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## Problems with Happiness

### **Abstract**

This project is primarily concerned with the problem of human unhappiness. I explore the philosophical history of happiness and its relationship to other concepts such as freedom, reason, and human nature in general. By putting various optimistic and pessimistic approaches into conversation with each other, I illustrate a complicated and rich dialogue about some of the biggest questions philosophy, namely: is it actually possible to be a happy person, and if so, how? If happiness is impossible, is life worth living? While I will be arguing more from a pessimistic perspective, I do not reject the entire non-pessimistic canon, and there are many pessimistic conclusions that I do not agree with. Rather, I will suggest a different approach to the problem of happiness. By clarifying the limitations of the human condition, namely the expected and actual nature of freedom and reason, I suggest a possibility of happiness that is not based in the illusion of optimism or the denial of the fundamental aspects of human nature.

### **What is happiness?**

Much like Augustine's reflection on time from the *Confessions*, happiness seems to be one of those things that we all have an implicit idea of but that becomes more complicated as we try to articulate exactly what we mean by happiness. The meaning depends largely on the person and the context in which they are using it. It is assumed that as humans we want to be happy, but

there is great confusion on what that happiness actually is, what its value is, and how a person ought to go after it. In this section I describe some predominant theories of happiness in order to establish a shared understanding of the different meanings of happiness and the contexts they are used. Because the problem of this essay is human unhappiness, it is important to clarify what is meant philosophically by 'happiness'.

One idea of happiness is an emotional or psychological state, opposite to depression and discomfort. In this case, a person is happy when they feel happy, but this concept does not allow room for philosophical inquiry into the value of happiness. Further, this reading says nothing about what actually causes happiness or what *should* cause happiness. For this reason, I am uninterested in pursuing this purely psychological reading of happiness in this essay. Another concept of happiness is one that describes a happy life as the pursuit and actualization of pleasure; this is the hedonistic approach which puts pleasure as the ultimate good of a happy life. The final theory of happiness corresponds with a life well lived, and both this life-satisfaction and the hedonistic approach conceive happiness of being a value. Philosophers write about this *prudential value* of happiness that evaluates overall life-satisfaction in terms of the good life, flourishing, or *eudaemonia* in the Aristotelian sense. Happiness in this sense is correctly considered a problem of value because it has to do with determining what is *good* for a person, what serves to benefit her, or what is desirable for her. So called life-satisfaction theories are helpful in that they look at a person's life holistically, but the degree to which the conditions of happiness are subjective or objective is hotly debated. Such debates raise the question: how is it determined what is good for a person's overall happiness, and is this good universal to all people or is it necessarily subjective?

In one possible answer to this question, the hedonistic view discusses happiness in terms of individual pleasure, where something is good and valuable for a person if it is what brings them pleasure. On this reading, happiness is considered the ultimate good, and this happiness comes from pleasure, so a person is determined happy over the course of their life (or whatever time period is being evaluated) if their experiences of pleasure outweigh experiences of displeasure. This is not a strict formula where the quantity of pleasurable experiences is weighed over and against the quantity of unpleasant experiences, where each experience is one quantum. According to Jeremy Bentham's Hedonic Calculus, there are many aspects of pleasure that contribute to its value. Bentham's Calculus evaluates each pleasure by the same criteria in order to be as objective as possible and doesn't afford additional value to culturally preferred pleasures.<sup>1</sup> Therefore something that is historically considered intrinsically valuable such as poetry or music would not be considered more valuable than juggling just by virtue of the conventional value of poetry and music. This theory prioritizes the authority of the individual in evaluating their own happiness, and can be praised in that regard, because it doesn't subject a person to external judgements of their happiness. If a hedonist wishes to call themselves happy, so be it, the authority to do so is theirs. However, this theory could invest too much authority in the individual to determine what pleasures them without providing any guide on how to assess the value of any given pleasure *in itself*. The goodness of a thing is entirely invested in the pleasure it derives, and the happiness of a person's life is determined by the aggregation of these pleasures.

I argue it is ethically problematic to evaluate an action or desire entirely on pleasure, especially in cases where the thing, despite giving pleasure to the individual, might actually

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Haybron, "Happiness", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

cause harm in some other sense. For example, if I derive pleasure from binge eating or drinking, the hedonistic approach might not concede philosophical ground to evaluate my actions without the supplement of another framework that might argue for the intrinsic value in taking care of my health, or that might argue my actions are harmful to others. For the purpose of my argument, this purely hedonistic approach is unsatisfactory because it does not allow for an intersubjective account of happiness where individual pleasures may be contradictory or where one person's pleasure may cause the displeasure of another. In other words, the hedonistic approach does not seem to be concerned with the role of individuals in community in terms of mutual responsibility or care.

Life-satisfaction accounts of happiness are more objective and are built on a conception of human nature that is more complex, and I think accurate, than that of the hedonists. Life-satisfaction theories take into account many more factors than just pleasure in evaluating a person's happiness. One such account describes happiness in terms of the concept of eudaemonia, which is based in virtue ethics the foundational text of which is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>2</sup> While this is essentially a code of conduct for the elite males of Athens, but despite its original specific intent, it can be appropriated for a more general audience. Virtue ethics hold that the so-called 'good life' is one in which a person works to navigate between the extremes of virtue and vice, by a life of action and personal improvement. For Aristotle, the purpose or end of human nature is happiness, and this happiness is not an object or property but

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Thomas, "Virtue Ethics and Care Ethics Compare and Contrast" *Eidos* 14 (2011): 132–51. Virtue theory is a broad field of ethical enquiry but in this paper I base my arguments in Alan Thomas' reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In his essay, Thomas works to find common ground between virtue and care ethics. I am using his arguments and descriptions of these two frameworks in which he argues that they are not contradictory but rather than care is a part of virtue ethics.

rather an activity.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, happiness cannot be thought of as something that a person can one day achieve, but rather it must be a constant activity. While happiness is the ultimate good for human life, the good-life and happiness is not a monolith that looks exactly the same for each person. The *function argument* holds that something can be considered good inasmuch it helps the person improve upon or progress toward their specific function or end.<sup>4</sup> An example is that of the well-functioning organ; that a stomach is good inasmuch that it digests food and does it well. It follows that a lawyer ought to pursue and improve upon being a good lawyer, and what is good for them is that which serves them toward that end.

