

TRANSCENDENTAL PESSIMISM

Pessimism is a concept that is used in conflicting ways. As there is no clear definition of pessimism that philosophers can agree upon, more often than not it is up to each one to use the term as they see fit and apply it to a wide range of concerns that may have little in common. Faced with this, there are two main options. One is simply to accept that pessimism is a multifaceted concept that has distinct applications in sociology, gender studies, psychology, politics, and philosophy (and even within philosophy itself it is used to describe a wide range of philosophies). In other words, let people freely use pessimism as they see fit in order to describe whatever feature of life they want to highlight. A second option is for philosophers to retain the concept of *transcendental pessimism* (a term first coined by Dennis Darnoi in 1967) to refer specifically to pessimism of the purely philosophical variety (in contrast to the other uses). I will argue that this latter option is preferable insofar as it respects a rich philosophical history and contributes to overall clarity in philosophical discourse.

In what follows, I will first describe some different ways in which pessimism is currently used – with a particular focus on *psychological* accounts of pessimism. Second, I will elaborate on the history of pessimism in order to show how this history can help us obtain conceptual clarity. Finally, I will offer a historically rooted definition of pessimism. As part of this definition, I will defend the view that philosophical pessimism could be more accurately described

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as *transcendental pessimism*. Until I explain why *transcendental pessimism* is the term we should prefer, I will continue to use *philosophical pessimism* or simply *pessimism* interchangeably throughout this essay.

My claim that pessimism is used in numerous different ways that lends itself to ambiguity starts with the most basic of observations. Most of us have encountered someone at some point in our lives who, when offered an opportunity (for a job, a vacation, a project, and so on), has answered with a negative attitude. Say, for example, that we want to go to the beach for the day but our friend does not want to. They could say something like, “I don’t think we should go, you know, it’s probably going to rain, we are going to get wet and cold, we’ll surely lose something in the sand – doesn’t that always happen? – and overall we won’t have a good time.” Our friend imagines the worst outcome. They are, we would probably agree, a pessimist – or they have a pessimistic *attitude* towards our invitation. There is indeed a common (and perhaps prevailing) understanding of pessimism that makes reference to a *bad attitude* and a generally negative disposition towards people and events. This, however, is not what pessimism means in philosophical terms. Yet, outside of academia, and sometimes even within it, it is this psychological perspective on pessimism that remains dominant. The *American Psychological Association* defines pessimism as:

[T]he attitude that things will go wrong and that people’s wishes or aims are unlikely to be fulfilled. Pessimists are people who expect bad things to happen to them and to others or who are otherwise doubtful or hesitant about positive outcomes. Most individuals lie somewhere on the spectrum between the two polar opposites of pure optimism and pure pessimism but tend to demonstrate relatively stable situational tendencies in one direction or the other.

In other words, psychological pessimism is an *attitude*. Yet, as I will show, philosophical pessimism is a philosophical *system* that purports to answer questions about the value of existence and explain why suffering is so ubiquitous. This difference has, however, been routinely underappreciated. It is important to keep in mind that viewing pessimism as a psychological predisposition is not wrong *per se* – there really is, after all, such a thing as a pessimistic temperament. My claim is that it is wrong to conflate it with pessimism as a system.

In his 1877 book, *Pessimism: A History and a Criticism*, the English psychologist James Sully wrote:

[T]o most English minds, perhaps, the term pessimism suggests nothing like a philosophical creed or a speculative system. As a familiar word in popular literature it appears to signify a certain way of looking at the things of life, a *temper of mind* with its accompanying intellectual predisposition. In everyday language a man is a pessimist who habitually emphasises the dark and evil aspects of life (...) We do not think of them as a school adopting certain first principles in common, but rather as a peculiar make of a person characterized by a kind of constitutional leaning to a gloomy view of the world and its affairs.

Quite accurately, Sully points out that for most people pessimism is associated with certain character traits, rather than a rigorously developed school of thought that has first principles and proceeds to a complete system from those principles. Julius Bahnsen, a prominent 19th Century German pessimist philosopher noted regretfully how pessimism “is used to justify every negative mood and fit of hypochondria”. More recently, Joshua Dienstag makes the cautionary point that “just as theories of progress are not the same thing as a cheerful attitude towards life, neither should pessimism be equated with a foul disposition”.

MAGEE WOULD LIKE TO RESCUE SCHOPENHAUER’S SYSTEM BY GETTING RID OF THE PSYCHOLOGY MOTIVATING HIS PESSIMISTIC VIEWS

In line with Dienstag’s cautionary point, Bertrand Russell famously asserted that pessimism is not a philosophical system at all but a mere temperament. In his *History of Western Philosophy*, Russell said that “the belief in either pessimism or optimism is a matter of temperament, not of reason, but the optimistic temperament has been much commoner among Western philosophers. A representative of the opposite party is therefore likely to be useful in bringing forward

considerations which would otherwise be overlooked.” Simply put, pessimism (and optimism for that matter) is not really philosophy.

