James Sully’s Psychological Reduction of Philosophical Pessimism

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Introduction

In its broadest formulation, philosophical pessimism is the view that human life is essentially not worth living; that non-existence has been, is, and will always be, preferable to existence. From its advent in the 19th century, the predominant justification for this provocative view has appealed to the pervasiveness of suffering and the poverty of life’s pleasures. Various arguments of this nature were initially developed by Arthur Schopenhauer, and in the decades following his death in 1860 by his now less known interlocutors: Eduard von Hartmann, Julius Bahnsen, Olga Plümacher, Phillip Mainländer, and Agnes Taubert. The controversy over these arguments came to constitute the Pessimismusstreit or ‘pessimism dispute’ of 1860-1900. Occupation with the question of the value of life was so prevalent in Germany at this time that in his *Der Geschichte der Philosophie*, Wilhelm Windelband, a participant in the dispute, claimed that pessimism gave rise to “an unlimited flood of tirades of a popular philosophical sort, and for a time…completely controlled general literature” (Windelband, *History of Philosophy*, §46: 673). More recently, Frederick Beiser has claimed that it was “the major philosophical dispute in Germany in the last four decades of the 19th century” (Beiser, *Weltschmerz*, 8).

There is an observable temptation among many who encounter philosophical pessimism to consider it merely a psychological phenomenon; a belief so counter-intuitive that it must be the product of a peculiar mental constitution. In his influential study of Schopenhauer, Bryan Magee infamously claimed “there can be little doubt that Schopenhauer’s despairing view of the world, above all his conviction of the terribleness of existence *as such*, were in some degree neurotic manifestations which had their roots in his relationship with his mother” (Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 13-14), and on these grounds took Schopenhauer’s pessimism as separable from his philosophy-proper. This view was also shared by Bertrand Russell, for whom pessimism was “a matter of temperament, not of reason” (Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 758). L.E. Loemker has similarly doubted the rational justifiability of pessimistic belief, writing that the term ‘pessimism’ is useful only in expressing “fundamental human attitudes” toward the universe, which ultimately renders it “useless for a valid philosophical analysis” (Loemker, “Pessimism and Optimism”, 253; cf. 244). But this type of psychological reduction, despite the best efforts to the contrary by its principal defenders, was already one of the most prevalent objections to pessimism at the height of the 19th century dispute, endorsed in some form or another by philosophers as diverse as Kuno Fischer, Wilhelm Windelband, Eugen Dühring, and Friedrich Nietzsche (Hassan, *Nietzsche’s Struggle Against Pessimism*, ch. 5).

One of most developed versions of this psychological reduction was offered by the English psychologist James Sully (1842-1923). In his *Pessimism: A History and a Criticism* (*PHC*) of 1877, Sully attempted to undermine the case for philosophical pessimism—particularly as presented by Schopenhauer and Hartmann—by challenging its fundamental premises concerning the nature and reality of pleasure. But the most influential critique the text contained was a deflationary account of pessimism which appealed to the mental states of its adherents, and the socio-economic forces which shape them. *PHC* prompted targeted responses from the leading pessimists of the day, it was leant upon as a scientific authority (e.g. Nordau, *Degeneration*, 498), and it drew the attention of the likes of Nietzsche, who came to own and heavily annotate a French translation of the text in the mid-1880s (Brobjer, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context*, 99).[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite this, Sully’s primary argument for this psychological reduction of pessimism, and its parameters, are not entirely clear, and require reconstruction. This has not yet been undertaken in any detail. One of the initial aims of this paper is an attempt to rectify this.

There has been growing interest in philosophical pessimism as a historical phenomenon (Pauen *Pessimismus*; Dahlqvist, *Nietzsche and the Philosophy of Pessimism*; Fazio, Ciraci & Koßler, *Schopenhauer und die Schopenhauer-Schule*; Beiser, *Weltschmerz*; Van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*; Hassan, *Nietzsche’s Struggle Against Pessimism*). Despite this growing interest, very little contemporary work has given Sully’s critique attention. In an otherwise comprehensive study of the Pessimismusstreit, Beiser (*Weltschmerz*, 168n32) mentions Sully only once in a footnote. Joshua Foa Dienstag (*Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, 6n3; 163n3) similarly bypasses Sully save for two minor footnotes. Tobias Dahlqvist (*Nietzsche and the Philosophy of Pessimism*, 89-91; 273-280) pays closer attention to Sully’s critique of pessimism, placing his specific criticisms of pessimism into dialogue with other key figures in the dispute. But with Dahlqvist’s philosophical focus laying elsewhere, he passes over many of the details and subtleties of Sully’s critique.

These details and subtleties, I shall argue, are worth elucidating, not only because they shed light on Sully’s contributions to the pessimism dispute—a task worth pursuing for its own sake—but also because they develop lines of reasoning which anticipate much of the pathologising trend in contemporary psychology to consider pessimistic belief as symptomatic of mental illness or mental disorder (e.g. Seligman, *Learned Optimism*; Hecht, “The Neural Basis of Optimism and Pessimism”).[[2]](#footnote-2) The second aim of this paper is to present some important challenges to Sully’s argument. After considering how Sully might respond to these challenges, I review the best ways of thinking about Sully’s project. I conclude that Sully offers the resources for a more comprehensive and subtle psychological critique of pessimism than those typical of the 19th century. Moreover, that depending upon how we interpret Sully’s objectives, his psychological critique of pessimism will be more or less pertinent and persuasive. Because Sully remains somewhat unknown in contemporary philosophy, it is necessary to begin with a brief biography and philosophical context.

1. Sully’s Background and his Philosophical Project

James Sully’s intellectual achievements are predominantly defined by his contributions to the then emerging field of psychology which he helped to successfully establish as an autonomous discipline. He came to write the landmark texts *Sensation and Intuition* (1874) and *Illusions* (1881), with his insights being commended by no less than one of the founding fathers of modern psychology: Sigmund Freud (see Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams”, 60; 135n2). From 1892 Sully was the Grote Chair of Logic and Philosophy at University College London, and was instrumental in setting up the first major psychological laboratory in Britain there in 1898. Sully was also one of the ten founding members of what became the *British Psychological Society*, and was invited to join the first editorial board of the *Psychological Review*.

While Sullyworked comfortably within the academic field of psychology, he also helped facilitate the wider accessibility of psychological research to the public. Specifically written for the latter, Sully produced a number of textbooks, including the successful *The Teacher’s Handbook of Psychology* (1886), and *Outlines of Psychology* (1884), which was adopted as a class text by William James. These texts were influential in establishing the generally accepted parameters of professional psychological practice and methodology as distinct from the amateur (see Gurjeva, “James Sully and Scientific Psychology 1860–1910”).