The happy life is the life of virtue, and virtue requires exertion, activity, but what is virtue? Virtue ethics is primarily concerned with states of character of a person, and the form of virtue ethics I am discussing “understands the virtues as forms of responsiveness to the evaluative features of individuals and situations.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the virtuosity of an action is evaluated in context and takes into account the specific positions of the individuals, so that there is no monolithic right way for each person to respond to a situation. However, there is a universal governing principle in issues of virtue. Whatever choice is made ought to be governed by reason, because the virtuous life as described by Aristotle is ruled by reason which he took to be divine. Only human beings have natural reason and this is taken to be our best attribute, so it follows that reasoning ought to be considered the special function of humans and therefore all actions can be evaluated through the lens of reason. Actions that are thoughtless and motivated by impulse demonstrate an overdevelopment or underdevelopment of one or more of the virtues in the

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 10, trans. W. D. Ross, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, 147.

person. "And what we said before' will apply now; that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest."<sup>6</sup>

### **Freedom & happiness**

In this section I will be describing, from the optimistic and pessimistic perspectives, the relationship of freedom and happiness, while giving a general account of each school of thought. In later sections I will provide a closer reading of specific philosophers, but in this section I aim to lay out a basic understanding of how the optimistic and pessimistic perspectives characterize freedom and how this lends itself to the problem of happiness. It is a common error to think of these as emotional or psychological dispositions, but in this paper I am interested in optimism and pessimism as distinct philosophies, not moods. In their simplest forms, the optimistic position on happiness is that it is attainable; the pessimistic position is that it is not<sup>7</sup>. Despite the fact that the pessimists and optimists reach nearly opposite conclusions about happiness, they would both agree that reason and freedom are co-essential; that what we call freedom is unique to self-conscious and reflective (rational) beings, and that only rational beings can be properly free. However, their strikingly different conclusions on the relationship of happiness and freedom come from different arguments and assumptions about the human condition and our relationship to the world we find ourselves situated in.

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>7</sup> This is generally true of pessimists, with the exception of Camus in his *Myth of Sisyphus* which argues that we ought to imagine Sisyphus as happy.

### **The optimist's argument**

The optimism that permeates political consciousness can be traced to Socrates' pragmatic rationalism, which imagines our questions about the nature of existence as *problems* that can be solved with the correct application of reason. Dienstag describes Socrates' argument as, "the notion that there *must* be an answer to our fundamental questions, even if we have not found it yet, and that this answer will deliver us from suffering".<sup>8</sup> According to this reading, the optimistic philosopher would say that unhappiness is caused by ignorance and error, so the way to happiness is the application of reason to our actions, in other words, learning from our mistakes and improving for the future. This reading of happiness is reflected in Aristotle's virtue ethics in which one's journey to eudaemonia is characterized by the rational person's discernment between the extremes of excess and lack of the virtues. This theory of happiness assumes the notions of free-will and reason, and that when these qualities are utilized together, the potential arises to make informed decisions in order to consciously improve oneself for the future by learning from the present and the past. According to this view, the more we exercise our freedom to develop our rational capacities, the more capable we will be to alleviate suffering.

Philosophers that follow in the pragmatic rationalist tradition assume the 'perfecting principle', which claims that by exercising our freedom and the reason that comes from it, we can and will actualize a happy society. Other philosophies that reflect this pragmatic rationalism and thus can be read as optimistic are those of many of the Enlightenment philosophers, such as Locke and Hobbes, who in their preoccupation with reason and progress argue a positive

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<sup>8</sup> Dienstag, Joshua, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 34.

teleological view of human history. This conception of history is that of gradual betterment of the self and society, and mastery over one's environment via the application of reason. The social and political problems that plague civilization can be cured by creating the correct institutions, and although there are immense obstacles to creating this good social order, they are never taken to be insurmountable. History is there to inform us on past mistakes so we make them again. Optimists view history's accumulation of knowledge as helpful and informative, and hold that improvement and progress is not a side effect but the ontological purpose of reason. If we do not use our faculties to pursue happiness and improve our situation, then what is the point of having them at all?

From this philosophical stance, the freedom of individuals and the idea of humans as rational creatures is foundational to the possibility of happiness. We are free to act as we will, but if we are ignorant this free will may lead us to error and thus unhappiness, so our will can and must be mastered by the application of reason and reflection. While of course there is variation between philosophers on this topic, it can be said that generally, the idea that we have the ability to improve our situation by means of our faculties of free will and reason underlies this longstanding tradition. This tradition is correctly described as optimistic because it expects a positive and beneficial outcome from our efforts; it holds that freedom and happiness are essentially coterminous. This idea is still absolutely present in our social psyche, seen reflected in the supposed truisms, "You can do anything you set your mind to," and, "If at first you succeed try, try again." These sayings and others like them can be found on posters and bumperstickers around the world, and they are all unified by the implicit agreement that humans



have a significant degree of control over our situation, and that the promise of happiness is ours in as much that we are free to pursue it.

### **The pessimist's argument**

On the other hand, the pessimists challenge the very idea that happiness is attainable by any means, and especially oppose the argument that freedom and happiness are coterminous. "Man cannot decide between freedom and happiness. On one hand, infinity and pain; on the other, security and mediocrity."<sup>9</sup> Further, the pessimistic view of history is not one of inevitable progress, but of chaotic irony and absurdity. They distrust the promise of happiness, the 'perfecting principle' and challenge the optimistic notions that greater freedom and rationality will result in more happiness. The pessimistic critique of pragmatic optimism is that it is baseless; that it assumes without foundation that the nature of the world is knowable and that our powers of reason and freedom guarantee at least the possibility of happiness.<sup>10</sup> Pessimists imagine reason, and therefore the freedom that enables it, as fundamentally opposed to Nature.

An important text that problematizes the relationship of freedom and Nature is Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, which imagines humankind's movement from the so-called 'State of Nature' into political society, and argues that the co-development of reason and society increased unhappiness. He writes that civilized people can only "...be happy and satisfied with themselves on the testimony of others." This is the 'enslavement' that Rousseau argues comes from self-consciousness and reason, in fact he argues that reason is actually opposed to Nature.

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<sup>9</sup> Emil Cioran, *Tears and Saints*, (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 112.

