

What Pessimism Is

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Abstract: On the standing view, pessimism is a philosophically intractable topic. Against the standing view, I hold that pessimism is a *stance*, or compound of attitudes, commitments and intentions. This stance is marked by certain beliefs—first and foremost, that the *bad prevails over the good*—which are subject to an important qualifying condition: they are always about outcomes and states of affairs in which one is *personally invested*. This serves to distinguish pessimism from other views with which it is routinely conflated—including skepticism and nihilism—and to allow for the extent to which pessimism necessarily involves more than the intellectual endorsement of a doctrine.

1. What is Pessimism?

Many normative theories presuppose optimism—or, at least, so it has been argued¹—and a close relationship between pessimism and existential topics in philosophy is clear. Much as epistemology is driven by the provocations of the skeptic, so the provocations of the pessimist implicitly lie behind many existential concerns: the meaning and value of life, the disvalue (or value) of death, and the nature of happiness and well-being, to name just a few.² Meanwhile, in contemporary psychiatry, dominant therapeutic models (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) and diagnostic manuals (DSM-IV, ICD-10) routinely use pessimism as a criterion of emotional or psychiatric disorder.³ In all such cases, we find normative theories—whether ethical, social-

¹ The *locus classicus* of this view is Nietzsche 1872. For representative contemporary arguments see, e.g. Hampshire 1978, Stocker 1979, Williams 1992 & 2006, and Geuss 1999 & 2005.

² For recent representative examples of this trend, see Benatar 2004, Harris 2006, Heybron 2008, Tiberius 2008, and Bradley 2009.

³ See Beck 1976, Seligman 1990, American Psychiatric Association 2000, World Health Organization 2006.

political, or nosological—supported by views about the possibilities for which the world allows, and the reasonable or appropriate attitude to take in response. Practical implications rapidly follow. And yet, the world could be a very bad place, much worse than human beings are typically disposed to allow.

In ordinary usage, there is a general consensus about what pessimism is. Pessimism is an attitude, or perhaps a trait, wherein a person emphasizes adversity or misfortune. Pessimists expect things to turn out badly and approach the world with caution. These expectations appear to entail views—if not developed theories—about the world, the possibilities for which it allows, and the relative balance of good and bad it contains. It is generally suspected, however, that such views are matters of interpretation rather than fact—a glass that could be seen as half-full is seen as half-empty.

Perhaps as a consequence of this consensus, the relevance of pessimism to philosophical analysis has often been questioned. Bertrand Russell crystallized this view when he stated that pessimism is a matter of temperament, not reason (1947: 727). Loemker (1967) confirms an analogous verdict in the only standing encyclopedia entry on the topic (Edwards 1967a|Borchert 2006). There, Loemker records doubts as to whether pessimism is “sufficiently precise for philosophical purposes,” much less whether pessimistic beliefs are philosophically justifiable (1967: 244). As one commentator has since noted, the entry concludes with a “rather terminal judgment” (Sutherland 1981: 537).

Although optimism and pessimism are terms that are useful in expressing fundamental human attitudes toward the universe or toward certain aspects of it, they have an ambiguity that makes them useless for a valid philosophical analysis (Loemker 1967: 253).

I aim to show that Loemker is mistaken. Pessimism is neither essentially imprecise nor essentially ambiguous, and pessimistic beliefs may well be philosophically justifiable. The problem is merely that pessimism is not well excavated. Few papers address the topic, little

attempt has been made to define the concept, and there is a pronounced tendency to dismiss (or approach) the subject without serious argument.

In the contemporary literature, pessimism is typically characterized as:

- **Fatalism or Cynicism.** Pessimism is the view that human agency is futile with respect to one or more basic constraints upon the human condition.
- **Skepticism or Nihilism.** Pessimism is the view that important values—e.g., meaning, truth, knowledge, happiness, or the good—either do not exist or cannot be achieved.
- **The Affirmation of Decline.** Pessimism is the view that conditions are worsening or in a process of decline.
- **Despair.** Pessimism is the abandonment of hope—e.g., due to clinical depression, a character defect, or simply adversity in living.

All these views capture important features of, or issues involved in, pessimism.⁴ In each case, the notions involved are related to pessimism, and some may be on a continuum with it. However, none is adequate as an understanding of pessimism, much less as a way of making sense of the issues pessimism raises.

In this paper, I discuss what pessimism is, distinguishing it from other notions with which it is often confused or conflated. I hold that pessimism is a *stance*, or compound of attitudes, commitments, and intentions. This stance is marked by certain beliefs—first and foremost, that the **bad prevails over the good**—which are subject to an important qualifying condition: they are always about outcomes and states of affairs in which one is *personally invested*. This

⁴ This list is not meant to be exhaustive. It merely captures the broad state of affairs currently in the literature.

distinguishes pessimism from other views and psychological states with which it is routinely conflated, and allows for the extent to which pessimism involves more than the intellectual endorsement of a doctrine.

I approach the task in stages, providing something of a literature review in the process. First, I distinguish pessimism from fatalism, cynicism, and the affirmation of decline, three notions often mistaken for pessimism (or for which pessimism is often mistaken). Then, I turn to skepticism and nihilism, two central philosophical doctrines to which pessimism bears a close relation. Finally, I consider what is perhaps the most common notion regarding pessimism: namely, that pessimism involves—or is closely tied to—affect-laden states like despair.