But Sully was also philosophically inclined. He was a frequent contributor to *Mind*, published popular articles on the aesthetics of character in the prominent *Fortnightly Review* magazine, and completed a comprehensive entry in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* on the philosophical history of aesthetics in European thought. Sully’s philosophical acumen was cultivated while studying under Hermann Lotze at the University of Göttingen, and under the neo-Kantian Hermann von Helmholtz at Humboldt University, Berlin. His academic development through the German intellectual context no doubt familiarised him with the foremost philosophical controversies in 19th century Germany. Pertinent to our current concerns is how Sully’s subsequent exposure to the pessimism dispute ensured the competency required to offer a serious critique of Schopenhauer and Hartmann’s philosophies in *Pessimism: A History and a Criticism* (*PHC*).

A word on terminology is required before proceeding. Sully does not defend ‘optimism’, understood as the Leibnizian claim that this is the best of all possible worlds, but rather what he labels ‘meliorism’: the view that life, and specifically human well-being, can be improved via human efforts. In Sully’s words: “human progress tends, however slow the process may be, very largely to heighten the quality of individual happiness and to increase the proportion of those to whom it is a possibility” (*PHC*, 398). Crucially, Sully takes it follow from meliorism that, at least eventually, life “though far from being a state of ecstatic bliss, will be held by sober-minded persons to have a real and even a high value” (*PHC*, 399). In other words, Sully takes it to be the case that progress in matters of human felicity will at some point, if it has not already, pass the threshold for balancing the value of living in life’s favour. So when Sully uses the term ‘optimism’ in this context, he is referring to the view that life has a *positive total value*, not necessarily the view that life is as good as it could possibly be. Similarly, ‘pessimism’, refers to the view that life has a *negative total value*—i.e. the view which “distinctly [denies]…value to life, and represent[s] it as something unworthy, unsatisfying, or lamentable” (*PHC*, 5)—not necessarily the view that life is as bad as it possibly could be.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is how the terms ‘optimism’ and ‘pessimism’ shall henceforth be understood, unless otherwise stated.

A further distinction is worth flagging at this point, and will help clarify the scope of Sully’s attempted reduction. Sully takes there to be historical instances of “unreasoned” and “reasoned” judgements as to the value of life. By “unreasoned” pessimism and optimism, he means impulsive, intuitive, and pre-reflective appraisals of one’s own life, the lives of a closely related portion of humanity, or of humanity as a whole, i.e. where there is a “minimum of exact observation and rational calculation” (*PHC*, 30). Sully detects this, for instance, in the poetry of Byron, Omar Khayyam, Heine and Leopardi. Yet Sully takes some forms of pessimism to appear not obviously “as a product of unguided impulse”, but which seek to “take a scientific or philosophical shape as well, and to give itself the aspect of a reasoned and verified truth” (*PHC*, 30). It is clear that this “reasoned” pessimism—found in some world religions, and at its pinnacle in 19th century German philosophy—is Sully’s primary target. Setting the stage for his psychological reduction, Sully’s choice of words is significant here. He speaks of how “reasoned” pessimisms “*wear the aspect* of calm and studied affirmations” and “*assume the shape* of reasoned truths” (*PHC*, 31 - emphasis mine), suggesting that the alleged rationality of pessimism as a philosophical theory is undermined by the causal role of the same impulses that give rise to “unreasoned” pessimism.[[4]](#footnote-4) The details of this reduction are to be elucidated in the following section.

Dienstag has charged Sully’s analysis of pessimism in *PHC* with being superficial, claiming that his understanding of the view is “fairly simplistic and often conceives pessimism as merely positing an excess of pain over pleasure in life” (Dienstag, 2006, 6n3). However, this complaint misses its mark for two reasons. First, as has been noted (Dahlqvist, 2007, 89n194), the excess of pain over pleasure in life is not the *definition* of pessimism, but rather one *justification* for it. To confuse these two things is to misunderstand the shape of the pessimism dispute. Second, while it is true that there were multiple justifications for pessimism in the 19th century (see Hassan, *Nietzsche’s Struggle Against Pessimism*, 29-56), hedonic arguments were the *de facto* basis for it among the majority of commentators. Almost all of the vast literature dedicated to the topic was, rightly or wrongly, dedicated to whether condemnations of life on the basis of the ubiquity of suffering could be rationally defended. Consequently, Sully’s focus upon hedonic justifications of pessimism is entirely understandable.

2. Sully’s Psychological Reduction of Pessimism

*PHC*’s final chapter aims to convince readers that “neither optimism nor pessimism can lay claim to be a strictly logical belief—that is to say, the pure result of observation and induction” (*PHC*: 403). Sully offers a preliminary justification for this view on the grounds that because *both* the optimist and the pessimist appeal to alleged ‘facts’ about the world in support of their respective views this “renders it probable that the environment as well as the individual organism has something to do with the production of these opinions” (*PHC*, 403). Nevertheless, Sully appears to defend an asymmetry between pessimism and optimism on this account. He argues that although a “perfectly rational judgement on life” is unattainable, optimism nevertheless offers a more reasonable “approximation to such a judgement” (*PHC*, 445; cf. 444, 399), and appeals to the familiar notion of agreement among competent judges to do so. While this asymmetry and its justification is contentious, Sully seems to aim his psychological *reduction* exclusively at pessimism.

Sully evidently takes the “environment” (what he calls “external impressions”) and the state of the “individual organism” (what he calls “internal dispositions”) to have rather more than just “*something*” to do with the production of pessimistic judgements on life. He claims that such judgements are “the result” of them (*PHC*, 403). Moreover, Sully seems to reach further than just an explanation of what *produces* pessimistic belief. He suggests that he intends to offer a comprehensive analysis that does a number of things: to give an account of “some of the influences which appear to have *given rise* to, and to *foster*, the belief in general, and to have *lent it so great a vitality at the present day*” (*PHC*, 403 - emphasis mine; cf. 7). This seems to indicate that he takes his psychological analysis to do three things:

* 1. Identify the *causal origins* of pessimistic belief
  2. Identify what *sustains* pessimistic belief
  3. Identify what accounts for the contemporary *spread* of pessimistic belief

Sully does not explicate how these distinct tasks relate. This is significant, since an account of one does not necessarily entail an account of any other. As we shall come to see, Sully may have the resources to independently address (1)-(3), even though his strategy for doing so can be, and has been, challenged. However, let us first reconstruct Sully’s psychological reduction of pessimism.