<sup>10</sup> find citation in Dienstag

Ironically, we can never get back to the State of Nature, so the original ‘freedom’ of the pre-societal human is lost to us, and replaced with socially constructed values that, Rousseau argues, actually serve to enslave us under the guise of freedom. In response to Rousseau’s claim that we are in fact enslaved by societal constructions of freedom and happiness, Dienstag writes, “To act like human beings... we would have to free ourselves from the belief that happiness and freedom are themselves coterminous,” reflecting Rousseau’s idea that human nature and reason are at ontological odds <sup>11</sup>. While neither the optimist or the pessimist would argue that freedom isn't real, they would differ in regards to the limits and implications of freedom, especially when it comes to problems of political society. Inasmuch that political philosophy is assumed to be the exploration of necessary conditions to allow freedom and happiness to prosper in society, the pessimist would argue that the political philosopher is misdirected. Instead, the political philosopher should be looking at the contradictory relationship of freedom as it relates to reason and the pursuit of happiness, and work within the boundaries that such a relationship dictates.

Pessimists argue that we have been misled and deceived by the stubborn momentum of a historical optimism that tells us our goal of making sense of the world is achievable, and that unhappiness comes from our failures to do so. The promise of optimism is that our suffering is *unnecessary*, and that with prolonged effort we can overcome it. The optimistic conception of the world is that it is somehow made for us or at least that it is supposed to be harmonious with our existence, and that all we need to do is try our best and think really hard, and we will eventually overcome this obstacle. The pessimist argues that this is an illusion; that suffering is a *necessary* part of our existence. It is not that we have a poor outlook on life or lack the necessary skills to

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<sup>11</sup> Joshua Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 71.

be happy, it is that there is an “ontological misalignment between human beings and the world they inhabit”.<sup>12</sup> On this pessimistic reading of the human condition, the more free we are to try pursuing our goals and answering our impossible questions, the more unhappy we become, because the objects of our desire are incompatible with the nature of the world.

For this reason, the pessimistic perspective holds that life is absurd, and that this absurdity is best understood as the aforementioned insurmountable conflict between the objects of our desires and our ability to achieve them. It is the fundamental paradox that arises from our innate and insatiable search for meaning and happiness in a world that does not provide the necessary conditions for it. Camus writes that happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. The universe, or at least our relationship to it, is described as fundamentally opposed to human happiness. As humans we pine after happiness by means of understanding, permanence, immortality, among other transcendent impossibilities and perfections. There will always be disagreement over whether these transcendent objects of our desire actually exist, but regardless of whether they exist elsewhere in the Platonic realm of Forms or just in our imaginations, our plight remains the same: we will never understand everything, nothing lasts forever, and eventually we will die. In as much that we invest what we call ‘happiness’ into these transcendental qualities, any claim of happiness will be false. Dienstag writes, “since the reality of temporal existence is transience, decay, and death, happiness is found in illusion.”<sup>13</sup> Unhappiness comes from disillusionment or disappointment with the experience that we do not exist in a world that is meant to be understood or to provide our desires.

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<sup>12</sup> Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, 27.

### **Summary of freedom & happiness**

I acknowledge that there have been many different uses of the terms ‘freedom’ and ‘reason’ and I wish to clarify what I mean when I use them in different contexts. Both pessimism and optimism agree that freedom is the necessary condition of rational thought, and this capacity of reason includes the ability to think of one’s self as an individual existing in space and time. Freedom in neither case is meant as simple autonomy of movement, which is shared with human by many animals, but is taken to be a quality unique to humans that goes hand-in-hand with the rational capacity of an individual to think reflexively and make decisions based on critical judgements. Broadly, from the pessimistic view, freedom and rationality necessitate suffering, where as for the optimist, freedom and rationality can be used to alleviate suffering.

Happiness, from the optimistic point of view, can be thought of as the teleological end of freedom; they are imagined to be coterminous. Happiness in this case is attainable and can be thought of in terms of the ‘perfecting principle’ and pragmatic rationalism, which hold that suffering can be ultimately relieved by the practical application of reason in our individual lives and societies at large. This view where suffering is a problem that is ultimately solvable is grounded in the optimistic claim that the nature of existence and our questions about it are discoverable by reason alone. On the other hand, pessimists have an opposite conception of the world and our relationship to it as contrary and absurd, and in which suffering is necessary and happiness is illusory. Because human existence is characterized by constant change, death, and suffering, any instance of what we think of as happiness is unsatisfying in light of these facts and is ultimately unsustainable. Pessimism holds that the “absurdity of existence is illustrated by the

persistent mismatch between human purposes and the means available to achieve them: or again, between our happiness and our capacity to encounter or sustain it.”<sup>14</sup>

Much of the disagreement and confusion between the optimist and the pessimist comes from the usage of vague and ambiguous terms. Happiness for the optimist is possible because the optimist holds that we have everything at least potentially within our grasp to achieve our goals and actualize our desires. The scale, breadth, and necessary conditions of this happiness varies, namely the degree to which and how others might affect our happiness and the degree to which individuals are able to access what they need to actualize their happiness. While this perspective does not deny the reality of extenuating circumstances, tragedy, and disability, ultimately the optimist holds that happiness is possible. The pessimist’s argument against happiness is specifically the optimistic conception of happiness. That pessimism opposes happiness does not mean that everyone ought to be miserable but rather means that pessimism rejects the idea of happiness bolstered by the optimistic view of history and the human condition. The reason people are unhappy according to the pessimist is that humans are unable to reconcile their goals and expectations with the limitations of their natural faculties and pursuits, including freedom and reason.

### **Rousseau & Locke on natural freedom and reason**

Thus far, I acknowledge that my explanations of pessimism and optimism and their respective arguments on freedom, reason, and happiness have been generalized, so in this section I will go more in depth by utilizing two specific philosopher’s arguments. Here I put John Locke and Jean

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<sup>14</sup> Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, 33.

Jaques Rousseau into conversation with each other, focusing on their descriptions of the natural human condition and prescriptions for civil society. Dienstag aligns Rousseau with the pessimistic tradition because of his contention that reasoning is against nature.<sup>15</sup> Locke can be characterized as more optimistic because of his descriptions of human nature as self-evident and for his idealism about reason and justice. In the section that follows I use the second of Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* on the original extent and end of civil government, and Rousseau's *Social Contract*, both of which are concerned with freedom and reason as foundational aspects of human nature, but the definitions and implications of these for civil society and problems of equality are very different. The purpose of this section is twofold: first, to illustrate how the same terms can be utilized with different meanings to lead to nearly opposite conceptions of justice and the human condition in general; and second, to illustrate the problem of human unfreedom and unhappiness as conceived by two opposed philosophers and connect these to today.

