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## Human Extinction in the Pessimist Tradition

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# Abstract

Faced with countless threats that pose a danger to the continued existence of the human species, there has emerged a new field in philosophy known as *Existential Risk Management*. This discipline proposes to understand, quantify, classify and ultimately defeat the risks that exist and that threaten our continued existence. These philosophers accept that human life is good and that it should be promoted. And because of the tremendous value that is found in human life, they argue we should do whatever we can to avert our disappearance.

Philosophical pessimists hold that life is always filled with suffering and that because of this to not exist is better than to exist. Yet once we are here, once we *exist*, it is in our interest to reduce the amount of suffering. So while pessimists sustain that nonexistence and the disappearance of the human species is the ultimate goal (insofar as it is the only way to defeat and terminate the suffering that conditions all of existence), this nonexistence is to be obtained by *nonviolent* means, *voluntarily* and only in full understanding of our *existential predicament*.

In this dissertation I do two things. First, I define pessimism. This is essential because pessimism means different things to different people. Therefore, an important purpose of my work is to delimit and establish an historically grounded definition that carves out the unique contributions that pessimism makes to philosophy. To do this, I survey the history of pessimism and lay out the main arguments made by pessimists. Two, I argue that philosophical pessimists can support the efforts made by the Existential Risk philosophers even though the reasons for doing so are different. And in so arguing I highlight the relevance and importance of the history of philosophy for contemporary debates.

**Key words:** Extinction, Hartmann, Mainländer, nihilism, pessimism, Schopenhauer, Weltschmerz

# Summary for Lay Audience

The media and blockbuster films have often depicted catastrophic scenarios where the survival of the human species is in danger. Whether it is a giant asteroid, a cataclysmic climate event, nuclear war or a deadly virus that spreads over the world, the idea that humanity could one day go extinct is an idea well understood by most of us. While these scenarios are often played out in fictional contexts, these possibilities are not fictional but very real. For this reason, a philosophical discipline known as Existential Risk Management has recently arisen as a way to evaluate, understand and subsequently deal with these many threats. For these philosophers, and presumably for most of us, life is precious, valuable and we should do what we can to protect the future of humanity.

There is a philosophical tradition known as pessimism that claims that life is not good and that not existing is better than existing. For the pessimists life is not valuable and is not worthy of promotion. Given this, one would be tempted to conclude that pessimists oppose the Existential Risk Management project.

In this work I do two things. First I define pessimism. Pessimism is a concept that has many connotations and people mean different things when they think of pessimism. Second, I argue and defend the view that pessimists will actually support the aims of the Existential Risk philosophers. While this may appear surprising, I show that starting from different premises (the Existential Risk philosophers start from the premise that life is good and the pessimists start from the premise that life is bad), they can both arrive at the same conclusion: that we should protect humanity from the many existential threats that we currently face.

# Dedication

This is for you and for any and all beings that have ever had a hard time in life and wondered what it is all for.

# Acknowledgments

I could not have reached this point in my academic career without the support of many people. I am forever indebted to them and I want to mention their names, but first a brief preface.

I have had, overall, a good life. At the same time, I admit that there have been moments where I was certain that life was not a worthwhile experience. Other times I have felt that the suffering was almost too much to bear. Still, and even though I am unable, or unwilling, to evaluate and compare the amount of good and bad experiences that I have had, I am confident in my ability to claim that I have had a privileged life. Even though it may appear strange to preface an academic work with a statement about the quality of my life, the subject matter of my research merits such a comment. I have dedicated many years of my life to thinking about the question of suffering. Either because I have witnessed so many beings –not just humans– suffer, struggle and agonize over the tragedies and misfortunes that have befallen them or because in my own life I have been overwhelmed by certain experiences and events that have made me question the value of life. Witnessing so many people and animals die, suffer and go through horrible experiences (wars, famine, torture and so on) forces one to wonder *why* these things happen, *why* countless beings come into existence only to live a life full of hurt. One thinks, in these cases, that nonexistence would have clearly been the preferable option to existence. In the case of factory farmed animals, their predicaments are made worse by the fact that mothers are *forced* to give birth incessantly and until death arrives.

Philosophy, and I mean this in a very serious way, has been my place of refuge. In philosophy I have found a community of people deeply invested in trying to understand the human experience. These smart people are not just in books. I have had the privilege of meeting many of them personally. It does not seem right to me to make a division between personal and academic acknowledgments and gratitude. At this point in time I see no clear division between these two areas of life. People in my personal life have had –and continue to have– an impact in my academic work and the people in my academic circles have an impact in my personal life. Still, for practical purposes I can proceed as if these two areas are distinct.

For this reason I would like to first of all thank my family. My parents, Raul Moya and Sandra Arriagada. It is a privilege, an honour and a fortune so great to have had them as parents that I cannot really explain or properly express what I feel. Why should I be so lucky? I know that anything I say will fall short. To my siblings that accompanied me through my early years and with whom we shared so many experiences, Ian Moya and Katia Moya. To my wife Patricia Becerra who always, always encouraged me to pursue and deepen my studies and is always willing to support my decisions. She is my partner in life. To my children, Nicolas and Silvana Moya, both of whom I deeply love and know will help make this world a better place. I have no doubt that the world is indeed a better place because you are here. To our dog Diogenes. To the many canine friends I have had the privilege of knowing. I remember you Chascón and Cami.

To my supervisor, Corey Dyck. I still recall when I first reached out to him to ask if he would be interested in supervising my work on Schopenhauer and pessimism. At the time he encouraged me to apply to Western, which I gladly did. Then when I was offered admission into the PhD program, we had several email exchanges as I was deciding between coming here or going to another university that had also accepted me. If ever I have made the right decision it was to come to Western and work with Corey. I could not have asked for a better supervisor. His willingness to always support me and to facilitate things as much as possible were essential for my having finished this dissertation. We both had to work through the Covid pandemic and through it all I always knew that he was there to lend a hand, offer advice, guidance and support. Corey always went the extra mile for me. His intellectual depth and wealth of knowledge has helped me grow as a philosopher. At the end of this process I can now say that I consider Corey a personal friend.

To Dennis Klimchuck, Robert DiSalle and Anthony Skelton, members of my advisory committee and comp examination committee. At all times and at every stage of my process they have been supportive, encouraging, accommodating, respectful and willing to offer advice and guidance. I feel fortunate to have been surrounded by such exceptional people and philosophers. To the entire Western philosophy community and to Carolyn McLeod who at many times during my studies offered support, guidance and was always there to help me when I needed it. Her door was always open and for this I am grateful.

To Mark Migotti, the external examiner from the University of Calgary. I first met him at a conference that was held at the University of Lethbridge. I am grateful for his insightful comments and for sharing his vast knowledge of Schopenhauer with me during the conference and during my thesis defence. I also want to thank Joshua Schuster, the departmental external examiner from Western University for his willingness to participate and contribute with pertinent questions and helpful reading suggestions.

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# Chapter one - Introduction

*“I see those frightful spaces of the universe which surround me, and I find myself tied to one corner of this vast expanse, without knowing why I am put in this place rather than in another, nor why the short time which is given me to live is assigned to me at this point rather than at another of the whole eternity which was before me or which shall come after me.”*

Pascal, *Pensees*

*“It's too bad she won't live. But then again, who does?”*

Gaff, *Blade Runner*

In the year 2020, the human species witnessed how a virus spread around the world and brought with it sickness, pain and death to millions of people everywhere. National boundaries proved to be irrelevant. Oceans, mountain ranges and great distances provided no protection. And the arsenal of medical tools at our disposal was unable to stop the spread. As of the years 2022 and 2023, while I am writing and finishing this dissertation, it seems likely that the virus will become endemic and it remains possible that new variants may emerge and cause, once again, widespread illness and death. Among the many consequences of this pandemic, people have begun to think seriously about the possibility of human extinction. In light of this, considerations about human extinction and suffering are now highly relevant and timely topics. While it is true that, in one form or another, these questions have been around for a very long time and that they never been truly forgotten, the current historical context has provided us with enough immediate risk to our lives that questions about our death and the extinction of humanity are at the forefront and are more pressing than ever<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Further to the global pandemic, in March 2022, Russian military forces invaded Ukraine and a war has been going on ever since. This is by no means a unique or unprecedented event. Wars, invasions and occupations are a common

Human extinction appears, at least on a first reading, to be a tragedy of tremendous proportions. The Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom has said that “if we feel confident that committing a small genocide is wrong, and that committing a large genocide is no less wrong, we might conjecture that committing omnicide is also wrong. And if we believe we have some moral reason to prevent natural catastrophes that would kill a small number of people, and a stronger moral reason to prevent natural catastrophes that would kill a larger number of people, we might conjecture that we have an even stronger moral reason to prevent catastrophes that would kill the entire human population” (2013). This idea, that the death of the entire human population is something we ought to avoid, lies at the heart of what is known as the *Existential Risk Project*.

This claim –that our extinction would be a catastrophe– is (or so it seems) a rather unproblematic view to hold. Most of us will readily agree with Bostrom that one death, particularly a sudden and unexpected death is a *bad* and that many countless deaths are worse and even more so if those countless deaths occur violently and unexpectedly. This is a position I do not take issue with which is why I largely accept it at face value. That death is bad and even more so *countless deaths*, are principles that will not be questioned or cast into doubt. This appeal to our general agreement that death is bad is why the arguments offered by Bostrom and the rest of philosophers working with existential risk provide, at least on an initial reading, more than good enough reasons for doing what we can to prevent our collective demise.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons offered are persuasive and rooted so deeply in our collective imaginary, that, for example, at the early stages of the pandemic there was a general consensus around the idea that we had to do whatever was required in order to protect our lives and humanity in general<sup>3</sup>.

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occurrence in many parts of the world. However, what is uniquely worrisome about this particular invasion is that it has the potential of bringing into direct conflict two of the world's nuclear superpowers: Russia and the United States. In a hypothetical confrontation between these two powers, it is widely acknowledged that humanity could well disappear. This is the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 (between the now extinct Soviet Union and the United States), that the world is faced with a possible global nuclear exchange .

<sup>2</sup> A prime example of people taking action to prevent our collective demise is the contemporary movement known as *Extinction Rebellion*. This is a grass-roots movement that emerged in order to urge governments across the world to do whatever is necessary in order to prevent our extinction caused by climate change. Their stated aim is to use “non-violent direct action and civil disobedience to persuade governments to act justly on the Climate and Ecological Emergency.”

<sup>3</sup> This early consensus did not last very long. A growing number of people actively started to demand an end to all measures and restrictions. Motivated, on a first reading, by a desire for *freedom*, certain people saw in mask mandates and other health measures an expression of tyranny and oppression. This led to the now infamous

Protecting ourselves and our neighbours was understood to be an unproblematic ethical imperative. Such an almost universal agreement was initially possible because the value of existence is something rarely questioned; it is a widely and largely uncritically held belief that life is a *good* worth protection and promotion. Although certain ethical theories may allow for the death of others under the most exceptional circumstances, casting doubt on a principle as essential as the value of life itself is something, it would appear, left to the fringes of thought.

Yet, this is only apparent. Philosophy has a long tradition of questioning the value of existence and this questioning found its culmination and most coherent articulation in the philosophy of the *pessimists*. These philosophers, the *pessimists*, differentiate themselves from other philosophers precisely because they not only question the overall value and worth of life, but that they decidedly come down on the side of life as a generally miserable experience. As a philosophy, pessimism is diverse and we find within it a rich and varied landscape of examples and arguments about the overall undesirability of existence and what, if anything, can or should be done about the wretchedness of life.

While questions about the worth of life have a long history –something we shall see ahead– the *pessimists*, understood as a group of philosophers, has its roots in 19th century Germany and its main representatives are Arthur Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann and Philipp Mainländer. This group of philosophers –the *pessimists*– all agree that life is inherently *bad* and filled with suffering. They hold that life is inherently *bad* because they claim that existence is always filled with pain and suffering which is why life is ultimately an unfortunate experience –something that if one could avoid then it would be better to do so. In the eyes of the pessimist, there are no good reasons for defending life. This is why they hold the view that nonexistence is preferable to existence. And this is also why the extinction of humankind as an

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“freedom convoy” (February, 2022) in which truckers occupied the streets of downtown Ottawa, Canada, as a way to force the Federal government into undoing the public health measures that were in place at the time. I point this out because it seems to me that there may be a point at which people may prefer possible death and harm over living under conditions that they do not like. This is even more evident in much more extreme circumstances where people are willing to engage in war and *sure-death* scenarios if they feel the reasons for doing so outweigh their own lives and well-being in general. In turn this calls into doubt the principle I laid out earlier: that people will do what is necessary in order to preserve their lives. It is also the case that some people are quick to revoke the right to life that others have if they feel that the other is a threat. This opens up a series of avenues worth exploring for their own merit, but I will not do so in this dissertation. It is enough for my present purposes to assume that people, at least initially, accept as a general ethical principle that life is always valuable and worth defending.

aspiration, as a sort of *liberation* from the pains of existence –a final redemption– finds favour among pessimists<sup>4</sup>.

What is strikingly unique about pessimists, then, is that for them the disappearance of humankind may not be a *bad*. In other words, on their account, our extinction may not be something morally indefensible or an idea better left to the fringes of thought. This standpoint in regards to the value of existence is where pessimism's unique contributions to human thought can be brought to bear on the contemporary existential issues that humanity currently faces and is trying to grapple with. Among these is the question of the value of life and what and how much humanity ought to do in order to ensure our survival as far off into the future as possible.

In spite of this agreement about the overall undesirability of life between pessimists, there are several disagreements amongst the different pessimist philosophers. These disagreements are in regards to the question of *why* we suffer, *what* can be done about it and, crucially for this dissertation, the methods and the timing of what our eventual voluntary *collective* demise will look like. Already here there are differences because in fact, not all pessimists think that nonexistence is something that should be achieved *collectively*.

When it comes to the question on the demise of humanity, Schopenhauer is quite alone amongst pessimists in arguing that our voluntary extinction is not a matter of collective action, instead saying that nonexistence is a personal matter, something each person should aim for on an individual basis. On the other hand, Philipp Mainländer and Eduard von Hartmann –the two pessimists that followed Schopenhauer– argue in favour of collective action as a means to bring about total human extinction. Mainländer is perhaps more nuanced on this point, walking a rather fine line between individual and collective action because he seems to think that individual decisions on whether to continue to exist or not are still important insofar they can contribute to the overall goal of complete human annihilation. On his account, as we shall see, collective

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<sup>4</sup> The question of *redemption* is an important one for pessimists. For all the suffering that exists in the world and the reasons for it (insofar as any reasons are available), their philosophies do not simply leave it at that, they do not simply say or point out that life is bad. They all consider what, if anything, can be done about our sufferings. Can we eliminate it? Can our existential predicaments be solved or overcome? While each philosopher has a different answer –as we shall see ahead– they all think that there is indeed something that can be done. In other words, we are not necessarily condemned to keep on suffering or to eternally perpetuate suffering. Some answers we shall see may appear more satisfying than others and this is part of the rich pessimist landscape.

action may be more effective, but it is not the only way to nothingness. What matters for him is the *end*, not so much the *means* employed.

In spite of this difference (and others such as the source of our sufferings), all pessimists do agree that our final disappearance is a decision that humanity ought to *make*, it should not be something imposed on us. And this case –imposed extinction– is the only scenario where I argue that pessimists *oppose* our extinction. This opposition to imposed extinction puts the pessimist in the camp of those that *favour* doing what we can to prevent the demise of humanity under the conditions envisioned by the Existential Risk philosophers (natural or human-caused catastrophes). Indeed, faced with the prospect of complete human annihilation, we would be forgiven for thinking that it would be difficult to find any pessimist defending life or arguing that we should do what we can in order to preserve humanity and avert extinction. Yet, as I argue and show in this dissertation, this is not necessarily the case.

There are therefore two goals I aim to accomplish in this work. First to provide a comprehensive understanding of just what pessimism *is* and how it is related to other philosophies that deal with some of the same existential questions. These include questions such as what is the value of life, whether it is worthwhile to exist and how suffering can be made sense of. Not all philosophies that address these questions and answer them in the negative are pessimists.

Pessimism is a very contested concept used rather loosely by philosophers and nonphilosophers alike. It is, perhaps, most often associated with a negative attitude towards people and events. Other times it is linked to misanthropy and/or a general dislike of everyone and everything. These are all mistaken views. To be precise, it is not that there is no relation between pessimism and certain negative attitudes towards life, if only because it is indeed possible to be a pessimist and have a generally negative attitude towards life. The point I want to make is that one can be a pessimist and at the same time have a generally positive attitude towards the daily events in our personal lives. Similarly, one can be a pessimist and refrain from holding ill thoughts towards others. As we shall see ahead, conflating negative attitudes with pessimism is a wrong reading (a *very* wrong reading) of pessimism.

It is because of this widespread misunderstanding that it is important that I dedicate some time to clarifying and establishing as clearly as possible a definition of pessimism that is historically grounded –which is why for the purpose of establishing such a definition, I will be drawing from the major pessimist philosophers of 19th century Germany. This needs to be done before I show how pessimists can agree that we should do what we can to deter the many existential threats that humanity currently faces (or to be more precise, the threats that life on the entire planet faces). Ultimately, this work will contribute to pessimist scholarship more generally by providing valuable precisions and a needed up-to-date taxonomy.

As a part of this contribution to pessimist scholarship, I present and develop the following concepts for the first time: *Philosophies of Disquiet*, *The Pessimist Arrow*, *Teleological Pessimism* and *the Problem of Infinite Advance*. I will develop each of these ahead in due course.

Once I do all this, I will show how the issues that pessimism raises are insightful for contemporary concerns. The main point being that pessimists, in spite of their preference for nonexistence over existence, can agree with Existential Risk philosophers.

When dealing with the existential risks we face and *how* or *what* we should do in the face of our possible extinction, I identify and elaborate two possible pessimist answers: the *strong stance* and the *weak stance*. The strong stance says that pessimists (motivated by compassion towards all living beings) will actively encourage all forms of existential risk deterrence. In other words, pessimists will buy into and be on board fully with the project. The weak stance says that pessimists, while not actively encouraging risk management, will not oppose or argue against it. This means that pessimists *will not* be on board with the project but will not necessarily oppose it either. Rather, they may adopt a more neutral stance towards it. Of particular note is the philosophy of Philipp Mainländer insofar as he is the pessimist more likely to adopt the weak stance –something we shall see ahead. Still, in no case –including Mainländer and those that would adopt the weak stance– will pessimists *actively* oppose and/or attempt to discredit or show that existential risk management is unethical, philosophically misguided or a pointless endeavour.

While I claim in this work that the strong stance is *preferable* from a pessimist point of view (with some caveats and conditions that will be proposed herein), the most relevant point here is that *both* stances provide an excellent way to understand and appreciate the valuable contributions that philosophical pessimism can make to this issue. Along with tapping into the great wealth of philosophical insights provided by the pessimist tradition, the new pessimism that I present here, and that I call teleological pessimism (see chapter 4 for a discussion of this) is meant to support the idea that humanity is bound to live in a state of uncertainty and anxiety *even if* all existential threats are successfully averted and most social ills are largely eliminated. Therefore, no matter how much progress humanity achieves, nonexistence will remain preferable to existence.

## 1.1 The Dilemma

The realities of life mean that most of us, today, are keenly mindful that human existence is fragile and that there are a growing number of existential risks that pose threats to our continued existence. I briefly mentioned two threats (Covid and nuclear war) that we are all currently dealing with, but if new threats were to emerge it would hardly surprise any of us. Philosophers, and non-philosophers alike, are aware of this. This is why already before the appearance of Covid and the appearance of new nuclear threats, the field in contemporary philosophy known as *Existential Risk Management Studies* arose as a way to study, think about and deal with these many threats (I will refer to this area of study as ERM from here on for practical reasons because it is a convenient short-hand expression for “existential risk management”).

So while Bostrom and others working within this academic field offer reasons to avoid our demise, they do not simply leave it at that. This is not a purely theoretical or abstract concern. Instead, they go a step further and argue that faced with a whole series of existential risks, humanity ought to elaborate concrete practical strategies in order to avert those risks (Bostrom 2002). In other words, we should *act* and adopt risk management strategies with the purpose of ensuring that humanity does not perish. The idea that our extinction is something that



we should prevent appeals strongly to our intuitions which is why it is a view easily accepted and defended by most philosophers, politicians, leaders and the public in general.

While the idea that we could all one day disappear is not a difficult one to conceive, Thomas Moynihan has recently argued that the notion of human extinction as a very real possibility was in fact only first conceived in the 18th and 19th centuries. In his book *X-Risk* (2020), he says that our extinction is an idea that “first had to be *discovered*” (7) and that humanity would not “have come of age without having stumbled upon this momentous realization [that of our demise].” (10) This realization is, from a historical perspective, a very recent event. Before that time it was thought that, although all humans could disappear, it would also be the case that humans would eventually return to occupy the prominent place we occupy (as it was believed) in the universe. Today, however, imagining a universe with no humans at all is fairly unproblematic. Our disappearance is therefore a serious possibility, both factually and conceptually.

The positions are now clear. Pessimists welcome human extinction and existential risk philosophers want to save humanity from possible extinction. They are, it seems, on opposite grounds. Yet, as mentioned previously, in this dissertation I argue that –in agreement with the pessimists– human extinction is not bad *per se*. And at the same time I make the stronger argument that this extinction *is bad* if it is imposed on us against our will. In this lies the possible *meeting of minds* between these two philosophical perspectives; in that both pessimists and ERM philosophers agree that avoiding *imposed* catastrophe and death is a worthwhile project<sup>5</sup>.

I am now in a position to state the view I defend here as the following: *existence is essentially undesirable and it would be better if humanity went extinct, but it is also desirable that we do what we can to deter the current existential risks we face*. In doing so, I do not argue that human life is so valuable that the end of the human species would be a *bad* thing. Instead, I accept and defend the pessimist view that the end of humanity is not necessarily nor in all cases a bad thing or something that we should fear or avoid; only violent and imposed death should (when possible) be avoided<sup>6</sup>. This unfavourable view of existence is common to all pessimists

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<sup>5</sup> While existential risk philosophers will add that any sort of extinction, be it imposed or voluntary, is always bad.

<sup>6</sup> This claim will be nuanced ahead, particularly in the case of the philosophy of Philipp Mainländer. The place that violence, and even violent *imposed* death occupies in his philosophy is a matter of debate.

and if we look further back into the history of human thought, we can find arguments in favour of the undesirability of human life that go as far back as the year 500 BCE (more on this below). The interesting point here is that pessimist ideas are not only historically relevant but that their claims and propositions can help us navigate the very contemporary and urgent issue of human extinction.

So while pessimism is an historically significant school of thought that is relevant and important on historical grounds alone (insofar as pessimism had its origin as a systematic and coherent corpus of thought in German philosophy of the 18th and 19th centuries that continues to bear philosophical fruits today), the insights into the human condition that pessimism can provide are very useful today for navigating the existential issues we face. Ignoring this contribution only deprives us of the philosophical tools that make it possible for us to better understand *why* we want to avoid human extinction and under what conditions (if any) we would *not* want to avoid our extinction. Even more than this, one of the contributions that pessimism can provide to the question of human survival is that it provides a much needed cautionary note.

Uncritically accepting the idea that the continued existence of the human species is, always and necessarily, something valuable that ought to be promoted is philosophically problematic. The really interesting point, however, that pessimism can make is not that protecting humanity and all the species that share Earth with us is in itself always undesirable; instead, the point is that accepting at face value the desire that some profess for the continued existence of humanity into the far future is a position that is questionable and should not be uncritically assumed. This assumption (that life itself is always worthy of protection) requires close philosophical scrutiny. Doing so only enriches the intellectual resources available to all of us and can make it possible for us to better justify (or not) the push to protect our species. And pessimism is in the best position to do this. As a consequence, one of the aims of this dissertation is to highlight the relevance and the importance of the history of philosophy in general and pessimism in particular for a better understanding of contemporary issues –specifically the issue of human extinction.

While pessimism has a history that dates back at least three hundred years, Existential Risk studies can “safely be called a new academic discipline.” (Moynihan, 21). So while these

two philosophical perspectives are not only separated by hundreds of years, as we have seen – and this is really the crucial point– they are also separated by questions of what they consider the value of life to be<sup>7</sup>. Yet, as I have already said, this distance between them can be bridged. And not only *can* it be bridged, it is in our interest to do so insofar as it allows us to advance our philosophical knowledge and our understanding of our place in the world. But not only this. By incorporating pessimist philosophy into the contemporary debates about the existential risks we face, some important philosophical shortcomings within the risk management field can be overcome.

To their detriment, most philosophers working within the existential risk project show a relative unfamiliarity with the history of pessimist thought. In their book *Calamity Theory* (2021) Schuster and Woods claim that these philosophers are “existential thinkers without thinking existentialism” (12). In line with this, I say that they are extinction philosophers without thinking about the first truly extinction philosophers: the pessimists<sup>8</sup>. By attempting to remedy this weakness, I make pessimism relevant for not simply (or only) historical reasons but also for the questions and issues that the world faces today.

## 1.2 Rise of a Philosophical Tradition

Our current historical juncture has become, once again (as it once was in Germany during the 19th century), an interesting time for philosophical pessimism. This is because there is a recent growth of pessimist studies as evidenced by a series of books, translations and academic journals

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<sup>7</sup> An important clarification needs to be made here. When pessimists talk of life and existence, they really do refer to *all* of existence. This clearly includes not just humans but, at a minimum, all the animals that inhabit the Earth. Of all the pessimist philosophers, Arthur Schopenhauer is the one that dedicated the most time in his writings to the question of animals. Existential risk philosophers, on the other hand, are primarily concerned with human existence. This is an issue of concern and I address it ahead. For now, the essential point to keep in mind is that whenever I use the concept of *existence* or *life* in the context of pessimism it refers to all beings. And whenever I refer to *existence* or *life* in the context of existential risk, this refers only to human life, unless I state otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> As far as I can tell, Thomas Moynihan is an exception to this. In his main book, *X-Risk* and in other places, he does address pessimist thinkers (mainly von Hartmann) but he does so with the main purpose of exposing what he thinks is Hartmann’s “disturbing and extremist position” which is why he views pessimists as philosophical opponents at best or as mere historical curiosity and so they do not have much to contribute to our general understanding of the human condition. Or, to be precise, what they do contribute can be discarded in virtue of their extreme views.

that have sprung in recent times<sup>9</sup>. While this resurgence tends to focus on historical aspects of pessimism, there remains limited scholarship in regards to its relevance for today. What can pessimism say to us today about how we can live our lives and face the many wrongs and sufferings that all beings confront in their daily lives? Pessimism, as I will show here, is not just an inert philosophical moment in history that is best relegated to historical studies. Rather, it has concrete practical consequences for the world today and evidenced by the contribution it can make to existential risk studies.

As a part of the recent uptake in philosophical pessimism, there are three books that merit particular mentions and that I will appeal to frequently within this work. I point these out in particular because each makes an important contribution to pessimist scholarship and as such they provide the best starting points for an approximation to pessimism. First is Mara van der Lugt's recently published *Dark Matters* (2021). This is a book that adds new historical elements to the study of pessimism by highlighting the relevance of authors such as Bayle, Hume, Rousseau and Kant for pessimism and by drawing a strong connection between pessimism and what is known as the *problem of evil*. For this reason alone, it merits special consideration. In addition to this, it is a timely book because it presents pessimism as a vibrant, relevant and consistent philosophical perspective on the question of the *value* of life –what she calls *value-oriented* pessimism (11)<sup>10</sup>. And this question, whether life is valuable or not, is a central pessimist concern.

Second, is Frederick Beiser's book *Weltschmerz* ([WZ], 2016). This book is important because it represents a turning point in the study of philosophical pessimism from a historical and academic standpoint. Although it is by no means the first book to address pessimism as a philosophical area in its own right, it has the merit of bringing together a group of German philosophers writing during the 19th century in order to show how their arguments and claims are interconnected and how they followed and evolved from one another in such a way that we can properly speak of a philosophical tradition. This had not been done in a consistent manner

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<sup>9</sup> Here I only want to mention two examples of scholarly journals that have recently appeared in the Spanish speaking world. "Henadas" (2019) and "Cuadernos de pesimismo" (2021).

<sup>10</sup> She refers to the pessimism that interests her as *value-oriented*. This is a pessimism that questions the value of existence, whether life is "worth living" (17). She draws a contrast with Dienstag who in his book *Pessimism* defends a *future-oriented* pessimism. That is a pessimism that, looking forward, expects nothing of the future (11).

before. In so doing, Beiser shows us that in Germany of the 19th century there had been an ongoing pessimist conversation lasting several decades. As a consequence, his book solidified the claim that there was (and still is) an actual school of thought called *pessimism*. And he, most aptly, called that philosophical period, the period of *Weltschmerz*<sup>11</sup>.

Beiser's use of the term *Weltschmerz* to describe that period is not without its share of controversy. In his paper "Worse than the best possible pessimism? Olga Plümacher's Critique of Schopenhauer" (2022), Christopher Janaway recalls how Plümacher had made clear in her own book *Der Pessimismus in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (1884) that *Weltschmerz* is not, properly speaking, philosophy<sup>12</sup>. Rather, it is a concept that captures a pessimist *mood* while pessimism is in reality much more than any particular mood; it is a well thought and argued philosophical system that reveals fundamental truths about the world. *Weltschmerz* is, in her words, "unreasoned pessimism" (Plümacher, 88). Janaway points out that according to Plümacher, *Weltschmerz* "is a self-centred attitude of lament about the world and one's uneasy place within it, whose most distinguished expressions are literary and poetic" and that it is a "sickness of youth" (Plümacher in Janaway, 213), while pessimism is rigorous philosophy<sup>13</sup>. It is

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<sup>11</sup> *Weltschmerz* is a German word that conveys a sensation of deep uncomfortableness with the world, or *worldpain*. *Welt* means world and *Schmerz* means pain (Beiser, 1).

<sup>12</sup> Olga Plümacher alongside Agnes Taubert are two important female pessimist philosophers in 19th century Germany. To his credit, in his book *After Hegel* (2014) Beiser includes an Appendix called "Two Forgotten Women Philosophers". There he mentions Plümacher and Taubert as "major contributors to the pessimism controversy" (217) –this *controversy* being the popularity of pessimism that was brought on by Hartmann's success and its subsequent discussion. While Plümacher and Taubert were both sympathetic to Hartmann's pessimism and often wrote to defend his philosophy from his critics, they also made original contributions to pessimism while articulating that defence. Taubert wrote *Philosophie gegen naturwissenschaftliche Ueberhebung* (1872) and *Der Pessimismus und seine Gegner* (1873). Beiser reports that Taubert died at the age of thirty-three of rheumatism of the joints (217). She left her husband, von Hartmann, behind. Unfortunately, I am unaware of any English translation of Taubert. Sully, for example only mentions her in passing and says that she "accepts Schopenhauer's doctrine, that with progress there comes a growing recognition of the unreality of happiness, and of the sufferings of existence, but lays great emphasis on the possibility of a considerable triumph over this misery, through the combined struggle of mankind" (108-109). In this, as we shall see ahead, Taubert is in agreement with Hartmann. Plümacher, on the other hand, wrote an essay in English and this has made her work more accessible outside of German circles. This is one of the reasons I spend time on her and none on Taubert.

<sup>13</sup> Janaway also points out that Plümacher finds the term *pessimism* itself problematic. As he says, "she calls pessimism an 'arbitrary derivative term' invented to be the counterpart to optimism (*Pessimismus*, 2) [yet] Plümacher retains 'pessimism' as a standard term and offers no replacement (it would presumably have to be *peiorism*) but insists that all Schopenhauer can really mean is a comparative judgment" (222). The issue at hand is that pessimism is understood as the *worst possible* in contrast to Leibniz's *best possible* whereas what pessimism really claims about the world is that it is not that this is the worst possible (this would be a superlative claim) but that the world is overall a bad state of affairs and filled with suffering (this would be a comparative claim insofar as it involves comparing *goods* and *bads*). This is an interesting point that should not be left unexplored and therefore merits future research.

essential to be clear on this distinction; while Plümacher says that pessimism is not to be confused with a mood or feelings of self-pity or self-loathing, she is not saying that pessimism does not involve feelings or emotions. What are, after all, pain, suffering, anxiety and the countless desires that we all experience? They are not not *just* emotions that one can readily ignore. Rather, they are part of what can make life a painful experience.

Ultimately, the important point that Plümacher wants to stress is that philosophical pessimism is not *primarily* or *only* about certain moods or emotions. Specifically, it is not about self-centred feelings, which is to say that it is not about how any one person primarily feels about the world. I may, for example, have the fortune to not experience the sufferings or pains of existence with any regularity and of not having lived through any personal tragedies or losses and *still be a philosophical pessimist* in virtue of the strength of its arguments alone. Equally true, I may be a person prone to bouts of sadness or bleak moods but this does not necessarily make me a pessimist.

Plümacher's point about the difference between pessimism *as Weltschmerz* and pessimism *as philosophy* not only merits serious consideration, but it is a position I agree with. Pessimism is not reducible to moods or feelings (I elaborate more on this in chapter two). Still, following Beiser I will continue to use the term *Weltschmerz* when making reference to the pessimist philosophers of 19th century Germany<sup>14</sup>.

Whether or not we prefer Beiser's characterization of that period as the time of *Weltschmerz* or we are inclined to agree with Plümacher that *Weltschmerz* is different from pessimism, it is a matter of historical agreement that, for reasons that are not completely clear, there did occur a unique combination of factors in Germany of the 1860s that made it possible for pessimism to acquire great popularity among the intellectuals of the time. This popularity, however, was not restricted to the intellectuals but gained traction among the public in general in such a way that "Germany in the late 19th century was *the* age of pessimism, *the* epoch of *Weltschmerz*" (Beiser, *WZ*, 4). Indeed, such was the popularity of pessimism during that historic period that,

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<sup>14</sup> The reasons for this are purely practical. It seems to me that giving a label to this specific historical period and the philosophers developing pessimist philosophy during that period is expedient and useful.

the dark cloud of pessimism hung thick over Germany. This bleak and black mood spread far and wide. It was not confined to decadent aristocratic circles; it could also be found in the middle classes, among students at universities, workers in factories, and even pupils in *Gymnasias*. Pessimism soon became fashionable, the talk of the town, the theme of literary salons. There were several anthologies of aphorisms and verse to indulge one's melancholy on any occasion. (Beiser, WZ, 1)

What happened in Germany that made it possible for pessimism to grow and attain such popularity? Beiser attempts several explanations but none seem to satisfy him completely. He quotes Kuno Fischer and Jurgen Bona Meyer as two philosophers that attributed the rise of pessimism in Germany to the failure of the Revolution of 1848. Yet, this seems like an incomplete explanation because pessimism gained popularity in the 1870s, almost twenty years after that defeat. Other competing explanations are the economic crash of 1873 and moving beyond purely social and economic explanations, Beiser thinks that the rediscovery of the *problem of evil* in Germany played a major role in popularizing pessimism. On the other hand, in his book *Le pessimisme au XIXe siècle: Leopardi--Schopenhauer--Hartmann* (1878), the French philosopher Elme-Marie Caro situates the popularity of pessimism in the great literary skills of Schopenhauer as well as what he called a “natural reaction to the empty optimism of the last century” (Caro, 292). All this, was coupled with the fact that

certain university students and part of the bourgeois classes learn at school, and under the pretext of pessimism, to ask aloud if monstrous inequalities in the conditions of well-being enter as an eternal and necessary element in the plan of nature. Life is cursed as it is ordered, and always the same story, waiting for the one who is the strongest to change it” (292)

These conditions conspired to give pessimism its popularity. People in Germany were asking questions about existence, politics and social questions and in looking for answers they came to settle on pessimism because it was, at the time, on offer through the works of the Weltschmerz philosophers.

In this attempt to understand the reasons for the popularity of pessimism as well as to try to make sense of it as a coherent philosophical system we get to the third relevant book I want to mention in this introduction. In 1877, James Sully published a book called *Pessimism, a History and a Criticism*, right in the middle of the great epoch of Weltschmerz. It was a book intended to introduce english readers to what was happening in Germany. Sully says that,

Englishmen are beginning to understand that pessimism also stands for a recent development of speculation which provides a complete theory of the universe, and which appears to be adopted, at least in the land of its birth, by a large and growing school [and] has for some little time aroused a certain curiosity in England. (2)

The relevance of this book is that Sully was able to introduce pessimist thinkers to readers beyond Germany and to show that there existed something like a pessimist spirit. While this book was perhaps the first to group pessimist thinkers –and in this lies its unique place in pessimist scholarship– it was more of an exploration of the philosophical issues raised by Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, Bahnsen, Frauenstadt and Taubert, than a systematic look at the *zeitgeist* of the period<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, the book was the subject of a poignant and sustained criticism on the part of Plümacher in her essay *Pessimism* (1879) for Sully’s failure (in Plümacher’s eyes) to recognize that pessimism had reached its high point *not* in the philosophy of Schopenhauer but in the work of Eduard von Hartmann. She also claimed that, in general terms, he misunderstood von Hartmann in such a way that “Mr. Sully finds everywhere contradictions and fallacies, which are mainly due to his own misunderstanding” (73)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Of note, the book *Weltschmerz* by Beiser includes a discussion on the philosophy of Philipp Mainländer –an essential and key philosopher in pessimist thinking that Sully does not include. This apparent omission on Sully’s part is, however, understandable because Mainländer’s magnum opus, *The Philosophy of Redemption*, was only published in 1876, a year before *Pessimism, a History and a Criticism* appeared. It is unlikely he had the opportunity to become acquainted with its contents.

<sup>16</sup> She says that, for example, Sully takes much too literally what are meant to be similes. In so doing he accuses Hartmann of “mythological fancies” when he, for example, speaks about the end of the world process (the end of all existence). According to Plümacher, Sully “takes it all as a positive statement, and ridicules him accordingly” (73). Yet, it seems to me that this is an unfair criticism. Sully is explicit in acknowledging that “it remains to determine the precise nature and conditions of this conscious denial of the will” (140). In this Sully is acknowledging the truth that Hartmann *is not* taking a definitive stance on how existence will come to an end. Plümacher’s critique seems therefore imprecise.



Furthermore, in Plümacher's criticism, she says that Sully has thrown "himself unreservedly into the arms of optimism" (88) because he ends up claiming that pessimism is not a substantial philosophical doctrine that has any fundamental truths to reveal about the essence of the world itself. Rather, Sully holds that "only a small proportion of nominal pessimists are sincere and firm believers" and most are pessimists due to a "special sensibility to pain" that is amenable to medical treatment (Sully, 444). Sully goes as far as to claim that "if ever a complete science of health shall exist, and the deepest conditions of mental as well as bodily welfare be ascertained, we may, perhaps, without being Utopian, predict a period when *the dearest forms of pessimism will disappear* together with the peculiarities of temperament which underlie and sustain them" (444, italics mine). It is clear from this that Sully thinks pessimism is better understood as a disease that can be cured. Plümacher rightly picks up on this point and is quite relentless in her criticism of it<sup>17</sup>.

A more nuanced reading of Sully, however, will show that he believes optimists are equally prone to the distortions of our individual temperaments. He says that "the optimist's overstatement of the benefits of progress is favoured not only by the hopeful joyous temperament as a whole, but also by those feelings which lead us to magnify our own condition in comparison with that of our ancestors" (440). In addition to this, he quite explicitly renounces optimism because he thinks it is vulnerable to the same objections he raises against pessimism. For him, "neither optimism nor pessimism can lay claim to be a strictly logical belief—that is to say, the pure result of observation and induction" (403).<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, and in spite of what Plümacher claims, Sully went to certain lengths in order to show that he is not an optimist. Rather, he was a self described *meliorist*. As he put it, meliorism, "lies midway between the

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<sup>17</sup> Sully is a psychologist and this likely informed his approach to the study of pessimism. Such an approach allows him to say things like "optimism and pessimism, then, have their deepest psychological roots in differences of sensibility. Yet these are not the only internal factors. Other mental influences cooperate to turn the judgement in this or that direction" (415) and that "pessimism is the natural outcome of the carping, fault-finding disposition" (423). Ultimately Sully is of the idea that pessimism is indeed a philosophical system, but a system not born out of arguments or philosophical reflection but of certain psychological predispositions (and the same applies to optimism).

<sup>18</sup> Sully raises an important and larger point here. As we shall ahead, pessimism is often criticized for being too reliant on moods and personal dispositions, but the same criticism is seldomly raised at optimists. It seems to me that Sully is correct in highlighting that both views may be subjected to the same criticism. I bring this issue up again in chapter 4.4.

extremes of optimism and pessimism” and he credits “our first living woman-writer and thinker, George Eliot” (399) as having come up with the term itself<sup>19</sup>.

This equating pessimism with moods and temperaments has been a sustained line of criticism since the Weltschmerz era and it continues to be used today. Caro, in one of the strongest criticisms of pessimism as a *temperament-based philosophy*, claimed that

Optimism and pessimism are, therefore, first of all, a matter of temperament, morbid inheritance, humor and nerves. Its influence must also be attributed to the character itself, although the temperament enters as an essential element, and also to the exercise and development of the will, more or less willing to fight with the outside, to suffer the pain, to contemplate it head-on and without fear. It turns out, then, that there are optimistic temperaments and pessimistic temperaments, happy characters and unhappy characters, more or less fearful sensibilities or propensities to pain; natures of spirit, in short, disposed to totally opposite appraisals of the same facts. (284).

On his account pessimism is a personal appraisal (as is optimism for that matter) and as such there can be no real philosophical insight to be found in it<sup>20</sup>. Caro had carefully read Sully and agreed with his general contention that pessimism is better understood as a psychological rather than a philosophical matter. He says that Sully is correct when “he tells us that [whenever] an exaggerated sense of the evil of life meets a fiery imagination for ideal goods, and at the same time a relative weakness of active impulses and of practicality: there is high probability that the lack of balance will result in a pessimistic concept of existence” (286). This is to say that pessimism is present where certain psychological predispositions facilitate its appearance, not when a philosophical evaluation and analysis of existence is carried out.

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<sup>19</sup> Meliorism is a view that claims the world can be better, that happiness is possible through hard-work and struggle. As Sully says, meliorism recognizes the possibility of happiness. This is not, as the optimists think, the best possible world, but it is also not, as the pessimists think, better that we not exist. In this way, meliorism is “fitted to stimulate human endeavour, and so has the qualifications of a practical conception” (440).

<sup>20</sup> This line of criticism foreshadowed Bertrand Russell's same criticism of pessimism by at least sixty years. I shall refer to this ahead.

An important precision is needed here. There are two similar, but distinct psychological concerns at work here. One is to say that philosophical pessimism, although it is indeed a philosophical system that presents a view of existence, it is a patently *mistaken* system or a highly *improbable* one because these pessimist philosophers are somehow blinded, misled or deceived into describing existence as undesirable in virtue of some psychological predisposition they may have (this is what Sully does). In other words, they build philosophical arguments and present *systems* to condemn existence because of their underlying psychological traits. Second, the concern is that one does not take pessimism seriously because it is in fact *not a philosophical system* at all but a psychological attitude. I will address this last concern in the next chapter.