Sully takes pessimism to be rooted in a combination of psychological dispositions and the presence of certain environmental factors which trigger those dispositions. Of the former, Sully lists the following:

(a) **Acute Sensibility**, which is where pessimism has “its deepest psychological roots” (*PHC*, 415). An excessive sensitivity towards physical and emotional pain that leads to a gloomy outlook, in which one anticipates future states in the currency of pains rather than pleasures.

(b) A **mind** “**irritable, rebellious, and quarrelsome**” (*PHC*, 419). To some, pain is experienced as “disturbing; it is something to rebel against; it calls forth the peculiar feeling of bitterness” (*PHC*, 419), while to others it is borne passively, leading to a diminution of its intensity, rather than an acceleration. Pessimism can be a result of the former, whereby one’s surroundings register consciously as hostile, and one takes up “a permanent posture of angry defiance in relation to the whole of one’s environment” (*PHC*, 420). Moreover, this can be a source of pleasure, where “a positive gratification is derived from launching out, so to speak, in idea against the constitution of things…Consequently, to persons of this temperament pessimism presents itself as something grateful and satisfying” (*PHC*, 421)

(c) A “**sluggish and indolent temperament**” (*PHC*, 421). Those who naturally lack an energy and vitality for activity will be disposed to view life as a chore, and “*unalterably* bad”. It is a “matter of fact”, Sully claims, that “men often drift into pessimism under the influence of weariness and distaste for further exertion” (*PHC*, 422).

(d) A “**carping, fault finding disposition**” (*PHC*, 423). The tendency to overly criticise is especially pronounced in pessimists, thereby presenting the actual world in a relation of utter deficiency to their own conception of how the world *ought* to be: “By how much, one wonders, would the amount of human criticism be diminished if men no longer derived from the process any agreeable feeling of intellectual elevation” (*PHC*, 423).

(e) A **desire for adulation**. Pessimism can express a need to be admired as a hero for bearing great pain or oppression. Already in human nature, Sully claims, there is a strong impulse to “martyrise oneself at a reasonable actual cost for the sake the flattering sense of desert that follows” (*PHC*, 423-424). Nowhere is this clearer than in the pessimist’s conception of life:

In truth, pessimism flatters a man by presenting him with a portrait of himself, in which he appears as another ‘Prometheus vinctus’ suffering tortures from the hand of the cruel Zeus-Pater, the World-all, which begot and holds us, yet bearing up resistance in proud defiance (*PHC*, 424)

In addition to these ‘internal dispositions’, Sully postulates a number of environmental factors which provoke, exacerbate and sustain them. He writes that at times “the spirit of an age is hopeful and active”, while at other times “there dominates a sense of weariness, a critical and condemnatory tone of sentiment”. Sully claims that these observable changes are “obviously connected with variations in external conditions” (*PHC*, 431). He lists volatile or difficult socio-economic circumstances; the frequency and gravity of catastrophic events (natural or human-made); climate; cultural endeavours which romanticise pessimistic feelings, such as the poetry of Heine, Leopardi, and Byron (*PHC*, 449);[[5]](#footnote-5) the pervasive effects of newspapers and the media industry—which are “much more careful to record and comment on the evils, abuses, and drawbacks of our social life than its blessings and advantages” (*PHC*, 442). Reflection upon the events of 19th century Europe might, in support of this claim, bring to mind its fatal cholera epidemics, the economic “Founder’s Crash” [*Gründerkrach*] of 1873, domestic and continental political turmoil, and sharp social stratification. We shall come to challenge this analysis shortly.

Both “internal dispositions” and “external impressions”, for Sully, together produce, sustain, and promulgate the emotional state of ‘Weltschmerz’: a pervasive sadness or pain at the experience of existence itself (see *PHC*, 432). This emotional state was popularly associated with philosophical pessimism by its host of critics in the 19th century, and Sully is no exception. But there are two ways of understanding this association as a reduction of the latter to the former. On one view, the pessimist feels bad and melancholic about existence, for the reasons outlined above, and then unconsciously concocts in a post-hoc manner an attempted *proof* of the worthlessness of existence in order to rationalise and justify that feeling (see Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*: Preface, §2, §357; Nordau, *Degeneration*: 20). But an alternative way of conceiving of the association between feelings of Weltschmerz and philosophical pessimism is that the pessimist is led to their view because their melancholic dispositions and bad circumstances skew the evidence. On this view, pessimists suffer from a certain selection bias: their evaluations of objects and states of affairs are especially distorted by their dispositions to, for example, more intensely feel and notice pains than pleasures, and this constraint ultimately leads them to make bad inferences. In both cases of reduction, adherence to pessimism is taken to be *expressive* of a certain psychology. But the way in which the pessimist is led to endorse arguments in favour of their view differs. The second of these views appears to reflect Sully’s typical stance:

Special sensibility to pleasure shows itself in a readiness to conceive and dwell on pleasurable experiences rather than painful. Now, everybody's judgment of life really rests on a vague representation of the most impressive and abiding aspects of his experience. Just as the disposition to enjoy leads to a selection of pleasurable objects and events in a retrospect of any small section of life, so it will lead to a selection of ingredients of good rather than of evil in a review of life as a whole. In this way the judgment of life formed by a person of happy temperament will be even more favourable than the experiences themselves, though these have already been made favourable by the play of the same emotional forces. The same line of remark clearly applies to the case of the unhappy temperament (*PHC*, 415; cf. 436-437)

So for Sully, his psychological reduction is not wholly, or even primarily, an attempt to show that pessimism is endorsed for the sake of justifying the pessimist’s feelings. Rather, it is typically that the pessimist’s feelings lead them to acknowledge only the evidence that makes pessimism seem rational.

An interesting feature of Sully’s psychological reduction of pessimism is the way it harnesses the interplay of the “internal dispositions” and “external impressions” to flexibly explain adherence to pessimism at different times and places. Sully does not appear to give primary explanatory power to one rather than the other. Nevertheless, he does pay special attention to external impressions insofar as they have an effect on a greater number of people. The pessimism of certain exceptional individuals—e.g. Schopenhauer, Leopardi, Byron, and Heine—can be primarily attributed to their peculiar “forces of temperament” which have led to “the adoption of so dark and dismal a view of life” (*PHC*, 447-448). But Sully recognises the “far more important *social* problem which contemporary pessimism presents to us” (*PHC*, 448 - emphasis mine). Referring to the height of the pessimism dispute in the 1870’s, he asks: “how is it that pessimism happens just now to be adopted by so large a number of persons as their life creed?”, and answers that it is “no natural logical development of European thought”, but rather its “main source is…social sentiment. It has been adopted as meeting a dominant emotional want of the age” (*PHC*, 448). Sully’s justification for this claim is a crucial, yet controversial, move in his case for a psychological reduction of pessimism, and is thus worthy of close attention.