This psychological line of criticism was also taken up by Bryan Magee who, like Russell, denies pessimism a place in philosophy. For him pessimism is *not* philosophy. In reference to Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy, Magee thinks that if we could set aside his psychologically misguided pessimistic musings, we would then find in his writings a much better philosophical system – and one that has no need for pessimism. In other words, Magee would like to rescue Schopenhauer’s system by getting rid of the psychology motivating his pessimistic views. As Magee writes, “it is true that his pessimism is compatible with his philosophy – but that is only because the two are, of necessity, logically unconnected. Non-pessimism is equally compatible with his philosophy. The traditional identification of him in terms of his pessimism is largely irrelevant to a serious consideration of him as a philosopher.” Instead, Magee thinks that Schopenhauer makes important contributions to metaphysics (for example, by arguing for the *oneness* of ultimate reality) and ethics (for example, by saying that compassion is always the proper moral attitude) with no need to appeal to pessimism. Thus, Magee concludes that there is no such thing as *philosophical* pessimism to be found in Schopenhauer. By reducing pessimism to psychology, Magee denies its relevance as a philosophical system.

But if philosophical pessimism is to be seen as something more than a “mere” temperament or attitude, what might this be? Is it about saying that life is filled with pain? Is it about denying progress? Perhaps it is simply about saying that life is *bad*? If so, then pessimism turns out to be a rather thin and malleable concept that admits almost any philosophy or claim that emphasises the negative in life. But, as I will now argue, there is much more to philosophical pessimism than this. It is in fact a rich philosophical area that makes a series of specific claims and commitments. Crucially, it has a fruitful history that evolved into what can be properly called a *tradition*. It is now time to look at this.

First, the term *pessimism* made its appearance during the 18th Century in reference to Voltaire’s tragic

depiction of Candide’s voyage through the Americas. Voltaire’s pessimism was presented as a response to Leibniz’s optimism – the view that this was the best possible world. In other words, it has a philosophical origin story which is why philosophy has so much to say on the topic. For Voltaire, our pains and sufferings serve no ultimate purpose – this belief lies at the heart of philosophical pessimism.

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But if pessimism is to be considered as a fully-fledged philosophical tradition, then it must be *extensive*, i.e., it is not enough if one or two philosophers are writing, or have written, on the same topic. Second, it must also be *consistent*, i.e., there must be something like a continued focus on this theme over time. Finally, the issues and questions raised should have enough in common so that debate and disagreements are *philosophically fruitful*, i.e., they acknowledge the work being done by others and that they are not all talking past one another.

These conditions are all met when we look to 19th Century Germany. During that period, there was a series of philosophers – Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann, Philipp Mainländer, Julius Bahnsen, Olga Plümacher and Agnes Taubert among others – who were writing about the value of life, suffering, the essence of existence, and whether or not being is preferable to not being. This is the *Weltschmerz* tradition and these are the *Weltschmerz* philosophers (*Weltschmerz* is a German word that means something like “world-weariness”). They were the first group of philosophers to discuss these questions in a systematic way and they were also the first to refer to their philosophies as *pessimist*.

It is Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) that represents the true starting point for pessimism as a philosophical *system*. These early

pessimists not only came together around the idea that existence was suffering, that our suffering has no ultimate purpose, and that nonbeing is preferable to being, but they accepted that this is due, in large part, to some feature about the *essence* of existence. In other words, they accepted a metaphysical position – a metaphysical position laid out by Schopenhauer.

Crucial to this shared philosophical ground for pessimism is the metaphysical concept of *will*. Schopenhauer was the first to give us a fully developed view of the will as *thing-in-itself* and ascribed to it an inescapable role in giving existence its fundamentally wretched and pessimistic character. In his metaphysics, the *thing-in-itself* refers to reality as such, i.e., *independently* of how we perceive it. Further, it is one single *undivided* reality that unites everything that exists in this world of representations. At a fundamental level, everything that is, is *one* same thing: *will*. In Schopenhauer's work, this will emerges as a sort of *vital force* that – being beyond space, time and causality – exists with the sole purpose of endlessly wanting and desiring. As a result, satisfaction and happiness are not possible – or at least are not possible in the long run due to the insatiable nature of desire. As Schopenhauer put it, “all will springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering. Fulfilment brings this to an end; and yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied (...) therefore we never obtain lasting happiness or peace”.

Ultimately, all the German pessimists agreed that the fundamental source of our misgivings is found in the essence of existence itself – the *will* – and not in this or that particular circumstance of our lives. This belief that the essence of existence is the source of our existential predicaments is a central feature of philosophical pessimism. For the German pessimists, our existential misgivings are found in the will, and this will lies forever beyond our reach, remaining, therefore, ungraspable and unaffected by our actions in this world no matter what we may try to do to change it, e.g. advocate for revolutions. Olga Plümacher makes this point very clearly:

The future will doubtless heal many wounds which now seem incurable. Even the social question will some day find a solution, though no one dare say whether it will be by gentle or by violent means. But

the great sources of suffering will still abide in the future for the reason that they spring from the very conditions of life.