Locke and Rousseau are concerned with human nature and how our natural capacities determine the boundaries of action, although they differ on their arguments about the limitations of these capacities, namely the limits of freedom. While these two philosophers agree that humans are *fundamentally* free, Rousseau complicates this freedom by pointing out that, "Man is born free, and yet we see him everywhere in chains."<sup>16</sup> Locke on the other hand argues that one's natural liberty of cannot be taken away from them except by explicit consent. The main difference between Rousseau's and Locke's idea of freedom is in its limitations and the degree to which, if at all, anyone else can diminish or constrain it. Rousseau is responding to and arguing

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<sup>15</sup>Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, "The Social Contract", in *Social and Political Philosophy*, edited by John Somerville and Ronald E. Santoni, (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), 203-238 (203).

against Locke and other thinkers like him that use their philosophies to justify oppression, violence, and slavery. Locke writes:

“Men being... by nature all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent, which is done by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any that are not of it.”<sup>17</sup>

If Locke is right, that no person can have their liberty diminished except by their consent, the direct implication is that political subjugation is justified, and the more subtle but intentional argument is that people who are not considered people do not have to consent to being subjugated. The era when Locke was writing was at the height of the slave trade and he and other philosophers were working off of racilogies that categorized non-white people as subhuman and thus they did not possess the natural human capacities and rights afforded to ‘real’ humans. Sub-humans do not have the natural capacity of freedom or reason to have the basic right of self-preservation. Further, Locke’s argument rests on the consent of the governed, which sounds good but it implies that people are well informed about the rules and duties of whatever society they’re entering and that more importantly, there is no abuse of power on the side of the governing party.

While Rousseau agrees that humans are fundamentally free, he distinguishes between natural and political liberty, where the former is indispensable and the later can be revoked or limited either by one’s consent or by force. This renunciation of liberty by force is condemned by Rousseau and he argues that any perceived consent given by one to a stronger other is not actually consent, and is thus an invalid and unjust practice. This principle is the grounds on which Rousseau condemns slavery and political subjugation. He believes, like Locke, that it is

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<sup>17</sup> John Locke, “An Essay Concerning the Original Extent and End of Civil Government”, in *Social and Political Philosophy*, edited by John Somerville and Ronald E. Santoni, (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), 169-204 (178).

self-evident by natural reason that a fundamental right of a person is to protect their life; it is the most precious and basic property they have, although it is Locke and not Rousseau that describes one's body and life and their 'property'. They differ in that Rousseau sympathizes with the person who 'consents' to be governed in order to protect their lives and does not call this subjugation true consent but rather coercion and an abuse of power.

“To renounce our liberty is to renounce our quality of man, and with it all the rights and duties of humanity. No adequate compensation can possibly be made for a sacrifice so complete. Such a renunciation is incompatible with the nature of man; whose actions, when once he is deprived of his free will, must be destitute of all morality.”<sup>18</sup>

Rousseau argues that a person would not willingly give up their liberty as it would deny their own humanity. The inequality that follows from this subjugation is therefore not natural but artificial and political, and cannot be justified as it violates the fundamental human right of liberty.

Both of their theories rely on a characterization of what is called “The State of Nature” which is imagined to be what human experience was like before the move into civil society. Locke characterizes this as an exceedingly violent and miserable condition, and argues that because people have no way to protect their lives and property, their lives are short and full of injustice. Property and the protection of it is fundamental for Locke's idea of happiness: how can one be happy if they cannot protect their lives and are always having their things stolen from them? Further, the state of nature for Locke has no real justice because there is no governing principle of fairness, and he calls this the “strange doctrine” which grants executive power to all, meaning that each person is judge and executioner of whomever they perceive has wronged

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<sup>18</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 209.



them.<sup>19</sup> Locke believes that because of our own self-interest and unbridled passions, people would inevitably punish too harshly and that a vicious cycle of punishment and retribution would follow. His proposed remedy to this chaotic violence is civil government, which according to him would be based on the freely given consent of a rational and equal body of people. To Locke, the sacrifice of a small amount of liberty in order to be part of a society that is just and that affords the protection of property to its citizens is well worth the cost.

On the other hand, Rousseau argues that in civil society we are less free than in nature, and that it is under a grand scheme of deceit and abuse of power that people give up this fundamental right believing that they are actually protecting it. The ‘savage’ or unincorporated person for Rousseau has no cares and wants for nothing. They are completely free and have no concern for anything but themselves, and this is why they are happy. He argues that it is the phenomena of self-consciousness and comparison with others, and the subsequent desire for esteemed qualities and properties that gradually diminish one’s freedom and happiness. They develop social bonds and grow accustomed to having things that they did not have before, such as dwellings and tools, so that “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.”<sup>20</sup> Here, we find a completely different idea of happiness that is actually coterminous with a sort of freedom, but this is because the pre-societal person has a different type of freedom. Because freedom in the strictly political sense can only be possessed by a self-conscious and reflexively thinking being, the freedom Rousseau argues the pre-societal person possesses is the

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<sup>19</sup> John Locke, “An Essay Concerning the Original Extent and End of Civil Government”.

<sup>20</sup> Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 174.

freedom from the judgement and comparison of others, the trap of social esteem and the desire to acquire and protect property. She is happy before society because she has all that she needs and is not conscious of herself in the way we think about it today. When living entirely independent and free from reflexive thought, she does not have to worry about being well-liked, productive, or beautiful, she simply wants “to live and to remain idle.” When people are together, they become aware of themselves and their own properties, and lack thereof, for the first time as they are seen by an other; in other words, it is not until humans start comparing and judging themselves according to others that we become self-conscious and unhappy.

According to Locke the state of nature was an unhappy and violent condition where people’s basic right to protect their life and property were not respected and where there was no justice. On the other hand, Rousseau argues that in the state of nature people were actually happier, but this is a qualified claim that is rooted in a distinction between two types of freedom. Remember that for both philosophers, freedom is a necessary condition of happiness. While Rousseau argues that the animal freedom and happiness of nature was less complicated and more real, and good in that respect, he acknowledges that a return is impossible and ultimately argues for the benefits of civil society, saying that while the person loses the original happiness found in nature, they gain the ability to develop and exercise their faculties, which for him is a natural good. Locke argues that a person is happier in civil society because their lives and property are protected. Both accounts have their merits and fit into a ‘well-being’ concept of happiness, in which the happy person is she who in addition to having her basic needs met, enjoys the freedom and independence to develop her capacities and flourish.