The first step in Sully’s argument is the postulation of a historical correlation between popular adherence to pessimism on the one hand, and social hardship and suffering on the other. Where there is a widespread endorsement of pessimistic philosophy, there is also (Sully claims) misery and social destitution. The second step in the argument is an inference to the best explanation for this relation as *causal*: where there have been impoverished socio-economic conditions, their associated hardships must have given rise to pessimistic sentiment and belief. Sully frequently suggests such a view. For example, on the effects of social conditions on evaluations of life generally, he writes:

Among the circumstances of the individual life which vary and so encourage one of the opposed forms of belief respecting the value of life, are social conditions. As these are, on the whole, happy or wretched, they must, it is certain, affect the individual's judgment…When he comes to sum up the worth of existence generally, his judgment will thus be affected by the character of the social circumstances of his country and age (*PHC*, 433)

He goes on to directly postulate a causal link between social catastrophe and the emergence of pessimistic sentiment and belief:

When circumstances are adverse, when social and political abuses abound, where the pressure of physical need is severe, and when the channels of happy and fruitful action are obstructed, there is clearly a reason for the acceptance of a gloomy view of things by the community as a whole (*PHC*, 434)

…with the change in the environment there goes as a consequence a change in the tone of sentiment and the temper of mind. A multiplication of social evils naturally produces a sadness of mind which is tantamount to a disposition to lamentation and to despair….In this way changes in the environment affect the common judgment in two ways; first of all, by altering the value of the object; secondly, by producing a prevailing mode of feeling favourable to one kind of belief (*PHC*, 434)[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, at times, Sully is more nuanced and offers a subtler version of the abductive argument from historical correlation. According to this subtler version, it is not harsh social conditions that encourage pessimism *in and of themselves*, but rather only when that harshness is considered unacceptable or disappointing in light of a person’s or group of persons’ expectations:

Once more, the age is vocal with social plaint, the cry of thwarted or postponed political aims. The masses of the leading European communities seem to be learning to ask whether the monstrous inequalities with respect to the material conditions of well-being are, after all, an eternal and immutable ordinance of Nature, though they have not yet arrived at the hopeful point of a distinct perception of the means of amelioration. On the other hand, the characteristic boast of our age, rapid material growth, tends to set up a coarse and limited ideal of life, which only makes the absence of loftier aims the more keenly felt by the more discerning order of minds. How can men who have had visions of universal equality and fraternity find consolation in the spectacle of a plethora of material prosperity confined to a mere handful in the crowd, and serving only to throw out into bolder relief the prevailing emptiness? (*PHC*, 450)

The focus here is not material inequality *itself*, for example, but its significance for those with “visions of universal equality and fraternity” (i.e. high ideals which were at one time believed to be attainable). A condition for pessimistic sentiment then, is some set of thwarted expectations. As Sully puts the point elsewhere: “Anything which tends to ruin one’s individual hopes and aspirations clearly supplies a fragmentary objective basis for pessimism; and in proportion as we are surrounded by circumstances and events which annoy us, disappoint our hopes, and sadden our hearts, we shall find pessimism plausible and credible” (*PHC*, 433). We can call this the *Historical Disappointment Thesis* (HDT).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Sully goes on to offer a host of evidence for the rise and spread of pessimism in terms of HDT. In Germany, where pessimism is “most rife”, he wagers that any foreigner that has visited and “had opportunities of getting at the feelings and convictions of the people” would “doubtless have been struck by the amount of dissatisfaction” (*PHC*, 448). This dissatisfaction is claimed to have a number of causes, including “the unremitting pressure of increased taxation”; “the exactions of an arduous system of national militia”; a large socialist working class that are “barely allowed to express their ideas”; and authoritarian “police surveillance” (*PHC*, 451). Sully plainly claims that these influences “seem largely to account for the temporary success of philosophic pessimism in Germany” (*PHC*, 452).

But Sully also includes in this critique the manifestations of pessimism outside of Germany—in Russia, France, and England—accounting for them in terms of a broader “intellectual cynicism” that is the result of “religious scepticism, and a sense of the hollowness of the last century optimism, partly as the depressing reaction after a period of extraordinary emotional tension, and of exalted confidence in ideal aims” (*PHC*, 449). Attempting to account for the tremendous socio-political changes across 19th century Europe while pessimism has developed, he writes: “In its earlier manifestations it was the apparent failure of a social and political ideal which brought about this state of despondency. In more recent years, the collapse of the extravagant aspirations and endeavours of certain aesthetic schools, has probably perpetuated, if it has not deepened, the pessimistic mood” (*PHC*, 449). Indicative of the breadth that Sully takes HDT to have, he is explicit that these social conditions have not just “perpetuated” and “deepened” pessimism in Europe, but that pessimism is “an *outgrowth* from them” (*PHC*, 452 - emphasis mine).

Sully is admittedly ambiguous in cashing out his historical correlation argument in terms of either HDT or of harsh social conditions themselves. However, there are significant advantages to framing the argument in terms of the former. For instance, HDT provides Sully with greater options for resisting the elementary objection that pessimism seems to have flourished in relatively mild conditions while being unpopular in relatively harsh ones. If it was the impoverished social conditions and suffering *themselves* that produced pessimistic belief, we might expect pessimism to have flourished in antiquity or the medieval period, instead of (or in addition to) 19th century Europe. But, Sully can say, this is not necessarily the case if HDT is right. As a result of having a very different ideological framework to medieval serfs, 19th century labourers, for example, expected better conditions, and this disappointed expectation is what actually makes pessimism probable. Put another way, it seems simple enough to establish that adverse social and material conditions were prevalent throughout human history. HDT holds, though, that what matters for the explanation of pessimistic belief is the significance of those conditions in the eyes of those who experienced them. This narrows the scope of where we would expect pessimism to arise and where we might not, and does not leave itself open to obvious counter-examples. The extent to which HDT can withstand further critical scrutiny and ensure a successful psychological reduction of pessimism overall, however, is the task of the following sections.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The noteworthy implication of HDT is that, if sound, it would be hopeless to expect pessimism to decline in popularity by challenging it in rational terms alone. Since pessimism is fundamentally a psychological state, it will decline in popularity when the sentiments and conditions underpinning it dissolve in the wake of progress. This progress, Sully suggests, will be partly medical in nature (i.e. concerning “internal dispositions”):