In the end, however, all these sorts of criticisms are rather simple ways to brush aside the arguments presented by the pessimists. By not taking them seriously, an opportunity for a fruitful philosophical conversation is lost. Unfortunately, and as we shall see numerous times here within, when dealing with pessimism this is a common approach among philosophers and non-philosophers alike. Instead of dealing with the substance of the arguments, even people otherwise sympathetic to the pessimist project tend to appeal to temperaments and psychological explanations in order to ground pessimism, in order to understand why anyone would *be* a pessimist philosopher. It is my expectation that this work can contribute to dispelling this approach.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> I am in no position at this time to explain why this is such a frequent criticism levelled against pessimism. The psychological view is a line of critique raised often and consistently when it comes to pessimism, but hardly so when it comes to optimism. My first intuition is that pessimism is a philosophical view that reveals some fundamental truth about existence. And this truth is not a pleasurable one. It is bleak and harsh and as such it causes pushback and a certain cognitive as well as affective resistance in most of us. Pessimism seems to fly in the face of our most cherished beliefs; that life is good and that we ought to be thankful and appreciative of it. The pessimist challenges this. In an interesting parallel, Schopenhauer says that one of the reasons that suicide is an act condemned in the eyes of the general public is that giving up life voluntarily “is a poor compliment to the one who said everything was good” (PP, 279). Suicide is a way to refute and repudiate God, in the surest terms possible, by letting everyone know that *life is not good*. The same could be said of pessimism. That it is a way to refute, through arguments, our deepest held inclinations about the value of life and to tell everyone that *life is not good*.

## 1.3 Structure

In order to accomplish everything I have just set out, this dissertation is divided into five chapters. In the next chapter, Chapter two, I define pessimism. While I have thus far been making long and sustained use of the concept of pessimism, I have done so without reference to any specific understanding of what it means and instead I have simply appealed to our general intuition that pessimism is about general misfortune, suffering and the desirability of nonexistence over existence. In actuality, pessimism is a concept that has many different usages and connotations depending on the subject matter being discussed and the discipline it is used in. For this reason, in this chapter, I will proceed to narrow and specify what I mean by pessimism.

In chapter three I expand on the pessimist tradition by elaborating in detail the arguments of three essential Weltschmerz philosophers: Schopenhauer, Hartmann and Mainländer.

In chapter four I present the concept of *teleological pessimism* as a new source for pessimism and as a way of understanding why suffering will persist, even if all social ills are eliminated and existential risks are removed (which is why extinction will always ultimately be the preferred choice). Teleological pessimism is an important contribution I hope to accomplish in this dissertation with the purpose of strengthening the pessimist landscape.

Finally, in chapter five I elaborate the existential risks we face as laid out primarily by the existential risk project. I then proceed to show exactly what each pessimist philosopher says about how to best achieve extinction and what strict conditions need to be met in order for extinction to be philosophically justified. In this chapter I will not argue against the existential risk project nor will I engage in a significant philosophical analysis of its claims. Some criticism, however, is inevitable. Schuster and Woods (*Calamity Theory*, 2021), for example, provide a series of poignant and highly relevant objections and criticism of the field. Such criticisms merit thoughtful consideration and detailed discussions, but in keeping with my purpose here (to outline the main existential risk arguments) I will engage only in a limited –but necessary– criticism<sup>22</sup>. As Moynihan says, this is a new academic discipline that has the potential to

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<sup>22</sup> The Existential Risk field is fraught with political and ethical difficulties that merit time and dedicated space. In this sense, the work of Schuster and Woods is important because it addresses many of these concerns. Although, as I have said, I will not be referring to them in any detail in this work, it seems to me that it is important to point out

influence public policy and as such it is important to achieve a working familiarity with its main points. And once the main arguments of the existential risk philosophers are presented, the main dilemma of the dissertation will become clear: how can pessimists favour human extinction and not oppose existential risk management at the same time? They appear to be, after all, at opposite ends of the debate. In response to this, I elaborate on the *strong* and *weak* stances that pessimists can adopt vis-a-vis existential risk management. By the end I will have brought everything together to show that while human extinction may be desirable, so is existential risk management.

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some of these concerns. First, the existential risk field is focused on the long-term survival of the human species. As such it is often oblivious or indifferent to actual and current social problems we have to deal with (poverty, xenophobia, inequality and others). Further, they tend to not concern themselves with the sufferings and even the death and disappearance of small groups of humans if and so long as that does not impact the survival of the human species *as a whole*. The last point I want to mention here (and that I will refer to further below) is their instrumentalization of the rest of life, and the planet itself. In other words, *everything* is seen as a means for maximizing the flourishing and expansion of the human species. Consequently, it denies any inherent value to other beings.

## Chapter two - What is pessimism?

Most of us have encountered someone at some point in our lives that, when offered an opportunity (for a job, a vacation, a project or other similar events), has answered with a negative attitude. Say, for example, that we want to go to the beach for the day but our friend does not want to. They could say something like, *I don't think we should go, you know, it's probably going to rain, we are going to get wet and cold, we'll surely lose something in the sand –doesn't that always happen?– and overall we won't have a good time.* Our friend imagines the worst outcome. They are, we would probably agree, a pessimist –or they have a pessimistic *attitude* towards our invitation. There is indeed a common, and perhaps prevailing understanding of pessimism that makes reference to a *bad attitude* and a generally negative disposition towards people and events. This, however, is not what pessimism means in philosophical terms. As I referenced in my previous discussion on the rise of pessimism as a *tradition*, one line of psychological criticism consists in denying that pessimism is a philosophical system insofar as it is primarily a psychological attitude. Yet, though related, there are important and crucial differences between psychological and philosophical pessimism and this plurality in meanings requires us to outline a clear understanding of pessimism before any fruitful philosophical conversation can begin.

Outside of academia, and sometimes even within it, it is the psychological perspective on pessimism that has been, and still is, the dominant one. This has been true since the first appearance of pessimism and continues to be true today. The *American Psychological Association* defines pessimism as,

the attitude that things will go wrong and that people's wishes or aims are unlikely to be fulfilled. Pessimists are people who expect bad things to happen to them and to others or who are otherwise doubtful or hesitant about positive outcomes. Most individuals lie somewhere on the spectrum between the two polar opposites of pure optimism and pure pessimism but tend to demonstrate relatively stable situational tendencies in one direction or the other.

In other words, psychological pessimism is an *attitude*. Philosophical pessimism, on the other hand, is a philosophical *system* that purports to answer questions about the value of existence and explain why suffering is so ubiquitous. More on this ahead in chapter 2.4 when I define pessimism.

Already at the height of the Weltschmerz period, Sully rightly made the point that,

to most English minds, perhaps, the term pessimism suggests nothing like a philosophical creed or a speculative system. As a familiar word in popular literature it appears to signify a certain way of looking at the things of life, a *temper of mind* (italics mine) with its accompanying intellectual predisposition. In everyday language a man is a pessimist who habitually emphasises the dark and evil aspects of life (...) We do not think of them as a school adopting certain first principles in common, but rather as a peculiar make of a person characterized by a kind of constitutional leaning to a gloomy view of the world and its affairs (1).

Quite accurately Sully says that pessimism is often associated with certain character traits and hardly ever with a developed school of thought that has first principles and proceeds to a complete system from those principles<sup>23</sup>. Beiser cites Julius Bahnsen, one of the prominent Weltschmerz philosophers, as saying already in 1881 that unfortunately, pessimism “is used to justify every negative mood and fit of hypochondria.” (WZ, 281). In more recent times, Dienstag pointed out that “just as theories of progress are not the same thing as a cheerful attitude towards life, neither should pessimism be equated with a foul disposition” (4). The task, then, is to establish pessimism as a philosophical point of view, different from the claim that views pessimism as essentially a personal psychological trait<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> This assessment that Sully makes should be nuanced. While he does hold that pessimism is *not only* a mood but a philosophical school, recall that he also says that the foundations of pessimism are indeed found in psychological temperaments and dispositions. Also, and as Plümacher pointed out and refuted (see above page 13), Sully even claims that pessimist inclinations are often due to the presence of certain pathologies within individuals.

<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that there do not exist overlapping aspects between psychological and philosophical pessimism. While I will not pursue this line of enquiry here, it is nonetheless interesting to point out that, at a minimum, they both share the general view that bad things happen in the world, that they can happen to us and that these things are, largely, beyond our control.

Conflating philosophical pessimism with a psychological attitude is widespread. Yet, this is not the only misunderstanding that is commonly made when discussing pessimism<sup>25</sup>. Even within philosophical pessimism there is a varied landscape and different ways of interpreting pessimism that can sometimes lead to confusion. It is a concept used rather loosely and directed at many different philosophers that may have very little in common other than a negative evaluation of life or a general ill disposition to existence. Still, and in spite of the confusion that arises when pessimism is used in these different ways, none of the views used in philosophy can be said to be wrong in any meaningful sense. Furthermore, they are all equally good at capturing what is distinct about pessimism understood as a philosophical perspective –even if these views appear to be addressing, at times, different questions or issues.

Yet, while it is true that none of these views are wrong *per se*, that does not mean that they are all equally accurate. To varying degrees, the different views can be said to be more or less insightful, more or less comprehensive. Some are much too narrow, others too broad. As is usually the case with attempts at reigning in philosophical debates, the task is not a clear-cut one. Keeping this in mind, in the case of pessimism it is still possible to find a view, among the many that exist, that better encapsulates the unique contribution and the historical and thematic connections that bring together a series of pessimists into what can be properly called a *philosophical tradition*.

But first, what are the other ways in which philosophy has conceptualized pessimism? Raymond Tallis in his book *Enemies of Hope: a Critique of Contemporary Pessimism* (1997) quotes the conservative counter-enlightenment philosopher Joseph comte de Maistre as saying that “the whole Earth, perpetually steeped in blood, is nothing but a vast altar upon which all that is living must be sacrificed without end, without measure, without pause, until the consummation of things, until evil is extinct, until the death of death” (in Tallis, 15). This is a most graphic

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<sup>25</sup> Because of this widespread misuse of the term pessimism (as language evolves and usage takes words in different directions, perhaps to label it as *misuse* may be inappropriate at this point), a case could be made for the idea that pessimism is a concept that is no longer very useful for describing the philosophy of the Weltschmerz period. Aside from the point that Plümacher made about the inaccuracy of the word pessimism, (see note 12), we can also add that today it is largely and overwhelmingly associated with psychological traits. It is doubtful whether so much time needs to be invested in carving out philosophical pessimism from the other more popular uses of pessimism but this may be a *ship that has sailed*. If, as Janaway suggested (note 12 again) *peiorism* is a more useful concept, then it may be worth exploring this possibility. However, in the end it may turn out to be just as difficult to replace philosophical *pessimism* with *peiorism* which would only mean that we are best left with pessimism.



depiction of the way the world is seen by most (if not all) pessimist philosophers. Yet, while it is an accurate description of how pessimists *see* the world, it provides no reasons or justifications as to why the world is *perpetually steeped in blood*. This is why de Maistre's characterization of the world is a powerful opening line but is unsuited for a proper understanding of pessimism *as a philosophy*. For this we need the *Weltschmerz* philosophers.

Yet while I claim that any comprehensive understanding of pessimism should ideally make reference to the *Weltschmerz* philosophers, this is a view not shared by all philosophers. In his paper *What Pessimism is* (2012), Paul Prescott develops a useful contemporary survey of the distinct meanings associated with the concept of pessimism without making any reference to the *Weltschmerz* philosophers. Still, and in spite of this important shortcoming, his discussion allows us to familiarize ourselves with the different meanings attached to pessimism as it is currently conceptualized. So although his survey is short on Schopenhauer, Mainländer and von Hartmann, it is helpful for framing how pessimism is often understood today. He says that pessimism can be understood as,

- *Fatalism or Cynicism*: the view that human agency is futile with respect to one or more basic constraints upon the human condition.
- *Skepticism or Nihilism*: 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*: the view that conditions are worsening or in a process of decline.
- *Despair*: the abandonment of hope—e.g., due to clinical depression, a character defect, or simply adversity in living. (338)

Prescott rightly points out that these views are insufficient because they fail to make sense of the issues raised by pessimism—these being, from his perspective, issues related to *good* and *bad* as *values* that contrast and compete with one another. In the end he endorses the view that pessimism is a *stance* where the belief that bad prevails over good (343) means that the bad is greater than the good (343) in the world. Prescott argues that we believe this is the case (that bad prevails over good) not only because we arrived at this conclusion as the result of some unattached abstract philosophical reasoning. Rather, we arrive at this belief insofar as, one, we

compare valuable outcomes in our everyday lives and, two, we take into account the historical and psychological dimensions of this comparison as well. And when we do these two things we cannot help it but end up endorsing a particular stance –in this case a pessimist stance; that there is more bad than good in the world. On his account pessimism is a stance that one arrives at after considering both certain psychological predispositions and evaluating our everyday lives. Further to this, a philosophical and historical analysis of these evaluations leads us to conclude that, in our world, the balance between bad and good is tilted towards the bad.

Most interestingly, Prescott points out one of the more dismissive attitudes towards philosophical pessimism as exemplified by Loemaker in his entry on pessimism. Loemaker's criticism of pessimism is important because it captures a certain distrust about the relevance of pessimism that exists among certain philosophers. Loemaker claims that "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" (in Prescott, 2)<sup>26</sup>. This is a clear instance of denying that pessimism is a philosophical system by labeling it as a psychological attitude. Prescott rightly points out that Loemaker is mistaken. Yet this is not only a mistake but a failure to appreciate the important contributions that pessimist philosophers make to ethics, epistemology and for the issue I address in this dissertation –the future of humanity.

It is important to keep in mind that viewing pessimism as a psychological predisposition is not wrong *per se*. Only that it is wrong to conflate it with philosophical pessimism. Prescott is aware of this which is why along with dismissing Loemaker, he also brushes off Bertrand Russell's assertion that pessimism is not a philosophical doctrine at all but a mere temperament. As if Loemaker was not clear enough in denying the existence of pessimism as philosophical system, in his *History of Western Philosophy* (1947), Russell said that "the belief in either pessimism or optimism is a matter of temperament, not of reason, but the optimistic temperament has been much commoner among Western philosophers. A representative of the opposite party is

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<sup>26</sup> This is, as we have seen to this point, a fairly recurrent criticism of pessimism (that it is somehow not a legitimate philosophical system of thought). I have already pointed out that this view has been refuted on several occasions by different philosophers. Here I only want to recall that very early on Plümacher identified this sort of critique leveled against pessimism and she dealt with it by making clear that pessimism is a philosophical system open to analysis and criticism just like any other philosophical argument. As such, and insofar as pessimism is amenable to the sorts of analysis that philosophers carry out, it is not philosophically useless as Loemaker claims.

therefore likely to be useful in bringing forward considerations which would otherwise be overlooked.” (751). Simply put, pessimism (and optimism for that matter) is not really philosophy. Furthermore, in that same entry he makes a reference to Schopenhauer (chapter XXIV), and says that his philosophy had a *certain shallowness* to it (751). If anything, these two statements show a failure on his part to grasp the issues, perspectives and insights that pessimism offers by reducing its arguments to attitudes and psychology.

Roger Scruton, a known conservative in political matters, defines himself as a pessimist because, in his view, pessimism is a tempering attitude (*The Uses of Pessimism*, 2010). In other words, pessimism is a healthy check on our utopian expectations and as such it is a desirable attitude towards the inevitable –or so he claims– deceptions and defeats that humanity will face when it fails to live up to the utopian ideals. There is a straightforward line from this particular understanding of pessimism to conservative politics. By appealing to caution and realistic expectations based on the idea that things can be worse and that aiming too high only sets one up for disappointment, the conservative pessimist is able to slow (if not defeat) the pace of social change.

Similar to this, Stuart Sim in *A Philosophy of Pessimism* (2015) argues in favour of what he calls *positive pessimism* which means that while progress is possible it is important to keep in mind that it is also true that the worst is always a real possibility at all times. These pessimisms, however, are more about cautionary tales, about looking at reality closely in order to understand that the world is complicated and a fundamentally untamable one where things we cannot control are bound to happen. They make no metaphysical claims about the *essence* of the world and this, as I shall elaborate further ahead, is a distinctive feature of pessimism as I conceive it.

Joshua Dienstag, in his book *Pessimism* (2009), presents an interesting view of pessimism. Picking up on Schopenhauer’s discussion on time and its relation to suffering, he argues that pessimism is the view that freedom is incompatible with happiness, that existence is absurd and that *time is a burden* (19), in particular for human beings. This is because we have a “mental horizon that includes past and future, we are vulnerable to disappointment, worry and regret” (87) in ways that other beings are not (assuming they have no notions of past or future –a

debatable claim that I will address in passing at several points further ahead<sup>27</sup>). As he puts it, “flux in time is the background condition of existence against which the human desire for happiness must constantly run aground” (54). Dienstag’s emphasis on the role of time on our existential predicaments is, as he recognizes, based on Schopenhauer’s views on the relation between time and suffering. When discussing how the passage of time factors into our predicaments, Schopenhauer says that

happiness lies always in the future, or else in the past, and the present may be compared to a small dark cloud driven by the wind over the sunny plain; in front of and behind the cloud everything is bright, only it itself always casts a shadow. Consequently, the present is always inadequate, but the future is uncertain, and the past irrecoverable (...) the way in which this vanity of all objects of the will makes itself known and comprehensible to the intellect that is rooted in the individual is primarily time. It is the form by whose means the vanity of things appears as their transitions, since by virtue of this all our pleasures and enjoyments come to naught in our handsome and afterwards we ask in astonishment where they have remained (WW2, 573, 574)

Such is the degree of suffering that time imposes on us that we humans are not only “prey to bodily pain limited to the passing moment, but also to those incomparably greater mental sufferings, which reaching forwards and backwards, draw upon the future and the past; and by nature, by way of compensation, has granted to man alone the privilege of being able to end his life at his own pleasure, before she itself sets term to it” (*The Basis of Morality* [BM], 19). While Schopenhauer’s point here is to not to defend or encourage suicide (he opposes suicide on philosophical grounds –a point I will develop ahead), he is saying that time burdens us with

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<sup>27</sup> While I will be making several comments in regards to animals as this work progresses, for now it is pertinent to mention that there is plenty of anecdotal evidence for the claim that, for example, when dogs realize that they are heading to an appointment with the veterinarian, they get scared. In these cases, their “mental horizons” include the future and the past—sometimes a very long past (this being the last time they visited the veterinary). Their suffering is, consequently, not limited to a narrow present moment. I am unaware of any systematic study of this, but *prima facie* there do not appear to be any good reasons to rule out the ability of certain animals to project to the future and/or the past. As so often happens, there appears to be a strong desire to carve out a special and unique place for humans within the world and this may explain our blindness to the complex mental lives of other beings. Schopenhauer has more to say on this as we shall see in chapter 3.1.

additional sufferings not available to other beings. This is also why, so he claims, we always have the option of suicide available to us whereas other beings do not.

While it is therefore undeniable that Schopenhauer places a great deal of importance on time as a source of our ills, Dienstag overemphasises this point. Time is not the main or even the most relevant source of the suffering that permeates existence. Rather, time is an additional source, an *add-on* that increases suffering. Time is, therefore, not a prime source for pessimism. It is only an aggravating factor. Still, Dienstag's reading is an interesting contribution to the pessimist landscape and one that along with *teleological pessimism*, strengthens the pessimist argument that existential suffering is an inescapable aspect of our lives regardless of social changes.

A helpful way to understand the philosophical questions raised by pessimism is provided by Thomas Munro (1958), when he rightly points out that

Pessimists differ as to how extensive and disastrous suffering is among humans: as to what proportion of mankind, if any, is really happy and successful. They differ on how miserable the ordinary person is, and how deep a tragedy life is to those that feel. They differ on how inevitable failure is for man in general, for contemporary man, and for the more sensitive individuals today. Those that regard it as due to an unjust social and political system imply that it could be corrected by a better one: if not by reform within the limits of present capitalism, then by revolution, communism or some other radical panacea. The mystics who denounce the present age from the standpoint of medieval or oriental religion put the blame on science and materialism; but some of those believe that science can be put to good use. They differ on the extent to which human nature is essentially corrupt, and can be saved without supernatural intervention." (148)

The point raised by Munro is important and relevant for the question at hand. How extended is suffering and can social reforms provide a solution to the many ills we face? This is important because if most of our ills can be reduced or eliminated by human acts, then there are good reasons to be hopeful and optimistic about our future. Pessimists must be able to answer this challenge. To not do so is to admit that favouring human extinction as the only way to end

the long chain of pain and suffering that befalls us is a mistake. This is why, as we shall see, pessimists hold that our existential predicaments cannot, ever, be solved by any social progress.

Mainländer understood this point extremely well, which is why he ends up advocating for all sorts of social reforms, even social revolution, as a way to dispel any doubts we may have in this regard. He makes the strong claim that in utopian societies the preferability of nonexistence to existence will be all the more evident. The reason for this is that –as all pessimists hold– the source of human suffering is existence itself and not the sorts of arrangements we make for ourselves or the material conditions in which our lives are carried out. This is not to say that such factors do not play a role in our predicaments. It may in fact be the case that our objective environmental conditions have a tremendous influence on the quality of our lives. It may also be the fact that those conditions can be modified, thereby reducing our sufferings.

I concur with all this –that social change can and often does make people's lives better. There are more than good reasons to advocate greater justice and social change from a pessimist perspective just as there are reasons, albeit perhaps not as good, to defend conservative positions. Ultimately, and setting aside the conservatism that follows from Scruton's pessimism (I set him aside because his is not, properly speaking, a philosophical pessimist –at least not as the *Weltschmerz* philosophers or I conceive pessimism), one can be a pessimist and favour revolutionary politics as much as reactionary ones. Von Hartmann and Mainländer have much to say on this particular point with the latter favouring progressive politics and the former favouring conservative ones.

In spite of these differences in political terms, where all pessimists do agree on is that the fundamental source of our misgivings is found in the *essence* of existence itself and not in this or that particular circumstance. This, holding that the essence of existence is the source of our existential predicaments, is a central feature of pessimism as I understand it. To use Schopenhauer's terminology, our existential misgivings are found in the will –the will being the most important concept in Schopenhauer's metaphysical pessimism (I will explain what the will is and what role it plays within pessimism further ahead and until I do passing references to the will shall nonetheless be required). The essential point here is that this *will* lies forever beyond our reach and remains, therefore, ungraspable and unaffected by our actions in this world no

matter how revolutionary or reactionary they may be. Plümacher, once again, makes this point very clear when she says that,

The future will doubtless heal many wounds which now seem incurable. Even the social question will some day find a solution, though no one dare say whether it will be by gentle or by violent means. But the great sources of suffering will still abide in the future for the reason that they spring from the very conditions of life (87).

Pessimists hold steadfast to this point: there is nothing we can do to ever change the essence of existence. And, as we shall see ahead, this point is an inescapable feature of pessimism and what helps to distinguish it from other related philosophies.

## 2.1 Early Challenges to the Value of Life

Questions related to the goodness or badness of life can be traced as far back as the early Greeks. The myth of Silenus presents us with the first antinatalist dictum. The Greek philosopher Plutarch (45–120 CE) tells us about the myth of Silenus and how, according to Aristotle, King Midas captured Silenus. In that encounter, Midas asked Silenus –whose reputation as a wise person was known– what was the best that a man could wish for. As Plutarch puts it,

They say that Silenus, after the hunt in which Midas of yore had captured him, when Midas questioned and inquired of him what is the best thing for mankind and what is the most preferable of all things, was at first unwilling to tell, but maintained a stubborn silence. But when at last, by employing every device, Midas induced him to say something to him, Silenus, forced to speak, said: ‘Ephemeral offspring of a travailing genius and of harsh fortune, why do you force me to speak what it were better for you men not to know? For a life spent in ignorance of one's own woes is most free from grief. But for men it is utterly impossible that they should obtain the best thing of all, or even have any share in its nature (for the best thing for all men and women is not to be born); however, the next best thing to this, and the first of those to which man can attain, but nevertheless only the second best, is, after being born, to die as quickly as

possible.’ It is evident, therefore, that he made this declaration with the conviction that the existence after death is better than that in life.<sup>28</sup>

This idea –that the best is to not have been and that the second best is an early death appears to be a common theme in Greek literature. In addition to the passage by Plutarch quoted above, in the play *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles has the chorus exclaim something very similar: “Say what you will, the greatest boon is not to be; But, life begun, soonest to end is best, and to that bourne from which our way began, swiftly return”. (109). And as if this was not enough, in *Pessimism, a History and a Criticism* (1877), James Sully recounts that “in the elegies of Theognis, the final conclusion of modern pessimism is expressed as (...) It would be best for the children of the earth not to be born... next best for them, when born, to pass the gates of Hades as soon as possible” (18). Antinatalism, then, has a long history that can be traced back to the early Greeks.

Perhaps one of the most striking features about pessimism is that it reveals itself in its most authentic and powerful aspects when we first encounter another being suffering. When we suffer ourselves, the feeling of despair can be intense and at times it can verge on the unbearable, but when we see an *other* struggle with the loss, pain and powerlessness we come to realize just how wretched life can be<sup>29</sup>. This is when the question arises, why do we – humans and non-humans– suffer? Once the question is posed, the intuition that something is very wrong with the world is installed in us. And at some point during our questioning, we encounter pessimism in one or another form. Some stay here, others move on. Regardless, the fact that suffering is indisputable and so widespread among all beings that inhabit Earth means that at some point we come to understand that we are all in this together. To use an expression coined by Schopenhauer, all the other beings are *fellow-sufferers*.

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<sup>28</sup> In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche also recalls this encounter between Silenus and King Midas. Faced with a barrage of questions from Midas, Silenus answers, “Miserable ephemeral race, children of chance and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it is best for you not to hear? The very best of all things is completely beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best thing for you is –to meet an early death” (Nietzsche, 27)

<sup>29</sup> Seeing *others* in pain was, recall, what prompted Siddhartha Guatama to dedicate his life to solving the question of suffering. I previously raised this same point, highlighting the importance of the suffering endured by others for pessimism in my essay *Pesimismo profundo* (2018).



Indeed, we are never alone when we ask ourselves about suffering in the world. Trying to understand why we suffer has long been a human pursuit. One of the earliest and most notable cases is that of a young prince by the name of Siddhartha Guatama, born at some point in the fifth century BCE in what today is the Indian-Nepalese border. Rupert Gethin cautions that “there is no scholarly consensus on the precise dates of the Buddha” (Gethin, 14). Where there is consensus is that at some point in his early youth, most probably when he was 29 years of age (Gethin, 21), the prince left the palace where he had been born and raised and had four encounters with the human condition that forever changed him and the course of human thought<sup>30</sup>. The things he saw were: an old person barely alive and able to handle themselves. Then he saw an extremely sick person followed by a corpse. The final encounter was with a wandering ascetic. These sightings were enough for Siddhartha Guatama to see and understand with clear certainty: life is full of suffering and he subsequently decided to abandon his life as he had been living up to that point and went on to become a wandering ascetic himself (Gethin, 21) with the express purpose of trying to discover what, if anything, could be done in the face of suffering. After a series of meditations, finally “one day seated quietly beneath the shade of a rose-apple tree his mind had settled into a state of deep calm and peace” (Gethin, 22). In this state, he was able to see with absolute clarity what are known as the four noble truths concerning knowledge of suffering, its cause, its cessation and the way leading to its cessation (Gethin, 22). An early quoted summary of these four truths<sup>31</sup> is,

*First.* This is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, dying is suffering, sorrow, grief, pain, unhappiness and unease are suffering; being united with what is not liked is suffering, separation from what is liked is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates of grasping are suffering.

*Second.* This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: the thirst for repeated existence which, associated with delight and greed, delights in this and that, namely the thirst for the objects of sense desire, the thirst for existence, and the thirst for non-existence.

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<sup>30</sup> Gethin claims that making reference to Siddhartha Guatama’s wealth and status as a prince is a cultural misunderstanding insofar as his family was not *royal* per se, but a locally important aristocratic family.

<sup>31</sup> Gethin stresses the point that when buddhism speaks of *truth*, these truths are not to be understood as propositional truths, but rather as *real* or *actual* lived truths (60).

*Third.* This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the complete fading away and cessation of this very thirst -its abandoning, relinquishing, releasing, letting go.

*Fourth.* This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: the noble eightfold path, namely right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. (59-60 italics mine).

And with this, Siddharta Guatama had founded one of the great religions (or to be precise, one of the great *philosophies*) of the world: Buddhism<sup>32</sup>. The idea that life is filled with grief has therefore accompanied human thought for a long time.

Questioning the value of life and whether or not existence is worthwhile can be, sometimes, a dangerous philosophical activity. The best example of this is demonstrated by the life of he who was known as Hegesias, *The Death Persuader* –an ominous sobriquet for a philosopher like perhaps no other. As Matson put it, he was a philosopher that “positively advocated suicide” (553) and this meant that his teachings were ultimately prohibited by King Ptolemy making him, perhaps, “the first philosopher to have his academic freedom infringed by government” (553). Matson tells us that Hegesias lived in Alexandria in the third Century BC and that the only notes about his life available to us appear in Cicero’s book *Tusculan Disputations*. The description of Hegesias is a brief paragraph, but it is enough to give us an idea of what made him dangerous in the eyes of the political authorities of that time. According to Cicero,

death takes us away from the bad, not the good. ... Indeed the Cyrenaic Hegesias argued for this so eloquently that it is alleged he was forbidden by King Ptolemy to make those statements in his classes because many on hearing them committed suicide... There is a book by Hegesias entitled *The Man Starving Himself to Death* in which someone dying of self-starvation is called back by his friends, and in answer to them he enumerates the unpleasant aspects of human life. I could do the same, although less emphatically than he, for he thinks that living is to

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<sup>32</sup> Buddha is not a name, but a title and so is not inexorably tied to one particular individual. It is a title that means *one who has woken up* (Gethin, 8) and as a consequence there have been other buddhas besides Guatama Siddhartha.

absolutely nobody's advantage, whereas I say nothing about other people, only asking whether it is to my advantage.

Matson describes Hegesias's hedonistic philosophy as pessimist (554) insofar as his claim is that happiness is impossible in this life. The interesting point here is that the exact way that the question about the value of life has been posed, and the way its causes are understood and what can be done about it, has a long history and has varied widely through time and cultures. Writing in 1885, Edgar Saltus said in his book *The Philosophy of Disenchantment* that while pessimism as a systematic philosophical system is new, the idea that existence is bad is not. He claimed that

Within the last half century (...) there has come into being a new school, which, in denying the possibility of happiness, holds as first principle that the world is a theatre of misery in which, were the choice accorded, it would be preferable not to be born at all (...) In stating that this view of life is of distinctly modern origin, it should be understood that it is so only in the systematic form which it has recently assumed, for individual expression of discontent have been handed down from remote ages, and any one who cared to rummage through the dust-bins of literature would find material enough to compile a dictionary of pessimistic quotation. (18).

Saltus is writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States and is certainly well-aware of the philosophical developments going on in Europe and specifically in Germany<sup>33</sup>. And while he correctly says that ideas about the misery of the world go back in history, he also accurately claims that these ideas cohered together to work as a system is something that only happened during his time –the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is, relatively speaking, a recent event in the history of philosophy but long enough so as to constitute a history worthy of study and consideration.

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<sup>33</sup> He carries out an extensive and long discussion of both Schopenhauer and von Hartmann in his *The Philosophy of Disenchantment*.

## 2.2 The Problem of Evil

It is because pessimists believe in the ubiquitous presence of pain and suffering everywhere that it is possible to draw a connection between pessimism and what is known as the *problem of evil*—perhaps even to the point that the two may be difficult to separate. Yet, while I claim that it is philosophically inaccurate to conflate the two, Mara van der Lugt thinks the relation between pessimism and the problem of evil is so close that pessimism—in particular Schopenhauer’s pessimism—is actually a part of the *theodicean* tradition that traces its roots to 17th century French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647-1706).

In her book *Dark Matters* (2021) she advances the idea that “the rise in prominence of the concept of suffering is closely related to the story of pessimism” (7) and she sees the problem of evil “mainly as a problem of suffering, sometimes as a problem of creation” (8). There is indeed overlap between pessimism and the problem of evil, not the least of which is trying to make some sense of the suffering that is so widespread in the world. Yet, while pessimism does attempt to answer the question of suffering (and in so doing, provides in my view one of the *strongest* answers thus far provided by philosophy), the *problem of evil* is often construed primarily in theological terms; that is as an attempt at reconciling the existence of God with the fact of suffering. As van der Lugt puts it, this is a “question that can be broadly described as a conflict between God's presumed attributes and the fact that bad things happen in the world”(3).

In agreement with Lugt, Susan Neiman formulates the question as “how could a good God create a world full of innocent suffering?” (*Evil in Modern Thought*, 3)<sup>34</sup>. In turn, Michael Tooley frames the problem of evil as an *epistemic* question about “whether the world contains undesirable states of affairs that provide the basis for an argument that makes it unreasonable to believe in the existence of God.” (*Stanford Encyclopedia*). In his book *The Best of All Possible Worlds* (2008), Steven Nadler provides a clear and succinct framing of the question at hand. As he says, “to generate the problem of evil, a number of conceptual and empirical ingredients are required. First, there is the claim that there is a God and that God is the creator of the world.

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<sup>34</sup> In her discussion of this issue, Neiman makes it clear that although the *problem of evil* is often thought to be a theological one (as I pointed out above), it is now a properly philosophical one.

Second, there is the claim, supported by everyday experience, that there is evil in God's creation" (84)<sup>35</sup>.

Given that this is inescapably a problem that points to God, it seems to me that the close link that van der Lugt draws between pessimism and the *problem of evil* is not as straightforward as it may appear. Yet, at the same time, it is not without historical merit. The relation that van der Lugt establishes between pessimism and the problem of evil is made clear when she claims that, as she reads it, Bayle is at "the heart and origins of a pessimist tradition" (21). She does this because she considers Bayle responsible for placing the issues that were later raised by pessimism (suffering and its possible meanings, origins and justifications) at the centre of 18th century philosophy (21)<sup>36</sup>.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that Bayle carries out his probing of the evils that exist in the world through a permanent conversation with God. And this is what prompted Leibniz to produce his *Theodicy* (1710) in an attempt to defend God from Bayle's questions and thereby rescue and reassert the omnibenevolence of God<sup>37</sup>. The question of evil in the face of God was so important for Leibniz that, according to Nadler, he "was occupied, even obsessed with the problem of evil" (89). Yet, he had to ultimately concede that "the problem of evil is one of enormous difficulty" (93).

Pessimism on the other hand, and as Schopenhauer himself made clear, need not address the *problem of evil* if we understand this as an attempt to explain the prevalence of suffering and evil in a world created by God. And he made this clear because the *idea* of God as the being that created the universe and rules over it (and is in some ways responsible for it) is absent in his philosophy. His philosophy posits no origin of the universe and no being responsible for

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<sup>35</sup> Questioning God and his Creation is, also, an old preoccupation in philosophy. The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-271 BCE) already claimed that "God either wishes to take away evils and he cannot, or he can and does not wish to, or he neither wishes to nor is he able, or he both wishes to and is able. If he wishes to and is not able, then he is weak, which does not fall in with the notion of god. If he neither wishes to nor is able, then he is both envious and weak and therefore not god. If he both wishes to and is able to, which alone is fitting to god, whence, then, are there evils and why does he not remove them?" (In Nadler, 85). This is known as the *Epicurus paradox*.

<sup>36</sup> It seems to me that a more accurate claim would be that, as I already referenced before, the issues raised by the Weltschmerz philosophers can be traced back much further than Bayle –all the way to the early Greeks. As such, the roots of these questions are as old as philosophy itself.

<sup>37</sup> As Nadler claims, the term *theodicy* comes "from the ancient Greek words *theos*, God, and *diké*, justice" (89) and was coined by Leibniz himself.

Creation or the events that unfold. As such, the presence of evil need not be reconciled with any omnibenevolent being.

The distance that exists between his philosophy and God is such that it is possible to claim that Schopenhauer was in actuality an atheist. This is, for example, a reading of Schopenhauer that was put forward by Nietzsche and Plümacher, with Nietzsche saying in the *Gay Science* that Schopenhauer was the “first admitted and inexorable atheist among us Germans” (357) and Plümacher claiming that as we contemplate “the world, the only thing that is not so much cognized, as immediately given in our self-experience, is the will, which as a blind principle cannot be God” (Plümacher 125, in Janaway 219)<sup>38</sup>. More recently, David Burman also supports the reading that Schopenhauer was an atheist. He says that “atheism does seem to be a clear implication of Schopenhauer’s system: for given that this world is essentially blind eternal will to life, there does not seem to be any need for an intelligent and good God who creates this world.” (1610).

God, then, cannot be equated to the will and the will is precisely what, for pessimists, lies at the foundation of all existence. Further to this point, Sandra Shapshay and Janaway endorse these readings. For Janaway, Schopenhauer can be unproblematically classified as “an atheist with profound ideas about the human essence and the meaning of existence” (*Parerga and Paralipomena*, [PP], ix). On the other hand, Shapshay says that Schopenhauer

assumes a thoroughgoing atheism, and so does not seek to justify this suffering by virtue of original sin; rather, he sees the victims of all of this suffering as rather innocently going about their lives as naturally dictated by their inborn will-to-life: Taking Junghuhn’s turtles for example, Schopenhauer asks rhetorically, “For what offence must they suffer this agony? What is the point of this whole scene of horror?” His answer is, of course, that there is no point; the turtles are not guilty of anything, they were simply born into this cycle, namely the manner in which “the will-to-live thus objectifies itself.” (*Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics*, [RS], 71)<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> While Plümacher is here likely referring to Hartmann’s will, in doing so she is also referring to Schopenhauer’s will insofar as Hartmann takes the idea of will from Schopenhauer.

<sup>39</sup> The Junghun turtle example is taken from *WWR2*, p.354 where he tells us how Junghun “a traveller who journeyed through several provinces of the island of Java” (355) found an “immense field entirely covered with skeletons, and took it to be a battle-field. However, they were nothing but skeletons of large turtles five feet long,

To this I add that it is important to point out that Schopenhauer is not an atheist *because* he was unable to reconcile the idea of an omnibenevolent being with the fact of suffering and evil in the world thereby deciding to forgo the idea of God. Rather, he is an atheist because he has no need to posit the existence of God in his metaphysics and therefore no need to reconcile His existence with the fact of evil. In Schopenhauer's system, evil exists as a consequence of the nature of existence itself –no creator or responsible being needed.

Aside from this particular point about atheism and the problem of evil construed mainly as a *theological* problem, van der Lugt goes to certain lengths in order to show that Schopenhauer does indeed engage with theodicy. One of the points she highlights is that Schopenhauer seems to be providing a justification for the evils that exist in the world and in doing this he is therefore, perhaps unwittingly, engaging with the tradition of theodicy. Insofar as the problem of evil attempts to explain why evil exists, and Schopenhauer also attempts to explain this, then it would seem that we can conclude that he is working with the same concerns and issues raised by Bayle. As van der Lugt puts it, although he is not “addressing theodicy explicitly, [he] is nevertheless operating within a theodicean context” (349)<sup>40</sup>.

In addition, van der Lugt suggests that in volume 2 of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer deploys a conscious and much more sustained criticism of Leibnizian optimism when he sides with David Hume who, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural*

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three feet broad (...) these turtles came this way from the sea, in order to lay their eggs, and are then seized by wild dogs (...) these dogs lay them on their backs, tear open their lower armour (...) and devour them alive. But then a tiger pounces on the dogs. Now all this misery is repeated thousands and thousands of times, year in year out” (354).

<sup>40</sup> In *PP2*, Schopenhauer addresses Leibniz's theodicy directly. He says that “Even if Leibniz's demonstration were correct that among all *possible* worlds this is one is still the best, still does not represent a *theodicy*. For the creator did not create merely the world, but also the possibility itself; accordingly he should have arranged the possibility in such a way as to allow for a better world” (271). While I think this reading of Leibniz is mistaken (because while it is correct that God made *this* world actual, He did not in fact create all possibilities as much as foresee them, *all* of them. Creating possibilities is therefore not something He did or does), the relevant point here is that Schopenhauer is undeniably aware of the theodicy debate and realized that engaging with it on some level was unavoidable. Indeed in this particular passage of the *PP2* he dedicates considerable space to the problem of evil. After the quote above, he goes on to say that “nothing is more certain, generally speaking, than that the heavy *sin of the world* is what brings about the abundant and great *suffering of the world*, which is meant here not in the physical empirical, but the metaphysical context. In accordance with this view it is only the story of the fall from grace that reconciles me with the Old Testament; in fact, in my eyes it is the only metaphysical truth appearing there, albeit in the guise of allegory. For there is nothing our existence resembles more completely than the consequences of a blunder and punishable lust” (271). Still, Schopenhauer is here taking original sin and our fall from grace more as revealing *stories* than as philosophical *truths* which is why it would be inaccurate to infer from this that he is engaging with theodicy.

*Religion* (1779), defended a pessimist interpretation of existence<sup>41</sup>. The fact that he sides with Hume is, according to her, evidence that he is well aware of the debates within theodicy and that in this debate he sides with the pessimism of Hume. In the *Dialogues*, Hume has Demea state in part 10, among other things that,

people are sufficiently convinced of this great and melancholy truth. These phrases, the miseries of life, the unhappiness of man, the general corruptions of our nature, the unsatisfactory enjoyment of our pleasures, riches, honours, have become almost proverbial in all languages. And who can doubt something that all men declare from their own immediate feeling and experience?”

So even though “Schopenhauer is not explicitly reacting to theodicy” she claims that it is still the case that “whether or not Schopenhauer mentions [Bayle], the tradition into which Schopenhauer is inscribing himself is a Baylean one” (354). In this way, pessimism would appear to be inexorably tied to the problem of evil.<sup>42</sup>

Still, it seems to me that the *problem of evil* is not the most important source for pessimism as van der Lugt argues for two reasons. The first reason is what we have seen up to this point; that insofar as it is construed as a theological question, is not really essential to Schopenhauer’s philosophy and, by extension, to pessimism more generally. And even if a strong case for Schopenhauer’s indebtedness to the theocidean debate could be made, the same would not necessarily hold for the other pessimist philosophers. In this way it would be hasty to conclude that philosophical pessimism *tout-a-court* forms a part of the theodicean tradition. As

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<sup>41</sup> As evidence of this, van der Lugt cites passages from *WWR2* where Schopenhauer praises Hume for his pessimism. Specifically, where he says that Hume defends “the miserable nature of this world and the untenableness of all optimism” (581-582) and where he claims that the theodicies ultimately succumbed “to the arguments of Hume and Voltaire” (591).