But first, I need to say something about a basic distinction between two things commonly referred to as ‘pessimism.’

2. Pessimism As a State v. Pessimism As a Doctrine

At least two distinct kinds of thing are commonly referred to as ‘pessimism.’ On the first, (1) pessimism is a view, roughly akin to a philosophical doctrine. On the second, (2) pessimism is a psychological state or condition.

As I aim to show, (1) and (2) are inextricably related—closer to two sides of a coin than two distinct subjects. It follows that any adequate analysis of pessimism will have to be able to differentiate pessimism not only from other philosophical views, but also from other phenomena (dispositions, attitudes, moods, character traits) routinely picked out by the concept. In other words, an adequate account must treat pessimism both as a thesis and as a psychological condition. One thus confronts two interrelated projects (as well as their interrelation):

- (1) identifying the philosophical view, pessimism, and distinguishing it from other views with which it might be conflated:

- (2) providing an analysis of what it is for a person to be pessimistic that is capable of distinguishing that psychological state from other states with which it might be conflated.

Here, I focus primarily on the first, as a necessary preliminary to the second. However, the reader should bear in mind that to “be pessimistic” requires that the individual holds certain views and also meets certain psychological conditions.

For this reason, I hold that pessimism is a **stance**, rather than merely a state or a doctrine. By ‘stance,’ I mean something closely akin to that articulated by Bas van Fraassen (2002, 2004, 2011).

A philosophical position can consist in a stance (attitude, commitment, approach, a cluster of such – possibly including some propositional attitudes such as beliefs as well). Such a stance can of course be expressed, and may involve or presuppose beliefs as well, but cannot simply be equated with having beliefs or making assertions about what there is (2002, 47).

‘Stance,’ On van Fraassen’s account, is a technical concept that evokes both a “*standing place* or vantage point” as well as “an attitude adopted in relation to a particular subject” (2004: 174-5). As such, stances are distinct from both states and doctrines. Unlike a doctrine, a stance cannot be identified with holding a particular view, or affirming certain propositional content. While a stance can involve having or adopting certain views, stances essentially involve commitments, intentions, and other non-propositional conditions as well. At the same time, a stance is never merely a state. Unlike mental states *per se*, a stance includes an essential commitment to maintain the stance in question (2004: 176).⁵ Thus, a stance is never something that simply happens to a subject. Rather, it always involves some degree of active participation.

⁵ For the most part, I leave **pessimism qua state** aside to be dealt with elsewhere. For a preliminary account, see §9 of this paper.

A stance is something one *adopts* (or finds oneself involved in), akin to a policy or position (Teller 2004, van Fraassen 2004: 174).

Van Fraassen maintains that empiricism is a stance, and suggests that many philosophical views—including some of the most common—are better characterized as stances than doctrines. Regardless of whether he is correct, I, like Matthew Ratcliffe (2011), think van Fraassen has recognized something philosophically important; namely, that some disagreements—while appearing to be about beliefs and values—cannot be fully specified, much less rendered intelligible, by specifying the relevant beliefs and values. In some cases, conflicting attitudes are not “directed at propositional contents but [rather] more encompassing senses of how things are with the world” (Ratcliffe 2011: 123). For my purposes, I will bracket the larger metaphilosophical questions this observation raises. Empiricism, e.g., may or may not be a stance. Pessimism is.

Pessimism is a stance marked by the beliefs that define pessimism understood as a doctrine. These beliefs, like the stance itself, can be *implicit* or *explicit*; an unreflective (and typically unarticulated) background that underwrites various presuppositions, or a consciously held policy or position (Teller 2004: 169). The important point is that pessimism is never merely an affirmation of the views that accompany it, devoid of non-propositional content. To borrow van Fraassen’s terms, there is no position X such that one is a pessimist if and only if one believes or endorses a particular doctrine, X+.⁶ It is true that if one endorses certain propositions, then one endorses a view that often—if not always—accompanies pessimism. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to this view as **pessimism qua doctrine**. As I aim to show, endorsing pessimism qua doctrine is never sufficient to render one a pessimist, much less to capture what we mean when we speak of someone as *pessimistic* or as a *pessimistic person*.

With these preliminaries in place, I turn to the first set of distinctions.

⁶ In van Fraassen’s terms, pessimism violates Principle Zero, the metaphilosophical view that “[f]or each philosophical position X there exists a statement X+ such that to have (or take) position X is to believe (or decide to believe) that X+” (2002: 41). Like van Fraassen, I hold that Principle Zero is false.

3. Pessimism Is Neither Fatalism Nor Cynicism

Pessimism is often equated with fatalism and cynicism. By ‘fatalism,’ I mean the view that the future is metaphysically fixed, and thus beyond human intervention. By ‘cynicism,’ I mean the view that human beings are essentially corrupt, evil, or incorrigibly bad.⁷ As I aim to show, fatalism and cynicism can provide reasons for pessimism. However, pessimism *per se* does not rule out human agency, or commit one to a particular view of human nature.