Pessimists hold steadfast to this point: there is nothing we can do to ever change the essence of existence – the will. For this reason, one can justifiably say that the will ties all the pessimists together. Yet it is also true that each pessimist philosopher conceived of the will in their own ways by introducing important modifications. Recall that for Schopenhauer reality at bottom is *one* and *undivided*. By contrast, Mainländer and Bahnsen denied the oneness of the will and instead argued that there exists a multiplicity of wills. In other words, for them, the fundamental nature of reality consists of countless individual wills that struggle and fight against each other, which in turn explains why every living being is inescapably caught up in life's struggles and pains. Hartmann affirms Schopenhauer's oneness of the will but adds that the will is united to *reason* in order to form a unified force that he called the *Unconscious* (a view Plümacher accepted). This unconscious force turns our world into a battlefield where *reason* tries to tame and control the will but, ultimately, to no avail. This is what gives life its wretched character. In the end, these pessimists are all working within the metaphysical and pessimist framework established by Schopenhauer – albeit with some important tweaks here and there.

Now that I have provided a historical sketch of the issues and concerns raised by these German philosophers, it is time to have a look at the formal definition of pessimism that I propose. Let us call this pessimism *transcendental pessimism* in order to distinguish it from all other uses of the term. It is *transcendental* because it places the source our existential predicaments *beyond* the world of representations, of objects. The proposed definition has four points, all rooted in the philosophies of the original 19th Century pessimist philosophers.

- The *essence* of existence can be known either fully or partially and it is *will*. This is a metaphysical claim;
- This *will* is what characterizes life as an experience conditioned by need, want and pain. Ultimately, suffering is inescapable;
- There are no *ultimate reasons* for our sufferings.

This means that there is no cosmic plan or purpose to our suffering;

- Nonexistence is preferable to existence.

In the end, pessimism will likely remain a contested concept. The psychological perspective will likely continue to dominate, and many will likely dismiss the arguments presented by philosophical pessimists on the grounds that they are only depressed or miserable. Furthermore, it is likely that any philosophy that points out how miserable existence is (regardless of the *reasons* for doing so) will continue to be labelled as pessimistic.

ALL THE GERMAN PESSIMISTS AGREED THAT THE FUNDAMENTAL SOURCE OF OUR MISGIVINGS IS FOUND IN THE ESSENCE OF EXISTENCE ITSELF – THE WILL – AND NOT IN THIS OR THAT PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCE OF OUR LIVES

This is what happens with contemporary anti-natalists, to take one prominent contemporary example. Anti-natalism is often labelled as a *pessimist philosophy*. But while anti-natalist philosophers do claim that existence is overall *bad* and that non-existence is preferable to existence, they eschew all metaphysical talk about the will, the thing-in-itself, or ultimate purposes, choosing to focus instead on providing the best reasons for the idea that bringing new humans into the world is always a *harm* (given how filled with pain and strife life is). While both pessimists and anti-natalists argue for the preferability of nonexistence over existence, the original pessimists also engage with larger philosophical questions that provide us with a comprehensive view of the totality of existence.

Indeed, the question of whether or not to procreate is not a central one for the original pessimists. When

dealing with our existential sufferings, not procreating was one, among other, possibilities they considered. Hartmann, for example, was very unclear on this point. He argued that future humans will at some point decide how they will bring about an end to human existence and that we are not in a position to know what course of action they will choose. Hartmann is clearly a pessimist, but he is not a committed anti-natalist. On the other hand, Schopenhauer is much closer to an anti-natalist view point insofar as he favoured an ascetic approach to life whereby all desires, including the desire to procreate, would be tamed and defeated.

By not acknowledging the pessimist tradition and by not engaging with the issues they raise (in particular the metaphysical and transcendental framework that these original pessimists accepted), anti-natalists are setting themselves outside of this important tradition. It is essential to keep in mind that this is not *wrong* in any way; rather, it is a different philosophical approach, with its own merits. While it is likely that people will continue to refer to anti-natalists as pessimists, given what I have argued here, one could say they are *anti-natalist pessimists* but not *transcendental pessimists*. I think this is an important distinction to keep in mind because it contributes to philosophical clarity.

Ultimately, transcendental pessimism is a well-defined philosophical tradition with a rich history and a thematic coherence. It is not the same as psychological pessimism and it is not the same as other philosophies that deal with the wretchedness of existence. While some may continue to use the blanket term “pessimism” to refer to all of these perspectives, if we aspire to clarity then the framework of *transcendental pessimism* can certainly help.

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