<sup>42</sup> The importance of Christianity for this question cannot be downplayed. For this reason, what role Christianity plays within Schopenhauer’s philosophy is relevant. Yet as Gerard Mannion says in his book chapter *Schopenhauer and Christianity* “as a dialogue partner for his philosophy, Christianity clearly emerges as among the three most influential religions for Schopenhauer’s thought, alongside Hinduism and Buddhism”. In other words, Christianity (and by extension the *problem of evil*) is an important element in his philosophy but it is also the case that he is, at a minimum, equally influenced by Eastern religions, in particular Hinduism and Buddhism (though Mannion ends up claiming that Christianity had the larger role). Still, as Raj Singh puts it, “no other philosopher had studied, elucidated, and incorporated into his own system Indian philosophies as vigorously as he did.” (384). All this suggests that it is perhaps religion at large, and not only Christianity, that was an important interlocutor for him.



we shall see ahead, Hartmann and Mainländer, the two leading pessimists that followed Schopenhauer, also have little to say in the way of justifying evil in the presence of God. Hartmann thinks outright that religion *is an illusion* that is bound to be superseded and for Mainländer evil and suffering need no justification in the eyes of God because God *no longer exists*. Furthermore, He (God) is the ultimate source of our suffering and the evils that befall us and so does not need to justify the existence of evil any more than He needs to justify his own existence (more on this in chapter 3.3).

The second reason is that, at bottom, they are addressing different questions and so have different philosophical concerns. For the problem of evil, the question is, *how can the existence of evil be justified?* For pessimism, the question is, *is existence preferable to nonexistence?*<sup>43</sup> In arriving at their answers both of these perspectives touch on many of the same topics and concerns which is why it is tempting to incorporate one tradition into the other.

That they address many of the same concerns is why it would be mistaken to deny the presence of important and relevant connections between pessimism and the problem of evil<sup>44</sup>. The connections are undeniably there and this is why if one forces the issue too much—as I think van der Lugt has done—it may be possible to subsume one set of concerns into the other. But, as I have argued here, it is mistaken to do so because it erases the unique set of concerns and histories that each philosophy has.

The fundamental point that I want to make is a precise but necessary one: pessimism as a philosophical tradition does not require that the problem of evil be addressed, but it does not preclude it either. For this reason, it would be more accurate to say that while pessimism is indeed related to the problem of evil, the problem of evil can be largely addressed on its own

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<sup>43</sup> For Hartmann this was the essential pessimist question. In the first line of chapter XIII book three, he says that “The object of this chapter is to inquire whether the *being* or the *non-being* of this present world deserves the preference.” (1). While I take this to be a central question for all pessimists, other possible takes could be, *why is the world filled with so much suffering or is happiness possible?* In either of these questions, God is not a central concern.

<sup>44</sup> At one point, and acknowledging the presence of evil in the world as a *problem*, Schopenhauer says that “the astonishment that urges us to philosophize, obviously springs from the sight of the *evil and wickedness* in the world. Even if these were in the most equal ratio to each other, and were also far outweighed by the good, yet they are something that absolutely and in general ought not to be” (WWR2, 171-172). As we have seen, Schopenhauer addresses the problem of evil directly at several points throughout his work which is why a dialogue between these two philosophies is bound to happen.

merits with little, or any, reference to the pessimists. The same, of course, applies in the other direction –that pessimism can be addressed without making reference to the problem of evil. As a consequence of this, I hold that the problem of evil, which is to say theodicy, is better conceived as one of the many *philosophies of disquiet*.

## 2.3 Contemporary Philosophies of Disquiet

It is time to spell out just what counts as a *philosophy of disquiet*. This is a term that I use here for the first time in order to group pessimism, antinatalism, human extinction movements in general, existential nihilism, the problem of evil (theodicy) and, perhaps, existentialism. This umbrella term is meant to be broad and inclusive so that any philosophical perspective that discusses our existential predicaments and questions the value of existence in the face of suffering and lack of purpose can be included<sup>45</sup>. And I name it *disquiet* because the sense of *unease* with life is what ties all these perspectives together.

In formal terms, therefore, I define philosophy of disquiet as *philosophy that deals with the unease of life brought on by the suffering of existence*. This question does not entail a specific answer. Some disquiet philosophies may end up defending the value of life in the face of suffering. Others, such as the pessimists, end up preferring nonexistence to existence. What unifies them is not the answer to the question but the question –or the concern– itself.

While disquiet and unease are sensations –and as such are open to the same sorts of criticisms that Plümacher raised against Weltschmerz– the heavy philosophical lifting is to be done by each of the philosophies that come together in the disquiet. As such, philosophy, and not emotions or personal predispositions are first when it comes to evaluating each of the positions

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<sup>45</sup> Spanish essayist Unamuno (1864-1936), Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) and French-Romanian philosopher Emile Cioran (1911-1995) are three important existential thinkers that, while they cannot be properly called pessimists or antinatalists, fit easily as philosophers of disquiet. Quite fittingly, Pessoa has a book published posthumously called *The Book of Disquiet* (1982) in which he explores our existential experience. For example, in the section he calls my “factless autobiography” [and] lifeless history”, he confides that he “sees life as a roadside inn where I have to stay until the coach from the abyss pulls up. I don’t know where it will take me because I don’t know anything. I could see this inn as a prison, for I am compelled to wait in it; I could see it as a social centre, for it’s here that I meet others [and eventually] night will fall on us all and the coach will pull up” (S.1)

defended by the disquiet philosophies –be they antinatalist, pessimist or existentialist philosophies.

Disquiet has been a permanent presence in our lives. As we saw above, scattered ideas and claims about the preferability of nonexistence go back to, in the words of Saltus, the “remote ages”. Questions about suffering and how it can be justified have an equally long history<sup>46</sup>. Yet in spite of this long history, the popularity of questions about the value of human life have waxed and waned with its highest point being Germany of the Weltschmerz era. After a period of relative philosophical obscurity during the 20th century, concerns about the possibility of human extinction have risen to prominence in the last few years and this has in turn contributed to a renewed interest in questions about the value of existence *vis-a-vis* nonexistence.

A crucial contributor to this renewed interest has been the presence of contemporary antinatalist arguments within the public sphere. Its relevance today is such that it is unavoidable to address their arguments (or at least the most relevant ones) whenever questions about the value of life come up. In simple terms, antinatalism is the idea that it is better to *not* be born<sup>47</sup>. In other words, faced with the option of giving birth or not giving birth to a new being, it is better to not give birth because life is always filled with more pain than happiness. This is why antinatalism is closely linked with pessimism –both deny that life is valuable in itself and worth promoting for its own sake.

Antinatalism is overwhelmingly at the forefront of debates about the value of existence. The contemporary antinatalist field in philosophy is now a large one that has spurred a considerable amount of discussion –the book *Permissible Progeny* (2015) being a relatively recent anthology of antinatalist arguments. Sarah Hannan, the editor of the volume defends the timeliness and the philosophical urgency of this book because “historically, questions about the morality of procreation and parenthood have received little philosophical attention. This is rapidly changing. This collection adds to a growing body of work on the bearing and rearing of

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<sup>46</sup> The *Book of Job* in the Old Testament is a prime example of someone protesting to God for the suffering and injustice that has befallen for him for *no apparent reason*. In this way, Job calls into question the worthiness of existence as he tries to make sense of the tragedies that have befallen him. This is a document that dates back at least to 1500 years B.C.E.

<sup>47</sup> Antinatalism has enjoyed a renewed interest particularly since David Benatar published *Better Never to Have Been* (2006).

children, contributing to the field's maturation into an important area of moral and political inquiry.” (29) So while the history of antinatalism is a long one, it has only recently “become an important area of moral and political inquiry”.

Insofar as antinatalism is a philosophy of disquiet, it is *closely linked* to pessimism but not pessimism properly speaking. In this, antinatalism is in a similar position to the problem of evil *vis-a-vis* pessimism. And like the problem of evil, even though there is a very strong connection with pessimism –not the least because both proclaim that nonexistence is preferable to existence– the exact nature of the relation between them is not as straightforward as it might appear on a first reading. This distinction that I draw between pessimism and antinatalism is a nuanced but important one insofar as it can help us better organize the philosophical discussion about the value of life while at the same time allow us to appreciate the diverse landscape that exists within what I call the *philosophy of disquiet* more broadly.

My claim that antinatalism is better conceived as a *philosophy of disquiet* instead of outright pessimism (thus making it a close relative to pessimism instead of a fully fledged pessimist philosophy) is not arbitrary. There are several reasons for this. First, what contributes most to this *muddying of the waters* between these two fields is that contemporary antinatalists do not engage with the history or corpus of pessimist thought as it developed during the Weltschmerz period. Instead, they are writing as if, by and large, such a history did not exist at all –or if it does exist then they have judged that it has little to contribute to contemporary discussions on the issue of the value of existence.

One could say that such an engagement may not be necessary for the advancement of ideas and arguments about the overall undesirability of existence. In a sense this would be true. As we shall see ahead, many of the arguments advanced by contemporary antinatalists stand or fall on their own merits with no need to appeal to historical pessimism. This, however, places antinatalists outside of an important tradition that, crucially, gave rise to the concept of *pessimism* itself<sup>48</sup>. While Schopenhauer only used this concept sparingly in volume two of *WW*,

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<sup>48</sup> The origins of the word pessimism are not fully clear. Joshua Dienstag says that the “word pessimism itself (from the latin *pessimus* –the worst) came into widespread use only in the nineteenth century” and that “the international popularity of Voltaire’s *Candide ou l’Optimism* of 1759 apparently propelled the term (optimism) into English, but also propelled Voltaire’s Jesuit critics in the *Revue de Trévoux* to accuse him of ‘*pessimisme*’” (9). Dennis Darnoi (1967) locates the appearance of the term in 1776 “in the writings of George Ch. Lichtenberg, who is quoted by

Hartmann and Plümacher made long, sustained and coherent use of the concept throughout their philosophies –in the case of Plümacher we saw above that although at one point she questions whether or not the term is appropriate, she ends up embracing it nonetheless<sup>49</sup>. Ultimately, Hartmann is the first of the Weltschmerz philosophers to fully embrace the concept and use it extensively throughout his work.

That the concept itself only came into use during the 18th century and was later appropriated by the Weltschmerz philosophers does not of itself preclude anyone from legitimately using the concept today in ways not consistent with the Weltschmerz philosophers (something I addressed in some detail at the start of this chapter). What it does indicate, however, is that pessimism as a philosophical system has had an ongoing conversation that *has a history* and can thus be traced back to a determined point in time. And inserting oneself into that conversation also inserts one into a pessimist history.

Setting aside the historical gap, the other contributing factor to the distance between pessimists and antinatalists is that contemporary antinatalists make no claims whatsoever about the nature of existence itself or about what underlies *everything that is* –something that all Weltschmerz pessimists do<sup>50</sup>. There are no metaphysical underpinnings in antinatalism whereas all the Weltschmerz philosophers address these questions. So while both pessimists and antinatalists argue for the preferability of nonexistence over existence, pessimists also engage with larger philosophical questions that provide us with a comprehensive view of the totality of existence. In other words, pessimists have wider and far ranging concerns that go beyond the questions that antinatalists consider. Most importantly among them, questions about the essence or the nature of existence that imply metaphysical commitments. Antinatalists eschew all metaphysical talk. For all these reasons, it cannot be really said that current antinatalists are

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Ludwig Marcus as referring to different philosophers interpreting philosophy ‘one with his optimism, the other with his pessimism’ (...) Jacques Mallet du Pan uses it in 1793, in 1794 it shows up repeatedly in the letters of Samuel Taylor” and he also notes that the Académie Française approved the use of the word in 1878, 116 years after the incorporation of the word optimism (86, note 2).

<sup>49</sup> At one point in *WW2*, Schopenhauer says that “Here in his holy ardour he will not allow the Marcionites even the honour of originality, but, armed with his well-known erudition, he reproaches them and supports his case with the finest quotations, that the ancient philosophers, that Heraclitus and Empedocles, Pythagoras and Plato, Orpheus and Pindar, Herodotus and Euripides, and in addition the Sibyls, already *deeply deplored the wretched nature of the world*, and thus taught *pessimism*” (italics mine, 621).

<sup>50</sup> Making metaphysical claims about the essence of existence and situating the source of our existential sufferings in that essence is a central part of pessimism as I conceive of it. More on this ahead.

participants of the pessimist tradition. This is why the relationship between the two is not an easy one.

Finally, another important difference between pessimism and antinatalism in its current form is that pessimism also considers animal life in its evaluation of the wretchedness of life. That is, they factor and consider the overall quality of animal life in determining the worth of existence. For this reason when pessimists hold that nonexistence is preferable to existence, this is a general claim that applies not only to humans but to animals as well. In one of the better known quotes by Schopenhauer regarding pain and suffering of *all existence*, he says “whoever would like to briefly test the assertion that pleasure outweighs pain in the world, or that they are at least in equilibrium, should compare the feelings of the animal that devours another with those of the one being devoured” (*PP2*, 263). Compared to this, antinatalism as it is currently construed, is a largely anthropocentric concern that has remained silent on the question of animal suffering, though Benatar has made important efforts at correcting this shortcoming<sup>51</sup>. Writing in *Permissible Progeny*, he presents his *misanthropic argument* for antinatalism<sup>52</sup>. This is an insightful argument that highlights the countless harm that humans inflict not only upon other humans but upon the rest of the animals and the environment more generally (I will address this argument in more detail ahead). As he says,

Humans inflict untold suffering and death on many billions of animals every year, and the overwhelming majority of humans are heavily complicit. Over 63 billion sheep, pigs, cattle, horses, goats, camels, buffalo, rabbits, chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, and other such animals are slaughtered every year for human consumption. In addition, approximately 103.6 billion aquatic animals are killed for human consumption and non-food uses (*The Misanthropic Argument for Antinatalism*, [MAA], 44).

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<sup>51</sup> This oversight on the part of antinatalists is likely due not to an *inability* on their part to see what is so glaringly obvious (that animals suffer). Rather, because antinatalism itself is construed as philosophy that recommends non-procreation, it can only be a philosophy about those beings that are able to *make decisions* about their own procreation. And this is us humans.

<sup>52</sup> Benatar cautions that when he labels this argument as *misanthropic* it is not to be taken as a literal hate of humans. Rather, his arguments “are misanthropic only in the sense that they point to unpleasant facts about humans. Accepting these arguments does not commit one to hating humans” (35).

The numbers that Benatar cites are undeniably staggering<sup>53</sup>. These figures do not include the death and pain of wild animals and taken all together, the amount of death and suffering that befalls animals provides powerful reasons in support of the claim that existence is an overall miserable experience.

Overall, and due in part to the insights that perspectives such as the *misanthropic argument* provide, it seems to me it cannot be said that the antinatalist approach to the question about the value of existence is wrong or flawed in any important way. Antinatalist discussions provide insight and undoubtedly contribute to our philosophical knowledge on this subject matter. As such, it is an important and valuable contributor to the *philosophy of disquiet* in general and pessimism in particular, which is why pessimists would be wrong to ignore its many perspectives.

So how are we to conceive of antinatalism exactly? Undoubtedly, the most important philosophical milestone in this recent uptake of antinatalism is the appearance of the book that I have already referenced, *Better Never to Have Been* by Benatar (BNB, 2006). This is an important moment because it arguably set in motion the current antinatalist revival. The philosophical position he defends is as follows:

Each of us was harmed by being brought into existence. That harm is not negligible, because the quality of even the best lives is very bad— and considerably worse than most people recognize it to be. Although it is obviously too late to prevent our own existence, it is not too late to prevent the existence of future possible people. Creating new people is thus morally problematic. (Preface).

His argument is, fortunately, straight-forward enough. It says that it is better not to have been born and that, once we are here, it is better to not bring other people into the world. One of the central arguments in his thesis is what is known as the *asymmetry argument*. It goes like this. First,

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<sup>53</sup> Benatar cites the *Food and Agricultural Organization* (FAO) for these figures. See notes 43 and 44 in his article.

- (1) The presence of pain is bad and,
- (2) The presence of pleasure is good.

There is a clear symmetry between these two premises. Absence of one (pain) is bad; presence of the other (pleasure) is good. Now consider this,

- (3) The absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, and
- (4) The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation. (*BNB*, 30).

There is no symmetry between these two premises (there is an *asymmetry*). While absence of pain is good *always and in every case* (even in the cases where there is no one to experience that absence of pain), absence of pleasure is not always bad. It is only bad if there is someone being actually deprived of that pleasure. In other words, absence of pain is a universal good that *actual* existing people and people that do not exist or *may* come into existence can benefit from. Absence of pleasure, however, is only bad for the actual existing person. For the person that does not yet exist, it is *not* a bad. As he put it,

Both good and bad things happen only to those who exist. However there is a crucial asymmetry between the good and the bad things. The absence of bad things, such as pain, is good even if there is nobody to enjoy that good, whereas the absence of good things, such as pleasure is bad only if there is someone who is deprived of these good things. The implication of this is that the avoidance of the bad by never existing is a real advantage over existence, whereas the loss of certain goods by not existing is not a real disadvantage over never existing. (*BNB*, 14)

This is meant to show that, because of what is at stake (the quality of life), nonexistence is always preferable to existence insofar as existence is always harmful whereas nonexistence is not harmful. His asymmetry argument is meant to show that there is never any bad whatsoever in nonexistence; there is, however, always bad in existence –and although there may also be good



in existence, the fact that there is no good in nonexistence is not something bad that should make us reject nonexistence. So nonexistence has nothing bad, whereas existence always has something bad. This antinatalist argument is known as the *philanthropic* argument because it argues for antinatalism out of a concern for the well-being of other humans. And, on this view, such well-being can only be obtained by not existing.

As we also saw above in passing, Benatar also has what he calls the *misanthropic argument* for antinatalism. This argument says that humans are a bad destructive force on earth and that, for this reason, we should not bring any more humans into existence. The main argument goes like this,

- We have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of species that cause (and will likely continue to cause) vast amounts of pain, suffering and death.
- Humans cause vast amounts of pain, suffering and death.
- Therefore, we have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing new humans into existence (*MAA*, 36)

Aside from whether the asymmetry or the misanthropic arguments are ultimately convincing or not, the point that merits consideration for our purposes is that in his work, Benatar –and by extension, the entire contemporary antinatalist field– ignores almost completely the contribution that philosophical pessimism can make to current antinatalism debates as well as the insights it can make to discussions about the value of life more generally. To hardly engage with a rich philosophical tradition that is as complete and insightful as any is more than a simple omission, particularly when the issues being discussed are precisely the ones central to that tradition<sup>54</sup>. In the case of Benatar, this is particularly troubling because his arguments in favour

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<sup>54</sup> I am in no position to offer a definitive reason or a fully fledged explanation as to why this is the case. I can, however, infer possible explanations. The most evident one, it seems to me, has to do with the long-known chasm between what is known as continental and analytic philosophy. Benatar is working within the analytic tradition and so is interested in the correct development and consistency of his arguments. This may explain why he (and most analytic philosophers) feels he has no need to engage directly with the history of philosophy if such engagement does not have an impact on the overall soundness and validity of the arguments he is presenting.

of nonexistence parallel many of those already foreshadowed by the pessimism of von Hartmann more than one hundred years earlier (as we shall see ahead in chapter 3.2).

Benatar can still, however, lay claim to having contributed at least two novel arguments to the discussion that do not require appealing to any Weltschmerz philosopher. These two arguments are his *asymmetry* and *misanthropic* arguments. These are insightful arguments and on their own they are able to provide new reasons for holding that nonexistence is preferable to existence. In virtue of this original contribution, he can make the case that he has no need to engage with the history of pessimism.

While it may indeed be true that he does not *need* to appeal to any Weltschmerz philosopher in order to present his two arguments, it is still true that the overall case for the preference of nonexistence over existence can only be strengthened by making reference to the original pessimist philosophers. Therefore, if one wants to build a strong argument for nonexistence, the Weltschmerz philosophers are essential because antinatalism on its own is only able to provide a small and limited, though important, set of philosophical arguments. This is why it is so important to remedy the oversight that contemporary antinatalists, philosophers of disquiet more generally and existential risk philosophers alike consistently make. For this reason, it is important to familiarize oneself with the Weltschmerz pessimists.

While discussions about what (if anything) humanity can do to ensure its survival in the face of climate change and future pandemics are active issues not only in academia but with the larger public as well, it is also true that most of the current literature for or against human extinction revolves primarily around contemporary antinatalist questions and issues and concerns that they have raised<sup>55</sup>. There is very little reference to any pessimist philosopher of the Weltschmerz era –oftentimes no mention at all.

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<sup>55</sup> Indeed, there is an ever-growing number of essays, op-eds and articles written on the topic of human extinction in public spaces. Enumerating them would be a very long exercise, but here I only want to list some examples of this trend in the year 2021:

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/science/ideas-in-philosophy-on-human-extinction-are-toxic-seeds-that-must-be-dealt-with-1.4770092>, <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/agora/2021/08/would-extinction-be-so-bad>, <https://aeon.co/essays/to-imagine-our-own-extinction-is-to-be-able-to-answer-for-it>, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/humans-are-doomed-to-go-extinct/>, <https://theconversation.com/will-humans-go-extinct-for-all-the-existential-threats-well-likely-be-here-for-a-very-long-time-135327>

As a part of this renewed interest in human extinction, in her book *The Ahuman Manifesto* (2020), Patricia MacCormack claims that “human extinction can be understood as a good idea for ecosophical ethics and need not be considered ‘unthinkable’ but can be welcomed as affirmative of earth life” (144). In her view, the end of humanity is the start of life more generally. As she puts it, “the death of the human species is the most life-affirming event that could liberate the natural world from oppression and our death could be an act of affirmative ethics which would far exceed any localized acts of compassion because those acts will be bound by human contracts, social laws and the prevalent status of beings, things and their placement within knowledge” (141)<sup>56</sup>. From this perspective *life is not bad*; it is not a miserable experience that is better to *not* experience. It is only that humanity that unleashes death and destruction on the rest of life on Earth and as a consequence, the extinction of humanity would *liberate* the rest of life. Ultimately on her account life is good –if only we did not exist to corrupt that goodness.

This is the same concern that we find in the *Voluntary Human Extinction Movement*, whose motto is “May we live long and die out”. This group disseminates in an organized and systematic way what the more common antinatalist arguments are in favour of our extinction. Not surprisingly, there is not a single mention of pessimism or of any pessimist philosopher in the *Ahuman Manifesto* or in the *Voluntary Human Extinction Movement*<sup>57</sup>. This suggests that these movements believe that either pessimists have nothing of relevance to add to the conversation or that there is simply a general unfamiliarity with them<sup>58</sup>. The case, it seems to me, is the latter and in this they are similar to the rest of the antinatalists.

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<sup>56</sup> It is clear that there is a close relation between the misanthropic argument and MacCormack's *Ahuman* thesis.

<sup>57</sup> There is also the lesser known *Church of Euthanasia*. They not openly advocate for the extinction of humanity by antinatalism, but they are also open to suicide.

<sup>58</sup> In the case of the *Ahuman Manifesto* as envisioned by MacCormack the absence of pessimist philosophy is perhaps easier to understand insofar as the idea of the manifesto is to end *only* human life in order to permit the rest of life to flourish. In other words, it is not existence in itself that is miserable and that *ought not* to be as all pessimists hold. It is only human existence. Again, this is similar to the rest of the antinatalist movement that focuses primarily on human life.

## 2.4 Pessimism Defined

We have seen that pessimism is undeniably a rich and varied landscape. Yet within this variety it is Schopenhauer and his *The World as Will and Representation* that represents the true starting point for pessimism as a philosophical *system*. However, as we saw above in the discussion of philosophies of disquiet, and as we shall see more of ahead, this is not a view shared by everyone. This claim, that Schopenhauer is truly the first pessimist philosopher that all other pessimists followed, is not a unanimous position. There are different interpretations and certain philosophers take a different view on where and with whom pessimism started with. Dienstag, for example, claims that “if pessimism can be said to have an identifiable starting point in the philosophical tradition, it must be found in the contradictory figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau” (49). In addition, van der Lugt took Bayle to be the real starting point for pessimism. To make matters more conscientious, one of the central figures in philosophical pessimism, Eduard von Hartmann, claims that it is not Schopenhauer, but Kant that is the real starting point for pessimism as a philosophy. As is usually the case within any tradition, identifying a sole founder or a clear, original starting point is never an easy clear-cut matter. In part much of it depends on just how one conceives the subject matter being discussed. Is pessimism essentially about describing existence and reporting on the countless hardships we face in life? Is it about lamenting the state of affairs we find ourselves in? Is it a claim about human nature or about hopelessness in the future? Perhaps it is about devaluing our earthly existence in order to elevate the afterlife? This is why an historically grounded definition of pessimism that captures the main points of the philosophers working within this tradition is needed.

Ultimately, Schopenhauer’s philosophy carries with it a comprehensive view about the nature and the essence of the world. In turn, it is this view that gave all of pessimism a solid philosophical ground from which to build upon<sup>59</sup>. As a consequence of this, his pessimism is also the starting point for all the pessimists that immediately followed him: Philipp Mainländer, Eduard von Hartmann and Julius Bahnsen (as well as all pessimist philosophers today in any of its versions). These early post-Schopenhauer pessimists not only came together around the idea

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<sup>59</sup> More recently, and in agreement with my claim that Schopenhauer is the first pessimist philosopher, Mark Migotti is clear when he says that “philosophical pessimism (...) begins as Schopenhauerian pessimism” (*Schopenhauer’s Pessimism in Context*, p. 285)

that existence was suffering, and that nonbeing is preferable to being, but they accepted that this is due, in large part, to some feature about the essence of existence –in other words, they accepted a metaphysical position. This is why it is so important that, with the exception of Julius Bahnsen, in subsequent chapters I dedicate necessary space to explaining the views that each of these philosophers held<sup>60</sup>.

Crucial to this shared philosophical ground for pessimism is the metaphysical concept of *will*. Schopenhauer, as we shall see ahead in more detail, was the first to give us a fully developed view of the will as *thing-in-itself* and ascribed to it an inescapable role in giving existence its fundamentally wretched and pessimist character. All of the other pessimists that followed him subsequently made use of the will in their own philosophies. For this reason, one can justifiably say that the will ties all the pessimists together. And while it is also true that each pessimist philosopher conceived of the will in their own ways, introducing modifications (for example by denying the oneness of the will and affirming a multiplicity of wills) and giving it different roles within their metaphysics (Hartmann, for example, places the will alongside reason), they are all inexorably working within the framework setup by Schopenhauer.

Given all this, and the central role that Schopenhauer's metaphysics fulfills in pessimist thought, in order to offer a sound definition of pessimism there are two important considerations to keep in mind. One, that it be anchored in its historical roots. This means that its key features

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<sup>60</sup> Bahnsen also has a metaphysical position and he is equally an important philosopher of the Weltschmerz era. In *Weltschmerz* (2016), Besier includes him alongside Hartmann and Mainländer as the major pessimists that followed Schopenhauer. I will not, however, be engaging with his philosophy in any meaningful sense –though I will make passing references to him. Still, it is important to mention some of his major ideas, if only because doing so can help us understand the variety of pessimist perspectives that were being discussed in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. His major work is *Der Widerspruch im Wissen und Wesen der Welt* (The Contradiction in the Knowledge and Nature of the World, 1880). In his chapter “Post-Schopenhauerian Metaphysics: Hartmann, Mainländer, Bahnsen, and Nietzsche” that appears in *The Oxford Handbook of Schopenhauer* (2020), Sebastian Gardner characterizes the main thesis of that work as being that “there exists a contradiction within the essence of the world and our knowledge thereof” (464). In other words, “reality is contradiction”. In the simplest terms possible, Bahnsen has done away with Schopenhauer's *one will* understood as *thing-in-itself* and instead replaced it with countless individual wills that inhabit each of us. In this, he is following Mainländer. I will give a more detailed explanation of this (the oneness of the will in contrast to the multitude of wills) in the chapters ahead. What is relevant here in order to understand Bahnsen's philosophy is that he posits that contradiction is a feature of the reality of each individual will. This means that each individual *will* that exists wants, simultaneously, more than one thing. As he said in his book *Das Tragische als Weltgesetz und der Humor als ästhetische Gestalt des Metaphysischen* (1877) “to be able to do only one thing, when we want to do both, is the relentless law that reality imposes on us” (Cornejo trans. p. 46). A practical consequence of his pessimism is that there is no escape from dissatisfaction, that we are inevitably bound to live in lack and there is no escape from this condition. As Beiser said, he “is indeed more radical than Schopenhauer and Hartmann because he denies the possibility of redemption” (WZ, 231).

should be found *not only* in Schopenhauer, but in the philosophies of the Weltschmerz pessimists. Two, that it is not so broad as to make it indistinguishable from the rest of the philosophies of disquiet as I have presented them above. Sully, for example, makes this mistake when he defines pessimism. According to him, pessimism includes “all doctrines, reasoned or unreasoned, which distinctly deny this value to life, and represent it as something unworthy, unsatisfying, or lamentable” (5). This is much too broad. In this same direction, in his paper “Worse than the best possible Pessimism”, Janaway cites Plümacher from her book *Pessimismus* as saying that pessimism has just two propositions. The first proposition is that the sum of displeasure (*unlust*) outweighs the sum of pleasure (*lust*). And the second is that the nonbeing (*nichsein*) of the world would be better than its being (*Sein*) (218).

While Plümacher’s is right, and there is a certain appeal in the simplicity of her definition, I think her approach has the same weakness as Sully’s –it is also too broad. As such, it makes pessimism largely indistinguishable from antinatalism and other philosophies of disquiet, something I think can lead to confusions. Plümacher’s advantage over Sully’s, however, is that she makes it clear that for pessimism, nonexistence is always preferable to existence.

I am now in a position to state the main aspects that constitute pessimism. What I present below is not to be taken as an argument. Rather, these are what I conceive of as four statements, as four *defining* features of pessimism. The points below are precise enough so as to differentiate it from other philosophies that deal with the sufferings and pains of existence –what I called *philosophies of disquiet*. At the same time, it is broad enough so as to include and accommodate the diversity that exists within pessimism. A proper justification and a detailed explication for each point will be provided throughout this work as it unfolds.

The four points are as follows:

- The *essence* of existence can be known either fully or partially. This is a metaphysical claim.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> The metaphysical component is essential for pessimism. And it is because of this metaphysics that philosophical pessimism could perhaps be more accurately conceptualized as *transcendental pessimism* as opposed to only *pessimism* or *philosophical pessimism*. The advantage of this term is that it could set Weltschmerz pessimism apart

- This *essence* of existence is what characterizes life as an experience conditioned by need, want and pain. Ultimately, suffering is inescapable.
- There are no *ultimate reasons* for our sufferings. This means that there is no cosmic plan or purpose to our suffering (as we shall see ahead, Mainländer has a slightly different take on this point).
- Nonexistence is preferable to existence.

The above statements are not arbitrary. Rather, they are rooted in the philosophical views expressed by Schopenhauer in his book *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), and with some variations, they are held by all philosophers of the Weltschmerz era.

The definition I have laid out in the four propositions also represents my view of pessimism and from this point forward whenever I refer to pessimism, this is what –at a minimum– I mean. Yet, as a vibrant philosophical perspective, pessimism is not reducible to any principles set in stone uncritically accepted and/or used by all pessimist philosophers. So while they do in fact share some *minimum* perspectives –which is what the four points above are meant to highlight, these propositions are ultimately starting points for the development of new and distinct pessimist arguments. As a consequence, even though the Weltschmerz philosophers agree on these propositions, they take them in different directions and do not necessarily arrive at the same conclusions. In other words, they disagree with one another on a great many issues –

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from all the other instances of pessimism that are used by stressing the metaphysical component and making clear that pessimism applies to existence itself and it is not only a claim about the concrete conditions of lives. In other words, the reasons for pessimism transcend this world of objects or representations and are found in the *world-itself*. The downside of using this term is that it may obscure that while philosophical pessimism does indeed make transcendental claims, it also makes empirical claims and appeals to our *lived* lives. Still, it is useful to know that the term *transcendental pessimism* appears in the book *The Unconscious and Eduard von Hartmann* (1967) by Dennis Darnoi. He uses it to describe Hartmann's pessimism in contrast to phenomenal pessimism and transcendental optimism. These last two concepts are used by Hartmann in his essay *Zur Geschichte und Begründung des Pessimismus* (1880) to refer to Kant's pessimism about the harshness of our everyday *phenomenal* lives. On the other hand, Hartmann says that "psychologically, Kant's tendency towards *transcendental optimism* can be explained more than enough, since this was the only way he was able to prevent the complete detachment of his philosophy from the Christian impressions of his youth" (52). This is not an issue I will address in detail here (whether or not Kant truly was a transcendental optimist and a phenomenal pessimist). For my purposes, the relevant point is the availability and the supposed usefulness of these terms. Yet, even though these concepts appear to provide a measure of clarity to the concept of pessimism (insofar as it distinguishes between psychological pessimism and philosophical pessimism), in the end adding *transcendental pessimism* to the mix may prove more confusing. In this way it is similar to Plümacher's *peiorism* suggestion. Ultimately, I will stick with pessimism and instead (as I mentioned above) I will refer to all other philosophies that deal with the miseries of life and the preference of nonbeing over being as *philosophies of disquiet*. Still, transcendental pessimism is an interesting possibility to keep in mind.

among them what we can or cannot say/know about the essence of existence, what the most important source of our predicaments is and what we can or cannot do to redeem ourselves from existence. It is because of these disagreements that we can further refine the pessimist landscape into what I call *metaphysical*, *hedonic* and *teleological* pessimism. I will expand on all of these points ahead.

By the end it will be clear *why* these are the four essential pessimist points and *how* they work together to provide a pessimist view of existence that is nonetheless able to support the ERM project.



## Chapter three - The Pessimist Tradition

If one of the purposes of the existential risk management project is to convince people of the urgency of adopting all the measures necessary to ensure our survival and do what we can to deter the risks we face, then it is a purpose easily met—at least in theoretical terms. It is, so it seems, fairly unproblematic to defend the view that we should do what we can to preserve life, particularly human life<sup>62</sup>. In practical terms this has meant that in the last one hundred years we have witnessed countless laws and how political institutions have been set up with that precise purpose in mind<sup>63</sup>. International institutions such the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, the concept of Human Rights and all sorts of regional partnerships aimed at fostering cooperation and the well-being of all its members point in this direction<sup>64</sup>.

The differences arise when we try to determine *what* we should do and *how* to go about doing it. This is most easily demonstrated in the negotiations and the countless difficulties that arise in all international climate change meetings. Countries have competing interests that make agreements difficult. Still, in the face of all these difficulties, humanity (so it seems) tries and tries again to mitigate the most obvious and immediate threats to our existence, though it is by no means sure that all attempts are sincere or that they will yield any concrete results. Whatever the case may be (that we are motivated by either altruistic or selfish motivations), what is revealing is the expectation that, at least publicly, the right thing to do is to always advocate for the

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<sup>62</sup> It needs to be mentioned again that, as is the case with the existential risk philosophers, when people claim that the protection and preservation of life is important they probably have human life in mind and so do not—keeping in mind the pertinent exceptions that all generalizations fail to capture—include animals in this moral consideration.

<sup>63</sup> The *League of Nations* we set up in 1920 as an institution with the express purpose of fostering cooperation between nations. It proved, however, unable to prevent World War II which is why it was dissolved. In its place we now have The *United Nations* and although its effectiveness and utility has been called into question, that is beside the point I am making here. Namely, that humans look for ways to cooperate in order to ensure our survival.

<sup>64</sup> I make these claims with certain hesitancy, for at least a couple reasons—none of which I am able to address in any capacity within this dissertation. It is sufficient for my purposes to merely point them out. First, an argument could be made that what motivates humans to create such safeguards and institutions is not some deep rooted desire to preserve humanity but pure self-interest and the desire to secure the status quo and entrench positions of power. Second, even if we grant that humans look for ways to cooperate and secure the overall well-being and/or survival of the human species, it is also true that the universe of what counts as humanity has historically been a contested one. At different times in human history, entire ethnic and religious peoples have been excluded from the idea of humanity. This continues to happen today. But even in these cases the idea that the wellbeing of humans is a *good* still applies—even in those cases where the idea of humanity is a limited one.

preservation of humanity. The idea that nonexistence is better than existence, that it might not be such a good idea to do what we can to extend humanity into the far future is an idea not taken up in the public discourse by anybody in a position of authority. It is not too difficult to imagine the backlash from the public at large if such a person were to emerge.

Showing that life is not necessarily something that should be promoted is a difficult task not least because it seems to go against deeply ingrained beliefs. And being this the case, the question that follows is: why do most people intuitively side with the argument that life is a *good* and that protecting humanity is the morally right thing to do? Why is this the default position? Is it because the arguments that pessimists have presented in favour of nonexistence are weak or unconvincing? Why do most people not adopt the pessimist perspective on life? The strength or validity of the arguments themselves have likely a limited influence on the answer. Indeed, any complete and fully satisfying answer to these questions are probably not only philosophical in nature. They likely include appeals to anthropology, sociology, psychology and, perhaps, biology.

Still, philosophy can provide insights that can explain *why* we humans are often able to tell ourselves that life is not as bad as the pessimists say and that existence is always valuable in and of itself. There are three ways in which we can do this, three ways in which we can defend ourselves and sustain our claims that life is good and therefore worth living and promoting. These are, belief in God, the application of certain cognitive mechanisms that hide the true essence of reality from us and errors in the evaluations we make of our lives.<sup>65</sup>

While I will go into some detail in regards to the first two mechanisms further ahead, I want to briefly bring up our apparent tendency to make mistakes in evaluating the quality of our lives here. That we are biased judges of our own lives is a claim that was discussed by Hartmann in 1869 and subsequently popularized by David Benatar. In *Better Never to Have Been* he presents and defends the idea that from a psychological perspective, people's self-assessments

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<sup>65</sup> I need to make an important and cautionary note here. First, claiming that people are prone to errors when evaluating their lives and/or are in denial about the true nature of existence and about overall undesirability of life is very problematic. It may border on paternalistic (philosophers know better) and elitist (people that have studied the value of life are the ones that really know what the value of life is) attitudes. This is why in this dissertation any and all claims and references that I make about how humans are unable to correctly assess the value of life should be taken with caution. They are not meant to be definitive conclusions. Instead, they are to be viewed as *possibilities* (though likely *highly* possible) and avenues for further exploration.

about the overall quality of their lives tend to err on the side of positivity. While failing to make any references to Hartmann's discussions on this, Benatar proceeds to say that the main reason for our inability to correctly assess our lives lies in the *Pollyanna Principle* –defined as a psychological tendency towards optimism<sup>66</sup>. This is a psychological mechanism whereby we are prone to optimism and therefore we tend to evaluate our lives in a positive light, forgetting or repressing the negative aspects. The name is taken from the novel *Pollyanna* (Eleanor Porter, 1927) where the main character, Pollyanna, tries to see the positive in everything that happens, no matter how bad it may be. Crucially he says that this predisposition towards optimism is

unsurprising from an evolutionary perspective. They (these tendencies) militate against suicide and in favour of reproduction. If our lives are quite as bad as I shall still suggest they are, and if people were prone to see this true quality of their lives for what it is, they might be much more inclined to kill themselves, or at least not produce more such lives. Pessimism, then, tends not to be naturally selected. (69).

Evolution therefore seems to play an important role in weeding out pessimism and encouraging optimism. So while I will not, however, attempt to definitively answer *why* people hold the beliefs they do (I will only suggest possible answers), it is good enough for my purposes to point out and accept that the belief in the overall value of life is the default view held by most people. By pointing all of this out, it becomes clear that the philosophers that argue precisely against the overall goodness of life –the pessimists– have a difficult task. So, what grounds could possibly be offered against the idea that human existence is valuable and that our demise may not be a *bad* thing? What sort of arguments can be presented in defence of our demise? How can humans be convinced that what seems so obvious as hardly needing any defence (that life is a *good*) may in fact not be the case?

The best place to start to answer these questions is by having a look at the first pessimist, Schopenhauer. In what follows I will present what I take to be the central claims underlying Schopenhauer's pessimism and, ultimately, why his claim that nonexistence is preferable to

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<sup>66</sup> Pollyanism involves an "inclination to recall positive rather than negative experiences" (65) and also to evaluate the overall quality of one's life as "pretty happy or very happy" (66).

existence is fundamental required knowledge for any person dealing with questions about the value of life.

### 3.1 The Pessimism of Schopenhauer

Up to this point I have made several passing references to Schopenhauer's will as the essence of the world, and it has been unavoidable to do so. It is now time to explain in some detail just what the will is, what place it occupies within Schopenhauer's philosophy and why it is so essential to have a good notion of it in order to understand his pessimism and pessimism in general. All the Weltschmerz philosophers accept the existence of the will, though they make several adjustments and modifications to it, with Philipp Mainländer introducing the biggest changes (more on this ahead).

Arthur Schopenhauer, it is worth mentioning again, is the first *complete* pessimist philosopher. And by *complete*, I mean the first philosopher to argue for pessimism by presenting a system of thought that explained not only *why* existence is always fraught with suffering but *what* we can and cannot know about the world. Even though ideas about the *undesirability* of existence go back, as we have seen, at least two thousand five hundred years, it is still the case that Schopenhauer was the first to present a far-reaching pessimistic metaphysics that systematically touched on epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, animal rights and the human condition in general. As such any and all philosophers that explore pessimist issues do so on the foundations laid out by Schopenhauer.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> An important note needs to be made here. While Schopenhauer is, as I read him, undeniably the first and foremost pessimist (see page 62 for more on this question), it is also the case that stressing too much the pessimist aspect of his philosophy may lead one to miss other important and interesting contributions to philosophy more generally. In other words, there is a danger of overstating his bleak pessimism and failing to see that he made contributions to ethics, animal rights, aesthetics and epistemology. Furthermore, his pessimism may have ended up not being so pronounced as one may assume. This is a view defended by Sandra Shapshay when she says that "while there is textual evidence to support this traditional interpretation of Schopenhauer as the unwavering arch pessimist and proponent of resignation, this interpretation ignores some important evidence of Schopenhauer's own intellectual development toward being a less pessimistic thinker from the 1830s on". While I will not get into a detailed discussion in regards to Shapshay's reasons for making the claim that Schopenhauer nuanced his pessimistic stance, it is still important to understand where Shapshay is coming from. In *Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics* [RS], (2019) she makes the case that Schopenhauer's appeal to the Platonic Ideas in *WWR1* was later dropped in favour of Darwinian explanation for the existence of species. The consequence of this for pessimism is that Schopenhauer is now open to change, progress and to, possibly, new conditions in the world of representations where suffering and

The importance of Schopenhauer's philosophy for pessimism, antinatalism and existential issues in general can hardly be downplayed. In his book *Process and Reality*, A.N Whitehead asserted in what has now become a widely cited quote, that "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that *it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato*. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them" (39, italics mine). Whitehead's point is that the towering importance of Plato is such that all philosophers that followed him are writing in his shadow. A similar point can be made in regards to Schopenhauer and all pessimists that followed. All pessimists are writing at the table he has set. For this reason, a good understanding of his system is essential for anyone wanting to follow the development of pessimist thinking.