As W. D. Joske has noted, pessimism is often accompanied by a judgment of futility, or a recognition that “the world prevents the actor from realizing his [or her] ... intended end” (Joske 1974: 54). In such cases, states of affairs found in the world render certain goals and values unattainable—i.e., beyond the scope of human intervention. Such fixed outcomes can be good, however, and so not the proper objects of pessimism.⁸ Conversely, outcomes can be bad and yet not metaphysically fixed. Even where pessimism is accompanied by a judgment of futility, therefore, pessimism does not commit one to a particular explanation *why* action is futile. Action may be futile because the future is metaphysically determined. Alternately, it may be futile because of contingent empirical facts: e.g., limitations imposed by existing social, political, or psychological conditions (Care 1987: 25). In either case, uses of the language of ‘fate’ (as found, e.g., colloquially and in Greek tragedy) refer to the presence of forces beyond human control. They do not necessarily refer to the view that those forces or factors are metaphysically determined.

In much the same way, pessimism is compatible with positive—or for that matter, underdetermined—views on human nature. One need only attribute the bad outcomes or states of affairs to factors independent of human beings. Hence, it is not necessarily correct to say, as Valerie Tiberius has said, that the pessimist is committed to “negative judgments about human

⁷ For an account of cynicism with some striking similarities to the account of pessimism presented here, see Vice 2011.

⁸ My thanks to David Benatar for bringing this point to my attention.

nature” and “in the same boat as the cynic” (2008: 149). Pessimism is not a thesis about human nature any more than it is a thesis about the possibility of human agency. Contra both the cynic and the fatalist alike, one can be pessimistic—even about the human condition—while affirming both the possibility of human agency and the potential for good in human beings.⁹

4. Pessimism Is Not The Affirmation Of Decline

In conventional usage, pessimism is routinely identified with the affirmation of decline. The contemporary spirit—if not the letter—of this usage traces most clearly to Rousseau,¹⁰ and can be found both advocated and opposed in a wide range of scholarly discussion. Bernard Reginster, e.g., links pessimism with “the conviction that our existence in this world will take a turn for the worse” (2006: 29). Joe Bailey, writing from a sociological perspective, sees pessimism as the “social consciousness” of decline (1988: 19-24). On this view, pessimism entails a belief that things are getting worse, and the present is in a process of decline.

Here as before, while pessimism may be accompanied by a judgment of decline, it need not be. For example, if one holds things are getting worse with respect to certain conditions—and thereby holds out little hope that things might get better—one would be rightly considered pessimistic. In such cases, the object of one’s pessimism is a certain valued outcome: an improved state of affairs with regard to the conditions described. Should one hold out little hope of any change whatsoever, however—e.g., by judging the state of affairs to be intractable and essentially static—one’s position may be no less pessimistic. As before, one holds out little hope that things might get better. Hence, with the exception of cases where the intractable state of

⁹ Thus, Foucault can characterize his position—coherently—as one of “pessimistic activism.” “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism” (1997: 256).

¹⁰ For an account of pessimistic themes in Rousseau, see Dienstag 2006: 49-83.

affairs is “good enough” (in some important sense that I will leave unspecified) there is room for pessimism regardless of whether one posits stasis or decline.¹¹

This feature of pessimism comes out most clearly in recent studies of pessimism by Joshua Foa Dienstag (1999, 2006). On Dienstag’s account, pessimism is a distinct philosophical tradition “concerned with ... the problem of organizing the best kind of human life in the absence of a promise of progress, happiness, or salvation for society as a whole” (1999: 71).¹² As Dienstag notes, this does not require believing that conditions are getting worse, only that they will not significantly improve:

While pessimism may posit a decline, it is the denial of progress, and not an insistence on some eventual doom, that marks out ... pessimism. Pessimism, to put it precisely, is the negation, and not the opposite, of theories of progress. This may strike some readers as a fudge, but consider: most of those thinkers whom we could agree without argument to call pessimists, like Schopenhauer, did not profess a belief in any permanent downward trend (2006: 18).

On Dienstag’s view, pessimism is the affirmation of *non-progress*. To put the point more precisely than Dienstag himself does, pessimism is the denial of progress *provided the possibility of progress would be good*. It does not require the affirmation of decline.

Hence, whether pessimism actually rules out progress depends on what one takes progress to mean, or require. Dienstag follows Christopher Lasch in viewing ‘progress’ as the idea of “steady improvement with no foreseeable ending” (Lasch 1991: 47; Dienstag 2006: 5n2), and readily admits that progress in this sense is difficult to deny in some areas—e.g., technology. However, as he notes, it need not be “granted that [such progress is] (or in the long run will always be) positive” (Dienstag 2006: 25). Clearly, pessimism is incompatible with progress, if by ‘progress’ is meant the eventual triumph of the good, or the unqualified melioration of the bad.

¹¹ My thanks to Michael Stocker for first bringing this qualification to my attention.

¹² Pessimism, as Dienstag understands it, is “something more than a sensibility, but less than a doctrine,” marked by four interrelated themes: “that time is a burden; that the course of history is in some sense ironic; that freedom and happiness are incompatible; and that human existence is absurd” (2006: 19). For my purposes here, I focus primarily on the first, although my account is intended to be compatible with all four.

Progress in that sense (like the belief in providence before it¹³) is decisively ruled out. But progress can be too slow, too difficult, or too costly to yield the requisite promise; and pessimism is fully compatible with progress in cases where progress is bad (or at least not good), as Dienstag points out.

As an account of pessimism *per se*, however, Dienstag's account has several significant limitations.