Rousseau and Locke would agree that a person's potential for happiness is significantly inhibited in a political environment in which their freedom is inhibited unnecessarily, because they both argue that certain aspects of freedom must be given up in order for society to work. The freedom to be one's own judge in all matters is given up and authority is invested in a governing body of common laws that are intended to protect the natural equality of everyone. They vary on what this equality exactly means, but both can be described as having a respect for life qua life, and they argue that society and its laws ought to acknowledge and protect this basic value of life and allow individuals the freedom to pursue happiness for themselves, given that their pursuit does not challenge the laws or inhibit another's freedom. Locke's argument on the consent of the governed and human respect is ironic at best considering that they were used to bolster the cruel institution of slavery and the subjugation of women, but the principle that the government shouldn't take advantage of its subject is present. I hold that Rousseau's argument is the stronger because he addresses slavery directly, and shows how Locke's argument can be used to justify such institutions that invalidate the humanity and consent of others.

They both agree that we are born free and hence have certain rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness so what does this mean of our duties to others? Further, given we are all born free, what ought one do when we see someone else in slavery, or in the form of non-liberty that Rousseau describes, where a person is forced into subjugation either by birth or by necessity for self-preservation? Specifically, what do we do in our society that is founded on the robbery of native lands, the murder and enslavement of african and indigenous peoples, and that continues to exacerbate states of unequal rights and liberties? According to Rousseau, our political society is already dead because it controls those who have not consented to be ruled, who were born into

subjugation and continue to be forced to give up liberties for survival. I do not know how to solve political unfreedom and can not even begin to imagine how to address such a massive topic.

They both imagine a sort of crisis-point in the State of Nature where the strength of the individual is an insufficient mean to ensure their survival so people aggregate for mutual protection. They give up their native or pre-societal liberty for conventional or political liberty. However, what are we to do when the crisis point is not caused by Nature, when our biggest threat to survival is ourselves? Or more rightly, when the biggest threat to our survival is our masters, who enjoy greater rights than us, despite portending to act in our interests. What is the purpose of illustrating these two accounts? I hope to connect today's problems caused by false optimism with the political theory of Locke and Rousseau, especially as it relates to the concepts of freedom and reason, as they lead to or do not lead to happiness. I wish to illustrate how they conceive concern for others as secondary and conventional, not as essential to our human nature. They argue we come together by necessity for survival and that then we care about the well-being of others as it relates to our well being, which this is reflected in virtue ethics, where Aristotle writes how concerning oneself with the betterment of others helps themselves politically. We must give up some natural liberty for conventional liberty, for the sake of ourselves and others, and this collective responsibility is for the sake of protecting property, oneself, and the whole by default. Locke argues that conventional liberty is much better than the animal freedom of the state of nature, and for Rousseau this negotiation of freedom is sticky but ultimately could work out for the best of the whole, but despite this concession, Rousseau is not adamantly faithful in societies ability to enable happiness on an existential sense. Rousseau was

nostalgic for the experience of timeless freedom of the pre-societal person, and is sympathetic with the logic behind removing oneself from society.

What is happiness then? They both seem to imagine happiness in the well-being sense, where one's life is protected from violence, their freedom is protected from tyranny, and they have at least subsistence to survive. The happiness that comes from community, learning, creativity seem secondary, and to Rousseau it seems that happiness derived from within social complex is at least tainted. We cannot get back to the state of nature so it is not relevant for us here. We are in society and it is disingenuous to imagine it for us now. What is important in their formulations of the natural condition of humankind and development of society is their arguments about human nature and the conventional morality that follows.

### **The problem of time**

One critical aspect of the debate between optimism and pessimism on happiness that I have thus far overlooked is the problem of time. While I briefly mentioned the optimistic view of human history as linear and progressive and contrasted it with the pessimistic view of history as ironic, I have intentionally bracketed this subject until now, because I believe it is important enough to deserve its own separate section. Time for the pessimist is important because of its inextricable relationship to consciousness and how time-consciousness shapes and determines the conditions of human life. In this section I elaborate the pessimistic arguments about time and how time-consciousness is a root of human suffering, and how this time-consciousness presents itself in history. Time-consciousness to the pessimist is a root of suffering because it is what imbues in humans the capacity of temporal comparison. In other words, time-consciousness allows me to

reflect on yesterday and compare it today, and evaluate which was better. It follows that we are imbued with an idea of perfectibility, because in as much that betterment is always possible, the goal is impossible. The awareness of time and the fundamentally limited nature of our existence is one of the distinguishing capacities of humans that sets our special condition apart from other animals. So what is the relationship of reason to time-consciousness? Reason is basically the ability to reflect on and qualitatively compare different conditions over time, in other words, reflexive self-consciousness, which *is* time-consciousness. Just as time- and self-consciousness necessitates the awareness of death, reason necessitates and defines time-consciousness. They are all inextricable from each other, just as our experience of life is inextricable from our living. We must be wary of our own abilities and recognize that reason is not de-facto good, but like any tool can be used for construction or destruction.

It is through our rational capacity that humans have that ability of self-reflection and thus comparison, and through our agency that we have the ability to act according to the evaluations we make. A central problem tackled by pessimists is the constant confrontation with the absurdity of life, and it is the awareness of our temporal existence that gives us this idea of absurdity.

Absurdity in the context of time-consciousness is a sense of unreality of human life and its futility. Central to the nature of time is its state of perpetual change. Time is always moving forward, the present always becoming past, nothing is permanent or constant but change itself. Since our suffering comes from the impermanence of all that we care about and this impermanence is essential to reality, the conclusion is that human striving is futile. The more we care and try to hold onto anything or anyone, the more pain we will feel when it inevitably

changes or dies. We will never achieve the security in permanence that we seek, and to some this is defeating. However, resignation and nihilism are not the most common conclusion of pessimists, and is not the conclusion I agree with. To acknowledge that our lives are always on the way to death does not mean that they are meaningless, but is simply to set out the parameters of possibility for our existence.

The absurdity of existence resides in the ironic mismatch between our desires and the means to satisfy them found in ourselves and in the world. Not just the satisfaction of basic cravings or lust, pessimists are concerned with existential desires, for example, the desire to avoid death, to establish legacy and in a way seeking immortality, and the need to feel fulfilled and safe. Unpredictable, constant, and impersonal change is the fundamental attribute of the silent universe in which we find ourselves.<sup>21</sup> Awareness that our lives are limited means that with aware of our inevitable deaths, and with that awareness the immense pressure to make something of our lives. “To make sense of our situation, we adopt a destiny, a *telos* located in the future that enables us to explain our suffering by reference to a supposed historical trajectory.”<sup>22</sup> This constructed *telos* is imagined in countless iterations but they are all optimistic qua the fact that time is imagined as conterminous with human happiness. So if all this is true, can we be happy? Pessimism answers no, so the question must be asked, what’s the point?