If Schopenhauer is ultimately able to make a bold claim such as that *all life is wretched*, it is because he has set up a philosophical system that makes it possible for him to assert this. He is not making stand-alone assertions about the misery of existence that are only loosely connected to his other ideas. Instead, his conclusion that this is the *worst of all possible worlds*<sup>68</sup> is derived from his other claims about the nature of reality and about our perceptions of the *ultimate reality*

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pain may lessen –even if only marginally. While the *Ideas* are fixed entities whereby hope for change and progress is not possible, evolution does away with this. In her words, "Insofar as his doctrine of the Ideas secures a conviction in the fixity of species, without this metaphysical constraint on species character and especially on the species character of humanity, Schopenhauer's doctrine of pessimism loses a good deal of its a priori support" (67). At stake in all of this is the possibility of reducing Schopenhauer to a one issue philosopher which is why she argues "that the traditional view presents a one-sided, static picture of Schopenhauer's thought that is really a caricature, a caricature we would do well philosophically to avoid today. Instead, I shall urge that we embrace a new interpretation of Schopenhauer by seeing his philosophy as *dynamic* rather than static, and recognizing that in the course of his intellectual development, his work evinces a softening of this pessimism as he implicitly acknowledges that his own grounds for pessimism have become weaker" (40). While I do not think it is wrong to stress the pessimism in Schopenhauer, it seems to me that Shapshay's point is an important one to keep in mind at all times. Overall, I take this claim, that Schopenhauer is the first complete and systematic pessimist, to be rather unproblematic, even if as we saw in the previous note, Shapshay suggests he later tempered his bleak views. Part of the reason for this has to do with the fact that without his pessimism, one can hardly imagine a von Hartmann, Mainländer, Bahnsen, Taubert, Plümacher and the many others that have engaged with his pessimism either to refute it or to support it. In other words, without Schopenhauer, there is no Weltschmerz period. See chapter 2.4 for some additional remarks on this question.

<sup>68</sup> The expression *worst possible world* makes its appearance in *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol II, p.583 He makes this claim in direct allusion, and in opposition to, Leibniz's claim that this is the best possible world. He says that "against the palpably sophistical proofs of Leibniz that this is the best of all possible worlds, we may even oppose seriously and honestly the proof that it is the worst of all possible worlds. For possible means not what we may picture in our imagination, but what can actually exist and last". In other words, even if we are able to imagine a worse world (one with even more death, diseases, pain and sorrow), that world may not be sustainable, and may not last. As a consequence, this actual world we have is, among the worlds that can last and actually exist, the worst one.

(that which is beyond our perceptions). This is why it is so important to follow the road he takes towards pessimism and not simply dwell or focus on this or that claim about the misery of life. In what follows below, then, I present an outline of his metaphysics and the process that leads him to pessimism.

Schopenhauer's pessimism has its genesis in a specific view about the nature of our relation to the world. More strongly put, his version of transcendental idealism is an integral part of his pessimism (I will say more on his take of transcendental idealism ahead). This is an important point because while there have been attempts at separating his pessimism from the rest of his philosophy –most notably by Bryan Magee<sup>69</sup>– doing so only gives us a partial and

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<sup>69</sup> In his book *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (1997) Magee makes the remarkable claim that Schopenhauer is, philosophically speaking, no pessimist. In this he is echoing Russell's criticism of pessimism. This is an erroneous claim and it is largely why Magee gets Schopenhauer wrong. In the interest of getting an honest assessment of Magee's reasons for saying that Schopenhauer is no pessimist, I quote in its entirety the relevant section. He says that "in most people's minds the identifying feature of Schopenhauer's thought has always been its pessimism. Indeed, his name is more closely associated with pessimism than any other writer's. Even professional philosophers tend to see him in this light, as is evidenced by the title of Frederick Copleston's book *Arthur Schopenhauer: Philosopher of Pessimism*. Yet this is odd, because it is an elementary point in logic that no truth claim can entail a value-judgement. If a valid argument has a value-judgement anywhere in its conclusions this can mean only that the same value-judgement was already to be found somewhere in the premisses: you cannot derive an 'is bad' from an 'is'. No general philosophy — no ontology, epistemology or logic — can entail pessimistic conclusions. Professional philosophers ought always to have known, without having to read Schopenhauer to discover it, that in this sense his pessimism is logically independent of his philosophy; and so it is. It is true that he was a pessimist, no one more so. And it is true that his pessimism is compatible with his philosophy — but that is only because the two are, of necessity, logically unconnected. Non-pessimism is equally compatible with his philosophy. The traditional identification of him in terms of his pessimism is largely irrelevant to a serious consideration of him as a philosopher: I am tempted to say that it is a view of his writings which leaves his philosophy out. The point is so rudimentary that it is hard to see how it can have been so widely overlooked. Perhaps it happened because the pessimism is so all-pervading in the way the philosophy is articulated — in the prose, the metaphors, the illustrations, the references, the selection of quotations — all this combined with the extraordinary vividness of the writing and the dramatic force of the vision it conveys" (13). It is clear from this that Magee thinks pessimism is not an integral part of Schopenhauer's philosophy insofar as one can separate it from the rest of his philosophy. Still, the point he makes is a confused one. He appears to be saying that those who claim that he is a pessimist (as I do) only do so because we have mistakenly derived a value claim (that life is bad) from the truth claims about the essence of the world (will). The confusion on his part is due to two reasons. First, it is not clear if he thinks it is only us *as readers* or if it is also Schopenhauer himself that is mistakenly deriving a value claim from his metaphysics. But even if it is only us readers that make this logical mistake, his criticism only works if we affirm that pessimism is a psychological trait, only a personal disposition towards life (a common conflation that I referenced in chapter two and that Magee falls prey to). Further, if he is correct then, Leibniz is no optimist philosopher either (insofar as he is deriving an "is good" from an "is"). Even more, all philosophers of disquiet could be charged with the same *logical mistake* at some point in some of their arguments. This would do away with an important and storied philosophical tradition in a simple brush stroke (it seems to me that philosophy at large always deals in one way or another with value-judgements so the point Magee is making could also be construed as a critique of all philosophical activity, except perhaps the study of logic). While Magee could *bite the bullet* on all this, it is problematic to willfully gloss over the numerous passages where Schopenhauer clearly and straight-forwardly draws a necessary connection between the *thing-in-it-self* and suffering. This is the second reason why Magee is confused. Philosophical pessimism in general is decidedly *not* an add-on that one can conveniently sever from an argument, particularly in

incomplete understanding of his philosophical project *as a whole*. The psychological line of criticism that Magee takes is the one that denies pessimism a membership in philosophy. Pessimism is *not* philosophy. Specifically, Magee thinks that if we can set aside Schopenhauer's psychologically misguided pessimistic musings, we can then find in his writings a much better philosophical system that has no need for pessimism. In other words, we can rescue Schopenhauer's system by getting rid of the psychology motivating his pessimist views. I claim, however, that a good understanding of his philosophy is only possible by taking a holistic approach to his system and seeing how each of the different aspects serve to support and advance the entire Schopenhauerian project<sup>70</sup>. Furthermore, he expects nothing short of this. As he said, when referring to his own work, "a system of thought must always have an architectonic connexion or coherence, that is to say, a connexion in which one part always supports the other (Preface, *WWI*)". This alone should greatly weaken Magee's idea that his pessimism "is largely irrelevant to a serious consideration of him as a philosopher" (see note 46, above).

Dislodging pessimism from the rest of his metaphysics is therefore a philosophical mistake. The two *organically* work together. Christopher Janaway supports this reading because he set out to argue that while "it has been claimed that Schopenhauer's pessimism has no close link with his central metaphysics, I (...) argue that the opposite is true" (*Schopenhauer's Pessimism [SP]*, 323). He does this by saying that his pessimism "relies on an intimate link

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the case of Schopenhauer. To dismiss Schopenhauer's efforts at establishing a pessimist theory of existence is to dismiss his entire philosophical undertaking because it is not that Schopenhauer peppered here and there certain claims about how *bad the world is* in addition to his metaphysics. Instead those pessimist claims are *embedded*, other times derived and mostly dependent on his *a priori* arguments and subsequently supported by *a posteriori* arguments. So while we may legitimately hold that such a connection is not strong or that Schopenhauer was unsuccessful in firmly establishing it, we cannot simply dismiss it or claim that he did not make such a connection in such a way that we can simply and rather easily ignore his pessimism as Magee thinks we can. It is clear to me that Magee has overshot his criticism.

<sup>70</sup> My claim, and that I will only lightly defend and develop in this work (a robust defence is for a different project altogether), is a strong one: that Schopenhauer's entire philosophical project (as it appears in his major works, both volumes of *The World as Will and Representation*, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, *The Will in Nature*, and *The Basis of Morality*) is an effort to show that existence is a miserable state of affairs. Whether or not he set out to show this at the start or whether he arrived at this conclusion as a result of his take on transcendental idealism is also a matter for a different project. Still, the idea that *nonexistence is preferable to existence* is the central idea in all his work. In support of this, Schopenhauer did explicitly claim that his *World as Will and Representation* contained *one single thought* and that all his philosophical activity was dedicated to developing this *one thought* (see the Preface of *WWI*, first edition). So while Barbara Hannan suggests that this *one thought* points to the fundamental oneness of existence, that everything is will (120) and I sustain that his *one thought* is that *nonexistence is preferable to existence*, the question is ultimately an open one. Whatever the case may be, for Schopenhauer his philosophy is to be taken as an organic whole and we are destined to misread it when we isolate the topics from one another.

between the human will and suffering” (*SP*, 327). This is the position I support. Simply stated, with no will, *there is no pessimism*. And the will itself is the result of his metaphysical characterization of the world as having two aspects: *representations* and *thing-in-itself*. From this point forward, I will make clear how his pessimism follows from his metaphysics<sup>71</sup>.

In the opening line of his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer says that “the world is my representation: this is a truth valid with reference to every living and knowing being.” (3). This means that I, as a subject, perceive representations of the objects in the world. By having set up a subject-object duality, Schopenhauer has constructed a framework that necessarily creates a distance between the subject that perceives and the object being perceived<sup>72</sup>. That which is being perceived is what he calls *representations*. Put in other words, we do not perceive the object itself (as it *really* is) because we only have an *image*, a mental *representation* of it: it is never the object *itself*. That object is far from us, it is at a

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<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, Shapshay has a more nuanced take on this point. In line with her claim that Schopenhauer ended up holding a less bleak view of existence in his later work (see above, note 66), she also adds in *Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics*, that his pessimism is not as dependent on his metaphysics as it is largely held by the traditional reading (a reading that I have). Specifically, she says that “his philosophical methodology is coherentist rather than foundationalist, and this makes his metaphysics of will far less capable of grounding pessimism than most commentators have thought. Whether or not the sufferings of the world can be significantly diminished is ultimately a question to be addressed by experience, and settled on the basis of empirical evidence” (7). At bottom, she reads Schopenhauer in the second volume of *WWR* as a pessimist philosopher that focuses more on the ills and suffering that egoism creates. Humans are the main cause of pain to other humans and animals and he “expresses a moral horror at these potent, human-made sources of suffering to other living beings” (18). It is because of this that humans have the power to diminish and alleviate much of the suffering that we encounter in life. There is room for *hope* of a better future in Schopenhauer’s pessimism. All this may be correct. However, it would still be the case that even if suffering could be alleviated and that we could therefore justifiably have hope in the future, the fact of suffering can never of itself *be done away with*. In other words, it is one thing to say we can *reduce* suffering. It is another to say we can get rid of it –or at a minimum reduce it so much that life becomes overall a desirable condition to the point that existence becomes worthwhile and preferable to nonexistence. In other words, that life becomes *choice-worthy*. This, it seems to me, is precluded in virtue of his metaphysics. No matter how much we try to alleviate suffering, it will always, necessarily, permeate and condition all existence. Hence, his pessimism is still at bottom metaphysical.

<sup>72</sup> This starting point is sufficient for our purposes, but it is necessary to point out that in strict terms Schopenhauer takes the starting point for his philosophy to be *representations* themselves. He does this to avoid initially setting up a duality between subject and object that can lead to a series of presuppositions regarding realism (that objects exist independently of any observer) and idealism (that objects do not in fact exist and that only ideas exist). By saying that representation is the starting point he is making a more fundamental claim from which we can then, in a second step, readily derive that in fact there *is* a subject and object. This is a derivable claim from the proposition that first there are representations because if there was no subject, then there could be no representation and if there was no object, then there would be nothing we could have representations of. He says that the starting point for his philosophy is “neither the object (...) nor (...) the subject, but (...) *representation*, which contains and presupposes them both; for the division into object and subject is the first, universal form of representation.” (25) Furthermore, “all previous systems started either from the object or from the subject and therefore sought to explain the one from the other” (25). We can legitimately say that *representation*, then, is where Schopenhauer’s pessimism starts.



distance, it is separated from us and we are therefore inescapably prohibited from gaining access to its true, inner, fundamental essence. This means that, for example, when I see a tree I have no way of knowing the *real essence* of the tree. My claims about trees are limited to claims about *representations* of trees, never about trees *in-themselves*. As Schopenhauer puts it, any subject that ponders the nature of his perceptions of the world will soon realize that “he does not know a sun and an earth but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth; that the world around him is there only as representation, only in reference to another thing, namely that which represents, and this is himself.” (3). This is the expected outcome of this duality; that the essence of the object is inaccessible to a being (like us) that only knows representations.

As it turns out, however, Schopenhauer makes the rather bold claim that the apparent *inability* to gain access to the true inner essence of a representation is actually not so. On his account we *can* bridge the gap between a representation and the object as it is *in-itself* thereby enabling us to claim knowledge about the *true* essence of objects. The way to work around this problem, to bridge this distance between subject and object is at once one of the novel achievements of his philosophy and also what makes it possible for him to ultimately claim that all existence is suffering. In order to grasp how Schopenhauer went about bridging this distance we need to briefly look at his philosophical system.

First, it is essential to note that a necessary condition for our ability to have representations of objects in the world in the first place is that these objects appear to us as discernible and individuated, that is, *distinguished* from other objects. And, following Kant, Schopenhauer claims that we can only have such individual representations insofar as those objects appear to us in space and in time because they could *not* appear to us as individual objects under any other condition. All representations are thus necessarily governed by the *principium individuationis*—the principle by which all objects can be individualized; space, time and causality. Plurality, then, can only exist where the *principium individuationis* applies.

This is where it becomes clear that the philosophy of Schopenhauer starts where Kant left off. In case there was any room for doubt, Schopenhauer himself maintained that this was the case. In the Preface to his *The World as Will and Representation*, he states that “(...) the third demand to be made on the reader might even be taken for granted, for it is none other than an

acquaintance with the most important phenomenon which has appeared in philosophy for two thousand years, and which lies so close to us, I mean the principle works of Kant” (xv). Further still, he says that “I start in large measure from what was achieved by the *great Kant*” (xv, italics mine). As a consequence, we can legitimately say that the question of *access* to the inner nature of representations is where Kant left us off and where Schopenhauer’s unique entire philosophical project starts. This means that Schopenhauer’s pessimism is possible because his starting point is Kant’s end point. The relation between them can be put in these terms: while Kant opened a door to the thing-in-itself, he also said that we cannot go through that door. Schopenhauer, on the other hand, did enter and in so doing was able to offer us the first fully fledged pessimist philosophy.

Dennis Vanden Auweele puts the relation between Kant and Schopenhauer this way: “Schopenhauer continues a line of argumentation that Kant had already started (...) this Kantian frame is not just a first inspiration and impetus for Schopenhauer, but also the self-proclaimed premise of Schopenhauer’s thought. Schopenhauer signals that the starting point of his philosophy is transcendental idealism, but that he draws different conclusions from Kant’s premises.” (3). Simply put, Schopenhauer is a transcendental idealist that goes in a different direction than the one taken by Kant. Barbara Hannan says that “the great paradox of Schopenhauer is that he is a transcendental idealist, yet he thinks we can know the nature of the thing-in-itself” (*The Riddle of the World*, 4). While this last claim (that he thinks we can know the nature of the thing-in-itself) is later nuanced by Schopenhauer when he said that we can only have a *limited* or partial knowledge of it, Hannan’s point is well taken: he was a transcendental idealist, albeit a distinct sort of one.

This is also a view held by Sandra Shapshay. As she says in *The Enduring Kantian Presence in Schopenhauer’s Philosophy* (2020), “Schopenhauer’s system bears a complicated yet faithful relationship to Kant’s transcendental idealism” (112). Further, she claims that he was the “first ‘back to Kant’ philosopher. His aim was to ‘take up directly from Kant’ in order to modify and offer a self-consistent transcendental idealist system” (*Schopenhauer’s Reception of Kant* [SK], 314). In other words, Schopenhauer did not simply take Kant’s system uncritically and then use it for his own philosophical purposes. Shapshay points out that “Schopenhauer reconfigured transcendental idealism” so that talk about *things-in-themselves* was replaced by the

*thing-in-itself* (a move from plurality to *oneness*)<sup>73</sup> and by removing any suggestion of a *causal* relation between the thing-in-itself and representations. She also rightly points out that causality, together with space and time (the *principium individuationis*) are categories that are strictly limited to the phenomenal world (*SK*, 315) and can therefore have no application to things-in-themselves<sup>74</sup>.

At bottom, the question about the thing-in-itself of a representation, is a question about how the thing is beyond the way we perceive it. But from a Kantian standpoint *things-in-themselves* were cast into the noumenal world, forever outside of our knowledge so nothing can be said about it. Schopenhauer was troubled by the limitation on our knowledge that Kant had drawn. He thought that, unless we accept the view that the world is nothing but images, (ideas *a-la-Berkely*), we should be able to legitimately inquire into the inner essence of objects, into things-in-themselves –and this is precisely what he proceeded to do (*WW2*, 192). Yet, asking about things-in-themselves and claiming knowledge about things-in-themselves are two very different things and Schopenhauer wants to actually *claim* knowledge about things-in-themselves.

So how do we go about formulating a coherent answer to the question about things-in-themselves? First, the great impediment –that the inner hidden nature of things in the world is inaccessible from without (*WW1*, 99)– must be somehow overcome. The subject-object distinction that Schopenhauer has made the starting point of his philosophy means that perceiving something from the outside does not tell us anything about its inner essential nature. We are only dealing with representations. This is why the task at hand seems so difficult and it is also why the solution that Schopenhauer found was arguably the greatest insight of his philosophy –insight that subsequently made it possible for him to argue for pessimism. What he said was that there was a way to gain access to the thing-in-itself because there is one representation in the world that is accessible to us from within. There is, he realized, only one object in the world that presents itself to us as both representation and as thing-in-itself. What

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<sup>73</sup> At times I will continue to use the expression *things-in-themselves* (in the plural) until I elaborate, further below, what Schopenhauer actually claimed about the inner essence of representations and why it is more appropriate to speak of *the* thing-in-itself as Shapshay says.

<sup>74</sup> Still, as we saw above, it is important to keep in mind that even though Shapshay agrees that he was a transcendental idealist (although his is a unique transcendental idealism) it is also the case that she weakens the relation between his transcendental metaphysics and his pessimism.

object is this? Our bodies. While we see our bodies (a representation) we are also able to gain access to the inner essence of our bodies because we *inhabit* them, we live *in* them. This is, crucially, the only object-representation in the world that grants us this sort of privileged inner access. The body (our body) is “a subterranean passage” that gives us access to, at least, *one* thing-in-itself (WW2, 195). And by doing so, it (our bodies) gives us access to *all* things-in-themselves (or *the* thing-in-itself) as we shall see further below.

Our bodies are already objects alongside other objects in the world and it “is subordinated to the laws of objects, although it is immediate object. Like all objects of perception it lies within the forms of all knowledge, in time and space through which there is plurality” (WW1, 5). So although it is true that our bodies are *representations* and so subjected to the principium individuationis in the same way that all other objects in the world are- the fundamental difference between our bodies and all the other representations is that our bodies are known to us in two ways. We are in a privileged position when it comes to our bodies insofar as

this double knowledge of our own body (...) gives us information about that body itself, about its action and movement following on motives, as well as about its suffering through outside impressions, in a word, about what it is, *not as representation*, but as something over and above this, and hence what it is *in itself*. We do not have such immediate information about the nature, action, and suffering of any other real object. (WW1, 103, italics mine).

We know what we are in *essence* (that is beyond the representation of our bodies) because we have immediate, direct access to our *lived* bodies through the inside. We can *introspect*. Yet, when we introspect, when we look into our bodies to see what is in our essential nature, what is it that we *really* become conscious of? The answer to this question is the answer to the pressing question about what the thing-in-itself *is*. And the answer Schopenhauer gives us is that through introspection we realize that, at the most fundamental level we are a being that wills (Essay on Freedom of the Will [FW], 11) because we feel *a will* operate and work through our volitions and through the movements of our bodies (WW1, 106). In this way *will* is what we find at rock bottom.

An important point about introspection and exactly *what* it reveals about our essence needs to be made here. Descartes famously asserted that we are thinking things<sup>75</sup>. Schopenhauer says that the Cartesian cogito, however, is driven by our human desire to differentiate ourselves from other animals, to stake out something unique about us. That “in this fundamental and essential point all philosophers have erred, in fact have completely reversed the truth, might be partly explained, especially in the case of the philosophers of the Christian era, from the fact that all of them aimed at presenting man as differing as widely as possible from the animal” (WW2, 199) so they raised thinking to first place and the willing to second. Schopenhauer resists this move on the grounds that this desire to differentiate ourselves from other beings is hiding from us the fundamental oneness of all existence. This is the same view later defended by Hartmann in his magnum opus *The Philosophy of the Unconscious* (PUC, 1869) when in his discussion on the will, says that “it is scarcely to be doubted, that what we regard as immediate cause of our action and call Will is to be found in the consciousness of animals as causal moment of their action, and must also be called Will, *if we cease to give ourselves airs of superiority* by employing different names for the very same things (as devouring, swilling, littering, for eating, drinking, child-bearing) (Book I, 60)”. Humans have long had the desire to establish some fundamental difference between us and the other animals, a desire for *superiority*.

Once we have gone beyond the appearance of our body and accessed its inner nature through introspection, we are finally able to discover that we are fundamentally and essentially *will*. This answer, however, is still incomplete. A difficulty remains. This is because while we have direct access to the inner forces working in our bodies (the *will*), we can have no *representation* of those forces (which means no representation of the *will*). That is, we cannot apply the principium individuationis to it. In turn, this means that we cannot objectify, individualize or pick it out as if it was some object located in space and time. Furthermore, we cannot ascribe any causality to it. With all these strict limitations in place, how can we say anything about the will? It turns out that we can say some things about it because the *will* that we discover when we introspect and that we talk about remains –to us– partially mediated. That is, it still appears to us, partially, through the principium individuationis.

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<sup>75</sup> In the *Meditations in First Philosophy*.

Schopenhauer made clear that cognition (all cognition) is still *representation*. So what exactly is going on when we cognize the will? After all, if we can cognize that we are *will*, does this not place the will inside the phenomenal world? If so, does this not mean that we are in fact *not* accessing the thing-in-itself but just another representation? We can only give approximate answers to this question. It is indeed correct to point out that knowledge (*all* knowledge) is secondary to willing and as such knowledge can never grasp the thing-in-itself, which is why it (knowledge) also a representation. After all, we cannot, ever, escape space, time or causality. We always necessarily impose these categories, which is why knowledge of anything in the universe is only possible through these categories and this also includes our claims of knowledge about the thing-in-itself, of the will. As a consequence, anything we say about the will is necessarily mediated. So although we access the will inside of us immediately, our knowledge about its features remains slightly mediated or opaque (WW2, 197). Specifically, although the knowledge we can have of the will is free from space and causality, it is still not free from time. In Schopenhauer's words, "this inner knowledge of the thing-in-itself has indeed to a great extent cast off its veils, but still does not appear quite naked" (WW2, 197). Some aspects of the will remain hidden from us. So by observing in ourselves,

There still occurs a difference between the being-in-itself of its object and the observation or perception of this object in the knowing subject. But the inner knowledge from two forms belonging to outer knowledge, the form of space and the form of causality (...) there still remains the form of time as well as that of being known and of knowing in general. Accordingly, in this inner knowledge, the thing-in-itself has indeed to a great extent cast off its veils, but still does not appear quite naked. (WW2, 197).

The thing-in-itself, then, "still does not appear quite naked". But that it is partially known still allows us to, fortunately, say at least some things about the will. In other words, we are not completely in the dark, forever barred from claiming any knowledge whatsoever about the thing-in-itself. So here is what we can say about it: that every individual act of the will is what gives us the clearest representation of the thing-in-itself. (WW2, 197). In other words, every time we, as representations, *will* something we gain an insight into our will and ultimately into *the* Will. This

is why Schopenhauer can claim that among the features of the will we can include, “desiring, striving, wishing, demanding, longing, hoping, loving, rejoicing, jubilation and the like, no less than not willing or resisting, all abhorring, fleeing, fearing, being angry, hating, mourning, suffering pains –in short all emotions and passions” (FW, 11).

Yet, even if Schopenhauer is correct about our own particular internal essence –that we are *willing beings*– how do we go from recognizing that *will* is our essential nature to claiming that everything in the universe, nay, the universe itself, is *also* will? Let us recall that the will, as a thing-in-itself, is beyond space and time and therefore cannot be identified as an individual object. Whatever the will is, therefore, it must be one, eternal and indivisible because postulating many wills (for a example a will unique to me and a different will unique to you) or that it has a beginning is only possible if we can locate these supposed *wills* in space and time, if we can apply the principium individuationis to them. But, we cannot do this because this principle can only be applied to objects that appear to us as representations. But the will is not a representation, so the principle cannot be applied to it. As Shapshay rightly pointed out, there are no *things-in-themselves*, only a *thing-in-itself*.

On Schopenhauer's account, then, the will does not occupy space or occur in time. Therefore, it cannot be many (for it to be many it would need to be subjected to the principium individuationis) and it cannot have a beginning or an end. Further, the will cannot be the cause of the representations, of the things and objects that we perceive. This is why Schopenhauer says that representations and the thing-in-itself are better understood as two sides of the same coin whereby no causal link is established between them and “each of the two has meaning an existence only through and for the other; each exists with the other and vanishes with it” (WWI, 5). Furthermore, it follows that if the will is not many, then it must be one. One, indivisible, universal and eternal will that denies plurality and that is at the essence of all objects that appear in the world of representations. The will is the ultimate reality, that which every object *really* is. The world in its totality is, at its essence, *one* undifferentiated will. This means that all objects and representations are fundamentally *one same reality* because the will, which is the true essence of everything, is “free from all *plurality* (...) It is itself one, yet not as an object is one, for the unity of an object is known only in contrast to possible plurality [rather, it is] outside the

possibility of plurality” (*WWI*, 113). While in the world of representations, objects appear divided and individuated, the will itself is forever undivided.

The will wants and desires. And if the will is the one true reality and essence of everything that exists in the world, then everything that exists in the world wants and desires. This is why existence is suffering. It is because life is a constant striving driven by the blind impulse of the will. As the representations of a fundamental will, we are determined to seek out desires, to accomplish tasks and to aim at things. Further, we can only want things because we have a need for them, because something is missing, because the will is unsatisfied. When Schopenhauer claims that “all willing springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering”, (*WWI*, 196) he is pointing to an essential truth about existence: that being in a state of *want* is to already be in a state of suffering. And because the will is always wanting, lacking, in need, yearning and never satisfied, then we are always suffering.

This is why we always suffer. Further, this suffering never disappears. It does not matter if we sometimes obtain what we actually want. That is, I may want a particular job; I may desire to meet someone; I may want to live in the place I really like; I may aim for some personal goals I have set for myself. And I may actually obtain those things. I could land my dream job or I could end up living in the place I always dreamed of. But this is no solution,<sup>76</sup> it is no end of suffering because “fulfillment brings this [particular desire] to an end; and yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied... the wish fulfilled, at once makes way for a new one” (*WWI*, 196). For every goal we accomplish, for every desire that is fulfilled, others remain unfulfilled and new ones will arise to take the place of the fulfilled ones. This is, after all, the essential nature of the will; to always want, to endlessly want. Desire is only satisfied momentarily. New desires are around the corner and the fulfillment of a desire is only a door that leads us to more desire, more suffering. Therefore, that “there is no ultimate aim for striving means that there is no measure or end of suffering” (*WWI*, 309).

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<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, in critical thinking, there is a fallacy known as the *Fallacy of Composition*. The fallacy occurs when we assume that characteristics of the parts can be transferred to the whole. Take the following example: Atoms are not alive. We are made of atoms. Therefore we are not alive. Here we see how it is problematic to assume that what is true of the parts must also be true of the whole. I mention this fallacy because a similar error in reasoning appears when we assume that because life has good and happy moments, then it follows that life as a whole is good. From the fact that my life has happy moments, I cannot conclude that my entire life is happy. And even if *my* entire life turned out to be happy, I cannot conclude that *all* life in general is happy.



In this way, pleasure is to be understood as a negative. This means that pleasure is not a real presence of some internal state (a positive presence). Pleasure is only the *momentary* absence of suffering. The positive in life, that from which life emerges and on which all of existence is grounded on is lack, desire and suffering (WWI, 320). Attainment of our desires only provides fleeting satisfaction.

Furthermore, even if we are fortunate enough that we are able to fulfill our desires more often than not, it is still the case that “it is difficult to attain and carry through anything; difficulties and troubles without end oppose every plan, and at every step obstacles are heaped up” (WWI, 319). On this account, suffering in life is inescapable and compounded not only because we always find ourselves in a state of want and need because in the pursuit of those wants we find trouble, conflict and difficulties which add on to our initial suffering. Still, suppose that we put in the hard work, that we are able to make it through the obstacles and finally obtain the object of our desires. Then what? Is happiness, in spite of what Schopenhauer has been saying up to this point, obtained? No. Happiness is not obtained, it is only felt for a fleeting moment. This moment soon passes because if we obtain what we have willed,

a fearful emptiness and boredom come over it; in other words, its being and its existence itself become an intolerable burden for it. Hence its life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents. This has been expressed very quaintly by saying that, after man had placed all pains and torments in hell, there was nothing left for heaven but boredom” (WWI, 312)

As Cheryl Foster puts it, “human individuals oscillate between extremes of deprivation and ennui, one replacing the other like the steady swing of the metronome” (216). Suffering therefore strikes us four times. Once because our existence arises from need and want, so we constantly strive for things. Second, because that striving is itself fraught with difficulties and obstacles that cause more suffering. Third, because once we have what we want, we become bored and this starts a new cycle of wants and we are once again bound to race after a new desire. But this is not all. Another cause for suffering and pain, the fourth one I want to mention, is found in the fact that this striving and wanting is ultimately itself meaningless. Although we

may pursue a thousand desires and we may satisfy every single one of them, we are destined to face *desire one thousand and one*. And for what? Why are we pursuing these desires, suffering because of them and then repeating this cycle until death? There is, it seems, no explanation. How could there be? We are mere transitory objectifications of a will that is, in essence, irrational and purposeless. This lack of purpose means that “the life of men are like clockwork that is wound up and goes *without knowing why*” (WWI, 322, italics mine). We strive, because we must, but ultimately we do not know *why* we strive. Taking all this together, “the life of every individual, viewed as a whole and in general, and when its most important features are emphasized, is really a tragedy” (WWI, 322). This lack of purpose is, as we shall see ahead in chapter 4, the driving force behind what I call *teleological pessimism*.

We are therefore left with a definite dark, bleak and wretched image of our existence, of existence in general. It is important to note that Schopenhauer does not limit this suffering to human existence. He thinks we should extend this condition to all animals. Indeed, a good understanding of his philosophy shows us that not only *can* we extend suffering to others, but we *should* do so because all animals are also manifestations of the same essential will that is in all of us and so subjected or determined by the same relentless will that drives all of us. Mara van der Lugt makes the observation that Schopenhauer’s pessimism “has sometimes been misrepresented as focusing purely on the human condition” (342) but in actuality “pessimism, for Schopenhauer, does extend to the condition of animals” (361). His concern for the wellbeing of animals, it seems to me, is quite clearly established in his writings in many instances which is why this issue is not (or *should* not be) a matter of debate.

The debate about animal suffering, if it is to be had, revolves around questions on the nature and intensity of that suffering (not on whether or not they suffer) as well as what we humans can do about it, if anything. At some points he suggests that some use of animals is justified as when he says in a footnote, that “Man’s right over the life and power of animals rests on the fact that (...) the pain the animal suffers through death or work is still not so great as that which man would suffer through merely being deprived of the animals flesh or strength” (WWI, 372). At other times, as van der Lugt pointed out, he expresses admiration for the Hindus that “abstain from all animal food” while they embrace all of life, engage in charity, and have “boundless patience towards all offenders” (WWI, 388).

Shapshay also makes it very clear, and rightly so, that “the fact that Schopenhauer’s ethical thought brings non-human animals capable of feeling pain into the realm of the morally considerable in an intuitively compelling manner is a major strength of his view. He was ahead of his time on this, and for our contemporary sensibilities, he seems to be tracking a facet of what many of us would think as moral progress: taking animals’ lives and their suffering seriously, from a moral point of view” (*RS*, 170).

Suffering is, therefore, a condition of all living beings and he has presented the case for the claim that life, *all* life, is suffering and filled with distress. This is an important point to keep in mind at all times when discussing the existential predicaments that we all face. For Schopenhauer pessimism is not only an anthropocentric concern. To think that it is (or that it should be) demonstrates a failure to grasp the fundamental philosophical truth that is revealed by his take on transcendental idealism –a take that, as we have seen, claims there is but one thing-in-itself that unites all that exists. As we shall see ahead, that contemporary ERM philosophers exclude animals from their existential concerns is an important shortcoming that makes much of their work solipsistic in nature insofar as it is a philosophy done *by* humans, *for* humans and *only about* humans.

Ultimately, our existential situation is so wretched that it provides all the necessary elements needed for an accurate description of what hell would look like so much so that he thinks that in *The Divine Comedy*, Dante did not need to look anywhere but here in this world in order to get the material for his own descriptions of Hell (*WWI*, 325). Why continue living then? Why not commit suicide? It would seem, given everything he has said, that ending our lives would follow rather unproblematically from his claims about the wretchedness of existence. Yet, this is not the case.

It is important to understand why Schopenhauer does not endorse suicide as a solution to our predicaments. Once his philosophical opposition to suicide is understood, it is easier to grasp why his philosophy can coherently hold, at the same time, that life is undesirable and yet we can do whatever is within our means to avoid the extinction of humanity. For this reason it is necessary to dedicate some time and space to his discussion on suicide. Doing so will ultimately

allow us to obtain a more complete and rounded understanding of his pessimism –this being an essential task in order to make sense of the pessimist philosophers that followed him.

### 3.1.1 Against Suicide

Faced with our inescapable condition as sufferers, Schopenhauer thinks that “the proper mode of address between human beings , instead of *Monsieur, Sir*, etc, would be *Leidensgefarte, Soci Malorum*, *compagnon de miseres, my fellow sufferer* (PP, 273)”. We cannot go wrong when we understand that everyone *suffers*, that we are not alone in this.

Although ultimately he thinks that suicide is not a solution to the pains of life, and is therefore *not* a recommendation one should derive from his philosophy, in Schopenhauer scholarship there appears to be some disagreement around the validity of his claims. Michal Masny goes as far as to say that “Schopenhauer’s argument against suicide has served as a punching bag for many modern-day commentators” (Masny, 494). This is a point that needs to be cleared because, it seems, given all he has to say about the desirability of nonexistence his opposition to suicide is not warranted, that he is in fact *not* entitled to oppose suicide. This is why, for example, Frederick Beiser claimed in his book *Weltschmerz*, that “Schopenhauer's prohibition of suicide seems arbitrary: Why should the suicide affirm life itself?” (62). The question, however, is ill posed because Schopenhauer has no such prohibition against suicide.

In order to see that Schopenhauer neither prohibits suicide nor does he think it is a solution to our existential predicaments, the discussion around suicide can be approached from two perspectives. From a removed, abstract point of view and from an engaged, embedded lived point of view. This possibility —observing life from two perspectives— is found in Schopenhauer's ideas. When it comes down to evaluating our own lives, he says we can do this in two ways:

Man, besides his life in the concrete, always lives a second life in the abstract. In the former he is abandoned to all the storms of reality and to the influence of the present; he must suffer, struggle and die like an animal. But his life in the abstract, as it stands before his rational

consciousness, is the calm reflection of his life in the concrete (...) he is a mere spectator and observer. In respect of this withdrawal, he is like an actor who has played his part in one scene, and takes his place in the audience until he must appear again (...) but then goes on stage and acts and suffers as he must” (WWI, 85)<sup>77</sup>

Here he makes clear that we can look at life in two ways. As an *observer* and as a *participant*. I will accept this general framework and will apply it to his arguments on suicide. This means that from an observer’s point of view, Schopenhauer’s view on suicide is *not* arbitrary at all. Quite the contrary; his philosophical opposition to suicide is overall consistent with his views. Further, it is inaccurate to categorize his position as an *arbitrary prohibition* (as Beiser claims). In strict terms, more than a prohibition, his position is better understood as a philosophical *opposition* to suicide, what I characterize as a *strong recommendation* against it. From this observers point of view (which I will call the philosophical point of view), suicide is more akin to a mistake, which is why he does not favour it. On the other hand, from the subjective, participant and *actors’* point of view (to use Schopenhauer’s example of the theatre), suicide may be justified given everything what he has to say about the condition of our existence.

Suicide is a possibility only offered to human beings. Although, as we have just seen, pain and suffering are present in every being that exists, in the case of humans we have additional sufferings to deal with. Animals have to contend with day-to-day struggles. Humans have this too, but in addition we remember the past and we extrapolate to the future, something that animals do not experience. In this way, as Schopenhauer holds, it would seem that human suffering is not only of a different intensity, but of a different sort altogether. This is, however, a claim that is difficult to defend today<sup>78</sup>. The way we understand animal life has changed greatly

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<sup>77</sup> This distinction occurs in the context of a discussion on reason and the knowledge that it allows us to acquire. In this passage, which appears in section 16 of *The World as Will and Representation I*, he states that humans (as opposed to other animals) have the “wonderful” ability to survey existence in an abstract way.

<sup>78</sup> I do not intend to deny that there are differences in the way animals and humans understand and perceive time, suffering, pain, loss and a host of other experiences. While certain experiences may be available only to humans, the reverse can also be said: that certain experiences are only available to some animals and not us or other animals. Some experiences are almost too obvious to mention, but it may still be helpful to do so. So, for example, olfactory experiences available to dogs are wholly inaccessible to humans. The world, as it appears to them, is totally alien to us. While all this is true, for the issues I am raising here this does not seem to be a very fruitful avenue to explore. Humans may suffer in ways that other animals do not. But then again, even amongst humans there are some that,

and there is good reason to think that many animals (the Great Apes and possibly other mammals) have complex notions of time and personal identity. They may even mourn when a member of their community dies. Elephants are an interesting case because they have, so it seems, a clear and sophisticated understanding of death.

According to the anthropologist Barbara J. King, in order to speak of *mourning* in her book *How Animals Grieve* (2013) she argues that the individual must show changes in their behaviour. For example, sleeping or eating less, retreating from the group, and overall loss of energy. Elephants have demonstrated these behaviours and they even perform burials (they cover corpses with leaves and branches) and make frequent visits to the place where the death has happened similar to the way humans visit the graves of their loved ones. These behaviours, or others similar to them, have been observed in certain primates, birds, dolphins and killer whales. What is going on in the mind of the animal that processes the death of a loved one? Do they try to make sense of what has happened? Do they ask themselves questions? Doubts? Fear?

Still, if we put ourselves in the tentative position to grant that in humans it seems that the past and the future play far greater roles than they do in other animals, then this means that we have additional mental sufferings to deal with. As a “compensation” for this additional distress, nature has granted us “the privilege of being able to end [our] lives before she [nature] sets a term to it” (*BM*, 39). Suicide, then, is a live possibility available to all humans given to us by nature as a way to compensate for the additional suffering we are subjected to.

Now, given everything that we have just seen about life it may be tempting to conclude that suicide is a good answer to the ills that befall us, that it is a possibility we can legitimately act on. It may seem that by ending my life I put an end to all the striving and suffering. But on Schopenhauer's account, to believe that this is the case is to reason incorrectly, it is to

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faced with very similar experiences, suffer in ways that are very different from other humans, both in intensity and, perhaps, in kind. Some humans do not experience any pain whatsoever –this condition is known as *Congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis* (CIPA). Further, in the face of a determined event and due to a psychological makeup, some humans may not even suffer at all, while others may suffer greatly. I say all this because, as I take it, the essential point for pessimism is not to determine who suffers more than others. This is not about comparing intensities in order to draw conclusions about the nature of suffering. What matters is *the fact of suffering*, and this fact is applicable to humans and nonhuman animals. Whether it is the case that all nonhuman animals suffer or whether other organic life also suffers, such as plants, is a matter not yet settled. This gap in our knowledge should not preclude us from acknowledging what we do know: that many animals that do in fact suffer.

misunderstand his philosophical perspective. Recall that, as I stated earlier, the question of suicide is best answered from the two perspectives that, according to Schopenhauer, we can adopt on life: the philosophical and the actors points of view. Adopting either of these views allows us to approach the question of suicide from different perspectives that, in turn, can give us a comprehensive understanding of his nuanced and –it seems to me– insightful discussion of suicide.

But first, it is important to clarify the moral stance that Schopenhauer took on suicide. This is important because he had a clear, vehement and a very definite view on this. While today suicide is often viewed as a sort of moral failure, as a weakness of the spirit or something that can only be explained as a consequence of mental illness, Schopenhauer thinks we must refrain from any sort of moral judgment. It is never justified to condemn the suicide. He laments that “we have to hear that suicide is the greatest cowardice, or is only possible in madness, and further absurdities of this kind; or even the totally senseless phrase that suicide is “wrong”, even though quite obviously there is nothing in the world to which everyone has such an indisputable *right* as his own person and life” (PP, 276). The idea here is that there do not appear to be any good reasons for condemning the suicide, other than poorly justified religious reasons.<sup>79</sup> The last part of his claim (that everyone has a right to his life) is, as we shall see further below, a matter of debate specifically because it is the opposite of what Kant had to say on suicide. Kant thought suicide was a moral wrong *precisely* because we have no right over our own life. More on this point later.

Schopenhauer's plea is that we drop our moral indignation of suicide. He even does this by appealing to the very personal and intimate experience of those that have known a suicide: “(w)ho has not had acquaintances, friends, relatives who have voluntarily departed this world? And everyone is supposed to think of them with revulsion, as criminals? I say no and no again!” (PP, 276). The moral questions surrounding suicide are complex and this ultimate act cannot be easily described as bad, wrong or *evil*. Ultimately, “whether [man] ought on ethical grounds to

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<sup>79</sup> Schopenhauer blames religious orthodoxy for the widespread condemnation of suicide. He questions the authority of religious figures on this issue and affirms that there is no biblical grounds for such condemnation. He does propose that suicide is viewed as a wrong because “giving up life is a poor compliment to the one who said “everything was very good” (PP, 279). In other words, the suicide disproves Gods claim that life is good and so he is a dangerous person that is, in their eyes, rightly condemned.

forego this privilege [suicide] is a difficult question” (BM, 40) but one which Schopenhauer thinks can be answered from the impartial, spectator, philosophical point of view.