First, pessimism is not necessarily a philosophy of life, or thesis about social-political conditions. Like many who have written on pessimism, Dienstag appropriates the term for use in a particular academic context. In so doing, he understands the issues primarily in terms of concerns that arise out of, and are essentially bound to, a particular disciplinary discussion. There is nothing inherently objectionable in this practice. In this case, however, I see a number of reasons to resist it; foremost among these the extent to which the features picked out in one context are routinely implicated in, and potentially explained by, features noted and articulated in others. Dienstag's account captures much that is rightly called 'pessimism', but does so at the expense of much that is no less illuminating or relevant.

Second, it's not clear that pessimism, even in Dienstag's sense, actually requires the denial of progress (provided progress would be good). The idea of pessimism as "progress skepticism" rather than outright denial is found in closely related work by John Kekes, where pessimism is characterized as requiring merely *doubt* about "the possibility of a significant improvement in the human condition" (1998: 41).¹⁴ For the moment, I set this issue aside, returning to it shortly when differentiating pessimism from skepticism (§6).

¹³ For invaluable recent work on the history of notions of progress and providence in modern philosophy, see Neiman 2002 and Lloyd 2008.

¹⁴ "One of the safest generalizations about conservatism is that conservatives tend to be pessimists. ... [They doubt] the possibility of a significant improvement in the human condition." (1998: 41). In his 2006 entry on conservatism in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Borchert 2006), Kekes identifies 'pessimism' with hopelessness or despair, and 'realism' with 'pessimism' as understood in the citation above. See Kekes 2006.

What is evident at this point is the defining constituent of pessimism qua doctrine: a belief that **the bad prevails over the good**.¹⁵

5. Prevailing: The Bad Over The Good

‘Prevails,’ as I will use the term, is a technical concept that unifies the range of intuitions found in the diverse literatures here encountered. My intent is to pick out, and draw attention to, a common conviction in each of the varying standard (but non-essential) attributions put forward in scholarly discussions. As with the term ‘stance’, the term ‘prevails’ is chosen to evoke certain common notions. For example, one says that A *prevails* over B when A triumphs over B in a contest. In this sense, to prevail is to gain ascendancy or dominance. One also says that A *prevails* over B when A is pervasive, effective, or simply persists, relative to B. In this sense, one speaks of prevailing attitudes, or the prevailing weather. In both cases, ‘prevailing’ picks out highly particular form of comparative judgment.

Here, for the first time, we see that pessimism is a stance rather than merely a state or a doctrine. Ordinarily, comparative judgments are of three types, “greater than,” “less than,” and “equal to.” Provided those constraints, to say that the bad prevails over the good is to say that the bad *is greater than* the good. However, this characterization fails to capture what is at issue in two important respects. First, the comparison is not between values in the abstract, as the phrase ‘the bad is greater than the good’ might suggest. Rather, it is between *valued* outcomes or states of affairs. Second, the comparison is not *only* between valued outcomes or states of affairs. It has a historical and psychological dimension.

If the comparison were only between valued outcomes and states of affairs, one could say—wrongly, as it turns out—that ‘prevailing’ reduces to a claim that the bad *will be greater*

¹⁵ I owe this way of phrasing the comparative judgment at issue in pessimism to George W. Harris (2006). While Harris does not formally define pessimism with the language of ‘prevailing,’ his use of the expression has been instrumental in guiding my thinking.

than the good. ‘Prevailing,’ however, does not denote a comparative relationship that can be adequately accounted for apart from its historical and psychological context.

When the bad prevails over the good, the comparative judgment displays both *prospective* and *retrospective* features or conditions. Prospectively, it requires certain *expectations*—i.e., that the bad will be (or will likely be) greater than the good. Retrospectively, it presupposes certain *explanations*—e.g., that the past and present are such that the bad can be expected to predominate or persist relative to the good. There is, in other words, a *narrative context* to the comparison. ‘Prevailing’ obtains within a story in which one is involved, and in relation to which one has certain commitments. I say more about the nature of this involvement, and these commitments, in §9. For the moment, simply bear in mind that one is not considering valued outcomes and states of affairs in abstraction, but rather outcomes and states of affairs within a temporally-extended world one inhabits, and in which one lives. Thus, e.g., technological progress is fully compatible with pessimism regarding progress, provided only that one sees such progress as an instance of the bad prevailing over the good—e.g., as something that ruins rather than providing a valuable challenge.¹⁶

With this terminology in hand, I turn to two major concepts in the traditional philosophical literature that are often conflated with pessimism, or at a minimum seen to bear a substantial relationship to it—namely, skepticism and nihilism. Following that, I turn to the challenge exemplified by psychological states like despair.

6. Pessimism Is Not Skepticism

Many references to pessimism in recent philosophical literature treat pessimism as a species or analog of skepticism. In recent years, ‘pessimism’ has been employed by philosophers

¹⁶ One final remark regarding the term ‘prevails’. Unlike standard terms used to denote comparison, the use of ‘prevails’ is intended to accommodate a wide range of normative theories and commitments. At present, terms of comparison like “greater than” and “outweighs” immediately suggests consequentialism, with its inherent commitment to particular forms of value comparison.

to refer to the epistemological views of thinkers as diverse as Augustine, Hume, Kant, and Kuhn, as well as to the so-called “new skepticism” exemplified by likes of Fumerton (1995), Nagel (1986), and Stroud (1984) (see Williams 1991). In each case, ‘pessimism’ refers to the acceptance of radical skepticism as true, and the conclusion that knowledge is impossible. Analogous usages can be found in contemporary discussions of free will, where, e.g., P. F. Strawson (1962), Galen Strawson (1998), and Paul Russell (2004), all use ‘pessimism’ to refer to radically skeptical conclusions regarding moral responsibility in light of the metaphysical impossibility of free will.¹⁷

This use of the term ‘pessimism’ is not without warrant. Pessimism and skepticism share a number of features in common. Like skepticism, views referred to as ‘pessimism’ often pose problems that challenge conventional beliefs to survive reflection. Like skepticism, these problems often present themselves as results drawn from the consistent application of otherwise rational commitments. And like skepticism, the resulting conclusions typically have a bearing on, and implications for, a wide range of commitments that one might otherwise endorse without reservation.

