that produce a given configuration of human life. Consequently, the value of that configuration must be compared not merely to the value of non-existence, but to the value of *any number of contingent alternative configurations of human life that could have arisen instead had things gone differently*. Negatively evaluating *this* particular configuration of human life in all its absurdity and cruelty thus does not involve stepping into the problematic “bad life vs. total non-existence” dichotomy that skeptical pessimism seeks to force on us. While a skeptical pessimist might also be a critical pessimist and vice versa, the views are conceptually distinct. I might regret being born *here* and *now* in a world dominated by global capital, repressive state authority, and environmental catastrophe while leaving open the possibility that being born into a different configuration of human life would involve less cause for regret.¹¹

¹¹ While a critical value-oriented form of pessimism has to date received far less attention than its future-oriented cousin, something like the contrast I am drawing here may underlie Tom Whyman’s recent discussion of the difference between Benatar’s “ontological anti-natalism” and some radical

Second, the recognition that our conceptions of the good life and our desires for it can be socially mediated, ironic, and cruelly optimistic makes it possible to criticize, reimagine, and perhaps even ameliorate the structures that create this misalignment between embedded social incentives and actual human flourishing. Demonstrating that many of the sources of our sufferings are shaped by cultural, political, and economic forces that could have been, have been, and perhaps should and still could be otherwise is an invitation to resistance and experimentation, not resignation. This attitude of regret thus requires both the critical ability to reject an alienating and stunting status quo and to imagine different historical configurations in which human needs are not distorted in ways that function to replicate dominating power structures. This may require us to sacrifice many of the cruel pleasures and rewards associated with the status quo. Yet it also may give rise to identities, capacities, and communities more conducive to our flourishing.

Finally, critical pessimism involves regret for the fact that pessimism itself is a fitting philosophy for our time and place. Pessimist consciousness is often a historically contingent development which is symptomatic of the alienation that people justifiably feel in a world that reduces their capacities to the terms of competition and exchange value while delivering the ersatz rewards of comfort and pacification in exchange for their strivings. This means that in addition to a critique of current configurations of human life, critical pessimism offers an “internal” critique of pessimist consciousness itself. Skeptical pessimism may purport to speak rationally of the cold hard facts that attend the human predicament, but it must not be allowed to position itself as a purely *universal* perspective. For one thing, this can end up naturalizing and depoliticizing the sufferings and crises particular to modernity. For another, it can obscure the fact that there is nothing inevitable about pessimist consciousness itself.

This relationship between historically contingent configurations of human life, the socially mediated desires and strivings which that configuration fosters, and the historical specificity of pessimist consciousness itself can perhaps best be appreciated by looking at *this* configuration of human life from the perspective of a configuration which starts from very different assumptions about human capacities and relatedness. For example, in articulating an American Indian conception of humanity, Jicarilla Apache philosopher Viola F. Cordova suggests

climate activists’ “ontic anti-natalism.” See Whyman (2021: 12-15).

that many of the attitudes that philosophical pessimism speaks to would be viewed as a “psychotic disruption” in the context of relations presupposed by indigenous tribal life:

Human beings are a part of a whole that is greater than the individual. A human is not something apart from the Earth and the rest of its creations, including rocks, trees, water, and air; he is a natural part of the earth... Humans are not “fallen” creatures; they are what the Earth intended. Most of all, they “fit” in this world because they are products of it. A sense of alienation from the world and its many beings would not, in this context, be seen as the common malady of individuals but a psychotic disruption, an illness...Humans are not ‘meaningless bits of cosmic dust floating about in an infinite universe.’ They are an integral part of the whole. (Cordova 2007: 151-2).