### **Is life worth living?**

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<sup>21</sup> I do not claim that a universe of change is in any way a uniquely pessimistic claim. This idea is ancient and has myriad instantiations throughout human history, from buddhism to ancient greek culture. What is unique to the pessimistic interpretation of an ever-changing universe is the claim that satisfying answers cannot be found or derived from our reasoning about the nature of the world.

<sup>22</sup> Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 134.

Given this fraught view of the human condition, it would seem that life is not worth living, because happiness is impossible. One fundamental problem in pessimism, and philosophy in general, is whether suicide is justified given that there is no meaning to be found in the world. However, despite it being a technically positive action in attempt to alleviate the essential suffering of our condition, pessimists do not recommend suicide as a solution to the problem, although some do come close. The problem of suicide and the value of life is answered very differently depending on the philosopher you read. In as much that unhappiness comes from the very nature of human existence, suffering is a necessary fact of life and is unavoidable except by death, so the problem of suicide is one that the pessimists take very seriously. Although no pessimists explicitly endorse suicide as the best response to life, most are empathetic to the desire to escape. In this section I explore different arguments on the value of life and the issue of suicide in order to see if life, from the pessimist's point of view, is worth living, and if so under what conditions.

I am interested in finding a pessimistic response to life that embraces rather than rejects the absurd messiness of a life of relentless change, that is not nihilistic or misanthropic, and that does not permit suicide by consequence of its principles. This is not to say that I condemn or judge people who have chosen suicide as an option as irrational or immoral response to an absurd existence.<sup>23</sup> Rather, by exploring arguments given by the pessimist philosopher Giacomo Leopardi who rejects suicide, I illustrate that the question of suicide can not be answered by a purely rational framework. In addition I challenge Rousseau's conclusion that the best way to at

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<sup>23</sup> I am not interested in evaluating particular cases of suicide in this paper or condemning the act as morally reprehensible, as it is not the point and because I have no right to do so. Rather, the discussion of suicide in this paper is to demonstrate a philosophical inquiry about the value of life from the pessimistic perspective. The point is not to argue whether suicide is right or wrong, but rather to use the example to illustrate underlying arguments about human nature and the value of life.



least partially ameliorate the burden of an absurd and time-bound existence is to withdraw into oneself. I argue that he does not give a satisfactory account of human existence or the means by which to evaluate it.

Pessimistic descriptions of life hold that it is necessarily full of suffering and that lasting happiness is impossible. Giacomo Leopardi agrees and admits that there is logical ground to justify suicide, but describes this conclusion as being based on faulty premises. The person who wants to kill themselves according to Leopardi has misunderstood the proper response to life.

“The worst sort of unhappiness is produced by a lack of recognition of the limits to happiness. The yearning for suicide is the product of misplaced demands on life that life cannot respond to. ‘Ordinary’ suffering, on the other hand, is hearable. Each of us may even find some elements of life... ‘not unworthy of some care.’ We persevere in life ‘in spite of reason’ and not for grand causes but for trivial ones... they are enough.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite suicide being the logical answer to life for many pessimists, they still work against this reason, and claim that an action against life motivated by our disappointment in misplaced expectations acknowledges that the pursuit of happiness is one that can be won. To give in to the unhappiness caused by the false promise of happiness is to be defeated by the very thing acknowledged to be unreal, and thus not a compelling reason. Further, the reasons for wanting to die are significantly reduced once a person frees herself from the illusion of optimism and a cold rationality that would lead her to reject life as a whole. This freedom is realized by lowering one’s expectations of themselves and realizing the impossibility of perfection. If we give more power to the senses and keep rationality in check, small joys become more easily perceived and all the more enjoyable. Such a position grounds the individual in the present and helps them to

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<sup>24</sup> Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 79. This excerpt is Dienstag’s interpretation of Giacomo Leopardi’s thoughts on suicide from his *Operette Morali* or *Moral Essays* (1827).

appreciate the novelty of life as it comes, from a sensory and emotional standpoint where reason does not have ultimate authority. This stance would go against the nature of reason according to Aristotle, who argued that reason ought to be the governing principle of all action and that the happiest life was guided ultimately by reason, although Aristotle would not argue for suicide.

In response to a futile pursuit of happiness Rousseau suggests withdrawing from society because artificial goals and human purposes according to society only add unnecessary suffering to the existent necessary suffering of life. According to Dienstag, Rousseau's pessimism is based in the idea that unfreedom comes from living outside of oneself, referring to how we bound to the esteem of others and to the artificial goods we've made for ourselves. Especially taken by a community of mountaineers that he describes in the *Letter to M. D'Albert* (1758), Rousseau says they are conscious enough to be free and isolated enough to remain happy.<sup>25</sup> However, this course of action is not accessible or feasible for most people and I want to resist such misanthropy, although I have had the fantasy of living in the woods surrounded by books and very few people. Such a response to life denies the importance of social interaction and living in community, which I believe is a misreading of human nature.

According to Rousseau and other misanthropic pessimists like Schopenhauer, the more you care about someone or something, the more the pain will be when the relationship inevitably ends, for whatever reason it ends. Certainly this is true: the more I care about something, the more it hurts to lose it. But does this mean that I should never care about anything, or in a less absolute iteration of the same idea, that I should keep my self from caring as much as I feel compelled to simply because I am always anticipating the painful end? This is the conclusion

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<sup>25</sup> Dienstag, *Pessimism*.

some may make, but I argue that the response of rejecting society for the sake of self-protection goes against some basic ideas of pessimism. If I know that something good will necessarily not last forever, why should I let myself be destroyed by this basic fact? If the pessimist has already acknowledged that unhappiness in some form or another is inevitable due to the transitory nature of existence, but that some enjoyment, albeit fleeting, is still possible, then why would the pessimist reject *only* the joy and pain found in relationships and society but not other fleeting joys such as good food or wine? Certainly the joy found in eating a good chocolate cake is lesser than the fulfillment one might feel in a loving relationship, just as the sorrow that comes after the cake is gone is lesser than the pain felt when the relationship is through. I'm sure someone could make the argument that a life a little joys and sorrows is better than the life of great joy and great sorrow, but this is not the stance I take, especially when a life of little joys and sorrows indicates a life alone. In addition, it seems to me that deciding a course of action based on the degree of joy and pain is of minute importance when the pessimist has already acknowledged that they are going to feel pain anyway.