In addition, both concepts admit of degrees. Just as one can be more or less skeptical, so one can be more or less pessimistic. Thus, we have an answer to the question left open at the end of §4. Does pessimism require the outright denial of progress, as Dienstag suggests, or merely skeptical doubts regarding it? Like skepticism, pessimism is compatible with both. The pessimist may affirm non-progress outright, or have significant doubts regarding the likelihood of progress, either in a particular case or *tout court*.

There are, however, several important differences between the two concepts.

First, unlike skepticism, pessimism is not restricted to the denial of positive claims. Hence, even where skepticism and pessimism share a common intentional object (e.g., a

¹⁷ ‘Pessimism’ in this sense also approximates the view Van Inwagen criticized as “Fatalism” (1983: 23-54).

particular future state of affairs), skepticism is not pessimism. For example, if I hold that all inductive inferences are baseless, and conclude that a valuable human good—namely knowledge of the future—is forever beyond reach, my view would be rightly characterized as pessimistic. In this case, both my skepticism and my pessimism entail the denial of a positive claim: namely, that I have knowledge of the future. However, I would be no less pessimistic (although I'd no longer be skeptical) were I to affirm a positive claim—e.g., that some inductive inferences regarding the future are warranted, namely bad ones, while other more hopeful inferences are not.

Second and more importantly, pessimism, unlike skepticism, necessarily requires an emotional commitment to, and personal stake in, the state of affairs in question. I will return to the precise nature of this commitment in §9 when differentiating pessimism from despair. The point for the moment is simple: One cannot be *indifferently* pessimistic. Pessimistic conclusions are typically experienced as averse or unwelcome, and necessarily experienced as bad. Thus, skepticism is never sufficient for pessimism. In order to arrive at pessimism, the skeptic must hold not only that skepticism is true, but also experience the truth of skepticism as bad. While this additional element is assumed in much of the literature on skepticism (and indeed, is a major motivation for it), skepticism *per se* does not require it. One can be a skeptic without it, as were the ancient pyrrhonians, for example.¹⁸

7. Pessimism Is Not Nihilism

Pessimism is routinely conflated with nihilism in both popular and academic discussions. This is no accident given the axiological features of both concepts. Confusion between the two traces back to the nineteenth century discussions of pessimism inaugurated by Schopenhauer

¹⁸ This has the consequence that a great deal of philosophical discussion that goes under the heading of skepticism is also pessimism, or perhaps even better characterized as pessimism. I'm ok with this consequence of my account, particularly as it accurately captures features already present in the literature on skepticism (see Pritchard 2002). In the majority of cases, the possible truth of skepticism is held to be highly adverse and unwelcome. For the *locus classicus* of contrary opinion, cf. Sextus Empiricus c.200|2000.

(1818), and carried on by von Hartmann (1869) and Nietzsche (1872, 1901). A close association between pessimism and nihilism resurfaces throughout post-WWII thought, and can be found in both classic work on the meaning of life—where Edwards (1967b) and Joske (1974) identify pessimism with a rationally sanctioned response to nihilism—as well as in contemporary pejorative analyses of, e.g., “postmodern pessimism,” understood loosely as the triumph of nihilism over Enlightenment values (Tallis 1999; see also Dienstag 2006: 6n30).

‘Nihilism,’ however, is a highly contested and at times ill-defined concept. Like ‘pessimism,’ it is subject to a number of ambiguities and competing usages. For that reason, some preliminary grounds keeping is in order prior to distinguishing the two.

I begin with a distinction between metaethical and existential uses of ‘nihilism.’

Metaethical uses are straightforward. Nihilism in regard to a particular normative domain or object is simply the view that no such domain or object exists. Thus, e.g., moral nihilism is the view that there are no moral facts, and so no moral truths or principles. Nihilism in this sense is marked by a denial that the claims at issue are true.¹⁹

In conventional usage, however, nihilism is more often associated with existential claims about the human condition than claims about ontological commitments. In existential uses, nihilism is the view that human existence is meaningless. The substance of this view is perhaps best captured by George W. Harris when he defines nihilism as the view that “nothing is of sufficient value to merit our being committed to it” (2006: 32). Nihilism in this sense is a thesis about value, or, more specifically, particular values in relation to human needs and purposes (i.e., those involved in ‘meaning’).

As Bernard Reginster has observed, existential uses of ‘nihilism’ can be understood in at least two different ways (2006: 25-28). For the purposes of locating pessimism in relation to nihilism, the difference is important.

¹⁹ See Mackie 1977.