From the philosophical point of view, if we step back from life, step off of the stage and take our place among the spectators of the play as Schopenhauer suggested we can do, then we will see that suicide is a mistake. And it is a mistake, because the promise of suicide is a false promise, the solution it offers is illusory, it is a deception. He defends this view of suicide by offering two reasons.

First, we must recall that the will is eternal. It is beyond space and time and therefore has no beginning and has no end. Further, we, along with everything else that exists, are mere servants of the will, only fleeting manifestations of the one eternal essence. Ultimate reality is the will, we are only specific objectifications that live and die in time in order to serve the desires of the eternal will. This is why we, as individuals have “no value for nature, and can have none (...) nature is always ready to let the individual fall, and the individual is accordingly not only exposed to destruction in a thousand ways from the most insignificant accidents, but is even destined for this and it led towards it by nature herself (*WWI*, 276)”. We are not important to the will. The will needs individuals, but it does not need *this* or *that* specific individual.

As a consequence, because the will is not *interested* in our individuality or in our particular existence, our death is indifferent to it. Death is no annihilation of our essence. Death is only the destruction of a specific representation of the will, one representation among the countless others that serve the will. Anyone under the illusion that death is to be feared because it is a total annihilation is akin to someone thinking that “the sun can lament in the evening and say: Woe is me! I am going down into eternal night” (*WWI*, 280). This particular day may end at sunset, but the Sun itself remains intact, unperturbed and will be back tomorrow for another day.

The fundamental point here is that death does nothing to the essence of the world. Death does nothing to the will, to our true essence. And if this is the case, then suicide can do nothing to the will either. Faced with the tragedies of life, a person may consider suicide as way to put an end to strife, pain and suffering. But they are deceived if they think they can accomplish those goals by committing suicide. Ending their life does not end strife. Ending their life does not end suffering. If the suicide thinks they are destroying life, they are mistaken for with suicide they



are merely denying their individual representation. This is why “suicide, or the arbitrary destruction of an individual phenomenon, is a quite futile and foolish act, for the thing-in-itself remains unaffected by it.” (WWI, 399) The suicide may think they are putting an end to life, but the will is impenetrable and never subjected to *destruction*, especially by the act of any specific individual. Julian Young goes as far as to say that, under Schopenhauer’s reading, suicide is “an extreme act of egoism” and he is “self-obsessed (...) someone who has become so isolated from the rest of the world that it seems to them that only their own pain matters, indeed that only their own pain exists” (195). Yet while Young is correct in pointing out the fact that the suicide is someone that is concerned about their personal suffering and (perhaps) sees their own life as somehow deeply distinct from other lives, he is unwarranted in claiming that the suicide thinks that only their pain matters and even less warranted in saying that the suicide thinks only his pain exists. A person on the verge of committing suicide may know that pain is universal and that he is not alone or unique in this regard. The difference may be that they have decided to *do something about it* whereas the rest of us have chosen to muddle along. He may know this and still carry out the act. The real point Schopenhauer wants to make is that the suicide is ultimately powerless in the face of the will. He solves one problem: his suffering. But, as Young puts it – and on this point he is correct– “my suicide is a complete irrelevance to solving *the* problem”: existential suffering (195). So from the fact that suicide is a mistake, one cannot, indeed *should not*, pass any sort of ethical judgment as it is implied when one accuses the suicide of extreme egoism and total denial of the sufferings of the others.

This is why ending his existence in order to end suffering is to miss the point, it is to fundamentally misunderstand the relation between *representations* and the will. As Masny puts it, “suicide is objectionable because it prevents one from attaining salvation in the state of willlessness, which is superior to the outcome of suicide” (497) and “the person who commits suicide is deceived that they negate the will, but end up affirming it” (498), which is to say that pushing back against the will and negating my life is no negation of life itself or, in Schopenhauer’s terms, no negation of the will itself. This is why for Schopenhauer suicide cannot end life or suffering. The suicide ends but a representation insofar as in ultimate terms “beginning and end concern only the individual by means of time... outside time lie only the will, Kant's thing-in-itself... suicide, therefore, affords no escape.” (WWI, 366). As Shapshay puts it in

her chapter *Why Life Rather than Death? Answers from Rustin Cohle and Arthur Schopenhauer* (2017),

The reason Schopenhauer rejects suicide is that suicide does not negate but rather affirms the will-to-live, for the person who would die by suicide *desires life*; it's just that the individual is unsatisfied with the conditions on offer for their particular life. Within this logic, suicide is foolish because it prevents a person from attaining the highest wisdom and the true inner peace that would come from actual renunciation of the will-to-live (5).

The second mistake that the suicide unwittingly commits is that they help to bring about that which they seek to deny. The suicide wants to deny life (the will) but actually ends up affirming it. This is because it appears that he in fact “wills life, and is dissatisfied merely with the conditions on which it has come to him.” (*WWI*, 398). In other words, the suicide wants to end their particular life but would gladly and happily accept a different and distinct life. They would accept a happy life. One with no suffering (or less suffering). They would choose and live life if only it was given to them under different conditions. In this way, then the suicide affirms life itself and in so doing affirms the will. Give them a good life, and they will take it.

Furthermore, by *willing* suicide, the suicide is in fact *willing* and in so doing is affirming the will. The suicide wants something. They have a need. They want to achieve something (in this case, annihilation). By wanting and desiring, the suicide is offering a strong affirmation of the Will. (*WWI*, 398) which is why the suicide has never ceased to will. On the contrary, they remain a servant to it. The suicide ends up saying *yes* to the will, *yes* to life. *Yes*, let's keep willing, but not here, not in this particular phenomenon that I am. They only complain that this particular representation did not work out but they affirm (will) their disposition to live through another representation. As Dale Jacquette puts it, “Suicide ends life, but as the result of a willful decision in the service of the individual will-to-live, it cannot by its very nature altogether transcend willing. The only logically coherent freedom to be sought from the sufferings of the will is not to will death and willfully destroy the self (...) sublime indifference to both life and death” (Jacquette, 307) is the only way to deny the will. In other words, the only means by which we can effectively silence the will is by *not wanting* anything at all. Existence, being the torment

that it is, is only successfully confronted by quieting all the demands that the will makes on us, including the demand to end our individual existence.

For these two reasons, suicide is a mistaken action. It is based on a misunderstanding. It should be clear at this point that Schopenhauer's position on suicide is therefore not arbitrary. It follows from his overall views on existence. Further, contrary to what Beiser claimed, his position is not one of *prohibition*. First and foremost, Schopenhauer was not keen on prescribing. This is why he was reluctant to impose any strict views, or to issue commandments of any sort. He held that “generally we shall not speak of “ought” at all, for we speak in this way to children and to peoples still in their infancy, but not to those who have appropriated to themselves all the culture of a mature age” (*WWI*, 272). This explains why no arbitrary prohibition on suicide is to be found in his philosophy. His opposition to suicide is based on the fact that suicide is a philosophical incoherence and therefore not justified on those grounds alone. In the end, it is better to qualify Schopenhauer's opposition to suicide as a *strong recommendation*.

Eventually, as Schopenhauer said, we cease to be spectators and we are all called back on stage in order to resume our lives. From this point of view, suicide is appreciated in a different light. On the stage of life, suffering and discontent can be so huge that suicide appears as the most desirable option. Abandoned to *the storms of reality*, an individual may see suicide is the only way to end the sufferings of his particular existence. He may understand fully the philosophical argument against suicide, and he may be aware that his act will do nothing to the will itself, but this may be of no concern to him. Perhaps he does not want to strike at the will. Furthermore, he may understand that even if he wanted to do so, he is in no position to do it. He may *understand* all this but still decide to commit suicide because his aim is not the will, only this particular representation. In other words, his complaint, his rebellion is not directed to life itself, it is directed to his particular life, to his circumstance, to the life that he is leading now. A different life, under different circumstances, may very well be welcomed by the suicide.

This shows that the suicide may be in philosophical agreement with Schopenhauer and still want to terminate his particular existence. He will admit that his protest is not against life itself, that it is only against this particular life. In this way he may accept that his act of suicide actually affirms the will but, again, this may be of no concern to him. This is why “on the whole

one will find that, as soon as it comes to the point where the horrors of life outweigh the horrors of death, a human being will make an end of his life” (*PP*, 279). In other words, when life becomes too much to bear, a person may choose to exercise the possibility of suicide that nature has given him, while fully understanding Schopenhauer's point that this act leaves the essence of life untouched and unfazed. It is, from the purely subject standpoint, a live and legitimate option. Ultimately, together with his refusal to morally condemn the suicide, Schopenhauer can accommodate the person that decides to end his life even though the act does nothing to strike at the essence of suffering.

At this point it is relevant to consider Kant's objection to suicide. This is important for two reasons. First, Schopenhauer (as he himself acknowledges) is writing his philosophy in the Kantian tradition. Second, Kant has a specific argument against suicide and Schopenhauer directly addresses and criticizes this view, the only argument against suicide that he directly refutes. So what does Kant have to say on this topic?

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* [GW], Kant outlines his opposition to suicide. This opposition is based on his overall understanding of the moral duties we have, and specifically follows from the maxim that everyone should act so that “that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (*GW*, 38). In other words, the question of suicide is answered within the overall general framework for answering all ethical questions—it is not a question posed outside of the moral realm.

In the moral context suicide cannot be justified. It is immoral, always. The person contemplating suicide only has to apply the maxim and by so doing will come to realize that he can find no justification for it. Kant holds that “if he destroys himself in order to escape from a trying condition he makes use of a person *merely as a means* to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life” (*GW*, 38). But a human being is *not a thing* to be used, which is why the suicide reduces his own humanity and therefore is in violation of the ethical maxim that we are all *ends*.

This is why, from an ethical perspective, and even if I find myself in the middle of Schopenhauer's *storm of reality*, I am not at liberty to view my life, my humanity, as a *thing*. We

can freely dispose of things in the world, but this permission is not applicable to humans. On Kant's account, the first duty incumbent on all humans is to preserve our lives which is why he claims that "I cannot, therefore, dispose of a human being in my own person by maiming, damaging or killing him" (38). As I am a human, I cannot damage, maim, or kill myself. There is no room in Kant's ethics for suicide.

Schopenhauer finds no merit in Kant's analysis of suicide and believes we can easily dismiss it. He thinks his arguments are "pitiable and quite undeserving of an answer" (*BM*, 19), though he does indeed go on to answer them. One of the answers has to do with the ineffectiveness of the argument. In other words, Schopenhauer thinks that Kant's arguments will do nothing to prevent the potential suicide from carrying out the act. So much so that "it is laughable indeed to suppose that reflections of such a kind could have wrestled the dagger from the hands of Cato, of Cleopatra, of Cocceius Nerva or of Arria the wife of Paetus" (*BM*, 19) and furthermore they "have never hitherto restricted anyone tired of life even for a moment" (*BM*, 46). On this point it seems that Schopenhauer is very likely correct. A person seriously contemplating suicide is surely not in a state of mind to evaluate and consider the Kantian objections to suicide, let alone actually agreeing with the argument, thereby deciding to not proceed with the act. Further, to hold that the question of suicide is one that can be resolved on ethical grounds is to presuppose the wrong thing. The issues involved in suicide "belong to a higher view of things" (*BM*, 19) –they are not a purely ethical matter– and are related to questions that pertain to the relation between the will and the world of representations as previously discussed by Schopenhauer.

The main disagreement that Schopenhauer has with Kant's argument has to do with its practical effectiveness. In other words, he argues that from the subjective point of view, Kant's prohibition against suicide (and this *is* indeed a prohibition) is useless. He does not, however, assess the philosophical coherence of Kant's prohibition. Given Kant's views about humanity and morality, it may indeed be the case that Kant's views are warranted and justified. Yet, Schopenhauer chooses to criticize the subjective value of his arguments and concludes that, from this perspective, his arguments have *no* value and are thus condemned to remain purely abstract artifacts with no bearing on the subjects actual *lived* lives.

This same criticism, however, can be used against Schopenhauer. That is, his philosophical arguments against suicide may also be ineffective. It is difficult to see how any person seriously contemplating suicide could be persuaded by them and therefore refrain from ending his life based purely on his arguments. Does the suicide ever really consider the effect of his action on the will, on the essence of existence itself? Is this even a legitimate concern for the suicide? Except for, perhaps, some few *enlightened* suicides<sup>80</sup>, I think not. While this may seem to render Schopenhauer's argumentative effort pointless, there is a fundamental difference between his approach and Kant's. Kant has a full prohibition of suicide. Schopenhauer does not. He merely proposes that suicide is philosophically incoherent and does not actually solve anything. Furthermore, and to his great credit, Schopenhauer admits that suicide is a live and real option for some, which is why he so explicitly refuses to morally condemn the suicide.

Schopenhauer can understand why someone would end their life. From a subjective, personal point of view, he can accommodate the suicide and accept his motives even if from a philosophical point of view the suicide is making a mistake. But on the contrary, Kant does not provide such space or accommodation. His strict adherence to moral duty even in the face of tremendous suffering, pain and distress is what ultimately allows Schopenhauer to dismiss Kant's view as "laughable". I end with a final quote from Schopenhauer. This quote shows, once again, why suicide is a mistake but also shows why suicide may have an appeal to some.

Suicide can also be regarded as an experiment, a question one poses to nature and to which one tries to force an answer, namely what change in the existence and cognition of human beings is experienced through death. But it is a clumsy one, since it suspends the identity of the consciousness that would have to hear the answer" (*PP*, 280).

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<sup>80</sup> Because of the heavy trauma that suicide involves (both for the suicide and those close to the suicide) it may sound out of place to say that there is such a thing as *enlightened* suicide. What I have in mind, however, are cases like Philipp Mainländer. As we shall see ahead in chapter 3.3, Mainländer committed suicide on purely philosophical grounds and as such it was an act carried out in full knowledge of the philosophical motivations and implications of his act. This is, at least, what he claims and suicide does indeed seem to follow from his pessimist metaphysics. As to whether or not there are more complex psychological issues involved in his action, it is not for me to say as this would be a different question altogether.

The verdict on suicide is clear: it is a mistake that should be avoided and in no case encouraged or promoted. Suicide is not the solution. Collective suicide is no solution either. And it would also be a mistake; a collective mistake. As a consequence, from Schopenhauer's views on suicide, we can conclude that human extinction thrust upon us, against our wishes and without a full and complete knowledge of our fundamental nature as *will* is a futile act, an undesirable outcome. If we are to end our lives at all then that must come about by a conscious, deliberate act that in itself does not excite or call upon the will. The best example of this is death through a full and complete negation of the will. In a word, by inanition.

For these reasons, from the perspective of Schopenhauer it is desirable that we postpone our annihilation until and only when humans come to understand that the only way to fully negate the will is through the adoption of the ascetic life form.

### 3.2 The Pessimism of Eduard von Hartmann

Von Hartmann made his biggest contribution to the pessimist tradition in his book *The Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1869). After Schopenhauer, von Hartmann was the most read and discussed of all pessimists philosophers in his time. Beiser reports that, "Hartmann was a celebrity in his age. When his *Philosophie des Unbewussten* first appeared in 1869, it created a sensation and became a philosophical bestseller. The first edition rapidly sold out, and in the next decade the book went through no less than eight editions" (WZ, 122). And as Dennis Darnoi in *The Unconscious and Eduard von Hartmann* (1967) describes it, "the copies of the first publication disappeared from the bookstores within a few months. Foreign countries hurried to obtain copyrights for translation" (13).

As is the case with all the Weltschmerz philosophers, he is writing in the shadow of Schopenhauer. How much he is indebted to Schopenhauer is a point of debate if only because he himself attempted to strike a distance with Schopenhauer. In his essay "Zur Geschichte und

Begründung des Pessimismus”<sup>81</sup> (1880) he says that “it is not true that Schopenhauer is the founder of philosophical pessimism; Rather, this honor or, as many believe, this dishonour, is due to the old master of the latest German philosophy, Immanuel Kant, and in fact Kant presents philosophical pessimism in its purity, undisturbed by personal moods and undistorted by quietistic-ascetic excesses” (viii).<sup>82</sup>

Whether Kant, and not Schopenhauer, should be identified as the first systematic philosophical pessimist is a matter that I will not address *beyond* what I have already done in chapter two<sup>83</sup>. This issue, it seems to me, is settled enough; Schopenhauer is the first pessimist. Still, for our purposes here the main point is that Hartmann distances himself from Schopenhauer’s pessimism. As if their pessimisms are not different enough in terms of what they identify as the main sources of our sufferings and what we can do about it<sup>84</sup> (the question of redemption) Hartmann wants to widen the gap between them *even more* by denying Schopenhauer any rightful claim to being the founder of *philosophical pessimism*. And by denying this, he is also denying that *he follows* Schopenhauer<sup>85</sup>.

Whether or not Hartmann ultimately provides enough philosophical support for his contention that Kant is truly the first foremost pessimist, it can still be said that von Hartmann had a unique project and an approach to pessimism that foreshadowed much of the current work in contemporary antinatalism, even more so than Schopenhauer. This makes his absence within contemporary antinatalism debates today the more troubling.

That his philosophy represents a new development within pessimism was a point stressed by Plümacher. As we saw, she put considerable effort into advocating the view that von

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<sup>81</sup> The translation to English would be: “On the History and Justification of Pessimism”.

<sup>82</sup> The original in German is: “Aber es ist nicht richtig, dass Schopenhauer der Begründer des philosophischen, Pessimismus ist; vielmehr gebührt diese Ehre oder, wie viele meinen, diese Unehre dem Altmeister der neuesten deutschen Philosophie, Immanuel Kant, und zwar stellt sich bei Kant der philosophische Pessimismus in seiner Reinheit dar, ungetrübt von persönlichen Stimmungen und unentstellt von quietistisch-asketischen Ausweichsen”.

<sup>83</sup> Hartmann thought it was important to stress the point on Kant’s preeminence over Schopenhauer by later adding in the Preface to the ninth edition of his *Philosophy of the Unconscious* that “not Schopenhauer but Kant is the father of Pessimism advocated by me, whereas Schopenhauer has one-sidedly disfigured and spoiled Kantian Pessimism” (xxxvi).

<sup>84</sup> I will address these two aspects, the differences in the sources of our predicaments and redemption, in greater detail in chapter 4.4

<sup>85</sup> To further differentiate their philosophies, Hartmann, and Plümacher, made it clear on many occasions that their pessimism is *scientific* whereas Schopenhauer’s is not. I will elaborate more on this ahead.



Hartmann's pessimism was unique and of a higher philosophical level than the one achieved by Schopenhauer. As Darnoi reads the relation between them,

It is common belief even in academic circles that von Hartmann's doctrine is a mere imitation or a slightly modified revision of the pessimism of Schopenhauer. Insofar as von Hartmann is concerned nothing can be further from the truth. First, von Hartmann emphatically denies that there is any significant resemblance between his pessimistic theory and that of Schopenhauer. Secondly, in his opinion, Schopenhauer's is not a philosophical pessimism at all. It lacks the sober objectivity, order, and clarity that are indispensable conditions of any philosophical theory. Instead it is a display of subjective feelings, emotions, and moods, and a pathetic extreme of "abnormal personal dispositions", an "unscientific subjective effusion of the heart" (88).

This is not a new criticism of pessimism. To say that it is largely related to moods and emotions is a line seen many times before. We have seen this in some length in chapter two and Plümacher was very effective in drawing a distinction between pessimism as philosophy and pessimism as *Weltschmerz*. What is indeed new here is that this time this criticism is from another pessimist philosopher and that it is directed at, arguably, the foremost pessimist. However, Hartmann's claim that Schopenhauer's pessimism is a *display of emotions* is highly debatable<sup>86</sup>. Still, if anything, what this critical engagement with Schopenhauer ultimately demonstrates is just how rich and varied the entire pessimist landscape is.

The claim that Hartmann is a more advanced form of pessimism is partially sustained on the idea that his was a philosophical attempt at bringing together two apparently very different philosophical systems; that of Schopenhauer with the one of Hegel<sup>87</sup>. As Plümacher puts it,

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<sup>86</sup> Not to say that there are no emotions in his writing. There are. Yet, it seems to me that the presence of that sort of language is complementary and not essential to his philosophical arguments.

<sup>87</sup> Julius Bahnsen also attempted a similar approach, but with different results. He took elements of Hegel and Schopenhauer in order to arrive at a pessimism that is decidedly bleaker than Hartmann's. What he took from Schopenhauer was the *will* –all pessimist philosophers ended up using Schopenhauer's will in one way or another. He introduced changes to it (by speaking of a multiplicity of individual wills in place of Schopenhauer's monism), then appealed to Hegel's dialectical principle and introduced it directly inside of each will. In this way, each will is at essence, caught in a struggle with itself but, contrary to Hegel's dialectical process, does not resolve into a synthesis. Instead, it is forever caught in that struggle, therefore remaining unsatisfied. This is what Bahnsen called "Real Dialectic" and as Beiser describes it, "real dialectic makes three central claims: (1) that contradiction exists in

although “every vital system of philosophy must assimilate the main ideas of its predecessor, Hartmann’s is a higher synthesis of Schopenhauer’s “alogical” will and Hegel’s logical idea as attributes of the unconscious spirit” (69). What we get from this union of *reason* and *will* is what Hartmann called the *Unconscious*. I will say more on this crucial concept ahead.

Keeping this in mind, a useful way of understanding the important contribution that von Hartmann makes to pessimism is to view his brand of pessimism as what I call *hedonic pessimism* (or, as he calls it, *eudaemonic pessimism*). That is, a pessimism that argues for the idea that the world is filled with suffering because pain always and necessarily outweighs pleasure in life. If pleasure is what we seek in life then we are condemned to suffer because such pleasure is always difficult to come by and short-lived when we do experience it. The reason this is the case has to do with our biology. Put in simple terms, we are not made for pleasure. As a consequence of this, the world is bad because pain always outweighs pleasure and this is because of the *way we are*, *not* because of anything we do. Sully (1877) rightly says that “Hartmann views life from the standpoint of hedonism, measuring all its values in terms of pleasure and pain” (131). I agree with this assessment, and this is precisely why I categorize his pessimism as *hedonic*.

Ultimately, the journey through pessimism that von Hartmann traces starts off with the most important question for all pessimists. As he puts it, his purpose (which is also the purpose of all pessimists) is to “inquire whether the being or the non-being of this present world deserves the preference.” (*PUC*, Book III, 1) In order to arrive at the answer he eventually does (that nonbeing is preferable over being), he starts with a look at what other philosophers have said on this topic. This is important because the judgments that they, “the greatest minds of all ages” (1) make constitute an important contribution, an essential insight into the judgment of existence. Yet, while their judgments are important, they should not –as we shall see– be taken as definitive. He appeals to the perspective of four philosophers, starting with Plato, who he quotes from *The Apology* as saying that,

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the very heart of reality itself (...); (2) that contradiction cannot be resolved (...); (3) that source of contradiction lies in the will, which is the basis of all reality.” (*WZ*, 271). Whereas, as we shall see in this chapter, Hartmann was able to infuse a degree of optimism into his pessimism by appealing to Hegel’s dialectical process and gradual unfolding of human history, Bahnsen manages to drive deeper into pessimism using the same tools found in Hegel.

Now if death is without all sensation, a dreamless sleep, as it were, it would be indeed a wonderful gain. For I think if anyone selected a night in which he had slept so soundly as to have had no dream, and then compared this night with the other nights and days of his life, and after serious consideration declared how many days and nights he had spent better and more pleasantly than this one, that not merely an ordinary mortal, but the great king of Persia himself, would find these but few in number as compared with all his other days and nights. (2)

Next, he cites four philosophers, although he does so very briefly without taking the time to really engage with their assessments. This is not, however, a failure on his part. He cites them because he wants us to think about whether or not we should take their opinions as definitive or not. As we shall see ahead, he thinks we do not. Still, it is important to know what their thoughts are on the question at hand if only because their perspectives can reveal interesting insights into the nature of existence. So second in line is Kant. Hartmann quotes him as saying that if life lasted longer than it already lasts, then that would be nothing more than the unnecessary “prolongation of a perpetual contest with sheer hardships” (2). Then Fichte who thought that happiness in this world was not possible because nothing could ever satisfy us. Indeed, “no object beneath the sun and the moon will satisfy them [us]... Thus they pine and fret their life through; in every situation in which they find themselves, thinking if it were only different how much better their lot would be and yet, after it has changed, finding themselves no better off than before” (3). On his account, nothing in this world can satisfy us and we are always thinking that if things were different, everything would be better. In this same direction, Schelling said that nature was permeated by sadness and that for this reason pain is universal and necessary for all life (4). In his review of the different perspectives offered by philosophers, von Hartmann does not forget Schopenhauer and includes him among the thinkers who have proclaimed how bad it is to exist.

So although it is interesting to know what philosophers have to say about existence, it is not the case that their perspectives have, necessarily, a universal and objective validity. One reason to distrust their judgements is that, perhaps, precisely because “they proceed from eminent intelligence (they are) affected by that melancholy sadness which is the inheritance of all genius” (4). In other words, their evaluations of existence may not be a fair reflection of

existence in general. Instead, it may be a biased and partial one. This is why, no matter how many arguments pessimists –or philosophers in general– offer us, ultimately it would appear that the best judge of a life is always the subject who lives that life. In the end *we* are the best judges of our lives –or so it seems. This is a crucial caveat because although it may *seem* that we are the best judges of our lives, von Hartmann challenges this assumption. And he does this by asking us to attempt to evaluate our lives as objectively as possible. In order to do this, he goes through four scenarios meant to show how and if such an evaluation on our part is possible.

For the first one, he asks us to consider if there is a way for us to judge the lives that we have lived up to this point. Take a moment to reminisce, to think of your past. If we do this exercise and go back to our past (our childhood, adolescence or another period), it is most likely that we will remember only the good moments. That is to say, our pains, difficulties, all the obstacles we face and the multiple frustrations that we experience are forgotten or if and when we do remember them, we give those moments a positive spin. For example, we now see the good that followed, or we tell ourselves how much we have grown since then. In this sense what was lived as very bad at the time is now, perhaps, seen not as bad. As a consequence of this, we are in no position to evaluate our past lives impartially and objectively. In our memories, the balance tips toward happiness, but in reality our past may have been more filled with pain than pleasure<sup>88</sup>.

Second, consider the future. Perhaps our future will be quite good, we may even have very good reasons to believe that this will be the case. Von Hartmann, however, claims that any projection we make is condemned to be a false projection, because hope distorts and conditions the way we imagine our future lives. We think that everything can improve, that life is progressing, that we have learned valuable lessons from the past and that we will put those lessons to good use. We think that things are going to get better and that is why it is worth moving on with our lives no matter how difficult it may have been up to this point. In short, the future will bring more good than bad. By the way we evaluate our past and we project our future, von Hartmann concludes that we cannot make an impartial evaluation of our lives and that

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<sup>88</sup> This is clearly not always the case. Some people, often justifiably so, painfully remember their past and are haunted by trauma and pain. These cases, however, still prove von Hartmann's point. This is because anybody that has overall traumatic memories is already in a position where they are more likely to agree with the proposition that they have had a bad life and that existence is, generally, an unfortunate experience.

therefore we will always tend to believe that our life is better than it really is. Hope is the greatest deceiver. He says that

Without doubt hope is a very real pleasure. But what, then, does one hope? Unquestionably to catch and retain pleasure. But if happiness is not to be had, because, as long as one lives, pain always preponderates over pleasure, it follows that hope is a contradiction and worthless; that it is indeed the illusion; that its function is just to dupe us, i.e., to make fools of us, in order only that we may endure to perform our yet uncomprehended task. (72)

This line of reasoning –that we are bad judges of our lives– was taken up more than one hundred years later by David Benatar and the contemporary antinatalists. When Benatar argues that most people are prone to Pollyanism and therefore unreliable judges about the quality of their lives, he is perhaps unaware that he is rehashing a claim that precedes him by more than one hundred years. It is also a claim with support in contemporary psychology. As Baumeister *et al* hold in a 2001 study on how we weigh goods and bads in our lives,

events that are negatively valenced (e.g., losing money, being abandoned by friends, and receiving criticism) will have a greater impact on the individual than positively valenced events of the same type (e.g., winning money, gaining friends, and receiving praise). This is not to say that bad will always triumph over good, spelling doom and misery for the human race. Rather, good may prevail over bad by superior force of numbers: Many good events can overcome the psychological effects of a single bad one. When equal measures of good and bad are present, however, the psychological effects of bad ones outweigh those of the good ones. This may in fact be a general principle or law of psychological phenomena, possibly reflecting the innate predispositions of the psyche or at least reflecting the almost inevitable adaptation of each individual to the exigencies of daily life. (323).

In other words, we are *unreliable* judges of our lives –sometimes giving too much weight to bad events. Given this unreliability, and if doubts about the overall badness of existence still remain, von Hartmann presents us with his third scenario. Here he presents us with a

hypothetical case that asks us to consider the following. If we imagine for a moment that we are offered the possibility of living this life that we have had again, if we have the opportunity to be reborn and repeat the cycle, what would we say? Would we say *yes*? Would we live again, would we embrace the possibility of repeating everything again? Using the concept of regress he presents the following case,

Let us imagine Death to draw nigh this man and say, Thy life-period is run out, and at this hour thou art on the brink of annihilation; but it depends on thy present voluntary decision, once again, precisely in the same way, to go through thy now closed life with complete oblivion of all that has passed. Now choose! (...) I question whether man would prefer the repetition of the past performance to non-existence, if his mind be free from fear, and calm, and if he has not altogether lived so thoughtlessly, without all self-reflection [...] how much more must this man prefer non-being to a re-entrance into life (*PUC*, 5).

If we had the choice to live again, we would decide against it. Asking whether one would choose to live the same life again was a question later raised by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (1882) but to a different end. In Nietzsche, the purpose of the question was to make us understand that we should live life to the extent that we would want to live it again in an *eternal recurrence*. This, the *eternal recurrence*, is presented in this way:

How, if some day or night a demon were to sneak after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return (...) Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? (...) Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?” (102).

How great, happy and fulfilled would our life have to be for us in order to affirm its eternal recurrence? The point here is to embrace and live life in such a way that we would be

disposed to say yes to life again. The Nietzschean eternal recurrence is thus *life-affirming*. For von Hartmann, it is *life-negating*. If we had the chance to do it all again, would we? While Nietzsche and Hartmann are on opposite sides of the issue, there is another possibility. Leibniz proposes a slightly different thought experiment insofar as he does not ask us to consider the possibility of living *exactly* the same lives again but rather he wants us to ask if we would live again under *different* circumstances. Given that Leibniz believes in the overall goodness of life, he thinks we would indeed take up the offer to live again (as Nietzsche said) but only if the conditions offered were different (as Nietzsche did not say). In other words, experiences –good and bad in different arrangements– are always worthwhile because life itself is worthwhile. As he put it,

Had we not the knowledge of the life to come, I believe there would be few persons who, being at the point of death, were not content to take up life again, on condition of passing through the same amount of good and evil, provided always that it were not the same kind: one would be content with variety, without requiring a better condition than that wherein one had been. (*Theodicy*, 133)

The key concept here is that of *variety*. We would live again, yes, but as long as it was a different life, with (so he says) the same amounts of good and bad. We would not expect our lives to be *better*. Just *different*. This is an insightful perspective because it forces us to consider that life experiences are goods in themselves and that our complaints about life –if there are any– may be about the specific circumstances that we experience and not about the experiences of good and bad in themselves, not about life itself, not about the *fact* of experience.

We have, then, three different views on the desirability of life expressed through the idea of living again. The pessimist von Hartmann, perhaps unsurprisingly, believes that if we were presented with the option to live again, we would say no. One life is enough. And if this is true (that most of us would say no to repeating this experience), it would demonstrate in a categorical

way that life is not a *good*. Ultimately, it is up to each one of us to make the call and determine which of the three answers better corresponds with our evaluations of life.<sup>89</sup>

Regardless of our personal views on all this, the conclusion that Hartmann thinks we can draw from all that we have seen above is that living is bad, that existence is not something we intrinsically appreciate. Not experiencing life is better than experiencing it. This claim holds even if someone were to say, for example, that although there are negative moments in life, there are also good ones. Those moments could even be incredibly pleasurable experiences. But even then, the bad experiences nullify any benefit we receive from the positive.

In order to drive his point further home, and in case the three scenarios presented thus far have been unable to support his claim that life is overall a bad experience, there is a fourth exercise that he asks us to consider. Suppose they offer you the following experiment. First, we have the option of hearing a pleasant sound for five minutes. Then five minutes of hearing discords. Second, we can skip this experiment and not hear anything at all. Although we really want to hear that, for example, beautiful music that we like so much, we must remember that later comes the most horrible sounds, so we have the option of not hearing anything. No good and no bad. Nothingness. (*PUC*, 21). Would we choose to go ahead and hear both sounds? Would we rather hear or not to hear? Is the beautiful sound worth the experience of the discords? This scenario is repeated two more times. A second time with a smell. That is, smelling a pleasant aroma followed by a horrible stench or the option of not smelling anything. The third time with taste.

In these three cases we are first offered the possibility of experiencing pleasure, attraction, and then pain and repulsion. The option of skipping these experiences all together is also offered in the three cases. That is, we can say no, that we do not want to smell or hear or taste because it is better not to subject ourselves to those sufferings or tensions. What would most of us say? Von Hartmann thinks we'd rather skip those experiments. He believes that it is not worth so much sacrifice to obtain pleasure no matter how intense it may be because the displeasure or disgust that follows is enough to render the pleasure void. In other words, no

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<sup>89</sup> This thought experiment was also mentioned by Schopenhauer when he says that “at the end of his life, no man, if he be sincere and at the same time in possession of his faculties, will ever wish to go through it again” (*WWI*, 324). In the case of Schopenhauer, then, he thinks we would *not* live again and is in agreement with Hartmann.



matter how great a pleasure is, it is not worth the pain that precedes it<sup>90</sup>. If he is right, then it would be mistaken to say that life is good even if bad things happen because good things are also bound to happen. As his thought experiment purports to show, that we experience good things *after* bad experiences does not imply that *experiencing* in itself is desirable.

But even if the thought experiments that Hartmann proposes were not convincing or we were inclined to conclude the opposite of what he thinks we would (for example, that we would prefer to hear, smell and touch repugnant things provided pleasurable things follow, or that we would agree to living our lives again) there are two other reasons, beyond our personal preferences, that indicate the overall badness of life.

The first is that, as is also the case with all other pessimists, he argues that life is filled with suffering because of some *fundamental* feature of the world and not because of any specific feature about the world that we have *constructed*. That is, our predicaments are not social in nature and they are not due (or not *largely* due) to this or that particular social problem. Life is a wretched state of affairs no matter what we do to alter our material conditions (this has to do with the *Unconscious*, as we shall see ahead).

The second is that the sort of *material* beings we are does not make it possible for us to experience happiness for any extended period of time. Rather, we are constituted in such a way that pain and suffering will always be the predominant feature of our existence. Specifically, we are *biologically* constituted in such a way that life will always be more painful than pleasurable.

That the pessimism of von Hartmann rests so heavily on biological explanations that involve the workings of our nervous system and how we process pain and pleasure is one his unique contributions to pessimism and what sets him apart from the other *Weltschmerz* philosophers. The reasons that von Hartmann offers in support of this have to do with, among other things, the fatigue of our nerves in the presence of sustained pleasure. That fatigue increases dissatisfaction insofar as it makes the body less able to retain pleasure and if we want more pleasure we must seek out higher and more intense sensations (this reminds us of addictions that require consistently higher exposures to retain levels of pleasure).

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<sup>90</sup> Unless, and only if, the pleasurable experience is so much greater in intensity than the painful experience.

On the other hand, pain is always felt directly (immediately noticed) whereas pleasure (arguably most pleasures) must be discovered, recognized, and sought after. We have to strive and *work* for pleasure. The pleasures of life can be learned (learning requires effort and dedication) and some pleasures require overcoming an initial period of *pain*, frustration and effort<sup>91</sup>. By contrast, we do not have to strive or *work* for pain. Pain is always felt immediately, it just *happens* to us, easily and effortlessly. Further, we need to keep working in order to sustain pleasure, yet pain sustains itself without any active input on our part. This means that, “pleasures and joys we miss painfully as soon as they cease; but pains, even when they disappear after long presence, are not immediately missed, but their absence has to be brought home to us by means of reflection. In the degree in which enjoyments increase, the receptivity for them diminishes; the accustomed is no longer felt as enjoyment” (17). In other words, when after much effort we experience a pleasure, as soon as it is gone, it is *painfully missed* again. This gets to one of von Hartmann’s main points; that pleasures are difficult to come by and that once felt, they require higher levels of exposure in order to maintain the desired levels of satisfaction. Then when said pleasure is no longer present, its absence is felt immediately and we long to recapture the feeling. The sort of beings we are means that pleasure is always hard to come by.

Ultimately, the road that von Hartmann travels through pessimism involves direct appeals to our lived experience. This is a strength of his approach as his examples are of such nature that they often allow us to test them in our own lives. The basic and most fundamental starting point for any pessimist is the question of the value of life itself. In this the pessimist is not alone for who has not wondered what the value of life is? Indeed, pessimism is a philosophy that addresses questions most people can easily identify with and in this lies its relevance for most of us. After all, at some point or another in our lives we have probably all asked ourselves if happiness is possible or if it is some sort of illusion. We have asked, why is there so much pain and death in the world? And we have wondered, is life worth living?

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<sup>91</sup> We can think of some pleasurable activities that were, initially, anything but pleasurable. Think back to the first time you tasted coffee, beer or wine. The first time you smoked (for those that enjoy(ed) smoking). Learning to read in order to appreciate the great works of literature –much effort and study is required on our part. Think about learning how to ride a bike and how many falls and frustrations we go through only to, at the end, enjoy the experience of riding our bikes through beautiful scenic trails. This list could be quite long, but these short examples lend credence to von Hartmann’s claims that pleasures (perhaps not all, but still quite a few) require work and commitment whereas pain never requires work or commitment on our part.

These questions are not only legitimate for a pessimist but necessary. And if all our toils and misgivings are due to factors that belong to existence in itself, then can anything be done about our existential suffering? The possible answer(s) to this question is the well-known problem of *redemption* (see footnote 4), and it is a central concern in all pessimistic philosophy. Crucially, one of the more novel contributions that von Hartmann makes to pessimism is that he provides answers that explain why, in spite of everything that has been said up to this point about the wretchedness of existence, we continue to live and procreate. It is time to have a look at those answers.

### 3.2.1 The Unconscious

It is best to start by having a look at Hartmann's idea of the *unconscious* in more detail. This is important because in order to explain why we continue to move ahead with our lives in spite of all the suffering, we need to grasp what and how the *unconscious* works.

The unconscious is today a concept well rooted in our collective knowledge, due in large part to the work of Freud. In this way, the unconscious is inexorably tied to psychoanalysis. Yet, not only did the concept *not* originate with him, it is not the creation of Hartmann either. The very notion that there is an unconscious presence at work in our lives can be traced as far back as twenty-five thousand years ago. In the book *Thinking the Unconscious - Nineteenth Century German Thought* (2010), Angus Nichols and Martin Liebscher find references to *ideas* of unconscious forces at play in “Gautama Buddha (c.563–483 BCE); in Plato's (427–347 BCE) theory of the recollection of divine memory (anamnesis); in the works of Plotinus (204–269 CE); in the theological writings of St. Augustine (354–430 CE) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–74); in German mystics such as Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) and Jakob Böhme (1567–1624)” (4). Such a far-reaching history is, however, not useful for the particular purposes that Nichols and Liebscher have in mind. For them, the concern is pinpointing the conversations around the unconscious that took place in 19th century Germany; precisely when Hartmann presented his pessimist philosophy based on a fully fledged theory of the unconscious. For this, they identify

Descartes and his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) as the place where the unconscious entered modern European philosophy (4)<sup>92</sup>.

With such a varied and complex history, Nichols and Liebscher warn us about drawing a straight line between how the unconscious was used in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and how Freud conceptualized and popularized it. The relation is not as transparent as it seems. As a consequence, it is important to keep in mind that when Hartmann speaks of the unconscious, his unconscious is not the same and is not necessarily a direct precursor to Freud's unconscious<sup>93</sup>. In his book *The Unconscious and Eduard von Hartmann* (1967), Dennis Darnoi claims that while it is indeed problematic to establish "a direct line of descent [to] Freud's *Es-Unbewusste* and Jung's *Kollektiv-Unbewusste*, from Hartmann's *Das Unbewusste*" it is still relevant to show "that any later application and meaningful usage of the term takes its origin from von Hartmann's philosophy" (3). So while this matter is for a different conversation altogether, it is helpful to point out that, at a minimum, Hartmann was essential in firmly establishing the concept of the unconscious. So much so that in all of the subsequent uses of the term (including Freud) the unconscious appears to refer to a *drive* or *impulse*—exactly as Hartmann had described it— that we are not aware of at a conscious level and therefore beyond our direct control.

Hartmann's unconscious is unique in that, as I said in a passing reference to at the start of this chapter, it is central to his entire philosophical project; to bring together Schopenhauer's pessimism and Hegel's dialectical movement. This attempt at reconciling the systems of Hegel and Schopenhauer seems difficult to accomplish from the outset. He clearly recognizes that the task is not an easy one because both philosophers are at extremes where Hegel represents the logical element and Schopenhauer the irrational element through the *will* (*PUC*, 147). In his view, "as certainly as Schopenhauer was incapable of comprehending Hegel, so certainly must Hegel, if he had known him, have shrugged his shoulders over Schopenhauer; both stood so far from one another, that every point of contact was wanting for mutual recognition" (150). It was up to Hartmann himself to bridge the gap between the two and in so doing create a unique philosophical system. Sebastian Gardner says that Hartmann's "intention is even-handed: it is to

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<sup>92</sup> In addition, they identify Ernst Platner's *Philosophical Aphorisms* (1776) as the first place where the word *unconscious* itself is used in a German text (9).

<sup>93</sup> For Hartmann, the unconscious is a metaphysical entity that underpins *all* existence and has a very distinct character that I will explain ahead.

give both parties equal weight in fashioning an original form of monism, one that employs the deficiencies of each allegedly one-sided system as a motive for unifying it with the other” (4).