If ever a complete science of health shall exist, and the deepest conditions of mental as well as bodily welfare be ascertained, we may, perhaps, without being Utopian, predict a period when the dreariest forms of pessimism will disappear together with the peculiarities of temperament which underlie and sustain them (*PHC*, 444)

But it will also be socio-political in nature, noting the efficacy of social engineering in tackling the main forms of “external impressions” that foster pessimistic sentiment:

When new practical ideals assert themselves, when science impresses the popular mind with its large and fruitful ideas, and when the social structure adapts itself to growing intelligence and capacity, one may reasonably anticipate at least a partial decadence of pessimism (*PHC*, 452)

These conclusions crucially depend upon the plausibility of HDT. However, there are important challenges to HDT which may diminish one’s confidence in the thesis.

3. Challenging Sully’s Psychological Reduction of Pessimism:

This section considers and disentangles three major challenges to Sully’s psychological reduction of pessimism, all of which were, I argue, anticipated to varying degrees during the pessimism dispute. They are: **(i)** HDT is empirically disputable, at least with respect to 19th century Germany; **(ii)** HDT looks more plausible if pessimism is assumed to be a rare and modern phenomenon, but this assumption can be challenged; and **(iii)** Sully conflates the origins and essence of pessimism, and consequently begs the question in reducing pessimism to a psychological condition.

3.1. The Zeitgeist in 19th Century Germany

Like Sully, many combatants in the pessimism dispute attempted to deflate the entire controversy by pointing to calamitous events, disappointment, and widespread suffering as the best explanation for pessimism’s apparently sudden uptake. For the neo-Kantian Jürgen Bona Meyer, pessimism was the consequence of disillusionment following the failed 1848 revolutions, and Germany’s “internal disunity” and “humiliation” following the Napoleonic wars and other conflicts, all of which would be dispelled under the new Reich (Bona Meyer, *Weltelend und Weltschmerz*, 25). This diagnosis was shared by numerous others (e.g. Dühring, *Der Werth des Lebens*; Duboc, *Hundert Jahre Zeitgeist in Deutschland*, 79-84; Fischer, *Der Philosoph des Pessimismus*, 100-101).[[9]](#footnote-9) But attempted reductions of this kind were well-known to contemporary pessimists. Julius Bahnsen, for example, considered the whole strategy to be a disaster, writing that “Rarely has anything compromised the development of German science so badly as the pitiful failure of the repeated attempts to historically integrate or psychologically analyse the pessimistic trend as a supposedly transitory phenomenon of the times” (Bahnsen, *Der Widerspruch im Wissen und Wesen der Welt*, 13). Even as early as the 1850s, Schopenhauer thought it an equally weak objection. In a letter to Julius Frauenstädt from 1855, he gave the following appraisal of Kuno Fischer’s historical analysis of his pessimism:

Incurably corrupted by Hegelianism, [Fischer] *constructs* the history of philosophy according to his aprioristic patterns, and then I as a pessimist am the necessary opposite to *Leibniz* the optimist: and this is deduced from the fact that Leibniz is supposed to have lived in a time of *hopefulness*, I on the other hand in a *desperate* and unhappy time. *Ergo*, if I had lived around 1700 I would have been a well-groomed, optimistic Leibniz, and he would have been me if he had lived today! – That’s how crazy Hegelianism makes you […] Furthermore my pessimism took form between 1814 and 1818 (when it appeared in its entirety); which was the *most hopeful* time, after *the liberation of Germany*. The greenhorn doesn’t know that! (Schopenhauer*, Gesammelte Briefe*, 368)

Schopenhauer questions an appeal to HDT as an explanation of his pessimism on the grounds that the alleged sentiments at play do not match up. However, the flexibility of Sully’s appeal to both “internal dispositions” and “external impressions” in explaining pessimistic belief may be exploited here to provide an effective response. It affords him the conceptual resources to argue, as he does (*PHC*, 447-448), that Schopenhauer’s pessimism was a result of his peculiar psychological dispositions, sufficiently strong in degree as they were to outweigh the influence of his wider cultural environment.

Nevertheless, the same scepticism might be applied in the case of post-Schopenhauerian pessimism, at its popular height in the 1870’s and 1880’s: were things any worse in the general population’s eyes then? On the contrary, the *Gründerkrach* and cholera epidemics not withstanding, one cannot ignore a multitude of events which would have fostered a national sentiment quite the opposite to the one postulated by Sully. This is exactly the objection to psychological reductions of modern German pessimism on historical grounds made by Beiser, who writes that “from a broad historical perspective, the second half of the 19th century in Germany seems a happy age” (Beiser, *Weltschmerz*, 1-2), listing as evidence the national unification of Germany under Bismarck in 1871, military and political victories over France, economic and social progress, the expansion of trade and living standards among middle and working classes, growing democracy and liberal legislation, the achievement of universal education, and tremendous advances in science and public health. All of this progress, Beiser adds, seems “reason to celebrate rather than mope” (Beiser, *Weltschmerz*, 2).

It is important to draw attention to why this point puts pressure on HDT in particular, and not merely a claim about the material conditions of life. HDT does not require the conditions in the 1870’s and 1880’s to have been objectively worse than conditions at any other time, only that they had been felt as particularly disappointing. But crucially, Beiser’s essential point can be interpreted in terms of decreased disappointment and increased fulfilment: the political victories, rapid advancements in technology, and the implementation of progressive social policies gave the Germans of the 1870’s onwards an emboldened belief in the value of life, and the confidence in attaining further worthy goals.

Sully might have responded to this charge by redeploying an argument made by one of the most capable pessimists of the day, Olga Plümacher, in a way that actually supports his case. Explicitly responding to Sully’s critique, Plümacher rejected historical psychologising of pessimism, writing…

…it is not because they have to pay high taxes, or to do military service for their country, nor yet from any humiliating consciousness of the superiority of French civilisation and luxury, that so many Germans confess to Hartmann’s pessimism; but because a time of material prosperity and of fulfilment of national hopes and wishes is a fit time to show how small an influence a little more or a little less of luck in external conditions can have on the value of life (Plümacher, “Pessimism”, 88-89)

Contrary to some defensive strategies employed by pessimists in the dispute, Plümacher acknowledges progress in social conditions. Her point appears to be, however, that an increase in material prosperity has nonetheless been experienced as a tremendous disappointment: even though we have significantly improved our material social conditions, life still falls short of being acceptable and we are left with further disillusion and disgruntlement. But taking Sully to endorse HDT, he can whole-heartedly agree with this analysis of why people are developing pessimistic belief. It is evidence *in favour* of his reduction via HDT, he would say, and not against it.