North American indigenous peoples have long recognized that this sense of alienation from the earth, true needs, and community is rooted in the social ontology of settler colonialism, which fundamentally distorts human capacities and desires in its quest for social and metaphysical categorization, hierarchical organization, and domination (Waters 2004). Euro-American and Canadian settler colonialism was and is *rapacious*, involving vast, unsatisfiable hunger for ever-more resources, wealth, territory, and conquest, backed up by almost limitless dishonesty, cruelty, and brutality. Diné writer and activist John Redhouse explains that these violent desires were and continue to be rooted in a “human condition” that was characteristic of the “ever advancing society of the West”:

Wasi’chu is the Lakota (Sioux) word for ‘greedy one who takes the fat.’ It was used to describe a strange race that took not only what it thought it needed but also took the rest. *Wasi’chu* is also a human condition based on inhumanity, racism and exploitation. It is a sickness, a seemingly incurable and contagious disease which begot the ever advancing society of the West. If we do not control it, this disease will surely be the basis of what may be the last of the continuing wars against the Native American people. (Johansen and Maestas 1979: 11).

Cordova and Redhouse each highlight the extent to which contemporary

alienation and crisis in the Global North are products of a history of colonialism, capitalism, toxic individualism, racism, and other contingent artifacts of human design. Globally dominant political, cultural, and economic systems continue to reflect this condition of greed, “inhumanity, racism and exploitation.” In particular, the Global North’s current ideals of the good life, centered as they are around accumulation, individualistic notions of achievement and success, comfort, and a corresponding politics of exclusion for those who are deemed insufficiently deserving of the good life, seem to be the historical and political descendants of *Wasi’chu*.

Skeptical pessimism rightly points out the emptiness of these ideals, and directs our attention to the possibility that all this is pointless. Yet while skeptical pessimism purports to make an “ontological” point about the human predicament writ large, it fails to acknowledge that it speaks from *within* the standpoint of an alienated configuration of human life, from a set of social conditions in which a felt sense of alienation in no way seems like a “psychotic disruption.” Skeptical pessimism’s inability to locate its own perspective as something that is shaped by the currents of a particular configuration of human life thus “collapses into resignation” by default, “because it fails to interrogate the social and historical conditions that reinforce domination and necessitate negativity about political reality” (Witlacil 2022: 14).

5. Conclusion: Regret, Resistance, and Resignation

Philosophical pessimism is, among other things, a symptom of the badness of contemporary life. Yet I have been suggesting that critical pessimism might be part of the cure. In its future-oriented mode, critical pessimism offers a vital disruption of reigning hegemonic optimism about the forces of global capital to meet human needs.¹² The triumphalist veil has a tendency to hide the dark sides of “progress.” Critical pessimism illuminates these dark sides, not so that it can make an ahistorical point about the inevitability of suffering, but so that it can highlight the *cost* of “progress,” and ask what (and for whom) all this “progress”

¹² Witlacil rightly points out that the cult of uncritical and vapid optimism about these forces is itself a symptom of alienation: “There is a need for the vapid assurance of ‘live, laugh, love’ to pacify the alienation caused by contemporary reality. However, the need for vapid assurance ‘lies in the will of people to be safe from being buried by a historical dynamic they feel helpless against.’ [Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 93]... Just because a person accepts the premises of late capitalism does not mean they are free from the alienation and domination necessitated by capitalism.” (Witlacil 2022: 11)

is for. And then the question for praxis becomes whether we are going to say “yes” to a situation like this. Are we going to allow this to stand?

In its value-oriented mode, critical pessimism suggests that our current *configuration* of human life does not “cover the costs.” Perhaps it would have been better for it never to have been--not only for our own sake, but for the sake of those whose ways of life were and are erased, colonized, assimilated, or brutally truncated on the way to the often cruelly optimistic ideals of prosperity and comfort that so many of us doggedly strive for.

Yet unlike skeptical pessimism, critical pessimism insists on seeing our various sufferings and crises as inextricably embedded in historically contingent cultural and political relations. It encourages us to learn from, imagine, and actively experiment with alternative ways of conceiving of human life that could potentially liberate us from the distortions that historically contingent modern capitalistic societies impose upon our real needs. It encourages us to imagine a world in which even the most ineradicable features of human life—birth, death, and suffering—function not to isolate and individualize us, but to lead us into networks of mutuality for which it makes sense to be grateful we are here to participate in. Critical pessimism is thus a philosophy of regret, but also a philosophy of resistance. What it is not is a philosophy of resignation.¹³

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