In addition to the philosophical differences between them, Schopenhauer's negative opinion of Hegel is well known. He accused him of being a charlatan who presented himself as a deep thinker by using words and terminology difficult to understand<sup>94</sup>. He also accused him of being servile to power, a mere university professor who lived in his ivory tower. But beyond these anecdotes, the truth is that between the philosophy of Schopenhauer and that of Hegel there appears to be a sidereal distance that von Hartmann recognized. While for Schopenhauer the world is in its essence irrational and purposeless, Hegel argues otherwise. The whole world is guided by a rational spirit (*Geist*) and the progressive unfolding of human history follows a rational course that takes us to increasing stages of progress. There is purpose in the world. And we can understand that purpose. As Hegel puts it *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), “Reason is purposive activity” (12) in such a way that “Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward” (6), so that Science (understood as truth and knowledge by way of a rational connection of concepts) is ultimately “the crown of world Spirit” (7). Complete knowledge is our end. On the other hand, recall that Schopenhauer's will is beyond the reach of our reason, destined to remain hidden from us (although we can know it partially). Of what little we can say about the will, this is the most essential: it is irrational (or at the least not amenable to reason), insatiable and purposeless. It simply *is* and we do not know *why* it is.

As Beiser claims, Hartmann's philosophy is “a synthesis of pessimism and optimism (...) an attempt to correct and complement the one-sidedness of Schopenhauer's pessimism with Leibniz's and Hegel's optimism.” (*After Hegel*, 186). In this consists the great project of Hartmann; in bringing together Hegelian reason with Schopenhauerian will into the concept of

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<sup>94</sup> In his Preface to his *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (1847) he says this that Hegel is a charlatan and that because of him, “German Philosophy stands before us loaded with contempt, the laughing-stock of other nations, expelled from all honest science (...) and the brains of the present generation of savants are disorganized by Hegelian nonsense” (xix). This is by no means the only negative remark that he makes of Hegel. They are frequent and appear in several of his works, sometimes indirectly as the final example I want to mention here. In *Parerga and Paralipomena I*, where he is speaking to the –in his mind– deplorable state of academic philosophy, he wonders if academics are not “full of corrupt views and give out hollow phrases, vacuous drivel, and repulsive Hegel-jargon where we expect thoughts?” (149).

the *unconscious*.<sup>95</sup> As a consequence, it can be rightfully said that the unconscious is von Hartmann's biggest contribution to metaphysical pessimism. In an interesting contemporary scholarly discussion of Hartmann's unconsciousness, Gardner says that his

theory of the unconscious serves (...) as a framework for the large-scale philosophical synthesis of Schopenhauer with Hegel that he proposes. (...) Thus, if Hartmann is right, his system can be justified from two directions, either through a critique of Hegelianism which shows the need for its union with Schopenhauerianism, or vice versa. Hartmann also supposes, and this comprises a further important part of his strategy, that Hegel and Schopenhauer can be seen jointly to form an antinomy: because each has an irrefutable claim to truth, their systems must be viewed as contraries, not as contradictories, and his own philosophy of the unconscious, he claims, provides the (unique) solution to the antinomy (4).

On one hand, the unconscious is what drives our needs, wants and desires –insofar as it is *will*. But on the other hand, the unconscious is also Hegel's reason. As a consequence, while one half of the unconscious (the will) simply *wants*, the other half (reason) attempts to *guide* the will, to tame and control it. In other words, reason tries to deliver purpose to our existence while the will only delivers want and pointless, endless desire. This is why, within the unconscious, reason attempts to temper the blind impulses of the will and presents itself as the saviour of the world for it alone, so it seems, can bring peace and happiness to all. If suffering is to end, then we ought to trust reason.

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<sup>95</sup> A note of caution is required here. While von Hartmann did indeed accept important aspects of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, in particular the notion of the will as an essential aspect of the world, Gardner makes an important point when he claims that Hartmann was *not* a transcendental idealist. In other words, Hartmann is not carrying out an epistemological project and he is not setting up a framework that establishes a distance between representations and things-in-themselves. Furthermore, Hartmann does not need to appeal to transcendental arguments in order to present his pessimism (whereas, as I claim, Schopenhauer does). As he says, "he regards Schopenhauer's commitment to this large portion of the Kantian legacy as a major error. Whatever gap there may be between "appearance" and reality can be bridged, Hartmann believes, by inductive inference (...) our acts of will are simply, Hartmann maintains, further objects of cognition. This allows Hartmann to furnish will with exactly the same plain realist epistemology as any other object of knowledge." (5). While this an important point to bring up and is certainly an area for further development, for the purposes of understanding Hartmann's pessimism, it is enough to accept that he incorporates Schopenhauer's will (even if for him it is cognizable) into the essence of the world alongside Hegel's *Spirit*.

The role of reason is essential in Hartmann's philosophy. It is what gives Hartmann's pessimism a very unique character. According to him, the world is not simply irrational chaos or a disorderly endless struggle to fulfill wants and desires. On his account, reason is here to provide a measure of control, some *rationality*. And it is precisely because of the role of *reason* that von Hartmann can declare, perhaps surprisingly for a pessimist, that this is the *best of all possible worlds*. In this he initially appears to be in agreement with Leibniz, but in actuality each one is saying that this is the best possible world for very different reasons.

It must be remembered that for Leibniz this is the best of all possible worlds because of all the possible worlds God chose this one (insofar as this is the one that ultimately allows the greatest amount of good). In the end and in spite of our sufferings (or perhaps *because* of them) great good will come of everything. On the other hand, for von Hartmann this is the best world because the rational part of the unconscious is doing the best it can to guide the will and build the best world by channeling and attempting to regulate and reign it in even as it seeks to satisfy its desires at all costs. So this is *the best possible world*, yes. And yet, behold how terrible and wretched it is.

Contrary to Hegel and Leibniz, awaiting us at the end there are no assurances that everything will turn out fine or that it will all be for the best. Reason can only *attempt* to build the best world it can, given the endless irrational volitions of the will. So while this is the best of all possible worlds it is also, and at the same time, better that it did not exist at all. As Hartmann says,

We have seen that in the existing world everything is arranged in the wisest and best manner, and that it may be looked upon as the best of all possible worlds, but that *nevertheless it is thoroughly wretched, and worse than none at all* (PUC, 123, italics mine).

Besides the struggle between them, the precise nature of the relation between will and reason in the unconscious is such that,

the world is *what* it is and *how* it is as presentation of the Unconscious, and the unconscious idea has as servant of the will, to which it itself is

indebted for actual existence, and as compared with which it has no independence, also no counsel and no voice in the “That” of the world. The will is essentially only non-rational (destitute of reason, alogical), but in that it acts, it becomes through the consequences of its volition, *irrational* (contrary to reason, anti-logical), inasmuch as it attains unblessedness, the contrary of its volition. Now to bring back this rational volition, which is guilty of the “That” of the world, this unblessed volition into nonvolition and the painlessness of nothingness, this task of the logical in the Unconscious is the determinator of the “What and How” of the world. For the Reason the question therefore is to repair the mischief done by the irrational Will (126).<sup>96</sup>

The points that von Hartmann makes here are, first; that the will is primary and that in order for the will to become actual it must will something in particular (it cannot simply will in general or in the abstract). Second, in its original *willing*, the will is non-rational –understood as being *beyond* rationality and therefore not subjected to the rules or demands of reason. Third, that when the will actually wills something determinate, it then creates the conditions for the Unconscious to arise, which is why the unconscious cannot exist separate or independently of the will. Fourth, the will once *willing* ceases to be non-rational and becomes *irrational* –understood as *contrary to reason* and in this contrariety unwittingly subjects itself to the demands and rules of reason. In its irrational character, the will becomes anti-logical insofar as it is incapable of satisfaction and yet *irrationally* continues to *blindly* strive for satisfaction (124). This is where Reason –the other aspect of the unconscious– has a role to play in *correcting* and *guiding* the will so that it can lessen its suffering as much as possible<sup>97</sup>.

Yet, while *reason* may appear to be a positive force that can give us hope of a life with less pain and suffering, it turns out that the union between will and reason *in* the unconscious amounts to a view of existence that turns the world into a battlefield where existence itself is caught in a struggle between two forces that try to obtain the upper hand. The world is but the

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<sup>96</sup> Beiser points out that Hartmann’s use of the “That” and the “What” of the world is borrowed from Schelling, who also hinted at a sort of synthesis between Schopenhauer and Hegel.

<sup>97</sup> While the argument that von Hartmann deploys is essentially about a *world process* where these two forces battle it out on a global stage, I think that it is just as interesting to see how these forces can play out in our own individual lives. While we also *will*, our reason equally attempts to temper and control our desires and this results in an inner conflict that has no definitive resolution other than a rational realization that we have no choice but to accept that we are bound to live in this struggle and suffer for as long as we exist.



stage where this clash is carried out. In this conflict, either Hegelian *reason* will come out on top, or Schopenhauer's eternal and irrational *will-to-life* will be victorious.

So while we are currently locked in this struggle, Hartmann, as we shall see below, believes that reason will eventually win. This victory, however, is not good news for us. The triumph of reason brings disheartening news insofar as it consists in articulating and revealing to us the true existential predicaments that we face and ridding us of any illusions we may have in regards to happiness. As Darnoi states,

the progress of the world, therefore, has an end or purpose, but it is a negative one: the cessation of the process through the return of the essence from its contradictory state of activity to its proper and original state of rest. Since this will be achieved by the means of individual human consciousness, their end is also negative: to bring about as soon as possible the end of this alogical, irrational, painful and worthless progress of the world. At this juncture von Hartmann's metaphysics and axiology meet in the negative evaluation of all conscious existence (103).

It is only because Hartmann has incorporated the Hegelian idea of progress into the unconscious that he is able to imbue existence with *forward* movement. This is essential because by making progress an integral aspect of the unconscious and by then locating the unconscious itself at the centre of his entire pessimist system, he is able to make the claim that humanity necessarily and inevitably *evolves*. In turn, this evolution involves going through three universal stages, each representing a higher stage of evolution. Only after these stages have been outgrown will humanity come to understand fully the misery of existence.

In the end, the victory of reason consists in realizing that it cannot tame the will, that happiness is not possible (largely because of the sorts of biological beings we are) and that happiness is therefore always an *illusion*. Crucially, there is not *one* illusion that is preventing us from understanding the impossibility of happiness. There are three such illusions and each one, in true Hegelian spirit, represents a stage in human development. What are they?

In simple terms, the first stage of our illusion made its appearance when humanity thought that it is already happy. In other words, that happiness was not an ideal, but something

that has actually been obtained (*PUC*, 12). However, once humanity realized that this is not the case, that happiness has not been and could not be obtained (among other reasons due to our biological constitution), happiness was cast outside of this world. In other words, the claim now became that happiness could still be achieved but not in this world, only in the afterlife. This is the second stage.

The third stage will occur after Christian ideas about the afterlife are gradually and slowly broken (94), after the second stage is superseded. Breaking free from this illusion about happiness in the afterlife is what leads us to the third stage: that happiness can be found here on this planet, but that it lies in the future. It is no longer here in the present and actual with us. But it can, and will, become reality in the times to come through social progress, technological advances, medicine and other related aspects meant to make our lives easier and more pleasant. This is the last attempt of *reason* at providing hope and at saving humanity from coming to grips with the misery of existence. Reason wants to attempt, one last time, to tame the will and provide all of us with lasting happiness in the future society. At this point it is important to have a look at each stage in more detail.

### 3.2.2 The First Illusion

The first illusion (which we have overcome) was to believe that happiness was not only possible but actually current. That is, we thought that we were, or could be, happy. In this stage, “happiness is considered as having been actually attained at the present stage of the world's development, accordingly attainable by the individual of today in his earthly life” (12). At this stage of human development, humanity lived under the idea that happiness was real and that it was possible to be happy on a day-to-day basis. However, due to our biology (as discussed at some length above) and countless goods in life (youth, health and love among others) that are fleeting, we soon realized that happiness is not possible.

For example, if we think that one of the most precious goods for human beings is the absence of pain and we take this proposition seriously, we inevitably come to realize that the only existential condition (or existential *non-condition*) that can offer that long-awaited absence

of pain is non-existence; never existence itself. As a sign of just how fleeting and sacrificing it is to achieve those goods that promise us well-being and happiness, we can take love as an example. If we could somehow balance the amount of reciprocated love that exists in the world at any given time with the amount of incomplete, impossible loves, and love that has simply come to an end, then the balance would tip sharply towards heartbreak. And for the lucky few who have the opportunity to experience and *live* love, reaching that point has also involved a series of obstacles and sufferings that were experienced along the way. But, and this point is important to von Hartmann, those evils that have been left behind reappear once more when love has already been achieved. Further he asks us to consider that,

One side generally loves more ardently than the other; the less loving is usually the first to draw back and the other feels faithlessly abandoned and betrayed. Whoever could see and weigh the pain of deceived hearts on account of broken vows, as much of it as is in the world at any moment, would find that it alone exceeds all the happiness derived from love existing at the same time in the world, for the simple reason that the pain of dissolution and the bitterness of betrayal lasts much longer than the blissful illusion. (33)<sup>98</sup>

Even if we can count ourselves among the few that, at any given moment, are happy as a result of being in a loving relationship, it would still be the case that, overall, there are more broken hearts (and thus more pain) in the world. In addition to this, Hartmann says that if we were to look back on the road traveled before we became fortunate enough to fall in love, it turns out that

the real enjoyment in the union of lovers must not only be paid in advance with fears, anguish and doubts, indeed, despair not only often fleeting, but later again with the pain of disenchantment - that enjoyment, the perception of whose illusory character at the moment of enjoyment

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<sup>98</sup> Such sweeping statements as these must be taken with a grain of salt. There is hardly anything anyone could ever do to actually measure and quantify claims like these. This renders the proposition wholly unverifiable and it might serve von Hartmann's overall argument better to condition some of these claims. Still, this is an idea (measuring and quantifying pains) that Hartmann muses about at one point. He says that "It is a pity that there are no tables of statistics showing what percentage of all love-affairs in every rank of life lead to marriage" (34). The point here is that, at least intuitively, it seems rather unproblematic to assume that heartbreak outweighs love in the world.

itself, can only be avoided by the violence of the impulse that suspends, or even corrupts, the judgment. (38).

What remains, then, is not only a trail of suffering that we follow in order to achieve love, but once that is achieved, disenchantment and pain are just around the corner. Thus, the idea that we are already happy in this world is soon discovered as an illusion. But this is not only discovered as an illusion for humanity. Once we understand fully how biological mechanisms process stimuli it becomes clear that pain preponderates in the world as a whole which is why animals and plants are also considered when we ponder the general wretchedness of life (76).

What happens at this point, then, is that we create a new illusion. That is, since we realize that happiness is not achievable in the here and now, we come to think that happiness is possible in the future.

### 3.2.3 The Second Illusion

We now have the second illusion. Humans have not given up on happiness, we are a relentless lot. We still think that happiness is possible, but now we think that it exists beyond this world. Von Hartmann mentions the figure of Jesus Christ as a person that accepts the claim that this world is, generally, an unhappy place. He “completely adopts the contempt and weariness of earthly life, and draws from them their last and most repulsive consequences” and only “to those who felt the misery of existence, sinners, outcast (Samaritans and publicans), oppressed (slaves and women), poor, sick, and suffering, but not to those that feel themselves well off and comfortable in the earthly life does he bring his gospel” (79).

In this second illusion humanity has placed its hopes and expectations in the afterlife. Happiness may not be possible here and now, but that does not mean it is not possible over *there*, beyond this life. Final redemption through Christ is possible to the extent that "all follow him in their rejection of this world and live in the faith and hope of the world beyond" (80). Ultimately, and this is an important point to keep in mind, at this stage happiness is still attainable for the individual. However, the idea that our soul can survive our body and thereby pass into a different type of existence turns out to also be an illusion because with our death our individuality is

destroyed –there is no individual to whom we could ascribe any state of being (83). Von Hartmann is rather short in offering his own arguments in support of the idea that as individuals we do not pass on to a new sort of existence. Instead he relies on philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Schelling and Leibniz to do his bidding. For example, he claims that Plato (unbeknownst to him, according to Hartmann) turned the world of Ideas into a place of pure cognition where individuality as such did not attain (83). As a consequence the individual inhabits this world, but not the real world –there are no individuals there.<sup>99</sup>

The defeat of this second illusion is key because it allows us to bury the ego which in turn allows us to move towards the third, and last, illusion. And this *burial of the ego* is a fundamental step forward in the progress of humanity. What the first two illusions had in common was that they both centred happiness on the individual. The first illusion held that *my* happiness was possible, that it was real in this world. The second transferred *my* own happiness to the afterlife and in so doing only affirmed the ego for “all longing for immortality is egoism” (89). But once the illusion of the ego falls, once we accept that for the ego happiness is not possible here nor there, we are prepared to accept that the *good* could be located in the whole, in the collective. This is a crucial realization because it is ultimately an acknowledgment that we are all at bottom, *one*, that we are all *unconscious*. Further, by focusing on the collective, happiness can be looked for in the well-being of the collective, which is to say that society as a whole can rid life of its miseries at some point in the future.

### 3.2.4 The Third Illusion

The third illusion therefore consists of returning to this world, but this time we think that there is some cosmic purpose, a historical process that guides humanity as a whole towards future happiness (the Hegelian influence is clearly appreciated here). It is no longer about obtaining my

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<sup>99</sup> He also reads Spinoza as saying that what is eternal in us is that which is active and not the passive mind that is affected by the body. And it is precisely the latter passive part that is responsible for our passions, emotions and, crucially, our *memories*. As these depend on the body, it follows that when the body ceases to be, so does our sense of self (84). In regards to Leibniz he says that “at the present stage of physical science the statement [that souls *and* bodies are monads that in turn are immortal] is its own criticism” (86). Lastly, Schelling is said to argue in the same line as Spinoza and the soul “can therefore also *not be called immortal* in the sense in which this concept includes that of an *individual* perpetuity” (86). While it is not my purpose to critically engage with his interpretations of these philosophers, it is still important to know what he says about them insofar as it helps to give us a broader picture of how Hartmann goes about developing his pessimist argument –always in dialogue with his predecessors.

personal happiness (this expectation has now been dropped because its futility has been understood). It is now about progress and the good of the entire society in the future. This is where our hopes are now placed. However, the truth is that this social progress is not really an advance towards happiness. Rather, it is “always only the mitigation of evils, not the attainment of positive happiness” (113) that we achieve with social progress. Some of the reasons for this have to do with the fact that,

however great the progress of mankind, it will never get rid of, or even only diminish, the greatest sufferings -sickness, age, dependence on the will and power of others, want and discontent. However many remedies found against diseases, diseases, especially the tormenting slighter chronic ills, always increase in quicker progression than medical science. Cheerful youth will always form only a fraction of mankind, and the other part be composed of morose age (...) with the increasing cultivation of the people grows, as experience shows its discontent (103).

It is not that social progress does not deliver certain goods that we all long for. What happens is that with each good that society can satisfy, new demands appear and with these new demands come new deficiencies (and we should not forget that, as we discovered in the first illusion, the satisfaction of goods is also usually temporary and ephemeral). Take for example education. One of the advantages of social progress is that access to education is easier and more widespread. However, education and knowledge only increase our discontent with the world. The more we know about it, the more we know that no matter how much society progresses, there are evils that can never be eliminated. Furthermore, progress can never be any definite solution to our ills because as often happens in our individual lives, “he who comes into a better position in life will in passing from worse to better certainly feel pleasure. This pleasure however, disappears with astonishing rapidity; the new and better circumstances are taken as matter of course, and the man does not feel himself a hair’s-breadth the happier than in his former position” (113). If we take this example to be analogous to social progress, we can see how and why each new stage of development will hardly provide an enduring satisfaction. In the end, von Hartmann asks, “who feels himself better off now than thirty years ago because now there are railways and then there were none?” (113).

Our faith in social progress as a way to achieve the much sought after happiness ends up collapsing when we realize that the advancement of society, with the availability of greater resources to satisfy my desires, does nothing more than create new needs and new desires. That is why it is possible to affirm that with the advance of history not only misery grows, but also the awareness of our misery (115).

There is nothing else left. Once we understand the illusory nature of happiness, once reason understands that, despite all its efforts, it can do nothing more, then human beings will overcome the three illusions and in so doing reach the last realization; that happiness is never possible.

Finally, at this point *Reason* has triumphed. But it has succeeded not because it has managed to tame the will or because it has finally led humanity to happiness. No. It has succeeded because it has realized that nothing can be done to change the essentially miserable character of all existence<sup>100</sup>. And this realization leads us to realize that if we are to find a solution to the pains and sufferings of existence as a whole, it is to be found in the disappearance, in the extinction of *everything that exists*. Von Hartmann eloquently says that the time will come when

Hoary humanity will have *no heir* to whom it may bequeath its heaped-up wealth, no children and grandchildren, the love of whom might disturb the clearness of thought. Then will it, imbued with that sublime melancholy which one usually finds in men of genius, or even in highly intellectual old men, hover like a glorified spirit over its own body, as it were, and as Edipus at Colonus, feel in the anticipated peace of non-existence the sorrows of existence as if they were *alien* to it, no longer passion, but only self-compassion (...) the illusions are dead, hope is extinct.” (117).

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<sup>100</sup> In his book *Moral Fables* (1824), Italian poet-philosopher Giacomo Leopardi has a similar take on how the Truth of existence will impact our lives. In the fable “The History of the Human Race”, he says that “once [the illusions] have been taken from the earth, through the teachings of Truth, which will enable men to understand them fully, human life will lack all value, all rectitude, in thought as in deed [yet] Truth will not be able, although she is so powerful and will continually wage war against them, either to drive men from the face of the earth, or to overcome them, except rarely” (12). Truth, then, will be unable to *drive us off the face of the earth*. In the end, Leopardi has a much bleaker view of humanity than Hartmann. In this, the optimism hidden in Hartmann’s pessimism becomes evident. For in spite of everything, Hartmann believes that the existential truth about our predicaments will be known and accepted, thereby paving the way for humanity to redeem itself and end all suffering. But Leopardi thinks that even when that truth is known, humanity will continue to exist and suffer propelled largely by the illusion of Love. No redemption is on the horizon for us.

That will be our end, the end of human history. And that end will be achieved through a conscious decision not to procreate. In other words, the path to redemption seems to pass through the universal acceptance of an antinatalist stance. It turns out that this, however, is not the final and ultimate solution to the problem of universal volition as such. Antinatalism is a major and necessary step on the way to the real complete redemption of existence.

The reason that antinatalism of itself is not the *real* final moment is because while antinatalism may bring about the end of human history this does not mean that it is also the end of the universal process that the unconscious unfolds. This point is important because the real solution to the predicaments of existence do not depend on the disappearance of the human species. Instead, it is about achieving, at some point, a complete *cosmic denial of the will*. That we, as humans, disappear is not enough to end the torments of existence because in cosmic terms, we are irrelevant. This point is interesting because Hartmann is insightfully pointing out that the end of us as a species does not preclude the possibility that, given the continued existence of our planet and of other life-forms, it is possible for the Unconscious to create a new species capable of giving way to a new cycle of suffering. As he says,

What would it avail, e.g., if all mankind should die out gradually by sexual continence? The world as such would still continue to exist, and would find itself substantially in the same position as immediately before the origin of the first man; nay; the Unconscious would even be compelled to employ the next opportunity to fashion a new man or similar type, and the whole misery would begin again. (129)

Still, it will most likely be us, the human species, that leads the way in denying the universal cosmic will by adopting, first, antinatalism and then, in some way (unknown to us), proceeding to end existence itself. But, although this is likely, it is not certain. There are other possibilities. For example, if we did die out but failed to take the rest of existence with us, then the species that would replace would be in charge of striking the final blow to the will (after they themselves come to the accept the wretchedness of life and subsequently overcome any illusions about the goodness of life that they may have). Another possibility is that life is completely wiped out on Earth or that some life-forms do remain, but they never give rise to a highly intelligent species similar to us. In these cases, and as Hartmann says, “a planet invisible to us of



another fixed star under more favourable conditions” (132) may be the place where the cosmic will is finally denied.

In the end there is some optimism to be found in von Hartmann. In this case, his optimism translates into a hope that allows him to believe in the triumph of reason over will. This is why, ultimately, he believes that the human species is the one that is called to overcome all illusions and adopt the pessimistic attitude that will allow us to deny the will and end the misery of existence. We are the species primed to understand the wretchedness of existence better than any other known species. And although we still have many generations to live (we do not know how many), he thinks it is reasonable to assume that at some point the pessimistic consciousness will become the dominant force and, in this way, put humanity in a position to renounce and deny the cosmic will that sustains everything.

### 3.3 The Pessimism of Philipp Mainländer

Philipp Mainländer (the pen name for Philipp Batz) is unique amongst the pessimist philosophers for not opposing suicide as a form of redemption. Not only does he not oppose it (as Schopenhauer did) but he actually committed suicide on April 1, 1876 at 34 years of age. He did so as soon as he received the first edition of his major work *A Philosophy of Redemption* (Cornejo, 9, 10)<sup>101</sup>. Setting aside any considerations about the state of his mental health (an interesting area of research but not relevant for this issue at hand), his suicide is, as we shall see, wholly coherent with the main arguments set out in his work.

Mainländer accomplished two tremendously important things. One, he lived up to the central argument of his philosophy: that we have a very specific and predetermined destiny to

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<sup>101</sup> I am working from the Spanish edition of *La Filosofía de la Redención* translated by professor Sandra Baquedano (2021) and from an edition translated by Manuel Cornejo (2014). At times I consult them both in order to compare the translations and use the version I consider to be the clearest. There is a general agreement in both translations and the differences are minor and are related to some punctuations and word selection. This can also be partially explained by the fact that Cornejo is Spanish and uses common Spanish expressions while Baquedano is Chilean and sometimes resorts to a South American Spanish in her word selection. When in doubt as to which translation is more accurate I have sided with Professor Corey Dyck’s (my supervisor) interpretation. Of note, there is currently no vetted English translation of *The Philosophy of Redemption* that I am aware of. As far as I can tell, YuYu Hunter is working on a translation and sporadically posts updates online but I have not consulted it.

fulfill (more on this ahead). Two, that suicide, more than a philosophical *problem*, a weakness of character or a psychological disorder, is an act of redemption. Even though suicide is indeed an important theme in Mainländer's philosophy the temptation to say that Mainländerian philosophy is an apology for suicide should be resisted. This point is made clear by Sandra Baquedano when she says that “the philosophy of redemption does not in general exhort suicide [rather] it clears and destroys counter-motives of enormous power who condemn the act and those who committed it” (35). So although it is not correct to read Mainländer's work as a defence or a promotion of suicide, it is important to recognize that suicide does indeed occupy a central and inescapable place. Suicide is always present, always in the background and, at times, in the forefront. Not only because actions speak loudly –as his actual suicide does– but because his pessimism gives philosophical support for the idea that terminating our lives is a rational course of action. This is one clear and important difference with Schopenhauer. Recall that, for him, suicide was a philosophical mistake, an error borne out of a misunderstanding of our true fundamental nature. For Mainländer it is quite the opposite. That is, suicide is no philosophical mistake. On the contrary, it is philosophically coherent.

Suicide was recast as a philosophical problem by Albert Camus when in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955), he tells us that the most urgent philosophical question is the question of suicide. As he puts it, “there is but one serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (1). Presumably this is the case because if life is not worth living, then all other philosophical questions –what is ethics, what is the best form of political organization– become irrelevant. In his discussion of suicide, purpose and existential meaning, Camus ends up saying that in the midst of this absurd existence, our lives can find purpose and that existence can be good. But Camus's answer makes sense only to the extent that we accept that existence has no purpose and that therefore we can *give* ourselves a purpose. Life, while absurd, can be meaningful if we so make it.

But what if there already *is* such a thing as existential purpose and there is no need for us to create one? This is where, perhaps, one of Mainländer's most interesting contributions to pessimism lies. He said that the universe does indeed have a purpose and reason for being, that it was created with an end in mind. This is why it is not, as Camus and the contemporary existentialists say, a matter of *giving* ourselves a purpose. That purpose is given to us. In this way

it may seem that the existential angst associated with lack of purpose is dissolved. This is, however, where the genius of Mainländer seems to play tricks on us. As it turns out, more than giving us peace of mind, in Mainländerian metaphysics the affirmation that the universe has a reason for being can become a new source of anxiety, anguish and deep despair. This is because on his account, if we exist it is not because we have something to *positively do* with our lives (by *positive* I mean something that will help us *thrive* and *flourish*), it is not because we have an objective that guides our daily lives by giving us something to wholeheartedly pursue in hopes of attaining a state of personal realization in this life.

Taking as a starting point the existentialist claim that we are hanging over the emptiness and nothingness of existence, many have sought to fill that nothingness with *something* because we think that something (whatever it is) is always better than nothing. But although (as we shall see in chapter 4 in my discussion of teleological pessimism) *absence* of existential purpose is an important source for pessimism, with Mainländer we have the interesting situation where the actual *presence* of existential purpose is what turns out to be the source of pessimism. This is because while Mainländer has indeed given us something that we are striving towards, in his case that something actually turns out to be a *nothing*. What has Mainländer given us? Or what has he *seemed* to have given us? The answer is that he has given us *death* and *nothingness*.

On our way to fully understand this answer, we need to set up a general framework of Mainländerian metaphysics. So let us recall what I have said up to this point. First, that suicide, though not encouraged, is fully coherent with his views on existence. Second, that existence is not purposeless and filled with irrational willing as Schopenhauer says. Instead, there is purpose, there is a reason *why* we are here, *why* we exist and also *why we will*. And, taken together, these two claims (that suicide is coherent and that existence has a purpose) give us what is, perhaps, the bleakest version of pessimism of any Weltschmerz philosopher. It is now time to see why this is the case.

In general terms, Mainländer is working within the framework setup by Schopenhauer. His departure from Schopenhauer, and what also makes his philosophy different from the other pessimists, is twofold. First, there is no such thing as one, universal and eternal will that is the essence of all things in the universe. The strict metaphysical monism of Schopenhauer is done

away with in Mainländer and replaced with a multiplicity, an immanent manifold. For Mainländer each one of us has a unique, individual will. Second, these wills are not purposeless. They are not merely willing for willing sake in a blind pursuit to satisfy endless appetites.

Still, in a most important and crucial way he is a natural continuer of Schopenhauer. I say this because Mainländer is actually developing his philosophy as an attempt to answer some fundamental questions that Schopenhauer himself posed and then left unanswered because he thought they *could not* be answered. In this sense, he is completing Schopenhauer's philosophy and in so doing he offers a unique and insightful understanding of existence.

That Schopenhauer's philosophy *needed* to be completed was an issue raised, perhaps unwittingly, by himself. Or, to be precise, his philosophy left the door open and *invited* an attempt at completion. Perhaps surprisingly and after all of the time and energy invested in presenting arguments about the will and the essence of the world, Schopenhauer closes volume two of *The World as Will and Representation* with a strikingly short chapter where he warns us that in spite of the laborious philosophical work already done and in spite of everything we have discovered to date, the really more fundamental questions about existence and the essence of the world can never truly be answered. In that chapter –chapter 50– called *Epiphilosophy* he makes the following observations,

This philosophy does not presume to explain the existence of the world from its ultimate grounds (...) accordingly, it arrives at no conclusions as to what exists beyond all possible experience, but furnishes merely an explanation and interpretation of what is given in the external world and in self-consciousness<sup>102</sup> (...) after all my explanations, it can still be asked, for example, from what this will has sprung (...) *what is the fatality lying beyond all experience which has put it in the extremely precarious dilemma of appearing as a world in which suffering and death reign*, or else of denying its own inner being? Or *what may have prevailed upon it to forsake the infinitely preferable peace of blessed nothingness?* (...) how could the will-in-itself, prior to all phenomenon,

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<sup>102</sup> Schopenhauer had already started to pave the way for this conclusion (in volume 1) when he nuanced his claim that we can access the will. Recall how he said that such access was in fact only partial and that the real nature of the will was to remain forever behind a veil insofar as when we access the will we still do so through the category of time and thus the will is not truly free from the *principium individuationis*.

and consequently without knowledge, *go astray and fall into the ruin of its present condition?* (640, 641 italics mine).

This is a rather spectacular way to end the intensive work he developed through two long and extensive volumes of *The World as Will and Representation*. At the very final moment it turns out we must admit that we are unable to explain why the will *wills* and why the will has manifested itself as *world*. His philosophy *does not presume to explain the existence of the world from its ultimate grounds* which is to say that the will is, in the end, not the ultimate ground of the world –perhaps because when we talk about the will we are inevitably talking about a representation subjected to time. Yet, the ultimate ground of the world is beyond time. As Schopenhauer previously said, the will *does not appear quite naked* and in the end he had no choice but to accept the inevitable conclusion; that questions will remain unanswered and that his philosophy has limits.

This is the point where Mainländer makes his appearance. Precisely where Schopenhauer says we have reached a limit and can go no further, Mainländer steps in and says that we *can* go further, that we *can* know why the will *wills* –or more precisely (as we shall see ahead) why the *many wills* will.

I can now present what I take to be a crucial line of pessimist thought and that I call *The pessimist arrow*. This *arrow* is central to pessimism and has made it possible for pessimism to grow as a field, entering new areas of inquiry. The arrow is a triad, composed of three philosophers and that I characterize as follows:

Kant—→Schopenhauer—→Mainländer

Each of them, and in that order, made possible and substantially advanced pessimist thought by pushing its limits, by going one step further than their predecessor. Right at the point where one philosopher said we can go no further, the philosopher that followed *did* go further. So when Schopenhauer says that he was the natural follower of Kant and that he completed his philosophy, I add that Mainländer is the natural follower of Schopenhauer and likewise completed his philosophy.

The forward moving *arrow* that I propose functions thusly: Kant posited the existence of the thing-in-itself but said we can have no knowledge of it whatsoever. He therefore claimed that the thing-in-itself was where fruitful philosophical enquiry ended. Then along came Schopenhauer. He said that we can indeed have knowledge about the thing-in-itself. Granted, it is not complete knowledge, but it is enough so as to allow us to make specific claims about the essence of existence and explain why the world is the way it is –filled with strife, suffering and pain. And he ended everything by saying that more fundamental questions about the *will* will remain unanswered. He, as Kant did before him, established a limit that we could not overcome. This is where Mainländer picks up the relay. He said that we could overcome those limits; that those more fundamental questions about the will *do* have answers, that we *can* know why the will(s) will and we *can* know why the world exists. On his account, it is possible to answer the final questions posed by Schopenhauer –*what may have prevailed upon it to forsake the infinitely preferable peace of blessed nothingness?* and *what is the fatality lying beyond all experience which has put it in the extremely precarious dilemma of appearing as a world in which suffering and death reign?* And the answer that Mainländer gives is that, as we shall see below, God disintegrated himself into countless *wills* with the specific purpose of achieving that blessed nothingness that Schopenhauer speaks of. So what is the purpose of these wills? As I mentioned above, the purpose is to reach nothingness, to die and disappear. In the simplest terms possible, *disappearance is the purpose of the entire universe.*

In order to understand why the purpose of the universe is to cease to exist, Mainländer posits the existence of an original unity that he calls God. At one point, God “existed alone, in absolute solitude” (Baquedano trans, 355) and was “in absolute rest. Its being was over-being [*Uebersein*]” (352). Although we can never know what sort of existence this was (352), we can say that in that situation, he was alone with nothing existing outside of him. This means that God saw himself and understood the tedium of an existence that consisted of just being, simply being, and nothing else in addition to this. This was, we can suppose, an undesired state of affairs. Faced with this tedious and existentially boring type of existence, God made the decision to put an end to his life. This may seem to be a rather extreme solution to a tedious existence, if only because His omnipotence would seem to suggest that he could have done something in order to not be bored. However, this turned out to not be the case. He was not free in an absolute way. He was not free to change His essence –this essence being existence in *oneness*. Instead, “the

freedom of God could find application in one single choice: namely, either to remain [*bleiben*], as he is, or to not be [*nicht zu sein*]" (355). This means that God, as a simple unity, was only free to decide between his continued existence or his own death. He had no power over the type of existence he could lead, over his *oneness*. As Mainländer describes God's existential predicament, the stakes are dramatic.

To the binary choice that God had to face, we have to add an additional limitation. If he were to choose death (as he ultimately did), he still had to face an obstacle that proved his omnipotence had a limit. This is that God was unable to simply annihilate himself, to *decide* his own instantaneous death. These two limits on God's omnipotence (his inability to change the conditions of his existence and his inability to instantaneously disappear) are crucially, according to Mainländer, limitations that only apply in regards to his own self. He "had no omnipotence towards his own [*eigenen*] might, his might was not destructible by himself, the basic unity could not stop to exist through itself (...) he had not the might, to immediately become nothing" (Baquedano trans, 356). This means that God, as the simple unity (motionless and in complete rest), was unable to vanish through a simple act of his will. The road to nothingness, to annihilation, had to be reached *indirectly*. And the way to accomplish this was through "disintegration into multiplicity" (356) which is why the world, all of existence, is nothing but "the medium [*Mittel*] for the objective [*Zwecke*] of nonbeing, and the world, in truth, is the only [*einzig*] possible medium [*mögliche*] towards that goal." (356). In other words, the initial *motionless oneness* of God was broken up and disintegrated into the countless individual parts (multiplicity) that constitute the universe and everything in it today –including us– in order to reach the goal of nonbeing.

This is, at the same time, an origin story for the universe and a story about the existential meaning of our lives. Eventually at some point the total energy of the universe will disappear and only absolute nothingness will remain. And when this happens, God will have accomplished his part and each of us will have fulfilled his part and carried out God's last wish –to die and cease to be. Crucially, Mainländer summarizes his own philosophy into the following seven points:

- One: God preferred nonexistence.
- Two: his own essence was an obstacle to his immediate annihilation.

- Three: His essence had to be disintegrated into a world of plurality, where individuals all strive towards nonexistence.
- Four: in this striving, these individuals are obstacles to one another, they fight against each other and in this way they weaken [*schwächen*] their energy.
- Five: all of God's essence passed into the world, in an altered form, with a total sum of energy.
- Six: the entire world, the universe, has a goal [*Ein*], nonbeing, and it reaches this through the continuous weakening of all the sum energy of the universe.
- Seven: in the course of its development, each individual is taken, through the weakening of his energy, to the point where he can fulfill his goal of annihilation (Baquedano trans, 358).

This is why existence is so filled with suffering, toil and struggles; why everything in life requires work and why our strength and energy always decreases. We expend energy and it takes time to recover and build it up again only to have it diminish again. And this cycle is repeated daily until we simply die out –in the best of cases of old age. Furthermore, friction and erosion are features of the entire universe as forces are in continuous collision and competition. Indeed, strife and hardship are not contingent features of existence. They are constituent because God willed it so, because it is only through permanent struggle that energy is expended and it is only when all the energy everywhere is expended that God will have accomplished what he set out to do when he disintegrated himself: complete nothingness, absolute non-being.

Baquedano quite rightly draws an interesting parallel between Mainländer's metaphysics and recent advances in physics and the various theories about the origin of the universe – specifically the big bang theory (31). The similarities are important and have to do with the idea of a simple original unit that disintegrates and gives rise to everything that is. For Mainländer the primary unit disintegrated to create the universe with the aim of bringing it to nothing. For physics, that primary unit expanded, thus also giving rise to the universe. To this revealing parallel, we can add the physical possibility of a thermodynamic death for the universe –a state of thermodynamic equilibrium where the exchange of energy would no longer be possible, which would imply the absolute disappearance of all energy and all matter. This would be, from the



physical point of view, the end of the universe. And this end is very similar to the end of existence that Mainländer anticipates.

That the world exists in order to *not exist* is the hallmark of Mainländer's pessimism. Whereas in Schopenhauer, the one eternal and universal will exists for the sole purpose of wanting and endlessly desiring, for Mainländer each individual will exists for the purpose of *ending all desiring*, all wanting, of ending the universe itself. We are, as Sebastian Gardner says "residues of extinguished divinity" tasked with the job of continuing "along the path to non-being." (8). This is, then, our existential purpose: death. And it is a purpose given to us by God. As Gardner once again puts it, "if we recognize what is required of us in accordance with the world's normative source—then we will be able to find fulfilment (redemption, *Erlösung*) in promoting the end that God has built into our constitution." (8). The Schopenhauerian *will-to-live* thus becomes a *will-to-death* [*reiner Wille zum Tode*] (Cornejo trans, 343). According to Beiser, Mainländer has put a unique twist on Schopenhauer's will-to-life insofar as now "we will live only for the sake of death" (WZ, 202). Finally, we know *why* we live. So while no other pessimist can tell us why we exist, what purpose the universe has, Mainländer does tell us, but his is not the sort of reason that can seem to provide any sort of security or relief from existential angst.

These are the reasons why suicide is no philosophical mistake. Again, while in no place does he actively encourage it, it does follow quite seamlessly that suicide is a right choice of action insofar as it quickly accomplishes our purpose. His own suicide, carried out shortly after the publication of his book, is a testament to this.

The existential situation that emerges from Mainländer is decidedly bleak and there seem to be plenty of reasons for ending our lives and few, if any, for continuing to live. Certainly, these are, or so Mainländer thinks, powerful reasons to not bring new people into existence. He believes that we will reach a point where humanity as a whole will come to understand the pointlessness of our continued existence. As a consequence of his metaphysical views on the purpose of our individual existence (that we exist to *spend energy*, to die and reach nothingness), he argues that humanity will never be content, that we can never be truly happy and satisfied with life. It is not, as all pessimists would say, a matter of adopting this or that attitude towards life or of making individual or societal changes. No matter how many changes we do in our

lives, life itself is but a *means to death* and as such it is designed to waste and exhaust energy. Life is not meant to be about or for happiness, it is about *energy expenditure* through friction and struggle.

A rather striking conclusion that follows from these metaphysics, and that serves to distinguish him even more from the other pessimists, is that there is a strong *deterministic* current in his philosophy. For Mainländer death is inevitable. More precisely, *complete annihilation* of everything that exists is a sure and predetermined destiny. Recall that Schopenhauer held that the will was eternal, beyond time and therefore had no beginning or *end*. As a consequence, the best we could hope for was to quiet its demands thereby relieving our personal lives of continued suffering. And that was as far as we could go. The will itself (the essence of existence) remains forever untouched. On the other hand, for Hartmann, the *unconscious* does display an order and a progress towards ever higher levels of awareness about the true essence of existence. Crucial in this progress is the supersession of the three illusions that befall humanity. And once the third and final illusion is overcome, then humanity will realize that nonexistence is preferable to existence. As a consequence of this realization, we will act to bring about nonexistence and the end of the entire *unconscious* process. An important caveat here is that this requires that humans come to *realize* the true nature of the world in order to strike at it. Specifically, the disappearance of the universe depends on humans arriving at this truth and then acting on it.<sup>103</sup>

Mainländer, however, does away with all of this. First, the *timeless* aspect of the will and second, the requirement that an intelligence *act* in order to bring about total annihilation. Instead, our final disappearance is ensured by virtue of the nature of the universe. Nothingness is made certain because the universe was created and designed for this end. It exists only to inevitably progress towards nothingness. No willful and/or conscious decision is required on our part to bring this about. And when it does come about, it is not just representations that cease to be (as Schopenhauer says) but existence itself that comes to an end. Complete nothingness is thus obtained. Recall the striking similarities between this claim and possibility of a thermodynamic

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<sup>103</sup> He even suggested that if humans were unable to accomplish this, then the task could be left to some future intelligence on Earth or even an alien intelligence.

death for the universe that is hypothesized in contemporary physics. Humans or no humans, the cold death of the universe may be a scientific truth just as it is a philosophical truth<sup>104</sup>.