Leopardi argues that life is worth living and that, in fact, with a pessimistic point of view it can be more enjoyable. By freeing ourselves of the illusion of optimism and unrealistic expectations, he argues that the pessimist can experience life invigorated by the freedom of existing entirely in the present and allowing the novelty that is so often overlooked to be enjoyed. In addition to a new sort of freedom by living in the present, a pessimistic view provides a sense of humor about life. This is an interesting argument because my knee jerk reaction is to say that laughing at the suffering and absurdity of life is disingenuous and even cruel. How could I tell someone in pain to laugh at themselves? By embracing the triviality of

life and learning to laugh not just at our pleasure but also pain, we gain a kind of freedom in embracing the absurd rather than running from it as it the case with Rousseau<sup>26</sup>, but I think there are many cases in which laughter is not the appropriate response to our condition. Despite the fact that pain is inevitable, when we consider the case of unexpectedly losing a loved one, it seems cruel to laugh or find humor in the irony of such a random incident. The response of laughter in cases of unforeseen loss seems to imply that the very act caring was foolish; that to care for someone is illogical or stupid to begin with.

While the conclusion that caring for other is not worth the cost is not Leopardi's argument, it seems to be what Rousseau argues in his ideation of isolation or limited social interaction. I think this stance denies the very real presence and importance of care, and rejects it outright as an unnecessary cause of pain. While we could reject society and live as misanthropes, according to Rousseau, despite this effort there is still nothing we can do to *totally* free ourselves from the necessary conditions of human life. On this reading, there are moments of happiness on a background of unhappiness. Instances of happiness are more like blips on a radar that burst through the blackness with a brilliant spontaneity, and then are gone, sucked into the past and digested by a perpetually dissatisfied reasoning that can not help but note how this instance could have been improved. Now this instance of happiness has lost its significance in itself and has become a point of reference for reason to use to measure toward an infinitely distant perfect Happiness. Rousseau's argument that the default condition of life is either boredom or pain, it seems that to ultimately imply that suicide is the only possible way to absolutely free from pain.

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<sup>26</sup> Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 79-81.

Rousseau's argument does not *explicitly* justify suicide but it does not providing a satisfying defense of life.

## **Rebellion**

I argue that life is worth living, even if it is unhappy. In this section I explore what to do with that life and in what ways it is valuable. Some pessimists such as Rousseau are misanthropic and endorse withdrawal from society and politics altogether as they are considered futile and damaging to the individual. This is not an acceptable avenue of action, especially in our current position where we are facing more pressing problems than ever, including but not limited to climate destruction, economic and political instability, global food insecurity and mass violence. As 'nice' and ideal as it would be, it is not an option to retreat to the woods and read books all day, at least for me. This paper has largely been motivated by my personal desire to find a pessimistic stance that describes the human condition truthfully without being immobilizing. It is unhelpful and dangerous to show how the world is absurd and tragic, how the human condition is fraught with contradiction and suffering, and then not give any follow up justification for why life is still worth living. If we can not justify why life is intrinsically good, we conversely can not condemn murder and violence. I want to find an active and properly pessimistic approach that defends life and empowers freedom while embracing absurdity.

One such an example is portrayed in Camus' *The Rebel*<sup>27</sup>, which rejects misanthropy and violence all the while embracing the contrary essence of the human condition. Pessimism certainly is personal inasmuch that it has to do with how an individual can best cope with their

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<sup>27</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Many in Revolt*, New York: Borzoi Books, 1956.

existence but that doesn't mean that pessimists exist in a vacuum or that someone with pessimistic values cannot be a positive actor in society. While pessimism argues against a positivist historical view and the idea that someone can effect good *lasting* change, pessimistic thinkers need not fall into nihilism and give up on the project of society entirely. This may seem like a contradiction but it isn't; Camus acknowledges that good action ultimately will not change much on a grand or lasting scale, or alleviate the conditions of human existence that necessitate suffering, but this is not to fall into nihilism. The human condition is absurd and meaningless, but for Camus this meaningless is qualified and is not justification for carelessness or suicide.

“The final conclusion of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe.... But it is obvious that absurdism hereby admits that human life is the only necessary good since it is precisely life that makes this encounter possible.”<sup>28</sup>

Suicide for Camus is not so much a judgement about the value of life but rather an avoidance of the problem altogether. “It is not the *wrong* answer to the crisis of meaninglessness; rather, it is not answer at all.”<sup>29</sup> Meaning is created by us but Camus asserts that life is *the* essential good because all the meaning that is created is dependent on the fact of our existence and all the faculties that come from it. To deny the intrinsic value of life would mean killing is justified. Affirming the value of life is necessary in order to make any other value claim; life is the means by which any thinking is made possible. The moral life and happiness is meaningless if we affirm the value of life first.

Actions and ideologies can and must be morally evaluated, because giving up morality permits the horrors of genocide and oppression, which Camus was all too familiar with given

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<sup>28</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 131.

that he is writing from the context of Nazi occupied Paris during and after the second World War. He argues that ideology is dangerous and detrimental to freedom and happiness because ideologies tell individuals what to think and do uncritically. Ultimately Camus endorses a politically active life in which the individual refuses, on logical and moral grounds, to align themselves with a political party or religion. She must be a humanist who rejects violence and who exists presently and lives in each situation as it arises. This person is Camus' rebel: she who cares for and protects human life, and who wants to do good in spite of the fact that existence is absurd and essentially meaningless. She distrusts and refuses to accept external forces that harm human life, especially by harm inflicted upon the element of freedom. Camus has in mind political ideologies, narratives of hope, and institutions that in pursuit of achieving absolute justice, freedom, etc., actually inhibit and make them worse.<sup>30</sup>

I agree with Camus' arguments on rebellion but I have a lot of trouble trying to imagine what such a rebellion that rejects violence would look like, if this implies a sort of personal and ideological rebellion, or a political rebellion, or necessarily both. Camus would likely answer that I ought not look too far into the future if at all in deciding what to do and how to live. The future is immanent and out of our control, but we have a pretty good idea of what can happen and what is likely, for example, if climate change continues to go unchecked. Camus was writing about rebellion as it consists from the context of a world-war, but his arguments are still appropriate today. That is to say I have no idea what such a rebellion would look like today, and I recognize that there are endless routes of inquiry through which this whole project can be discussed. Yet, the idea of resisting ideological unfreedom as it is delivered in the forms of

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<sup>30</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, 292-293.

dogmatism, whether political, religious, or social, is more relevant than ever. I argue in support of Camus' claim that a pessimistic outlook ought to encourage political participation, and claim that establishes human nature as social, capable of reason, and empathetic. We do care about each other and we ought to be concerned with creating political, social, and economic structures that seek to affirm the humanity and happiness of others, for their sake. We do have a responsibility to others, although I do not know the scope of this responsibility and do not feel comfortable arguing for or against a geographic, political, or relational boundary that should limit the breadth of our care.