In the first, nihilism is fundamentally an ontological position, albeit one with existential implications. On this view, nothing is of sufficient value because, metaphysically speaking, nihilism vis-à-vis value is true. There are no such things as objective values. Let us call this first subspecies **axiological nihilism**.²⁰ Experientially, axiological nihilism is accompanied by what Reginster terms “disorientation.” If values can merit our commitment only in virtue of being objective, and objective values do not exist, then there are no values that can merit our commitment. On such an account, the commitments that ordinarily serve to orient human life prove to be illusory and baseless. The individual human agent is thus “disoriented”—left without the means of normative direction (Reginster 2006: 26-28).

On the second way of understanding existential uses of ‘nihilism’, nihilism is an empirical position. Let us call this second subspecies **practical nihilism**. On this view, nothing is of sufficient value because, practically speaking, nothing of sufficient value can be realized by human beings. Values may exist; and may even merit our deepest commitment. But the world is hopelessly inhospitable to their realization. Experientially, practical nihilism gives rise to despair. There is no hope of realizing the values to which we are, perhaps necessarily, committed. Hence, where axiological nihilism remains a thesis about value, practical nihilism is a thesis about the world—or more precisely, about how values can be realized in the world. The two are logically independent: one can be a practical nihilist even if axiological nihilism is rejected. The values to which one is committed can exist, and thus be realizable in principle, while nonetheless being unrealizable in the world as it is, by creatures like us (cf. 2006: 28-34).

With that said, the ground has been laid to differentiate pessimism from nihilism.

First, pessimism is incompatible with axiological nihilism. Axiological nihilism denies the grounds of the evaluative judgments pessimism requires. To borrow a nice turn of phrase from Bernard Reginster, “If nothing really matters, it should not matter that nothing matters”

²⁰ Axiological nihilism captures the meaning the term as it is currently employed in the contemporary literature on the meaning of life, see Metz 2002.

(27). Pessimism is predicated on an assumption that it very much does matter. This can be seen in the fact that where axiological nihilism issues in disorientation (but not despair), pessimism, like practical nihilism, can give rise to despair. George W. Harris, in particular, has emphasized this feature.

Pessimism recognizes that there are many things in life that in themselves are worthy of robust and passionate commitment. If these things prevail over the bad, there is great cause for joy, but if the bad prevails over them, there are grounds for despair (2006: 88).

Like practical nihilism, pessimism entails that values exist and that the normativity of those values depends on their objective standing.²¹ Pessimism is distinct from practical nihilism in that practical nihilism entails that the values in question *cannot* be realized, while pessimism only requires significant limits on the extent to which their realization can be reasonably expected.

Thus we arrive at the central point of distinction. Pessimism is marked out from nihilism by its compatibility with a claim that is incompatible with nihilism in any form: the claim that the bad prevails over a *realizable* good. Unlike both practical and axiological nihilism, pessimism allows that some things of value *can* be attained and yet *will likely fail* to be attained (or will be attained, only to be trumped by an accompanying disvalue.) Experience may defeat this expectation, but the pessimist will see this as a matter of luck, or exception to what reasonably could be expected. For the nihilist, on the other hand, there is no room for good fortune.²²

8. Pessimism Is Not Despair

And so we arrive at despair. For my purposes, I will keep my characterization of despair simple, and pejorative. Despair is the abandonment of hope—e.g., as manifested in clinical

²¹ This points to a remarkable consequence, akin to one noted by David Wiggins regarding the concept of ‘meaning’ and the challenge it poses for noncognitivism (Wiggins 1998: 98-103). Pessimism qua doctrine presupposes some minimal form of objectivity regarding value. One *cannot*, it seems, be a pessimist and at the same time consistently hold to a through-going subjectivism, expressivism, or projectivism about value.

²² My thanks to Ken Baynes for helping to focus my thinking on this point.

depression, a melancholic disposition, certain character defects, or simply adversity in living. As such, the term picks out a psychological state, and an affect-laden phenomenon, rather than a philosophical view or position. This state, furthermore, is bad. It is not, e.g., despair in the sense sometimes advocated as a necessary condition of tranquility. Rather, it is despair in the sense that so concerned existentialists following Kierkegaard (1849).

At this point, it should be clear that to embrace pessimism is not *eo ipso* to embrace despair. While pessimism, like practical nihilism, can lead to despair and may even serve as a necessary condition of despair, something more is required for a person to arrive at despair.

It is precisely at this point, however, that one encounters a revealing and substantive problem.

Consider a paradigmatic example of pessimism, a case where one believes that the bad will likely prevail over a realizable good. In such a case, one holds that something of value can be realized and yet will fail to be. Where that something is sufficiently important, the result can be despair. For example, one might find oneself unable to envision a future, or future course of action, faced with the unlikelihood of realizing the state of affairs in question. Whether pessimism gives rise to despair, however, can be a highly contingent matter. It hangs, among other things, on the character, dispositions, and psychological context of the individual in question. Many have lived, after all, (and for all appearances, lived well) in full acceptance of views that routinely lead others to despair. One need only point to David Hume, to cite a famous—and hence familiar—example.²³

It is here we encounter the problem, and in order to approach it the example of Hume will serve well. Hume avoided despair. He was, by all accounts, a fairly sanguine character. But Hume did not merely avoid despair. Assuming we take him at his word (and the word of those

²³ See the posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), where Hume challenges not only theism and providential order, but also (arguably) the Enlightenment hope that the natural sciences could secure verities where natural religion had failed.

who knew him), Hume was *not even an especially pessimistic person*.²⁴ He left his “philosophical melancholy and delirium” in his study, as he famously put it:

Most fortunately it happens, since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of that philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, I am merry with friends; and when after three or four hours amusement I return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther (1978: 269).