To show that there is nothing we can do to make life ultimately worth living, Mainländer argues in favour of social progress. He was a self-declared socialist and claimed that

the end of human history, in other words, of every battle, religious system, invention, discovery, revolution, sects, political parties, etc, is to provide the *masses* that which certain particular individuals have participated in since the start of culture. This is why it is not about educating a lineage of angels, lineage that has always existed, but about redemption from existence. The realization of the highest socialist ideals, therefore, will only create for all a benefactor state in which some particular individuals have always lived in. And what do these individuals do when they reach such a state? They separate themselves from life. No other thing was possible. (Cornejo trans, 415)

Faced with an existence full of needs, wants and struggles, it is possible to think that all (or surely, most) of our ills could be solved by taking social measures. Disease, hunger and personal fulfillment (through meaningful work, education and so on) are issues that any society can resolve if it so desires. There are no natural or physical laws or impediments that would prevent the construction of a society where people would have access to all the benefits, incentives, opportunities and security possibly imagined. Would such a society be one of happy people? Would humans living in that society rejoice in existence? Mainländer thinks not.

First, there are ills that we would continue to experience because they are not a matter of *this* or *that* social arrangement. Specifically, we would be plagued by four pains that we can do nothing about. These are: the pains of labour, sickness, old age and death (Baquedano trans,

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<sup>104</sup> A point of caution: this deterministic bend in his metaphysics does not entail that humanity should therefore not do anything to hasten our demise. Rather, if we understand that our unavoidable destiny is annihilation and that existence is, in essence, unable to provide any sort of true and lasting happiness, then we will realize that to continue to perpetuate our lives in full knowledge of these truths is not desirable and it is a pointless endeavour. For these reasons it is still the case that we should actively *decide* to terminate our lives if only because this is the only way to end the misery of all human life.

248)<sup>105</sup>. But even if they could be overcome (Mainländer is open to the possibility that science may eliminate all pains and cure most or all diseases), he thinks that existence would still be an undesirable state of affairs.

This is why it is so important to create such a society. Because only there will the truth of existence become evident to all of us. Give everyone, therefore, access to free high quality education. Better yet, and to put it more strongly, it is not just a matter of *giving* this to people but they (we) should “clearly *demand* free education, which is to say, scientific instructions, free for everyone” (Cornejo trans, 312, italics mine). Furthermore, they should ensure fair and equal wages and workers should share the profits of businesses (312, 313). This reads like a political project of sorts, and indeed it is. The point however, is not that humanity ought to aspire to a new just society as an end in itself, but that it ought to do so in order to bring about our final extinction. This is why “the redemption of humanity depends on the solution of the social question; this is a truth that should inflame any noble heart.” (316). In an advanced, just society, people will become wise, they read, learn and philosophize; they will eventually become tired of all the pleasures the world can offer.<sup>106</sup> As he puts it, a person will be “an entirely free human being. All the stimulating agents [*Triebfedern*] have gradually disappeared: power, heritage, fame, matrimony (...) the human being is exhausted [*der Mensch ist matt*]” (Baquedano trans, 345).

At this point, humans will be able to better judge life and the *wills* shall see their goal: absolute death. Only then will humanity reach the required maturity required for the final redemption. He thinks that in that highly advanced society, we would

feel a terrible monotony and a terrible emptiness. They [humans] have been brought out of misery, they really have no worries nor sufferings,

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<sup>105</sup> One can expand this list to include all sorts of personal pains as well. By this I mean sufferings associated with personal relationships (love, family, friends) and professional goals (having this or that job) among others.

<sup>106</sup> In a claim that is reminiscent of Marx’s idea of a communist society, Mainländer says that “there is no greater prejudice than to suppose that someone that reads English and French, or that reads Homer in its original language, cannot at the same time be a good farmer, business person, soldier, etc” (Cornejo trans, 312). In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx says that “in a communist society, (...) society (...) makes it possible for me to (...) hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have in mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (53). They both appeal to the idea that humans need not specialize in a given activity. Instead, a just society can give people the option of engaging in several activities and develop all of our potential.

but on the other hand they are prisoners of tedium. They have paradise on Earth, but the air they breathe is asphyxiating and suffocating (...) If they really had enough energy to withstand life until natural death arrives, there is no doubt they would not want to go through this again as rejuvenated. Misery is a terrible evil, yet, boredom is the worst of all. Better a miserable existence to a bored one (...) we have indirectly shown that life, even in the best State of our times, lacks value (...) in such a way that to not be is better than to be [*Nichtsein ist besser als Sein*]. (Baquedano trans, 250)

Boredom, then, is the ultimate negator of life. It was at the start of existence and it is also at the end of it. Crucially, and even though we will all eventually agree that nonexistence is preferable, Mainländer leaves rather open the question as to how humanity will extinguish itself. In the ideal, just society,

humanity will embark on the great sacrifice, as they call it in India, in other words, die [*sterben*]. No one can determine in which form this will come about. It may be based on a general moral resolution, that is immediately executed, or that action may be left to nature. Nonetheless, it may be carried out in some other way. In any case, the law of spiritual contagion [*Gesetz der geistigen Ansteckung*] will guide the last moments of humanity (...) it will be as in the time of Dante, where the people would walk through the streets of Florence, with the cry of:

*“Morte alla nostra vita! Evviva la nostra morte”.*

(Death to our lives! And long live our deaths!)

At this point we can also ask the question of when [*wann*] the great sacrifice will happen. (Baquedano trans, 345)<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> As to the question of when humanity might achieve its goal of nothingness, he proposes two possibilities. First, he says that if we consider the “demonic sexual instinct” and the love of life that most humans exhibit, then the moment of our extinction is far away in the remote future (Baquedano trans, 345). But if we consider the hurry, impatience, strife and agitation that cultures and people exhibit, taking into account the *violence* with which the *spiritual contagion* spreads, then humanity may have but a few more centuries left (346).

Our disappearance is therefore a sure outcome. However, just how this comes about is a matter yet unresolved.

## Chapter four - Teleological Pessimism

Pascal, when he pondered existence in general and his particular place in the universe, felt overwhelmed and lost in the vastness of life.

When I see the blindness and the wretchedness of man, when I regard the whole silent universe, and man without light, left to himself, and, as it were, lost in this corner of the universe, without knowing who has put him there, what he has come to do, what will become of him at death, and incapable of all knowledge, I become terrified, like a man who should be carried in his sleep to a dreadful desert island, and should awake without knowing where he is, and without means of escape. And thereupon I wonder how people in a condition so wretched do not fall into despair. I see other persons around me of a like nature. I ask them if they are better informed than I am. They tell me that they are not. And thereupon these wretched and lost beings, having looked around them, and seen some pleasing objects, have given and attached themselves to them. For my own part, I have not been able to attach myself to them (*Pensees*, S.692).

There is a clear sense of loss and at the same time, bewilderment in these words. He is bewildered because when faced with questions about our place in the universe, he sees that there are people that appear unperturbed by the sense of irrelevance. Do they know *something* that keeps them from falling into despair? Furthermore, this sense of existential loss is exacerbated when we consider that we all live on a planet that is located in a sparsely populated outer ring of our galaxy. The idea that we inhabit a small place in a vast indifferent cosmos is a recurring theme in pessimism. In the opening lines of volume II of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer says that

In endless space countless luminous spheres, round each of which some dozen smaller illuminated ones revolve, hot at the core and covered over with a hard cold crust; on this crust a mouldy film has produced living and knowing beings: this is empirical truth, the real, the world. Yet for a being who thinks, it is a precarious position to stand on one of those

numberless spheres freely floating in boundless space, without knowing whence or whither, and to be only one of immeasurable similar beings that throng, press, and toil, restlessly and rapidly arising and passing away in beginningless and endless time (3).

A few years later, in 1873 in his *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, Nietzsche had a very similar evaluation of our place in the universe. Specifically, he thought that humanity's greatest achievement –our intellect– was but an irrelevant and minor event within the cosmic context.

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of 'world history' — yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die. One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it. But if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that he floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world. There is nothing in nature so despicable or insignificant that it cannot immediately be blown up like a bag by a slight breath of this power of knowledge (Nietzsche in Kauffman, 42).<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> At a minimum, it is clear that Nietzsche is borrowing from Schopenhauer here without directly acknowledging it. In turn, Martin Heidegger in his book *Introduction to Metaphysics*, borrows from Nietzsche also without acknowledging it when, pondering the question of Being, he asks us to “consider the Earth within the dark immensity of space in the universe. We can compare it to a tiny grain of sand; more than a kilometer of emptiness extends between it and the next grain of its size; on the surface of this tiny grain of sand lives a stupified swarm of supposedly clever animals, crawling all over each other, who for a brief moment have invented knowledge (...) and what is a human life span amid millions of years? Barely a move of the second hand, a breath.” (5).



The theme running through these statements is certainly pessimist in nature. There is no trace of hope, happiness or any general feelings of appreciation for our existential condition in these words. More importantly, there is a recognition of our smallness within the context of the universe. So although they do not appear to speak directly to the pains, toils and sufferings we encounter in our everyday lives, they do speak to our sense of irrelevance within the universe, to our sense of loneliness in the vastness of existence.

As I will now argue, the recognition of our *smallness* and *insignificance* that follows from the acknowledgement that we are finite beings living in a universe that is indifferent to us is reason for holding that nonexistence is preferable to existence in virtue of the absence of any ultimate good that we can aspire to. And insofar as this absence is a source of suffering it is also a source for pessimism. Ultimately, a life devoid of meaning is a life prone to doubt and existential angst.<sup>109</sup>

## 4.1 Teleology, Futility and Pessimism

Given what we have just seen, I want to present a very specific sort of pessimism; one that I call *teleological pessimism*. This pessimism is not opposed to hedonic, metaphysical or any sort of pessimism (I will say more about both hedonic and metaphysical pessimism ahead). Teleological pessimism does not deny that the world itself is will (or *unconscious* for that matter) or that pain

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<sup>109</sup> An important point needs to be made. There is a difference between meaning *in* life and the meaning *of* life. Here I refer to the meaning *of* life. While in this chapter I present teleological pessimism as a pessimism that emerges from the realization that life has no transcendental meaning, it is important to point out that there is a growing philosophical interest in the analytic tradition on the topic of the *meaning of life*. Thadeus Metz (in his *The Meaning of Life* entry in the “Plato Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy”) makes the argument that it is only within the last twenty years that this has happened –making it a relatively recent event in the analytic tradition. While this is an interesting, vibrant and relatively new philosophical area of research, I do not engage with it in this work. Keeping with the main purpose of this dissertation, my argument for the lack of existential meaning draws primarily from the pessimist tradition represented by the Weltschmerz philosophers.

is always more predominant than pleasure because of our biology<sup>110</sup>. Rather, this is a form of pessimism that emerges from a lack of existential purpose<sup>111</sup>.

Already Schopenhauer made clear that not knowing why we are here is one of the sources of our existential predicaments. As he put it, the world is “a mere machine, whose purpose we do not see” (WW2, 319). The world is always presented to us as devoid of purpose and consequently incomprehensible for us. What is the purpose of it all? If life were a play, we would not know for what or for whom that play exists, “no one has the remotest idea why the whole tragi-comedy exists, for it has no spectators, and the actors themselves undergo endless worry and trouble with little and merely negative enjoyment” (WW2, 357). This description reminds us of a passage in *As You Like It* (1623), where Shakespeare wrote that,

All the world's a stage  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and entrances.  
And one man in his time plays many parts

When asked about the purpose of life and of the world, the best answer that Schopenhauer offers is that the world exists to sustain ephemeral individuals for a brief moment. This is a proposition that the teleological pessimist embraces fully.

In an interesting discussion of Schopenhauer's pessimism, Mark Migotti makes an insightful and very helpful distinction that can help us understand how lack of existential purpose

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<sup>110</sup> I am not making a specific commitment to Schopenhauer's or Hartmann's metaphysics. For my purposes here it is not necessary that I do. Recall that in chapter two in the definition of pessimism that I provided, I said that pessimism has a metaphysical aspect. For this reason, if teleological pessimism is to be a pessimism on my account, then it must incorporate claims about the essence of existence. As to which one it subscribes to, the question shall remain open and, perhaps, will always be insofar as teleological pessimism is compatible with either of these metaphysics. On the other hand, Mainländer's metaphysics may enter into conflict with teleological pessimism and so incorporating his views into teleological pessimism is unlikely.

<sup>111</sup> Also, the third point in my definition of pessimism (page 47) explicitly references lack of existential purpose as one of its features. I said that “there are no *ultimate reasons* for our pains and sufferings. As a consequence there is no cosmic plan or purpose to our suffering”. In this way, then, *lack of existential purpose* is from the start, an integral aspect of pessimism. However, by bringing it to the forefront as I do with teleological pessimism, I elevate it to such a degree that it becomes *the main source* for suffering. In this way, it can become a form of pessimism different than (but not opposed to) the other pessimisms I mention.

is an aspect of his pessimism. Migotti argues that there are three theses that underlie Schopenhauer's pessimist view. First, the metaphysical thesis; that all life is suffering. Second, the conative thesis; all striving is vain and futile. And third; the prohairetic thesis; that life is not choiceworthy insofar as there is no such thing as an unconditioned good or final cause of the universe (Migotti, 645, 658). Migotti thinks that the prohairetic thesis is the heart of Schopenhauer's pessimism and that the metaphysical and conative theses are premises meant to support the main pessimist argument (646).

Continuing this line of reasoning, Migotti adds that "if life is to be ultimately choiceworthy, there must be some way within it to realize an unconditioned (or absolute) good; but there is no unconditioned good, so life is not ultimately choiceworthy" (652). This is an insightful approach because it allows us to see that it is not only suffering due to hardships, constant toil and the many unfulfilled desires that we have to contend with that makes life unworthy of choosing. To further this point, and if doubts remain, Migotti stresses that lack of purpose, the absence of an *unconditioned good* (this good being the final cause of the universe), is an essential source for pessimism (658). As he puts it, "in missing an unconditioned good, we are (...) missing what might be called an ultimate source of practical intelligibility, a satisfactory reason for being glad of the chance of living" (658).

The relevant point here is that, on his reading, Schopenhauer has a strong argument in support of the idea that there is no thing, no ultimate good worth pursuing that would make life *something worth choosing*<sup>112</sup>. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle made the same point. He argued that having a *highest* good, an end purpose, was essential for the good life. If no such good is available to us, then we will work and toil "without limit so that desire will prove to be empty and futile" (1094a). It would seem that such an empty and futile life would be hardly worth choosing<sup>113</sup>.

We need, it appears, to know *why* we are here and why we go through everything we do. This is because futility and pointlessness are undesirable features of anything and everything that we do. We avoid these things. Indeed, in our daily lives most of us would rather not engage with

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<sup>112</sup> For Schopenhauer the *good* is just whatever happens to satisfy the desire of the will at any particular moment.

<sup>113</sup> I was guided to this Aristotle quote by Sandra Shapshay who cites it her discussion of striving in Schopenhauer's philosophy (*RS*, 77)

futile activities or invest time and energy in something pointless. Now consider existence. If it is the case that these features –futility and pointlessness– present themselves as central components of existence, then it is not difficult to see why we would not want to proactively defend the worthiness of life, and why we would think that existence is not choice-worthy.

That futility, insignificance, and lack of an end (a telos) are sources of suffering is something that the ancient Greeks already understood. For them, death was not really a punishment –or at least it was not the worst punishment. Indeed, futility is worse. Living and doing an activity that has no purpose is a destiny infinitely more horrible than death. Doing something repeatedly or embarking on a task that we already know beforehand to be pointless, is a source of a torment. Consider the case of Sisyphus, popularized by Albert Camus with his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus betrayed Zeus because he revealed divine secrets. Specifically, he told Aesop, god of the rivers, that Zeus had abducted his daughter Egina. This made Zeus furious and he asked his brother, Hades, to go fetch Sisyphus so that due punishment could be handed down. The sentence consisted in having him push a boulder up a hill with the supposed purpose of reaching the summit and have it roll down the other side. However, each time Sisyphus is about to reach the top, the boulder rolls back down again. This forces him to walk down and start the task once again. This cycle (pushing the boulder up the hill only to have it roll down again) is on repeat for eternity. It is a goal that is unattainable. It is a task that can never be finished. And even if it could be attained, it is a pointless, uninteresting and absurd goal.

As if this was not already a prime example of futility and more examples were needed, the Greeks also tell us about Tantalus. His is a paradigmatic example of what it means to know that what we desire can never be obtained no matter how many times we try –and *endless* times we try indeed. Tantalus, being a close friend of Zeus, was often invited to banquets on Olympus. For reasons not totally clear, at some point Tantalus decided to share, without the consent of Zeus, some of the divine food offered at Olympus with other humans. Later, and again with no apparent reason, he decided to invite the gods to a feast but soon realized he did not have enough food to go around. His solution was to kill his son –Pelops– cut him up and added him to the banquet. Unbeknownst to them at the time, the gods ate Pelops. For this horrendous crime it was decreed that his sentence was to be one of the worst possible punishments anybody could ever

endure; that of never being able to satisfy their needs. The devised method for delivering the punishment was thus; he was to be tied to a tree forever unable to satisfy his thirst or his hunger all the while having water and juicy fruits at his reach.

The fruits (Robert Graves reports that the fruits were pears, shining apples, sweet figs, ripe olives and pomegranates) hang from branches just above his head. And the waters bathe his legs and at times reach his waist. The torment happens every time he bends down to satisfy this thirst, for when he does this, the waters recede making it impossible for him to drink. And when he reaches for the fruits just hanging above him, they retreat only slightly, but just enough for them to remain unattainable.

All of this is meant to show that when we think of an existence that has no purpose, an existence that is lived even though we are keenly aware that what we do is pointless, we cannot but think that we find ourselves in a wretched state of affairs. But the Greeks have more. Campbell Bonner tells us about the Danaides. The Danaides were fifty sisters, daughters of Danaus that were compelled to marry the fifty sons of Aegyptus –Danaus and Aegyptus being brothers caught in a rivalry. At one point, Aegyptus threatened to wage war on Danaus unless their children married. Fearing that he would lose his kingdom to Aegyptus, Danaus agreed to the marriages but he arranged it so that on the wedding night his fifty daughters would murder the fifty would-be husbands. The Danaides did so and then proceeded to bury their heads. Bonner claims that such a bloody crime was unheard of in Greek mythology. Once again, the fitting sentence was deemed to be one of engaging in an endless, *futile* task. Death, it seems, is not quite as terrible. In this case, the widows were sent to the underworld of Hades where they were doomed to forever fill jugs of water and carry the water to a basin –the promise was that if the basin was ever filled, they would be released from their torment. The basin, however, was filled with holes and could thus never be filled.<sup>114</sup>

Ocnus and Prometheus are two other very good examples worth briefly mentioning. For having aided humankind with the gift of fire, Prometheus was sentenced to a life of pain. Chained to a stone, an eagle would eat his liver only to have his liver grow again so that the eagle could come back and feed once again *ad eternum*. On the other hand, the story of Ocnus

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<sup>114</sup> <https://www.greeka.com/greece-myths/danaides/>

tells us that he was forever weaving a rope only to have a donkey sitting behind him eat the rope thereby making progress impossible. What these myths show us is that a life that turns on itself – that is, a life that is not directed to an end but is lived for its own sake, that justifies itself with no appeal to anything *beyond* or external to it– is a life that collapses and disintegrates when scrutinized in detail. In his discussion of Sisyphus, Richard Taylor in his essay *The Meaning of Life* (1970) says that what makes his task meaningless is not that he will be doing the same thing forever. Rather, what makes it meaningless is that the task comes to nothing (2). Change the stone, change the route he takes, provide more or less obstacles but the task would remain pointless because of what it amounts to –*irrelevance*.

A life like this, living without knowing what you live for (Sisyphus), or living knowing that what we want and need is exactly what we can never get (Tantalus), is like the life of a hamster that lives trapped in its wheel without ever moving forward, never progressing but continuing to exert effort and invest time in that activity without really knowing *why*. Taylor, once again, provides an excellent example of how utterly pointless a life that is lived without any apparent reason appears. It is worth reading the following example in its entirety:

There are caves in New Zealand, deep and dark, whose floors are quiet pools and whose walls and ceilings are covered with soft light (...) as you look more closely, however, the scene is explained. Each dot of light identifies an ugly worm, whose luminous tail is meant to attract insects from the surrounding darkness. As from time to time one of these insects draws near it becomes entangled in a sticky thread lowered by the worm, and is eaten. This goes on month after month... until what? What great thing awaits all this long and repetitious effort and makes it worthwhile? Really nothing. The larva just transforms itself finally to a tiny winged adult that lacks even mouth parts and are devoured by the cannibalist worms, often without having ventured into the day, the only point to their existence having now been fulfilled. This has been going on for millions of years, and to no other end than that the same meaningless cycle may continue for another million years... and we are part of that life... all living things present essentially the same spectacle.

Are we in the same existential situation as these worms? The question, then, is already posed in the mind of all pessimists and philosophers concerned with existence: does life have a purpose? Are we in this for *something*? Will something, *anything*, come out of this? Leo Tolstoi, in his *Confessions*, thought long and hard about these questions. He wondered,

What will come of what I do today or tomorrow? What will come of my entire life? Expressed another way the question can be put like this: why do I live? Why do I wish for anything or do anything? Or expressed another way: is there anything in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me? (35).

Tolstoi is giving voice, with his usual insight, to the questions many of us face<sup>115</sup>. Indeed, these questions are installed in us, and once there they can hardly be ignored. These are questions that have occupied the minds of countless human beings throughout their lives. But whatever existential purpose is sought, it must be sought there where life does not exist, or at a minimum beyond our personal lives, in the transcendent –because *in* our lives that purpose is not found. Is it possible that our existential purpose is to be found *out there*, in some other place yet *inaccessible* to us? One could, for example, argue that unbeknownst to him, Zeus had a specific purpose in mind when he gave Sisyphus his repetitive task. This would be a purpose given from outside, by a designer that bestows purpose.<sup>116</sup> In this case, it is not that Sisyphus's task is purposeless. It is just the case that he does not know its purpose. But to make any similar claims about our lives is to smuggle into the argument a series of assumptions about the existence of a Designer. Still, if it is possible to say that perhaps there is some unknown hidden existential

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<sup>115</sup> According to Julian Young, Tolstoi “had a portrait of Schopenhauer in his study [and] began his intensive reading of *The World as Will* after the completion of *War and Peace* in 1869. He was tremendously impressed. To his friend A.A. Fet, whom he persuaded to make the first Russian translation of the work, he wrote, ‘You say that he [Schopenhauer] wrote something or other on philosophical subjects. What do you mean, something or other? It’s the whole world in an incredibly clear and beautiful reflection’” (235).

<sup>116</sup> In his essay *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre presents one of the core tenets of existentialism: that existence precedes essence. This means that humans have no *essence* or purpose because in order for there to be purpose there must be a creator, external to that being, that bestows a purpose. Take the example of a pair of scissors. Before scissors existed someone had to think they were needed. Then, the scissors had to be designed and created with that precise purpose in mind and this explains why and how scissors came to exist. In this case, essence preceded its existence. In the case of human beings, no such designer exists which may make our existential condition slightly more uncertain than Sisyphus’s provided we are comfortable with the hypothesis that, at a minimum, Zeus has a purpose in mind for his task.

purpose, at best we are only making a tentative claim that is in no case meant to be taken as definitive. And this is, as we shall see below, what I call *weak nihilism*.

It is difficult to find a person who has never, at least once in her life, asked that question, difficult to find a person that has not looked in that void for something to hold on to. Susan Wolf in her book *Meaning of Life* (2010), makes the important argument that meaning is a value of life (3). Meaning, on her account is so important that,

People sometimes complain that their lives lack meaning; they yearn for meaning; they seek meaning. People sometimes judge others to be leading exceptionally meaningful lives, looking upon them with envy or admiration. Meaning is commonly associated with a kind of depth. Often the need for meaning is connected to the sense that one's life is empty or shallow. An interest in meaning is also frequently associated with thoughts one might have on one's deathbed, or in contemplation of one's eventual death. (7,8)

What Wolf aims to show in her book (which is a collection of lectures delivered at Princeton University in 2007) is that a good life requires that we live a *meaningful* life. Crucial to her argument is the idea that a valuable life is a happy, moral and meaningful one. If one of these elements is missing, then our lives will be left wanting, missing an important element. It is this triad (happiness, morality and meaning) that makes life valuable. Wolf's assessment has been widely influential and rightly so. Still, while she speaks of meaning *in* life and not about the meaning *of* life, the relevant point for our discussion is that futility always presents itself not only as undesirable, but as the mark of a life that does not meet the threshold for a *good* life.

## 4.2 Nihilism and Pessimism

It is important to keep in mind that although I claim that lack of existential meaning is certainly a source of suffering, some people say that this is not *necessarily* the case. Others, as we shall see ahead, put this even more forcibly: lack of existential purpose *should not* lead to suffering. In other words, for reasons that I will mention below, some people do not suffer from the



recognition that life has no transcendental purpose. This can be understood if we turn to existential nihilism –a philosophical perspective closely related to pessimism, though there is some disagreement as to just how related they are. In *Nihilism* (2019) Nolen Gertz, for example, claims that while “pessimism is dark and depressive (...) it is not nihilism” (60). And if there was still doubt in regards to the relation between pessimism and nihilism, he puts the matter to rest by saying that “in fact (...) pessimism is the *opposite* of nihilism” (60). This is, however, a problematic claim that is only coherent if we accept that pessimism is characterized as hopelessness and by a constant dwelling on our existential despair. And this is precisely how Gertz views pessimism. In his words, “pessimists are not nihilists because pessimists embrace rather than evade despair” (65). On his account hopelessness, resignation and negativity are defining features of pessimism and the pessimist *embraces* them. A nihilist, on the other hand, is someone that can be “optimistic, idealistic and sympathetic” (109) in a world that has no existential meaning.

Yet in spite of Gertz’s efforts to show that there is a wide gulf between nihilism and pessimism, his arguments are not as effective as they may appear to be on a first reading for two reasons. One, as I discussed above, existential nihilism along with pessimism both belong to the family of *philosophies of disquiet*. As such, there are inevitable overlaps between them. Two, as Plümacher convincingly argued, feelings and emotions are not what characterize pessimism at all –or at least they are not its primary features. Pessimism, then, is not about despair, or not primarily about despair. Despair may follow from pessimism, but it is not its main constituent feature<sup>117</sup>. As a consequence, nihilism on its own can be a source for pessimism even if feelings of hopelessness and resignation (or any feelings for that matter) are not present in the nihilist. The distance that Gertz makes between nihilism and pessimism is not as wide, insurmountable or clear as he says it is.

On all accounts, existential nihilists deny that life has an ulterior purpose. Yet, while it is true that all nihilists agree on this fundamental point, there are different ways to approach this lack of purpose between them. One way is to deny, outright, that there is any existential purpose to our lives. Strongly put, we *know* there is no such purpose. This is what I call *strong nihilism*.

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<sup>117</sup> This is a point that is worth reminding and keeping in mind: while it is true that pessimism can lead to feelings of despair, anxiety, suffering and others, these moods or feelings are not the premises for pessimism.

Another approach is to claim that there clearly *seems* to be no existential purpose to our lives. Yet, from this it does not necessarily follow that there is, as a matter of fact, no such purpose. Perhaps it is hidden from us. Perhaps it is out there and we may find it one day. This is what I call *weak nihilism*.<sup>118</sup>

However, adopting either perspective and setting aside the issue of *feelings of despair*, it is still the case that nihilism does not necessarily entail pessimism because it is possible to claim that life has no purpose while simultaneously holding that life need not be *bad* because of this. For example, one could say that life may be good, pleasures may outweigh pains and happiness may be possible even if there is no ultimate purpose to life. One could say, *yes, there is no transcendental purpose to existence, yet this recognition is not a source of suffering for me and I still prefer existence*. For this reason, it appears that nihilism does not necessarily imply pessimism. Further to this point, some philosophers make a forceful case that, *as a matter of fact*, lack of existential meaning does not need to be a source of angst at all. Brooke Alan Trisel says as much. She acknowledges that “the notion that the universe is indifferent to us permeates the writings of pessimists and existentialists and led many of them to express feelings of disappointment and despair about our existence. Many of these thinkers claim that human life is meaningless from the vast, cosmic perspective. When making this claim they often assert that the universe is indifferent to us” (453). Yet, ultimately, “feeling disappointed or angry at the universe for being indifferent is unjustified and unwise” (456) because, she says, we humans can *make* our lives meaningful –no input from the universe is required. On her account, lack of existential purpose does not entail suffering.

Even if this was the case and no suffering was present in the face of nihilism (which I think may be due to cognitive defence mechanisms at play), her reading of existentialism is uncharitable –if not outright mistaken. Sartre, the leading existentialist of the 20th century was aware of this common misconception, of this linkage that is made between existentialism and despair. As he pointed out in his essay *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1945), “[it] is public knowledge that the fundamental reproach brought against us is that we stress the dark side of human life” (18). But it turns out that this is not the case. Existentialists are not angry, upset or

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<sup>118</sup> I made this distinction for the first time in my essay *Pesimismo Profundo* (2018), p. 53

particularly focused on the wretchedness of existence. Rather, they are concerned primarily with human agency and liberty in a world where meaning is an act of human creation. In doing so, they defend the view that *existence precedes essence* (20). This means that we were not created for a purpose<sup>119</sup>, that we are always on our own in the world, that there exists no higher authority on moral or existential matters than ourselves. There is no blueprint, no guide. Existential *angst*, on this account, may certainly follow from this. After all, complete existential freedom to create moral principles and to give our lives meaning carries with it a great deal of responsibility. We, and only we, can be held to account for the lives we lead. Yet, and in spite of this, there is no need to posit that the world is always filled with more pain than pleasure. I can have a good life because I can create one for myself. For these reasons it can be rightfully said that existentialists are no pessimists<sup>120</sup>.

The stark divide between pessimism and nihilism is correct, however, only on the assumption that pessimism is primarily about feelings, moods or personal dispositions. This, as we have seen, is a fairly common mistake that some philosophers and non-philosophers make; the mistake of reducing pessimism to affections. So while Gertz and Trisel attempt to draw a stark contrast between the two, I claim that the distance between them is much less and that nihilism and pessimism are better described as being on a continuum that includes a large middle overlapping area. And here, in this large overlapping area where nihilism and pessimism meet is where teleological pessimism lives. Indeed, for many of us, the emptiness of existence and the infinity that surrounds us appear as a source of existential anxiety and suffering in such a way that *existence is not preferable to nonexistence*. This is why pessimism presents itself as the *go-to* philosophical position. After all, how is one to live in a purposeless universe? Why is a

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<sup>119</sup> In order to make the clear what he means by existence precedes essence, in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre says that “if we consider a manufactured object, such as a book or a paper knife, we note that this object was produced by a craftsman who drew his inspiration from a concept: he referred both to the concept of what a paper knife is, and to a known production technique that is part of that concept and is, by and large a formula (...) we cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper knife without knowing what purpose it would serve. Let us say, therefore, that the essence of the paper knife (...) precedes its existence.” (21). With human beings, this does not happen. In other words, it is not the case that we are conceived with a purpose in mind (an essence) and then come to be (existence). Rather, first we exist, then we must create our own essence, give our lives meaning and purpose.

<sup>120</sup> I suggested earlier that existentialism could be considered a philosophy of disquiet. It is not my purpose to definitely decide this matter here, but it does seem that because existentialists ponder existence in the face of nothingness and consequently deal with angst in a world that is devoid of meaning, they share some common concerns with pessimism and other philosophies of disquiet.

purposeless existence *choice-worthy*, preferable to nonexistence? It is difficult to live standing over a void and with the sword of Damocles hanging over us. This, every pessimist knows.

When we ponder our small place in the universe, the existential storms that, as Schopenhauer said, *hit us daily*, acquire a force and a fury that we can hardly ignore. I say hardly, but as Trisel already pointed out, not impossible. In fact, denying the suffering that lack of purpose creates (or denying any suffering for that matter) is one of the most ingenious defences of the human mind. Without those defences, it can become difficult to imagine human life flourishing in the ways it has until now. That is why, once the question of human suffering is asked, a defence often appears; once the fear is raised, an escape route appears. Recall that in chapter three I mentioned how humans might be prone to Pollyanism. If this is indeed the case, then that provides one possible explanation as to why we think life is quite good in spite of the arguments and the empirical evidence that surrounds us. This was the first of three defence mechanisms that I want to reference –there are still two other ways in which we can deal with our predicaments, two ways in which we can *defend* ourselves.

Aside from Pollyanism, and in regards to the question of existential purpose, perhaps the most effective defence that humans have created is the invention of God. James Tartaglia in his discussion on the place that the question about the meaning of life occupies in philosophy said that, “we need look no further than the phenomenon of religion, the roots of which may be multifaceted but can hardly fail to include the fact that religions provide their followers with a take on the meaning of life” (“Is Philosophy All About The Meaning of Life”, 294). Indeed, with God in the picture life acquires meaning and purpose. Leibniz has much to say on this point. On his account, all pain and suffering in the world have a reason and can be ultimately explained and understood. As he says, “when one considers that God, altogether good and wise, must have produced all the virtue, goodness, happiness whereof the best plan of the universe is capable (...) one readily concludes that God may have given room for unhappiness, and even permitted guilt, as he has done, without deserving to be blamed” (278). Everything has been clearly laid out in God’s mind. Good deeds will be rewarded, bad deeds punished. All this will happen because it *must* happen this way if the greatest possible good that God wills is to happen. All this is

reassuring<sup>121</sup>. For many, that there is a Heaven and even a Hell is more reassuring than that there is nothing, absolutely nothing. An end, any end, offers clarity. A why, any why, offers purpose. And that purpose allows us to live and face the vicissitudes of existence.

It is no coincidence that Nietzsche was able to say that "If we have our own *why* of life, we shall get along with almost any *how*." (Kaufmann, 468). Now, if we remove that *why* (because we did not find one or because we are unable to give ourselves ones), if there are no rewards or punishments, if all there is is a complete cosmic indifference to our lives and our actions, then life appears to us as Schopenhauer described it: an endless succession of desires that take us nowhere. Those who resist looking at the infinity that surrounds us (or who once looked but now realize they can or no longer want to look) or those that see God when they look into the infinity are avoiding one of the great sources of human suffering. Comfort in God is how many of us live, how we get by and how we make sense of all the ills in the world<sup>122</sup>.

Despite the apparent futility, we do things, we set goals and try to achieve them without falling into existential despair. This, if the pessimists are right about just how undesirable our lives are, is quite an achievement for the human mind; that, somehow, we are able to set aside our existential despair and –in many aspects– thrive. Yet, the invention of God by itself does not seem to provide us with the philosophical tools that we need in order to move ahead with lives that seem to go nowhere at all. One reason for this is that belief in God is no longer a default position for many people. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor identifies the times we live in as the *Secular Age* –this also being the title of his 2007 book where he traces the historical conditions that make disbelief in God today a live possibility. While to the contemporary person this may sound rather unsurprisingly evident (that atheism is a possible belief), it used to be the case that “it was virtually impossible not to believe in God” (3).<sup>123</sup> As a source of existential comfort, religious belief is generally in retreat.

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<sup>121</sup> This claim must be nuanced because Kierkegaard already showed that this is not always the case. Belief in God can still be a source of existential angst. As his discussion of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* showed, faith in God is a “paradox which is capable of transforming a murder into a holy act well-pleasing to God, a paradox (...) which no thought can master, because faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off” (106). Ultimately, faith is not assuring as much as a source of angst and despair.

<sup>122</sup> The existence of God and the acknowledgment of all the ills that exist in the world can also be a source of *philosophical puzzlement*, as the problem of evil shows. I already addressed this question in Chapter 2.2

<sup>123</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation it is enough to point out that according to Taylor, the possibility of nonbelief in God traces its roots back to the rise of “a telos of autarky” (138) that emerges ever so gradually whereby a

We need, it seems, an *other* way of dealing with our existential insecurities. And this is the third and final defence that I consider. Peter Wessel Zapffe, a Norwegian philosopher that is not widely known, wrote an essay in 1933 called *The Last Messiah*. In it he presents a bleak view of all existence that rivals those of any *Weltschmerz* philosopher. Written with a strong literary flair, Zapffe paints a picture of existence where we humans, betrayed by the universe (because instead of being protected by nature we are cast outside of it by our superior cognitive development), “stand in wonder and fear” of life itself, of our very being (1). As he tells it, at a certain point in history, humans came to realize that Earth was filled with beings that are born, suffer and die, we being one them. As we looked around we became conscious of our inevitable death and suffering. This is why when we

behold the earth, [we see that] it is breathing like a great lung; whenever it exhales, delightful life swarms from all its pores and reaches out toward the sun, but when it inhales, a moan of rupture passes through the multitude, and corpses whip the ground like bouts of hail. Not merely his own day could he see, the graveyards wrung themselves before his gaze, the laments of sunken millennia wailed against him from the ghostly decaying shapes, the earth-turned dreams of mothers (2).

On his account, our cognition –that great human ability that apparently sets us apart from all other living beings– is an error of nature, a miscalculation that has brought upon us a great deal more suffering than happiness. This is because it is our cognition that allows us to form an idea of just how vast, indifferent and filled with death existence actually is. And this knowledge leads us into a “state of relentless panic (...) a feeling of cosmic pain that is pivotal to every human mind” (2). This *error of nature* is not, however, something that has only befallen humanity. Zapffe recalls the case of the now extinct Irish Elk. This provides a clear instance of, as he describes it, life *overshooting its target* in such a way that it ends *blowing itself apart* (2). The tragedy of the Irish Elk consists in that it developed ever greater antlers giving it, initially, an advantage over all the other competitors. Yet those antlers for all their fantastic splendor,

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distance (a *buffer*) is created between the self and the world. In *Sources of the Self*, he claims that one of the sources for this inward turn was St. Augustine, making him, surprisingly perhaps, one of the thinkers that paved the way towards the possibility of nonbelief.

ended up pinning the elk to the ground (2). As a consequence, it lived in “fever and constant pain” (3) and was bound to grow itself into extinction because the weight of its antlers prevented it from feeding and, ultimately, mating. The result of this was extinction.<sup>124</sup> Humans are in a similar position. We too have been given capabilities that are incompatible with life. Whereas the elk was brought to ground because of its oversized antlers, Zapffe says that “in depressive states, the (human) mind may be seen in the image of such an antler” (2).

And yet, once again, we live on. The Irish Elk went extinct, but we have not (or at least not yet). We procreate and, by and large, we continue to uphold the value of life. Why is this the case? In order to not make any appeals to God as a source of comfort or assurance in a world where, as Zapffe described it, a multitude of corpses *whip the ground like bouts of hail*, he takes a different approach. How, then, do we keep moving on? The answer is that, in his words, “most people learn to save themselves by artificially limiting the content of consciousness” (2). In other words, we have ingeniously employed defence mechanisms that have prevented us from living in perpetual existential angst and thus avoid becoming paralyzed by the cosmic insignificance of our little lives. Specifically, he mentions four of them.

First, he says that sometimes we *isolate*: this means that we remove from our minds any thoughts associated with the futility of existence. Those thoughts, questions and associated worries do not enter our consciousness. Someone saying *I would simply rather not think about those issues, nothing good comes from dwelling on these questions. I choose to face life one day at a time and get on with it* is an example of isolation.

Second, we *anchor*: this means that, faced with our existential uncertainty, we decide to cling to some grand existential truth that can give us security, tranquility and, most importantly, a sense of order in the world. Examples of this include religious faith or political ideologies.

Other times we get *distracted*: this is the third mechanism that he mentions. In *distraction* we keep our minds occupied with mundane and trivial things in such a way that we no longer

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<sup>124</sup> Such a deer did exist, and is known as the *Megaloceros*. It became extinct about 11,000 years ago. This deer lived throughout Europe. As described on the University of Berkeley Paleontology page, “it was thought that its lineage had started evolving on an irreversible trajectory towards larger and larger antlers. The Irish elk finally went extinct when the antlers became so large that the animals could no longer hold up their heads, or got entangled in the trees.”

have the time, energy or interest in contemplating the infinity that surrounds us. Activities such as watching television, shopping and playing games for extended periods of time are examples of distraction.

Lastly, he says some of us *sublimate*. In other words we channel all of our existential suffering into other activities, into activities that are creative or have some purpose for us –for example art and literature. While Zapffe readily acknowledged that his preferred defence mechanism for dealing with existential angst was sublimation (saying that his very essay *The Last Messiah* was an example of sublimation), we can also say that philosophy in general is a prime example of sublimation. We write and think about these issues as an attempt to tame and better deal with the threats to our well-being posed by our existential fears. So while people can freely move from one mechanism to the other and are not necessarily tied to one in particular, the relevant point here is that we have those mechanisms at our disposal; we have given ourselves a way to avoid existential depression. This has allowed (and continues to allow us) to live. For this reason, we can continue to procreate and flourish in a way that the extinct Irish Elk did not.

That existential lack of purpose creates within us feelings of despair, malaise and *Weltschmerz* is an important component of teleological pessimism. In contemporary nihilist scholarship, James Tartaglia made the fine point that what really strikes us and creates feelings of surprise is not the fact of existence (no matter how small or cosmically insignificant it may be) but the fact that *we cannot make sense of existence*. Because, as he says, we operate within a framework where it is assumed that we can make sense of everything (he attributes this to Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason), then we proceed to apply this to the question of existence itself expecting fully to find a *reason*. Yet,

When we contemplate the fact of existence, however, we are presented with an apparent exception, and one that can hardly be dismissed as trivial. And this is what explains our surprise: we expect every particular thing and circumstance that exists to be capable of being made sense of, and yet existence as a whole is something that apparently cannot be made sense of. What we really mean by the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?', then, is: 'why, given that no reason can be given for why there is something, was there not rather nothing?' What astonishes us is not so much that there is existence rather than non-existence, but that there is apparently existence for no reason; by making



the contrast with non-existence, we remind ourselves that existence for no reason ought not to exist (*The Meaningless of Life*, 35)

This is an important point because it makes clear that lack of existential reasons can be an urgent philosophical task. However, as Plümacher already argued against those that would reduce pessimism to a mood or a general feeling of existential angst, there is always the danger of stressing the affective component too much.