While this is a complicated empirical question, Beiser’s diagnosis of a spirit of optimism in the latter half of the 19th century was offered at the time by Nietzsche. On whether Schopenhauer’s insights had been properly received, Nietzsche denied that pessimism was a specifically ‘German’ phenomenon at all, given the nation’s concurrent spell of “bold politics” and “cheerful fatherlandishness” brought about by Bismarck (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §357). Shouts of “*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*”, Nietzsche writes, “bears emphatic witness to the opposite” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §357): mid-late 19th century Germany embodied a national sentiment of hopeful aspiration. On this basis, Beiser seems to be right that the popularity of pessimism in the 19th century appears to have “no straight forward social or historical cause” (Beiser, *Weltschmerz*, 1). But the fact that the cause is not “straight forward” does not, by itself, spell disaster for Sully. At the very least, however, the apparent complexity of the issue, undersold by Sully, shifts the burden of proof back onto him to justify HDT as an empirically sound thesis.

3.2. Pessimism as a Historically Entrenched Cultural Phenomenon

Another way to challenge Sully’s psychological reduction of pessimism is to question the explanatory power of HDT when it is applied to pessimistic belief broadly, and not just as it has appeared in modern German philosophy. It would be easier to establish HDT if pessimism was a peculiar and sudden phenomenon crying out for explanation. But the wider acceptance and longevity pessimism has in human history, the less impetus there is to seek a psychological explanation for it in terms of frustrated hopes through social turmoil. This type of challenge proceeds in two steps.

The first step is to note that for the majority of pessimists, belief in the worthlessness of life was not a new phenomenon or passing fad of the 19th century, but rather a truth attested to in large numbers across vast temporal and cultural boundaries. Eduard von Hartmann, for example, claimed that the “greatest minds of all ages” have pronounced “the condemnation of life in very decided terms” (Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, *XIII*, 1-2), including Socrates as at least a forerunner of philosophical pessimism (cf. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §340). Schopenhauer, too, argued at length that world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and early Christianity are essentially pessimistic. He goes as far as claiming that pessimism is “the most widely acknowledged fundamental truth in the whole of non-Islamic Asia, today just as much as three thousand years ago” (Schopenhauer, *WWR2*, 621). These religions, he claims, advance an ethics from the starting point, expressed allegorically for their millions of followers, that life is a vale of tears demanding not gratitude, but lamentation and redemption from it.

The second step is to issue a challenge to the reductionist: either they must argue that (a) Schopenhauer and others are wrong about the existential evaluation expressed in these world religions; or they must (b) accept that pessimism has a much larger uptake in human history than presumed, but hold that this can nevertheless still be accounted for in terms of HDT. Without a plausible case for (a) or (b), the reductionist would be making a highly contentious assumption that significantly favours their case.

A successful execution of either strategy is no easy feat, but it appears that Sully’s only option is (b). This is because while he makes his task easier by arguing that some of the Schopenhauerian designations of pessimism in particular religions and philosophical traditions are misguided (*PHC*, Ch. 3), he nevertheless recognises “traces of both optimism and pessimism, as partly religious, partly metaphysical doctrines” in the “earliest existing literatures” (*PHC*, 36). In particular, Sully agrees that Buddhism is “pessimism pure and simple”, and the “direct progenitor of the modern German systems” (*PHC*, 38). This is enough to generate a steep mountain to climb for Sully. There is a substantive problem and formal problem. The substantive problem is that Sully must show that wherever Buddhist belief and practice has been present, this has been because there was concurrent and widespread disappointment, thwarted ideals, and misery. In the case of ‘pessimistic’ religions as large, diverse, and the with longevity of Buddhism, this at the very least requires more robust argument to establish. Buddhism has enjoyed a mass followings across the globe in a variety of cultures and socio-economic contexts. The social-political-religious landscapes of, say, 5th century BC Magadha, or 3rd century AD Luoyang, radically differ (especially from our own), making it more difficult to tell what meaning disasters and social hardship had at the time for those populations, and if those same circumstances would hold the same significance today. Moreover, not only is it difficult to establish that such societies really were suffering such disappointment, but the continued and relatively stable *persistence* of Buddhism today despite radical changes in social conditions makes this an unlikely explanation.[[10]](#footnote-10) Where fluctuations in religious adherence are only recently observable,[[11]](#footnote-11) Sully’s opponents are, up to this point, entitled to scepticism about whether the cause is explicable purely in terms of HDT.

The formal problem is that because any account of historical pessimism in terms of HDT is bound to be complicated in the ways suggested, the explanatory power of HDT will correspondingly diminish. HDT appears attractive because of its elegance in the purportedly simple case of 19th century Europe: pessimism is suddenly flourishing alongside social conditions which are fostering feelings of disappointment. Why? Because the former *just is* an expression of the latter. But the abductive inference is harder to draw when it is conceded that pessimism has been prominent throughout human history. Its strength is proportionate to the intelligibility of the correlation at work. The more the narrative is qualified to accommodate historical instances of pessimism, less force the HDT has. One of Sully’s aims is to deny that the prominence of 19th century pessimism is due to its veracity. But when HDT is weakened in the face of entrenched historical pessimism—in which “external impressions” have no or little *prima facie* explanatory role to play—one can legitimately ask: why confidently rely on it to explain the growing adherence to the views of Schopenhauer, Hartmann, Plümacher, and others? Once again, the objection raised here is not necessarily fatal to Sully’s project, but it does put pressure on him to provide greater empirical support for HDT.

3.3. Plümacher Contra Sully: Distinguishing Pessimism from Weltschmerz

The third and final objection to consider concerns the precise relation between pessimism and Weltschmerz. The objection does not target HDT *per se*, but rather takes aim at any attempt to draw a conclusion about pessimism’s status as a theory from observations about its adherents’ motives and psychological condition, either as a result of some set of “internal dispositions” or “external impressions”.

Recall that Sully’s view is that what best explains the emergence and popularity of philosophical pessimism is the state of Weltschmerz which, he claims, is curiously correlated with it. Sully attempts a reduction of pessimism to this state, which is identified its true source. An objection, however, is that this reduction is enabled only by a suspicious presupposition that what accounts for the *origins* of pessimistic belief in turn explains *what pessimism essentially is*. In other words, Sully would appear to equate two claims:

(i) pessimism is *motivated* by Weltschmerz;

(ii) pessimism *just is* Weltschmerz.