How is one to account for this? The question is not merely what enabled Hume to avoid despair. Rather, the question is what enabled Hume to advocate the views that he did while avoiding the phenomenal features typically associated with pessimism.

In the passage cited, Hume supplies a possible answer. The sketch it provides is admittedly brief. But for the purposes of the moment, it will prove sufficient.

Hume often satisfied the conditions of pessimism qua doctrine, *to the extent it has been specified thus far*. He routinely argued that many of the values and states of affairs that serve to orient human beings in life are unattainable. However, he did not advocate despair, nor did he appear to personally suffer from, or manifest, a pessimistic attitude, disposition, or trait of character. Taken at his word, he accomplished this by never personally adopting the values his views undermined (“I cannot find in my heart to enter into them”), or allowing himself to remain committed to the projects his views called into question. Thus, while he often advocated pessimistic conclusions he seldom exhibited pessimism, understood as psychological state or condition. Nonetheless, Hume would at times *become* pessimistic upon reflection, and even fall into despair, a depressed mood, or similar state of dejection (his so-called “philosophical melancholy and delirium”). When he did, for as long as he did, he appears to have allowed that

²⁴ For the standard biography of Hume, see Mossner 1979.

the values and states of affairs at issue were important to him. Furthermore, by his own testimony, he appears to have *experienced* them as important.

Setting aside the larger issues to which this example gives rise, the point for the moment is straightforward. One sees here the broad outlines of the main qualification to (and constrain upon) pessimism qua doctrine: what I refer to as **personal investment**.

9. Personal Investment

To be pessimistic, it is not enough to hold the view that the bad prevails over the good relative to particular values and states of affairs. At least some of the values and states of affairs at issue must be ones **in which one is personally invested**. Pessimism qua doctrine, in other words, is defined not simply in relation to particular valued outcomes and states of affairs to which one is committed, but rather in relation to values and states of affairs to which one is committed in a particular sense. I mark this sense with the term ‘personal investment.’

Consider the following distinction between two ways in which one can be committed to an object—e.g. to a person, project, or goal. Call the first ‘commitment *without* personal investment,’ and the second ‘commitment *with* personal investment,’ or simply *personal investment*.

In **commitment *without* personal investment**, one is committed but not invested. Commitment without personal investment captures the sense of commitment typically found in philosophical literature. Thus, for example, one makes a commitment to a particular view by endorsing a particular doctrine. In such cases, one is committed in the sense in which one is held to recognize an obligation, practical requirement, or final end. The commitment is primarily intellectual, and serves to specify the aim or purpose of one’s activity as an agent. It does not necessarily require or involve an emotional commitment to its object—at least not in a sense that is essential to the concept.

Quite distinct from this is **commitment *with* personal investment**. Commitment with personal investment essentially involves emotion. As such, it is not reducible to beliefs, desires, or belief-plus-desire complexes, much less to having or recognizing an aim, purpose, practical requirement, or final end.²⁵ Personal investments are not, first and foremost, commitments to goals or ends—despite the fact that they often entail commitments (*with* personal investment) to various goals and ends. Rather, they are commitments to objects, full stop.²⁶ Thus, not even an exceptionally strong desire for an object is equivalent to the kind of emotional commitment at issue in personal investment.

In order to sharpen this essential distinction, consider the following: commitments *without* personal investment are things that one *does* in a straightforward sense. They are acts of a person, understood as an agent. While they may well reflect on one's character, they do not in any significant sense comprise one's character. To put the point in only somewhat metaphorical terms, one makes such commitments, but is not necessarily made by them; defines such commitments, but is not necessarily defined by them. Not so when it comes to commitments *with* personal investment. Here, while the commitment may be entered into voluntarily, it need not be. For example, one is born into some such commitments: those that initially comprise relations of family. While these initial commitments can be mitigated or perhaps even dissolved over time ("she is dead to me"), they represent a type that initially precedes one's capacity for agency. Furthermore, even where one's personal investments are voluntarily chosen, the process by which they are formed is most often just that—a process in which one is involved, and not discreet act or decision. Hence, while one can be the agent of one's personal investments in some cases—and to that extent active in their formation—personal investments, once formed, comprise bonds in relation to which one is always to some extent passive. This can be seen in the fact that one will suffer a particular kind of harm should the object to which one is committed

²⁵ Here I follow the work of Stocker (1996) in holding that emotions are first and foremost feelings, or irreducibly affective states, and Goldie (2000) in holding that emotions nonetheless admit of intentionality.

²⁶ In terms suggested by Stocker (1981), such commitments are 'archeological' rather than 'teleological.'

fail or (worse, in the case of persons) betray one's investment. That harm is loss. Hence, the primary marker of personal investment is the experience of loss (with its attending affective sequelae: grief, anger, denial, mourning, etc.) when confronted by the absence, unrealizability, or unsatisfactoriness of the object in question.²⁷

And with that, we arrive at the fundamental point of distinction between pessimism and the views with which it is often conflated. The commitments at issue in pessimism are commitments *with*, and not *without*, personal investment. When Hume experienced the values and states of affairs at issue in his views as *important*, he experienced himself as personally invested. At least in that moment, their unrealizability registered as a loss. Where these two forms of commitment are insufficiently distinguished, this crucial point can be easily missed, and confusion between pessimism, skepticism, and nihilism readily follows. Unlike skepticism or nihilism, however, pessimism is irreducible to beliefs and values devoid of affective commitment and content. Pessimism is a stance, rather than merely a state or a doctrine.