I endorse an idea of happiness that confirms the importance of the "good-life" and the idea of freedom to flourish; that one's freedom and happiness can not impinge on another. That community, relationships, recognition and feeling useful and cared for is important. Despite this validation being conventional it is real and important. We can not pretend that being isolated, hated or misrepresented is not harmful. Whether or not this value of our life and the lives of others is conventional or transcendent is not as relevant an inquiry to make as the inquiry into what the implications are of an ethic that does not adamantly defend the value of life in itself. Pain for pain's sake and the striping of freedom of any kind is wrong and harmful. Discomfort can be helpful if it is to show someone truth or if it leads them to a wider set of possibilities of happiness rather than constrains it. The intrinsic value of life is difficult to argue for logically with out making metaphysical claims about value that suggests a kind of divine or transcendent intelligent goodness in the universe, but nonetheless I affirm that there is value in human life qua human life. This is not to affirm that all that comes from human life and actions are good because



evaluating the means and the ends of actions are related but not identical. For any moral evaluation to have a foot to stand on, we must affirm that our lives are intrinsically valuable.

Once it is affirmed that life is good in itself, we can start to explore what is to be done with that life. I argue that because life is the ultimate good, it must be confirmed that *all* life is good. The implications of such an argument subvert the values of nationalism and really any ideology that claims the metaphysical superiority of any person or group. When I imagine the life of a stranger just as valuable as my life, I am filled with gratitude for the opportunity to exist, and even more so am filled with a compulsion toward empathy and a desire to reflect the value of that stranger's life to them.

### **Conclusion**

I hope to have established a reading of human nature that is realistic, not defeating or optimistic, but that acknowledges our limited abilities and that rejects the idea of perfection. Humans are empathetic and do care for each other but this empathy is limited by custom, geography, and ignorance. Humans are really gifted in ignoring the facts of other people's suffering especially when full acknowledgment of them highlights our own complicity in their pain. It is impossible to perfect the problems we have caused, but in embracing rather than blindly ignoring our nature to ignore our nature, we have a better chance of helping other people. I have not been looking for an innate, natural or metaphysical justification or compelling reason why we ought to act in the interest of others, but rather a human answer to a human problem.

This is huge task and I understand that my small contribution is just that. I am not claiming to have found a solution but I do want to suggest what I find to be a better approach to

the problem. If we want to do anything about human unhappiness, we have to understand the conditions and roots of our unhappiness, which is our very desire for happiness. If that sounds absurd, good. Humans exist in absurdity and contradiction, so it doesn't seem like a huge problem to have an absurd justification for living. It is a circular argument to say that life is good because to contradict it would mean that there is no such thing as goodness. If it is understood that there are no absolute truths or values in the Platonic formal sense, wouldn't that make value claims false? I say no, because such a dependency on absolute truths in the metaphysical sense is simply not necessary to make claims of value. We are not transcendent, infinite or absolute creatures, so it seems ridiculous to hold ourselves to ideals of permanence and perfection.

The impulse to deny responsibility is especially true for the more complex cases that implicate ourselves as partially capable of alleviating the problems that we are likely at least partially responsible for. The convention of social boundaries, imagined limitation of agency, imagined narratives of responsibility, while beneficial to those in the in-group are doubly depraving for those on the out-group. It seems self-evident that as humans we seek to act in our best interests but determining who is included in that "we" and what is actually in our best interest is not self-evident. It is extremely subjective on the level of the personal and extremely arbitrary and conventional on the level of the political and global. We are often ignorant, and when educated we are often misinformed or outright deceived, and this ignorance does often lead to actions with good intentions that have bad consequences. Or, we act with our good intentions and are blind to or kept from seeing the consequences by manipulation of the social order. In a world where people are more than ever connected by intractable and seemingly necessary political and economic associations, where each person is tied up in problematic and harmful

relationships, whether or not of our conscious choosing, how can an individual seek to effect positive change? How can I do anything? It is unlikely if not impossible to entirely eradicate these problems, but they can be addressed in such a way to minimize their negative and unjust effects. Even then, millions will continue to suffer, die, and be miserable for many more reasons than disillusionment. Despite our best efforts, it is likely that things will get worse.

This is not meant to be comforting. In fact, it is meant to be troubling and deeply discomfoting. I do not mean to cause discomfort for discomfort's sake, but for the sake of understanding, in general but specifically understanding about the reality of the human condition, which when properly confronted is the root of this discomfort. Too long have we pretended that our actions do not have consequences and too long have we not cared to learn. It might be too late, but I wish to see the extinction of humanity, but more presently, the insanely unjust suffering of the global poor and underprivileged, because the materially privileged of the world are 'happy' to believe a lie that shirks responsibility for the consequences of our comfort. Perhaps the original problem of this essay "human unhappiness" was the wrong one to explore. The unhappiness and dissatisfaction incurred on the globally privileged that comes from disillusionment about our optimistic values and culture seems less important than the very real material suffering of poverty, sickness, and loneliness.

Is it wrong to say these things without a firm prescription on what to do about it? Perhaps. I intend my description of the human condition or suffering to be gratuitous, exploitative or cruel. I do not know the mind of God or if such an entity exists, so I can not make a metaphysical claim about if we are *meant* to be happy but I think that means our happiness is worthless. If there is no eternal meaning but that rather we create meaning, does that necessarily

lead to the conclusion that all conventional meaning is meaningless, even evil? I think not.

Instead, embracing the fact that meaning is created by us restores and empowers our search for morality because rather than conjecturing about some external and essentially unreachable perfect form of Happiness, Goodness, Justice, etc., we have the freedom and rational capacity to make it what we want. This is a messy process that is fraught with human error, but that is the best we can hope for. This is the pessimistic principle I argue: we must acknowledge and give ourselves permission to exist within our natural limitations and give up the project of perfection, all the while refusing to appeal to these limits to justify cases of carelessness, quietism, or suicide.

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