But this move is highly suspect. Even if one grants that philosophical pessimism originated from feelings of Weltschmerz, this does not mean that pessimism could not also be endorsed on the basis of sound reasons. Part of Olga Plümacher’s critique of Sully in the 1870s can be read this way. Plümacher sought to dissolve the objection that the…

…main *source* of pessimism is an abnormal sensitiveness to pain, and that pessimism itself is to be regarded in a large measure as a pathological phenomenon, which will cease to exist when the medical science of the future shall succeed in overcoming the peculiarities of temperament in which it is rooted (Plümacher, “Pessimism”, 88 - emphasis mine)

Her strategy similarly looks to first drive a wedge between Weltschmerz and pessimism-proper, and then to deny that whatever gives rise to the former—peculiar dispositions or social circumstances— undermines the latter. For Plümacher, Weltschmerz is indeed a mood that is often present in those with melancholic dispositions and acutely sensitive psychological constitutions. She even concedes that in the case of this “unreasoned pessimism”, Sully’s HDT and the need for future advances in sciences and social engineering to overcome it “may be true” with “certain limitations” (Plümacher, “Pessimism”, 88). However, this is a separate phenomenon, she claims, from philosophical pessimism, which is “uninfluenced by subjective feelings” and “rests exclusively on objective observation” (Plümacher, “Pessimism”, 88). Thus, Plümacher did not deny that Weltschmerz was a real or pervasive phenomenon, nor that it could *lead* one to endorse philosophical pessimism. Her point was simply that the attempt to collapse one into the other is illegitimate.

In a later work, Plümacher seems to develop this argument by pointing to Schopenhauer as a clear example of how philosophical pessimism can be *motivated* by Weltschmerz without simply *being* Weltschmerz. Plümacher credits Schopenhauer with first developing a genuinely philosophical (if not sufficiently robust) pessimism, but locates its *origins* in features of his character: “Schopenhauer’s sensibility is entirely that of the man of Weltschmerz. He has a titanic feeling of self [*ein titanisches Selbstgefühl*]…Hence also the lament — not pessimistic, but truly characteristic of Weltschmerz — over earthly transitoriness and the lively emphasis on death as the first and highest of all ills” (Plümacher, 1888: 129). Psychological analyses of Schopenhauer were common among later pessimists as well as its opponents. Hartmann, for example, similarly described Schopenhauer’s pessimism as corrupted by his “abnormal dispositions” and an “unscientific subjective effusion of the heart” (Hartmann, *Zur Geschichte und Begründung des Pessimismus*, 68), with his condemnations of life having their *origins* in his “peculiarly constituted mind” (Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, ‘Preface to 7th ed.’: xviii). Nevertheless, both Plümacher and Hartmann also thought that Schopenhauer genuinely raised pessimism to the level of a philosophical theory, even if his psychological idiosyncrasies prejudiced him in a way that made his philosophical defence of pessimism less robust than it could be (see Janaway, “Worse Than the Best Possible”).

This bifurcation of claims (i) and (ii) is significant because it seems that philosophical pessimists could then unproblematically accept HDT without compromising pessimism’s status as a rational theory. In other words, they could accept that historical disappointment has produced accompanying feelings of Weltschmerz, but deny the inference from this to the view that pessimistic arguments lack rational foundation. HDT would then appear to lose its sting, and fail to explain the *merely* psychological status of pessimism without presupposing what it sets out to establish: one will only be convinced by HDT for Sully’s intended purpose if one *already* thinks pessimism *just is* Weltschmerz.

While a move of this kind may succeed against cruder psychological reductions of pessimism, it may misconstrue the structure of Sully’s critique. The most plausible way of understanding Sully’s psychological reduction is not as one independent anti-pessimistic argument among others, but as premised upon a sound rebuttal of the rational foundation for pessimism. Assuming that Sully is successful in this, his psychological analysis is an attempt to determine why, if pessimism is a bankrupt view, people come to endorse it in such large numbers. This form of debunking would seem to put the final nail in the coffin: if pessimism lacks rational foundations, *and* its endorsement can be explained psychologically, then there is no need to continue taking it seriously, and others will be dissuaded from seeking new grounds for it which perpetuate the dispute. An apt analogy here might be with how the views of conspiracy theorists tend to be approached.[[12]](#footnote-12) Since we have excellent reasons to think, for example, that the earth is not flat, we may *then* ask: what causes people to deny it? What causes the propagation of that denial in certain places, at certain times, and among certain demographics?

Sully’s reduction of pessimism appears to function in the same way. For instance, he claims in the introduction to *PHC* that it is “no doubt true that modern German pessimism as a philosophy of existence must be examined and estimated on its own grounds, and be accepted or rejected according as it shows itself to be or not to be a consistent and well-reasoned system of thought”. He continues on to say that “At the same time the *full significance* of this speculative doctrine cannot be understood except by reference to pre-philosophic pessimism” (*PHC*, 2-3 - emphasis mine), by which he means psychological dispositions. Furthermore, this more nuanced position reflects Sully’s actual methodology: most of *PHC* is spent addressing the *arguments* in favour of pessimism, and only *after* finding them wanting, attempts to account for its origins in the final chapter.

Psychological reductions of pessimism must be premised upon a successful antecedent refutation of the arguments in its favour, so its opponents must engage it rationally. Whether Sully has achieved *that*, however, is a matter of dispute, and something not pursued here. Nevertheless, his evident awareness of the need to achieve this prior to a psychological analysis demonstrates the seriousness of his attempted reduction over those such as Magee, Russell, Loemker, and many of Sully’s contemporaries.

4. Assessing Sully’s Contributions to the Dispute

The three objections addressed are suggestive of the breadth of philosophical controversies that the pessimism dispute contained. Discussion of the third objection demonstrates the need for careful attention to how philosophical and psychological analysis should be interweaved. But the first two objections, while not knock-down refutations, reveal how more substantial empirical evidence is needed for either party in the debate. Sully seems to be sensitive to this point. In one place, he sensibly recommends caution and epistemic humility when attempting a comprehensive aetiology of pessimistic belief: “it is much too soon to attempt an accurate and exhaustive analysis of the influences which have contributed to produce just now [a pessimistic] temper of mind” (*PHC*, 448). At least with regard to 19th century pessimism, he shows a reluctance to give the last word, noting that the phenomenon has not ceased in popularity at the time of his writing, and that a “proper perspective of time” is a requirement for a full understanding of it (*PHC*, 448).