10. What Pessimism Is

And so we arrive at the end of the process of differentiation. Pessimism is not skepticism or nihilism. Nor is it fatalism, cynicism, the affirmation of decline, or despair. Rather, pessimism is a stance, which can be found implicated (often enough, to a greater or lesser degree) in each of these states and positions. This stance involves both the endorsement of a view and the manifestation of an array of characteristic psychological features, all while being fully reducible to neither.

As a philosophical view, pessimism is pessimism qua doctrine. This view is defined by two conditions: a primary claim and a significant qualification. In this restricted sense,

²⁷ For a paradigmatic examples of the kind of phenomena I intend to denote by 'personal investment' see the psychoanalytic literature on 'attachment,' and specifically the classical theory of object relations: Fairbairn 1952, Winnicott 1958, and Bowlby 1969. For collected papers, see Buckley 1986. For scholarly overview, see Greenberg & Mitchell 1983.

pessimism is the view that the bad prevails over the good relative to values and states of affairs in which one is personally invested.

As seen in the case of Hume, the commitments that underwrite pessimism qua doctrine are not merely matters of intellectual endorsement. To be pessimistic requires more than merely an otherwise dispassionate acceptance of pessimism qua doctrine. One must *care*—the values and states of affairs must be *important* (albeit not exactly in Frankfurt’s (1988) sense of the term).²⁸ Being pessimistic—a state that involves, among other things, holding pessimism qua doctrine—is intimately bound to the psychological condition and context of the person. Thus, e.g., Hume was pessimistic only when he *experienced* the values and states of affairs at issue as important. The rest of the time, he was (merely) a skeptic.

All this leaves pessimism a rather curious subject. The stance it comprises is invariably personal. At the same time it is also philosophical, and raises issues that extend well beyond a mere temperamental coloring of one’s environment.

Few nowadays believe that we live in a world providentially ordered for the sake of the human good. Indeed, most will go further—as the persuasiveness of the evidential argument from evil against theism readily shows²⁹—and concede that the bad regularly prevails over the good. In this respect, at least, we are all pessimists. We all accept pessimism qua doctrine. We all share with the pessimist an insistence on the prevalence of evil and the tragic conditions under which much of human life is lived. And yet, there are implications of granting that we live in a world inhospitable to our strivings that have gone for the most part unnoticed.³⁰

As Charles Taylor has observed, (existential) nihilism—unlike pessimism—has recently joined skepticism as a driving philosophical concern:

²⁸ For an account of ‘care’ closely analogous to my notion of personal investment, see Shoemaker 2003. My thanks to Christine Tappolet for bringing this paper to my attention.

²⁹ See Howard-Snyder 1996.

³⁰ For thoughtful discussion, see Nussbaum 2001.

Melancholy, modern-style, in the form of a sense of perhaps ultimate meaninglessness, is the recognized modern threat. We readily see it as a danger that menaces all of us. We even see our philosophies and spiritual positions as addressed to this threat, as attempts to rebut or thwart a sense of meaninglessness. It is common enough to construe the history of religion through this prism, as though from the beginning we could see it as an answer to the inherent meaninglessness of things (2002: 41).

What then of pessimism? Pessimism has gone largely unnoted, and yet may be of greater concern. Taylor continues:

Awareness of [evil] can ... be eclipsed by the sense that our great problem in the secular age, after the “death of God,” is meaninglessness. The sense of evil seems to partake too much of the metaphysical dimension that we are supposed to have left behind us. But I believe that it defines just as important a threat, if not more urgent than the loss of meaning. As the sense of guaranteed order in which good can triumph recedes, the sense of the surrounding evil, within us and without, ... faces no obvious defenses. It cannot but deeply disturb us. Indeed, one can suspect that we sometimes take flight into the meaninglessness of things in order to avoid facing it (2002: 41-42).

On this point, I think Taylor is substantially correct. This, at a philosophical level, is pessimism—or at least an apt gesture towards the challenge it poses. To concede that that the world isn’t designed for our benefit is, at least potentially, to concede an awful lot. It leaves in its wake the challenge of underwriting our deep and abiding commitments—personal, practical, and theoretical—to the unrealized good under circumstances that too often rule such commitments rationally out of bounds. What *may* we hope? What serves as a defensible stance in relation to the world, and on what grounds? The problem is distinct; the answers by no means obvious; and the issues nonetheless central to understanding ourselves, and the world in which we must think and live.

I recommend it receive further careful attention than it has until now.³¹

³¹ For the structure of this paper, I am indebted to the model provided by Andrew Jason Cohen’s “What Toleration Is” (2004). My thanks to Ernesto V. Garcia for bringing this paper to my attention. Acknowledgments to Ken Baynes, David Benatar, Ben Bradley, Mark Brown, Jason Clark, Kevan Edwards, Kris McDaniel, John Monteleone, Adam Morton, Michael Stocker, Christine Tappolet, Samantha Vice, and Robert W. Daly MD for helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper.

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