But a question remains as to what Sully’s critique of pessimism might offer our contemporary understanding of pessimism and the pessimism dispute. Clearly, Sully was interested in the psychological origins of pessimistic belief. Yet he seems to have also been concerned to address, explicitly or implicitly, a cluster of distinct but related claims about pessimism beyond this. For example:

(A) Is pessimism true?

(B) Is pessimism capable of being true?

(C) Is pessimism philosophical or psychological in nature (or both)?

(D) Why is pessimism so widespread at time *t*?

(E) Can pessimists be reasoned with?

The relations between (A)-(E) will of course be complicated, and Sully himself is less than clear about how (A)-(E) are, or can be, associated. For example, one could accept that pessimism is, or can be, true and yet still argue that pessimists can’t be reasoned with. Further, one could accept that pessimism is (at least partly) philosophical in nature yet still argue that there are reasons which explain its popularity at certain times rather than others. The crucial point for our current purposes is that once we disentangle such questions, it becomes apparent that depending on which of them we take Sully to be addressing, his claims become more or less relevant and more or less plausible.

This project requires further investigation, but as a preliminary sketch, Sully’s arguments may support an answer to (C) along the nuanced lines that pessimism is both partly philosophical *and* partly psychological. The pessimist’s view is genuinely philosophical in the sense of being responsive to evidence, even though that evidence is skewed by selection bias, and it is genuinely psychological in the sense of being produced by the pessimist’s psychological condition. Harnessing Sully’s observations in service of this kind of answer to (C) would give weight to the view that pessimism might be more akin to what some have called a *stance* (Prescott, “What Pessimism Is”): a compound of beliefs, attitudes, sentiments, commitments and intentions. On such an account, a pessimist is someone who maintains certain views but who also meets certain psychological criteria, together orientating a worldview. If something like this is the right way to think about pessimism, and Sully offers us some reasons to think it might be, then it could in turn make sense of potential answers to questions such as (D) and (E).

Perhaps an answer to (D), for example, would be that pessimism is more widespread at *t* in contrast with *t1* because it is *partly* a matter of attitudes and emotional states, and that these are susceptible to conditioning by socio-economic circumstance, among other external forces, though they do not wholly determine or significantly compromise our rational beliefs. Such a view merely acknowledges there may be a certain degree of defeasible pressure to endorse certain stances based upon the existing ideological frameworks and socio-economic conditions within a given culture. Perhaps an answer to (E), for example, would be that since pessimism is partly a matter of non-cognitive attitudes and partly philosophical belief, pessimists can be reasoned with, but only to a certain extent, and under certain conditions. This is because disagreements between optimists and pessimists, while *seeming* to just concern beliefs, could not be resolved by addressing *solely* the integrity of those beliefs. Rather, attention must also be paid to the broader attitudes, commitments, and values of the disputants. Sully’s project may then be interpreted as one of attempting to discover what the specific conditions and limits are for successful reasoning with pessimists.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to reconstruct James Sully’s psychological reduction argument against philosophical pessimism, according to which the best explanation for the correlation between the emergence and spread of pessimism on the one hand, and feelings of despair and disappointment in the face of harsh social conditions on the other, is that this relation is causal: pessimism is a mere mood or disposition largely shaped by historical circumstances. I have argued that, as one of the most prominent forms of this argument-type in the pessimism dispute of 1860-1900, a full presentation of it allows us to appreciate the nuance of its key claims, as well as its subtle differences with, and advantages over, other prominent versions. Moreover, I have argued that there are serious objections to Sully’s version of the argument. The import of these objections is that the pessimist is justified in pressing Sully to further empirically support his claims. Nevertheless, psychological reductions of pessimism with the sophistication that Sully offers deserve to be take seriously by pessimists. While this paper has approached the argument historically, its contemporary critics and sympathisers alike may find the dialectic presented here fruitful for assessing the prospects for present-day psychologising of pessimism, and potentially other philosophical views.

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1. I attempt to elucidate some of the philosophical links and possible influence of Sully upon Nietzsche ’s critique of pessimism in Hassan, *Nietzsche’s Struggle Against Pessimism*, ch. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is the approach evident in the dominant diagnostic manuals, such as ICD-11 and DSM-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Pessimism’ is a term which has often been attributed to a variety of theses (see Hassan, *Nietzsche’s Struggle Against Pessimism*, 21-29). Sully’s understanding of the term was the *de facto* definition in the pessimism dispute. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As Sully later puts it: “philosophical pessimism treads on the heels of that vigorous manifestation of poetic pessimism…the age of Byron, Leopardi, and Heine” (*PHC*, 449). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sully also notes the efficacy of Schopenhauer’s and Hartmann’s respective literary styles in encouraging uptake on their pessimism (*PHC*, 452-458). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The same section indicates Sully’s endorsement of the inverse correlation too (*PHC*, 434). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising the importance of the distinction between this version of the thesis and the former in Sully’s writing. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One important challenge to Sully’s view here, whether cashed out in terms of HDT or not, is Nietzsche’s contrary observation that pessimism flourishes in periods of *comfort*, not because of altered expectations, but because the price of milder social conditions is a corresponding decline in tolerance for suffering (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §48). For discussion, see Hassan, *Nietzsche’s Struggle Against Pessimism*, 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a more nuanced account, see Windelband (*History of Philosophy*, §46, 673). Windelband was happy to allow that “[t]he pessimistic temper which prevailed in Germany in the first decade of the second half of our century had its easily recognisable grounds in political and social relations”, and continued: “the eager reception and welcome of Schopenhauer's doctrines, supported by the brilliant qualities of the writer, are usually regarded as easily intelligible for that reason”. But on the prevalence of pessimism in the 1870’s, Windelband pointed to a decadent “relaxation and surfeit [*Erschlaffungs und Uebersättigungserscheinung*]”, triggered by rapid *improvements* in social and political domains, to explain it. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For this same reason, any potential appeal instead to “internal dispositions” at the level of *race*, *nation*, or *culture*—which Sully in one place suggests (*PHC*, 431-432)—will also seem implausibly simple and essentialist. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For example, the numbers of practicing Christians in Europe and North America is well-known to have been declining for the last few decades, and there is some evidence to suggest that religiosity increased (with the notable exception among Buddhists) with the hardships experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sinding Bentzen, “In Crisis, We Pray”). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I am grateful to Azita Chellappoo for raising the relevance of this analogy. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)