### 4.3 Teleological Pessimism Defined

In general terms, and as I stated earlier, I agree with Plümacher that to understand pessimism as being primarily about moods and feelings is to *misunderstand* pessimism. Having said this, the formal definition of teleological pessimism is thus: *a life without existential purpose, without ultimate meaning and without some transcendental goal (a telos) makes existence ultimately futile and this leads to suffering. Under these conditions, nonexistence is preferable to existence.*

In this definition, it is lack of purpose itself, not feelings of despair, angst or any self-centred emotion that is the source for pessimism. To make this as clear as possible, consider the following steps:

- One: at some point questions about existential purpose arise in most of us.
- Two: when these questions arise, we enter into a state of need –need of an answer.
- Three: this incites in us a desire to search and find such an answer in order to satisfy the need.
- Four: we find an answer. Either belief in God or some other ultimate reference gives us the answer we seek. There *is* purpose. Our search is satisfied.
  - If four, then teleological pessimism is discarded. The process stops here.
- Five: such an answer is not available to us either because we consider the question senseless (A) or because we recognize that we do not *currently*

have the cognitive tools needed to answer it. The possibility of some AI in the future answering is open (B).

- If (A), then teleological pessimism is discarded. The process stops here.
- Six: the answer is that there is no existential purpose.
  - If six, we are bound to live in the knowledge that our lives are existentially pointless.
- Seven: the answer is that it *can never* be known if there is or is not existential purpose. There may some barrier preventing access to this knowledge.
- Eight: if (B) in five, then we find ourselves in a state of need that cannot be fulfilled due to a limitation on our part.
- Nine: if seven then we are bound to *permanently* live in state of need and uncertainty.
- Ten: if eight or nine then we are caught in an *infinite advance*.
- Eleven: if ten or six then we have teleological pessimism.

These reasons ground the claim that teleological pessimism is anchored in the awareness that our existential lack of purpose is primarily a philosophical issue and not a psychological issue. Teleological pessimism is not a result of a self-centred emotion or a particular personality trait. So while feelings of existential angst play an important role in teleological pessimism, they are not the source of teleological pessimism –just as *moods* are not the source for any of the different pessimisms, though they may certainly be present in pessimism.

The crucial distinction here is the following: the question of existential purpose is posed in points one and two, setting us in a search for an answer –point three. Then, we either admit that we have found existential purpose or that no answer is possible for reason (A) or (B). If (B), then we will be forever in a state of lack, living with a pressing question that has no answer. The other possibility is to move on to point six –the answer to our question is that *there is no purpose*. In this scenario, we have to live, toil and struggle in full knowledge that life and struggles are existentially pointless and everything eventually comes to nothing.

Whereas the well-known problem of infinite regress is an issue in epistemology<sup>125</sup>, by tweaking it slightly it can be a useful way to understand what happens when we look *ahead* for an existential purpose, an existential goal to aim for but consistently find that there is none because each time we think we may have found one, we can always ask, again, *then what* ad infinitum. For example, if someone were to say that our purpose is to be happy, once happiness is attained (whatever happiness means), one can ask, *then what*? If some other goal is added—for example do good deeds in the world, help others and so on—one can again ask *then what*? After a goal is identified and obtained, what is there left to aim for? Is the answer *nothing*? Some may be satisfied that, to stick with our example of happiness, happiness really is all there is and that it does not matter if there is anything *beyond* simply being happy. But others will succumb to the *infinite advance* and in so doing open the door to teleological pessimism.

The knowledge that we are caught in an *infinite advance* means that, as Schopenhauer said, “it is all the same whether he has been happy or unhappy in a life which has consisted merely of the fleeting present and is now over” (PP, 256). And this “nothingness [that] finds its expression in the entire form of existence” causes everything to lose “all true value” (PP, 255). This in and of itself is enough to make nihilism a source of suffering<sup>126</sup>. Hence, teleological pessimism.

However, one could pose the question of purpose (points one and two), search for answer (point three) and admit that (A) no answer is possible or (B) admit that the answer is *there is no purpose* and then deny that the absence of such an answer or deny that the nothingness we face is of any importance whatsoever. In other words, saying something like *I do not need such an*

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<sup>125</sup> When I say that the problem known as *infinite regress* is primarily epistemological in nature, I mean to say that it arises when we ask for justifications for the reasons we are giving in support of a conclusion within the context of an argument. Because one could, so it seems, coherently and consistently ask *why* or *what* support we can offer for any justification we offer, this could take us down a path with no end in clear sight. Consequently, the skeptic can often use infinite regress to show that any and all claims to knowledge have no solid foundation upon which we build our knowledge.

<sup>126</sup> As Schopenhauer says it, suffering is present when there is some sort of obstacle present between us and our goal (WWI, 309). In regards to the question about existential purpose, once the question is posed, it sets us off on a search for an answer. This is a wanting, a striving and as the striving that it is, it is born from “a want or deficiency, from dissatisfaction”—indeed as all striving is (WWI, 309). For this reason, we find ourselves in a state of suffering for as long as the question is not satisfied. And, I argue here, if this existential question can never be satisfied, we will always be in a state of suffering. If the question is answered (and the answer is there is no purpose), then we will also be always suffering insofar as a life that is lived and suffered is ultimately pointless and futile. Recall the punishments in the Greek myths that I recounted earlier.

*answer or even accepting that there is no purpose does not generate a lack in me that needs to be filled. This does not affect my life in any way or form.* In this case, the nihilist in question is not a teleological pessimist. As a consequence, we can say that all teleological pessimists are nihilists but not all nihilists are teleological pessimists<sup>127</sup>.

The absence of reasons for our sufferings and toils that, were such reasons to exist would permit us to make sense of our predicaments, is cause for pessimism. This comes into clear focus when it is contrasted with the philosophy of the foremost optimist –G.W. Leibniz. This is because the most decisive contrast between pessimism and optimism does not consist in that one recognizes the ubiquity of suffering and the other denies it. In actuality, both acknowledge the fact of suffering. The difference lies in that Leibnizian optimism goes to great lengths to demonstrate that our toils and misfortunes (that no one denies) can be ultimately explained in terms of an overall plan or design put in place by God in order to produce the greatest amount of good. The pain has meaning and purpose; its purpose being to contribute to the greatest good possible. And we all play our roles in this –roles that are meaningful and essential to the overall development of the universe. Yet because we may be unable to know why things are the way they are, Leibniz acknowledges that this shortcoming, that our inability to provide a sufficiently robust and convincing answer to the question of suffering and evil can leave many of us unsatisfied. However, “this incomplete explanation (leaves) something to be discovered in the life to come (and) is sufficient for answering the objections” (218).<sup>128</sup> This means that there are indeed answers to our questions, but they are inaccessible to us in our current state. We may have to live knowing that we cannot know here and now why things are the way they are, but in the “life to come”, however, we will have those answers. We only need to be patient.

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<sup>127</sup> This is a good moment to remember that Mainländer (see chapter 3.3) is a thorough pessimist but he is no existential nihilist insofar as he claims that existence does have a purpose –even if that purpose is to achieve nothingness.

<sup>128</sup> Here Leibniz is answering, as he does in large part of his *Essay on the Justice of God and the Freedom of Man in the Origin of Evil* (Theodicy, 1710), a direct objection raised by Bayle. Nadler says that this long and extended dialogue between Leibniz and Bayle “continued until Bayle’s death in 1706” (83).

## 4.4 The three Pessimisms

Ultimately, the pessimist landscape is a varied one. Indeed, there are differences within the pessimisms not only in regards to the question of redemption (what can be done about our suffering) but there are also differences about the sources of those sufferings. Still, and in spite of these distinctions, it is important to keep in mind that all pessimists share a common perspective on our existential condition and, as I set forth in chapter 2.4, they share a common set of four propositions. Indeed, they all agree that suffering is a fundamental part of life and that such suffering does not have a reason for being, a justification or a transcendental explanation –with the exception of Mainländer. Also, this suffering is not within our power to terminate<sup>129</sup>. And furthermore, suffering *just is* and as such we are condemned to an existence devoid of existential meaning. We are, as Schopenhauer said, “clockwork that is wound up and goes without knowing why. Every time a man is begotten and born the clock of human life is wound up anew, to repeat once more its same old tune that has already been played innumerable times, movement by movement and measure by measure, with insignificant variations” (*WWI*, 322).

That suffering does not have an ultimate reason for being does not imply that it is not possible to understand the source of our suffering. And it is precisely this point –the source– that differentiates one pessimism from the other. Therefore, and based on this distinction between *sources*, I claim that there are three main strands of pessimism: metaphysical, hedonic and teleological<sup>130</sup>.

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<sup>129</sup> This claim needs to be nuanced because, as I have already discussed, each pessimist philosopher offers a possible way to avoid suffering, to achieve redemption (Schopenhauer’s ascetic life, Hartmann’s collective antinatalism and Mainländer’s death) and in so doing, terminate suffering.

<sup>130</sup> There are many different ways of classifying the different pessimisms and I do not claim that my taxonomy is in any way definitive or conclusive. Each has their merits and each is useful depending on what aspects one wants to emphasize and for what purpose one is carrying out the classification. Recall, for example, the distinction that van der Lugt draws between *value-oriented* and *future-oriented* pessimism. Dienstag calls Nietzsche’s pessimism, *Dionysian pessimism*. He also proposed to divide pessimism into three broad types. First, cultural pessimism represented by Rousseau and Leopardi (42). Second, metaphysical pessimism represented by Schopenhauer and Freud (43). Lastly, existential pessimism represented by Camus, Cioran and Unamuno (43). Indeed, all the different types of pessimisms can be further divided and categorized to the point of creating a rather long and convoluted list. As an example of this, in his book *Infinite Resignation* (2018), Eugene Thacker proves this to be the case. He lists the following: “moral pessimism (La Rochefoucauld, Chamfort, Vauvenargues), metaphysical pessimism, historical pessimism, political pessimism, literary pessimism (Huysmans, Kafka, Pessoa), romantic pessimism (Baudelaire), Buddhist pessimism (Schopenhauer and his followers), practical pessimism, Dionysian pessimism (Nietzsche), religious pessimism (Pascal, Kierkegaard), dialectical pessimism (Adorno), existential pessimism (Dostoevsky, Camus, Unamuno), redemptive pessimism (Christianity), heroic pessimism (also see: skepticism), healthy pessimism (positive psychology), and so on” (43). He provides no detailed discussion of why he makes these

From a historical perspective, the first and foremost distinction between pessimisms is found in the contrast between the philosophies of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann. These are the first two pessimisms that make different claims in regards to the source of our sufferings and they are therefore the first pessimisms that emerged as fully fledged philosophical systems that offered different explanations for our existential ills. Although Schopenhauer and von Hartmann argued for essentially the same conclusion (that existence is always and essentially suffering), they approached the question from different perspectives and highlighted distinct aspects.

At this point, and having already explained in some detail the pessimism of Schopenhauer, von Hartmann and Mainländer,<sup>131</sup> I am not going to enter into any additional or detailed discussion of their views. Here I only want to briefly recapitulate their main points in order to make two aspects clear. First, that this division that I make between these pessimisms is a division whose limits are neither clear nor precise. Second, in spite of this *imprecision*, it is still a useful distinction because it can help us appreciate the diversity that exists within pessimism. Even more, these pessimisms each have characteristics of the other and therefore are not necessarily mutually exclusive. What distinguishes them is the emphasis they put on the *why* of suffering and that metaphysical pessimism makes suffering *necessary*<sup>132</sup>, whereas hedonic pessimism makes suffering *contingent* (or largely contingent insofar as this pessimism also has metaphysical constituents that makes life essentially about suffering –namely what Hartmann called the *unconscious*).

It is time to have a look at some of the essential features of metaphysical and hedonic pessimism with the purpose of comparing their strengths and weaknesses. Subsequently, I will show how teleological pessimism is related to them and complements them. While reading the following, it is important to remember that teleological pessimism is *not* an alternative to the metaphysical or hedonic.

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distinctions and, it seems to me, many of these categories can easily and simply be collapsed into others. As it stands, the list is overly long, perhaps due in part to a lax use of “pessimism” to cover any philosophy or idea dealing with existential hardship. For these reasons, I suspect his list may be a bit tongue-in-cheek, but that matter is for another discussion. My aim in making the particular division between metaphysical, hedonic and teleological that I present in this work is to highlight what each pessimism considers as the main source of our suffering.

<sup>131</sup> See chapter 3.1 on Schopenhauer, chapter 3.2 on Eduard von Hartmann and chapter 3.3 on Mainländer for a more detailed discussion of their pessimisms.

<sup>132</sup> When I say that suffering is a necessary feature of existence I am not saying that this suffering is always present at every point in our lives. The claim is only *that* suffering in life is necessary and therefore unavoidable.

First, Schopenhauer's pessimism rests to a great extent, but not exclusively, on arguments related to the essence of the world, to the world *in-it-self*. Another way to say this is that his pessimism relies largely on what he calls *a-priori* arguments. Indeed, as I argued above, his pessimism starts from transcendental idealism and from there he moves on to very specific metaphysical claims about the essence of the world; essence that he characterizes as *will* and that has as its prime feature, that it relentlessly pursues desires. And it is only after establishing this point that he proceeds to empirically corroborate the claims about suffering and the overall wretchedness of existence<sup>133</sup>. This is why I call his pessimism *metaphysical*.

For metaphysical pessimism –that because of its roots in Schopenhauer is the original pessimism– the explanation of suffering is found in the very essence of the world. Regardless of how we personally perceive the world or how we live in it, everything that exists, only exists to live in a perpetual search for a satisfaction that will never be obtained. Any satisfaction we get is only fleeting and momentary. That is what Schopenhauer's will *is*, the thing-in-itself that gives rise to all representations (to everything that exists in the world) and that is perpetually dissatisfied. It (the *will*), recall, is present in everything and not only in human beings or living beings; the will is also in the rock, the mountain and the river. One of the consequences of metaphysical pessimism is that the tragic character of life does not depend on how each particular individual lives their life. Beyond my own experiences or my temperament, the world itself and everything in it is forever *lack* and *desire* and therefore my existence is conditioned by this *lack* and *desire*. Nothing we do in our lives or that we do to the world can change the essence of it. We are born to want, to seek and to desire without ever finding any rest (the ascetic lifestyle being, for Schopenhauer, the only way to live without suffering).

Contrast this with Hartmann's pessimism. His system relies heavily on concrete *of-this-world* explanations, explanations that answer to the principium individuationis and that rely on calculations and comparisons between the amount of pleasure and pain that is experienced. As Beiser describes it, "his was to be a scientific pessimism, not one based on metaphysical principles" (*After Hegel*, 194). This is why I have called his pessimism *hedonic*. Ultimately, the hedonic pessimism that von Hartmann developed claims that we are doomed to suffer because

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<sup>133</sup> I refer to the relation between Schopenhauer's pessimism and his metaphysics in chapter 3.1

biologically we are not made to experience pleasure for long. That is, biologically, we are predisposed to feel pain more than pleasure. For this reason, hedonic pessimism relies to a great extent on *a-posteriori* arguments.

It would be mistaken, however, to just leave Hartmann's pessimism at that –as a contingent, purely empirical, *a posteriori* pessimism. He also has, as we saw in chapter 3.2, a definite view about the essence of the world<sup>134</sup>. He claimed that everything, at bottom, is *unconscious*. But the unconscious is not beyond time and space. In contrast to Schopenhauer's metaphysics, he locates our essence *in* time and in space. The unconscious is thus completely embodied in the world (nothing remains hidden behind appearances) and fully knowable and explainable. As Besier says, “we are shown the existence of this force in instinct, nerves, reflex movements, muscle contractions, organic growth” (WZ, 126) among many other manifestations in nature. The unconscious is at work *there* in the world and no introspection or elaborate metaphysical arguments meant to close the gap between representations and *thing-in-itself* are required.

Still, when it comes to providing an explanation as to *why* we can never attain happiness or lasting well-being, for Hartmann we have largely our biology to blame. And our biology, as it is now, is not necessary or timeless but contingent, temporary, and therefore constantly evolving. As such, what is true today may not be true tomorrow. The type of being that we are now is not the same as we once were, and we will hardly be the same beings in the future. And, given this, hedonic pessimism is in danger of being true today, but there is no guarantee that it will remain true tomorrow. Metaphysical pessimism, which also includes Mainländer, does not face these same difficulties. In this way, then, metaphysical pessimism stands on stronger foundations.

Another way to clearly state the difference between them is to say that hedonic pessimism is *a-posteriori* and metaphysical pessimism is *a-priori* (though not exclusively so). For this reason, between metaphysical and hedonic pessimism it is hedonic pessimism that has the greatest weaknesses because the strength of its argument depends (largely, but not wholly) on

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<sup>134</sup> Recall that having a view about the essence of existence (what amounts to having a metaphysical claim about existence) is a defining feature of pessimism as I conceive it. And Hartmann's pessimism fulfills this requirement.



*contingent* facts<sup>135</sup>. That is to say, even if it is true that the world is more full of pain than pleasure, even if it is true that, biologically, we are designed to feel pain more intensely and more frequently than pleasure, even if all this is true, these are not features of the world in its essence but features of life as we live it now. Our biology is spatial, temporal and constantly changing and evolving. Compare this with what Schopenhauer tells us about the essence of the world (the will). According to him, the will is *outside* of all space and time, it is eternal and indivisible.

Crucially, Hartmann clearly lays out, in *empirical* terms, why happiness in this world is never possible. As he says,

- Nerve fatigue means we become increasingly insensitive to pleasure and increasingly sensitive to pain.
- The pleasure we do feel does not compensate or outweigh the pain we felt before or will feel after.
- Pain appears uncalled, whereas pleasure must be sought out.
- Satisfaction is short and fades quickly. Pain endures.
- There can be no such thing as equal amounts of pain and pleasure. They do not compensate each other because pain always dominates (Book III, 74)

All this is not to say that Schopenhauer did not also make extensive references to the contingencies of life in order to defend pessimism (these are his *a posteriori* arguments).<sup>136</sup> He invited optimists to walk through the halls of “hospitals infirmaries, operating theatres , through prisons, torture-chambers [and] battlefields” (*WWI*, 325) so that they could see with their own eyes just how wretched existence is.

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<sup>135</sup> While as I will mention ahead, there is an undeniable metaphysical component that is crucial to von Hartmann’s system (his notion of the *unconscious* as the union of the *Will* and *Reason* that constitutes the essence of the world) just how much his pessimist arguments depend on the *unconscious* is a matter that needs further exploration. It could be the case that reliance on biology and *a-posteriori* arguments may prove sufficient for his claim that happiness is never possible for us. This, however, is a matter for a different investigation.

<sup>136</sup> Schopenhauer claims that Dante was inspired to write his *Inferno* by looking at the real actual world and all the miseries and pains that it contains (*WWI*, 325). What this intends to demonstrate is that there is no need to resort to metaphysical arguments in order to understand how ubiquitous suffering is. One only needs to look at the world we inhabit. The metaphysical arguments only tell us *why* such suffering is ubiquitous.

Yet, the central point of Schopenhauer's philosophy lies in the *thing-in-itself*, in the irrational and insatiable will that is the essence of the world. And by placing the will forever beyond the reach of our intellect, beyond the principium individuationis, there is no direct way to disprove or corroborate its existence. But, far from being a weakness, positing the will as the essence of the world is the mark of a philosophically sophisticated and original argument. Although the will is forever beyond all empirical verification, it is the logical product of the highest philosophical deliberation and as such represents a high point in the history of human thought.

In spite of this, the strength of an argument is not always enough to convince us of something. Vanden Auweele, for example, thinks that Schopenhauer has in fact not made the case for pessimism as strongly as he thinks he did<sup>137</sup>. He says that his philosophy "does seem all in all to lack conclusive and especially objective proof for his core conviction that life is suffering and, because of this, not worth living." (139). Ultimately, instead of going through Schopenhauer's arguments in order to see where and why they fail to *prove* pessimism, Auweele thinks that the best approach is to understand why Schopenhauer *thinks* existence is so miserable in the first place and then travel the path he has taken in order to make his point. As he put it, "Schopenhauer's philosophical arguments in favour of pessimism could then be read as a posteriori rationalizations and justification of this deeply felt conviction. The need for change comes first, the reason why second" (139). However, Auweele has missed the point.

First, that Schopenhauer has been unable to provide any "objective proof for his core conviction" is not the sort of criticism that can be raised against his pessimism. What, exactly, does Auweele mean by *objective proof*? The *proofs* offered by Schopenhauer may not appear to be objective (whatever it is that Auweele has in mind, though we could assume he means some sort of proof open to measurement, calculation or "impartial" observation) because he never intended to make such proofs essential or central to his philosophy. His *a priori* arguments for pessimism are meant to do the heavy lifting here. But if, on the other hand, by *objective truth* he only means some sort of empirical support for pessimism, then that is something he has already

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<sup>137</sup> He is not alone in this. Patrick Hassan cites John Atwell as saying that "Schopenhauer did not put forth a unified, coherent philosophy of pessimism; he did not have a standard set of arguments for establishing a pessimistic conclusion about conscious life" (3).

done (his invitation to walk through hospitals and prisons being an example of this). At most one could say that he only offers a limited amount of such *proofs*, and that his proofs may lack a quantitative character, but that is because (i) these real-life examples are only an *addition* meant to fulfill a supportive role and (ii) quantitative sociological or psychological proofs are not in themselves philosophical approaches. The empirical *a posteriori* arguments and examples are meant to strengthen his foundational *a priori* arguments.

Ultimately, Schopenhauer's project is not an empirical one. His pessimism stands or falls largely on the strength of his metaphysics and he should be judged on that. This is not to say that pessimism can not be defended by appealing principally to *objective truths*, measurements or quantifications. But that project –arguing that life is overall bad without engaging with any metaphysics– is a slightly different one, one taken up more recently by contemporary antinatalists.

Still, the demand for *objectivity* was never completely dismissed or ignored by the Weltschmerz philosophers insofar as one could say that all of them attempted to present their arguments as *objectively* as possible. This is a particularly important aspect of Hartmann's philosophy insofar as he went to certain lengths in order to present his pessimism as *scientific* – an endeavour Plümacher defended as being the right way to defend pessimism.

The other criticism of Schopenhauer that Auweele raises is really a moot point and does not add anything substantial to the discussion. Some of this was already addressed by Plümacher. In effect, claiming that his philosophy is a posteriori and works primarily as a justification for his personal conviction that life is miserable is to hardly engage directly with the arguments presented, with the philosophical idea that nonexistence is always preferable to existence. As I already discussed in some length chapter 1.2 on the rise of pessimism as a tradition, reducing pessimism to psychology is unhelpful. Indeed, to consider the other point of view for a moment (that existence is valuable and preferable), it would be akin to saying that Leibniz's optimism is primarily a quest to justify his a priori conviction that life is good and worthwhile. In both cases, the reasons would *come second*. To be precise; I do not think it is *wrong* to say this. For all we know, it could be true that reasons *come second*. But if we are willing to say that Schopenhauer is only justifying his particular temperament, then why not say that, sticking with Leibniz, he is

also answering to his personal convictions? Furthermore –and this is really the essential point here– who is *not* doing precisely this, who is not justifying their particular views on existence? Is it even reasonable to ask that a philosopher carry out an *impartial* evaluation on the worth of life? Not that such attempts are not made –recall the contemporary antinatalist arguments that claim to rely exclusively on the power and consistency of its arguments and on other sorts of measurements.

Wondering if a philosophical argument is second to personal convictions is a venue of inquiry that leads nowhere substantial. As such, the objection that Auweele raises is hardly a criticism of Schopenhauer and more an indictment of philosophy in general. Or, at the very least, it is a call for caution and humility in our philosophical argumentation writ large.

Even if we manage to set aside these concerns and we are convinced by the arguments presented by Schopenhauer, it is still the case that our being convinced of something does not thereby imply its truth. This is why, for example, it is always possible to remain sceptical about the existence of the will. Certainly many questions about the will remain unanswered. Some of these unanswerable but legitimate questions are, recall from our discussion on Mainländer, “from what this will has sprung? (...) What is the fatality lying beyond all experience which has put it in the extremely precarious dilemma of appearing as a world in which suffering and death reign, or else of denying its own inner being? In general, whence comes the great discord which permeates this world? What would I be, if I were not will-to-live?” (WW2, 641). These questions show just how hopelessly incomplete our knowledge of the world is and will always be<sup>138</sup>. As a consequence, nothing prevents the essence of the world from not being will, but being something else (von Hartmann would certainly claim that it is something else, namely, *unconscious*). For this reason, philosophical pessimism as a whole is stronger and on more secure foundations when its two perspectives (metaphysical and hedonic) complement each other. And despite their many differences, the pessimistic view of the world is only enriched when these different perspectives are used jointly.

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<sup>138</sup> From Schopenhauer’s transcendental idealism our incomplete knowledge of the world is secured in virtue of the fact that the conditions for knowledge (the principium individuationis) can only be applied to the world of representations and never to the *thing-in-itself*.

Although I have highlighted some of the differences between these two pessimisms, the subtleties and complexity of the arguments presented by Schopenhauer and von Hartmann reveal many more similarities. For one, without Schopenhauer's *will*, there is no von Hartmann's *unconscious* and both philosophers offer different perspectives, two ways of looking at one same reality: the *reality* of suffering. And this is the relevant point insofar as pessimism is a philosophy that is sustained and justified not only by the perspective it adopts or by strength of its arguments and examples, but to the extent that it establishes a coherent correspondence with the *reality* of the world. If pessimists talk about a world where pain and dissatisfaction reign, it is a matter of setting our books aside and looking at the world, looking at our own lives to see if pain and dissatisfaction really reign. If the state of affairs that the pessimists describe has no correspondence with the actual lived lives of all beings on Earth, then pessimism is greatly weakened even if its arguments are both strong and persuasive<sup>139</sup>.

There is room in pessimist thought for more arguments in support of the idea that existence is in and of itself conditioned by lack and is unable to satisfy our desires. This is where teleological pessimism can make its most important contribution. As I have developed it in this chapter, teleological pessimism is a third strand of pessimism that is not intended as an alternative to the metaphysical or hedonic. Instead, it is better understood as an addition *to*.

A good way to approach the relation between the three pessimisms is thus: If we see metaphysical pessimism as the foundation, the bedrock of all pessimist thought (not only because it is the first pessimism but because it is the pessimism that makes all other pessimisms possible), then hedonic pessimism can be seen as building on it. In other words, hedonic pessimism is an extra layer, a step further that strengthens the pessimist argument. It is, however, not essential to pessimism. Pessimism does not live or die by the hedonic view in the way that, perhaps, it does live or die by its metaphysical arguments<sup>140</sup>. This means that even if the weaknesses of the

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<sup>139</sup> Special note must be made here for people that fall into one of the three cases of denial that I have made reference to herein: belief in God, Pollyanism and the defence mechanisms mentioned by Zapffe. People that employ any of these defence mechanisms will deny the statement that all pessimists make; that is filled with pain and dissatisfaction. As I stated at the onset (see footnote 65), this is a delicate issue and should be addressed in greater detail at some point.

<sup>140</sup> This is a claim about metaphysical pessimism in general and not specifically about Schopenhauer's metaphysics. It seems to me that, from a metaphysical perspective, Schopenhauer really did say all there is to say when it comes to pessimism. Of course, and in spite of what I have just claimed, I am in no position to say that his truly is the

hedonic view were so great as to render most of its arguments false, pessimism still has Schopenhauer's metaphysical arguments to fall back on.

Teleological pessimism is better viewed as a third thin layer that depends on hedonic and metaphysical pessimism before it. In other words, I do not intend for teleological pessimism to stand alone and for it to provide, by itself, powerful reasons in favour of nonexistence over existence. Rather, it is a perspective that supports the general pessimist principle that life will, always, be a state of affairs conditioned by angst and suffering. The teleological pessimist merely emphasizes the point that the meaninglessness of life is one of the great sources of suffering in addition to the others raised by the metaphysical and hedonic perspectives.

An important clarification is needed here because it might seem to follow that one of the differences between teleological pessimism and other pessimisms has to do with the potential to turn suffering into a basically human experience. This is because if it is true that one of the great sources of existential suffering is the recognition of our insignificance in the cosmic infinity, then that presupposes that there is a being that looks towards the cosmos and wonders about its place in it. It presupposes the existence of a being who asks, who searches and searches but does not find. A being that before the silence of the world comes to the realization that his life is a constant dissolution towards infinity; ultimately, a being that questions its purpose and looks for some transcendental meaning in order to make sense of its life. To put it in the terms that Heidegger did, *a being that questions its own being*. And as far as we know, on this planet the only being that asks these questions is the human being –although not all humans (due to lack of cognitive abilities because of medical reasons in some cases and because, like infants, cognitive maturity has not yet been obtained). This would make humans the only beings capable of existential suffering.

I want to resist such a conclusion. To limit the capacity to suffer to those beings who rationally understand the insignificance of their lives is to blind ourselves to reality –a reality that Schopenhauer understood very well. As he made clear, the world itself is constituted in such a way that every being, every single being that lives here suffers the same torment. That is why he

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definitive pessimist system. There is no reason to think that someone at some point in time could not come up with an alternative pessimist metaphysics to rival or surpass Schopenhauer's.

says that “everyone will readily find the same thing [will] once more in the life of the animal, only more feebly expressed in various degrees. He can also sufficiently convince himself in the suffering animal world how essentially *all life is suffering*.” (310). This is the final pessimist verdict: *all life is suffering*. It is not necessary to have the rational capacity of an average human adult for living to hurt, for existence to be suffering.

But it is one thing to suffer, feel pain and experience an undesirable life. And it is another to suffer because existential questions cannot be answered. This would seem like a purely human tragedy thus rendering teleological pessimism a purely anthropocentric experience. But teleological pessimism does not deny the existence of the will as being the essence of the world. Consequently, wanting and constant dissatisfaction are aspects of all life –human and non-human. What serves to differentiate the suffering experience between beings is that with *some* humans (those with the ability and the interest to ask about the meaning of their lives) there is an additional degree of suffering that is added to their lives.

While all beings are equally subjected to the demands of the will, not all of us suffer to the same degree. This is true in a contingent, empirical sense; some people simply have the unfortunate experience of living a life filled with hardship, defeats and constant frustrated goals and desires. Countless beings are born in war zones, and more must endure famines, natural catastrophes and disease. Others do not. They may be born into wealth and privilege. They may benefit from superb genetics. All of this is true. But there is more. The differences in our sufferings extend beyond the contingencies of individual lives. There are, also, *essential* differences in the lives of the different beings that can increase and/or decrease the intensity of suffering; differences that are not only due to particular variations in the lives of any individual but are *species wide*.

We can go back to Schopenhauer for a good example of what these differences amount to. For him, something that differentiates human suffering in general from non-human suffering has to do with the fact that humans project future suffering and remember past suffering, which results in more suffering –a point Dienstag highlighted in his discussion of pessimism. To this we can add that humans actively question their lives and existence in general. We make demands of it and we expect certain things, existential purpose being one of the most important. And since

humans are more exposed to suffering, life has given us the ability to voluntarily end our lives. The human being can commit suicide, he can put an early end to his life if the torments become unbearable. What all this comes down to is that the demands we make of life and the lack of existential meaning that teleological pessimism highlights are meant to be taken as *one additional* source of suffering, it is not, in any case, the only source. Consequently, even if there is a being that does not recognize its existential futility, that does not imply that this being does not suffer.

In addition, to condition suffering to the ability to recognize oneself as an ephemeral and irrelevant being does not, necessarily, exclude other non-human beings. While up to this point I have largely accepted the idea that humans are the only species on Earth capable of making existential demands on life, the truth is that we do not know if there are no other species that also wonder about their place in the world and about the meaning and purpose of their lives. It may seem unlikely that there are other beings that do this, but one of the things we've learned from history time and time again is that non-human animals have many abilities once thought to be exclusively human.

Closing ourselves to the possibility that some animals feel some degree of existential fear, discomfort or *disquiet* in the face of infinity and death seems to me to be unjustifiably arrogant. I have already mentioned above how the anthropologist Barbara J. King has been able to show that some animals mourn the death of a loved one. Biologist Frans de Waal has some interesting observations to add to this. As he reported in his book *Good Natured* (1996) some poignant examples of animals exhibiting behaviours that one would be hard pressed to dismiss as anything else than concern and a clear understanding that a tragedy has occurred, that something *bad* and *irreparable* has befallen a member of their group. For the sake of getting a good picture of how death is processed in some animals, I will reproduce a situation that de Waal narrates. He tells us that,

One early morning in 1968, Geza Teleki followed a small party of wild chimpanzees shortly after they had descended from their sleeping nests. He hurried over to a site from which raucous calling could be heard (...) activity was concentrated around a small gully in which the motionless body of a male, Rix, was sprawled among the stones (...) Several individuals paused to stare at the corpse, after which they redirected



their tension by vigorous charging displays away from it, hurling big rocks in all directions (at what were they aiming their anger?). Amid the din chimpanzees were embracing, mounting, touching, and patting one another with big nervous grins on their faces (...) later on some chimpanzees spent considerable time staring at the body. One male leaned down from a limb, watched the corpse, then whimpered. Others touched or sniffed Rix's remains. An adolescent female uninterruptedly gazed at the body for more than one hour, during which she sat motionless and in complete silence (...) After three hours of activity around the corpse (...) one of the males finally left (...) others followed one by one, glancing over their shoulder toward Rix as they departed. (56).

These are quite remarkable observations. *An adolescent uninterruptedly gazed at the body. They glanced at the body as they departed.* Who is to tell what was going on in the minds of these chimpanzees? When gazing at the body do they wonder, *where is he? What happened to him? Why did this happen? Will it happen to me?* This is not the place to get into a detailed discussion about the *problem of other minds*, but it seems to me that we can justifiably say that, at the very minimum, events such as these should prepare us to keep an open mind whenever we are inclined to carve out some unique feature for humans and only humans. Death, grief and existential angst may not be purely human experiences. And because of this, teleological pessimism can also fill the life of animals with suffering and despair.

I highlight these concerns because I consider it a philosophical mistake to turn questions about the purpose of existence, suffering and existential angst into only (or primarily) human concerns. Pessimism –in particular Schopenhauer's version– provides a solid philosophical grounding for the inclusion of animal life in our considerations about the worth of life. This is why any serious philosophical discussion about the existential dangers our planet has to consider animal lives as well –something the ERM philosophers dismiss.

Having said this, we do know for certain that humans (or at least *some* humans) certainly ask these questions. As a consequence, we are in what appears to be a unique position to fall into what I previously called the problem of *infinite advance*.

Ultimately, these three pessimisms (metaphysical, hedonic and teleological) taken together with contemporary antinatalism provide the best possible philosophical defence for the preferability of nonexistence over existence that philosophy has to offer.

# Chapter five - The Existential Risk Management Project

Take teleological pessimism as I have just presented it. Add to this the metaphysical and hedonic pessimisms as defended by the Weltschmerz philosophers. The picture that emerges is one of a life that is inescapably fraught with more suffering than happiness, where existence is not necessarily a gift or a privilege that ought to be defended and promoted for its own sake. On this account nonexistence is always preferable to existence. It is now time to look at the arguments of those that think that, faced with a growing number of risks that endanger the survival of humanity, we ought to do everything in our power to avert those threats and thereby extend human existence as far off into the future as we can. The philosophical discipline that deals with this is known as *Existential Risk Management*. In the simplest terms possible, they argue that the reason we should protect our future is because life is always valuable and by continuing to exist into the future, we extend that value.

In his paper “Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority” (2013), Nick Bostrom offers the following definition of an existential risk: “An existential risk is one that threatens the premature extinction of Earth-originating intelligent life or the permanent and drastic destruction of its potential for desirable future development”. He estimates that the chances of such an event happening are around 10-20%. These risks fall into two main categories. The first are natural risks (asteroids, earthquakes, etc). The second are risks that he calls *anthropocentric existential risks*. These anthropocentric risks are risks that are not natural, but produced by human activities. In this category, he includes biotechnology, nanotechnology and machine intelligence as the potential threats we may face ([www.existential-risk.org/concept.html](http://www.existential-risk.org/concept.html)).

These existential risks are, in turn, classified according to the level of damage they can bring about. For this he offers the following scheme:

## Classes of Existential risk

<b>Human extinction</b>	Humanity goes extinct prematurely, i.e., before reaching technological maturity.
<b>Permanent stagnation</b>	Humanity survives but never reaches technological maturity.  Subclasses: <i>unrecovered collapse</i> , <i>plateauing</i> , <i>recurrent collapse</i>
<b>Flawed realization</b>	Humanity reaches technological maturity but in a way that is dismally and irremediably flawed.  Subclasses: <i>unconsummated realization</i> , <i>ephemeral realization</i>
<b>Subsequent ruination</b>	Humanity reaches technological maturity in a way that gives good future prospects, yet subsequent developments cause the permanent ruination of those prospects.

Among the things that we see in this graph is that the outright annihilation of the human species is not the only possible outcome of some catastrophic event. There may be other scenarios that are just as detrimental and undesirable as full annihilation. These sorts of threats – that do not cause our extinction but that greatly lower our overall wellbeing– are called *suffering risks* or *s-risks*<sup>141</sup>. Moynihan defines an *s-risk* as a risk that has the potential to create a scenario

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<sup>141</sup> The non-profit Foundation called “Center on Long-Term Risk” has as its main purpose to “address worst-case risks from the development and deployment of advanced AI systems. We are currently focused on conflict scenarios as well as technical and philosophical aspects of cooperation.” (<https://longtermrisk.org/about-us>). Crucially, the sorts of issues they raise and discuss are about the reduction of suffering as opposed to the promotion of happiness. Their particular focus is on the development of artificial intelligence and the potential amount of suffering that this could create. The risk lies in that with the advancement of technology humans could colonize other planets, fill it with humans and animals (terraforming planets) or that an AI could run countless simulations that would in turn create more suffering for those inhabiting those simulations. Interestingly, Lukas Godor has a paper on the Foundation’s website called “Tranquillism” in which he argues that our guiding moral idea should be the reduction

where “homo sapiens would survive, but its potential would be cruelly curtailed and its existence defined by untold suffering” (21). This last statement –that existence could potentially be defined by untold suffering– is something that pessimists argue is already the case. On a global scale (not just humans), untold suffering is already widespread. This is why such a scenario (untold suffering) is not one future possibility among many others, but actual reality. ERM philosophers, however, do not take these concerns about future or present *widespread untold* suffering very seriously because for them, life is presently good (or at least not overwhelmed by suffering) and the future life will be better.

Apart from this graph above and a series of additional tables that track and organize different aspects of the risks we face (such as the scope of certain dangers and whether or not a specific catastrophe impacts one or several generations or one or several groups of people), Bostrom is, as I will discuss in some detail below, short on providing a strong justification for the preservation of humanity. Yes, he does a thorough job of making clear what risks we face and what the consequences would be if those risks were left unchecked and this is a valuable project. Knowing what risks we face and may face in the future contributes to our understanding of our place in the universe. Realizing that our lives are fragile and that our power over nature may be limited, forces us to think deeply and hard about existence. These threats present an opportunity to think and ponder about our lives and life in general. It is an opportunity, however, largely squandered by the ERM philosophers. They have all assumed that life, specifically human life, is intrinsically valuable and this premise needs no justification or elaborate defence – it is axiological.

Bostrom does, however, make reference to Derek Parfit in that the extinction of humanity is bad because it deprives others of their futures. As he says,

we must consider how much value would come to exist in its absence [the absence of a catastrophic event]. It turns out that the ultimate

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of suffering by aspiring to a state of tranquility. As he puts it, “tranquillism is based on an alternative conception of value, where what matters is not to maximize desirable experiences, but to reach a state *absent of desire*.” In that paper he makes references to the Buddhist approach but he makes, perhaps unsurprisingly at this point for many contemporary philosophers dealing with these sorts of questions, no mention of pessimism or any pessimist philosopher within these discussions. Schopenhauer, remember, also argued in favor of the ascetic lifestyle as a way to end suffering and has ties to Buddhism. Why contemporary philosophers that deal with these questions seem oblivious to the long history of philosophy on this topic is a weakness of these contemporary approaches.

potential for Earth-originating intelligent life is literally astronomical (...) One gets a large number even if one confines one's consideration to the potential for biological human beings living on Earth. If we suppose with Parfit that our planet will remain habitable for at least another billion years, and we assume that at least one billion people could live on it sustainably, then the potential exists for at least  $10^{16}$  human lives of normal duration. These lives could also be considerably better than the average contemporary human life, which is so often marred by disease, poverty, injustice, and various biological limitations that could be partly overcome through continuing technological and moral progress.

These sorts of arguments that start from the assumption that life is valuable are often used alongside a series of graphs (like the one we saw above) that aim to show that these existential risks pose a great danger insofar they threaten the valuable existence of life. This form of argumentation plays an especially important part in Bostrom's overall approach. Schuster and Woods rightly point out that "Bostrom's philosophical style makes heavy use of typologies and lists (...) these typologies betray an impatience with traditional philosophizing, scholarship, and interpretive reading across the humanities and social sciences" (18). This is a most pertinent observation and one that reveals a profound shortcoming of the entire ERM field<sup>142</sup>. Building an entire academic discipline around the idea that existence is a good that we need to protect and project as far into the future as possible without substantially engaging with the history of philosophy means that its claims and arguments will likely be incomplete and lacking in essential insights. As a consequence, the entire field itself is weakened.

An interesting divergence from this is the work of Moynihan. He does make reference to pessimist philosophers and he engages with some of the issues they raise and the reasons they provide for the idea that existence is a wretched state of affairs. This engagement, however laudable, is only superficial. This is because while Moynihan does dedicate some time to the

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<sup>142</sup> As I previously mentioned, I will not attempt to explain why ERM philosophers have largely chosen to not engage with a rich philosophical tradition that directly challenges their main assumptions about the value of existence. This is something that, if they consider important, they should address at some point. My intuition, however, is that many philosophers dealing with contemporary issues display a disregard for the history of philosophy in general and ERM philosophers are no exception to this. As if any doubts remained, the field that studies s-risks (see the previous note) is also notoriously silent on the history of suffering as it is explained in pessimist philosophy.

pessimists –namely to Schopenhauer and von Hartmann– he largely limits himself to presenting their views and then dismissing them on account of their unpalatable views<sup>143</sup>. While dedicating little to Schopenhauer, he does give Hartmann more consideration. In so doing he thinks that the main problem with his pessimism is that it conflates existence of suffering with existence itself (277)<sup>144</sup>.

In an uncharitable move, (similar to what John Leslie does when he discusses Schopenhauer –something I will bring up ahead), Moynihan makes reference to Konstantin Tsiolkovsky immediately after accusing Hartman of conflating suffering with existence itself. What is misleading about this is that Tsiolkovsky claims that humans should one day populate the galaxy and then eradicate the “purposeless sufferings of the lower forms” (277). The implication here is that the pessimism of Hartmann is somehow related to the “astrobiological programme of euthanasia” (278) that Tsiolkovsky defends. But any serious reading of Hartmann will show that there is nothing in his pessimism that would lead anyone to think that euthanasia (let alone on a cosmic scale) is an expected course of action. In the chapter on Hartmann (3.2), I showed that extinction is to be *voluntarily* carried about and not something *done* to others (no matter what motivation one may have for doing so). Yet by presenting Hartmann next to Tsiolkovsky, it is very easy to conclude that pessimism leads to such acts.

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<sup>143</sup> When it comes to Schopenhauer he dedicates not more than three paragraphs and it is mainly to say that he uses some “fancy bit of reasoning” to argue that this is the worst of all possible worlds (272). For Moynihan, this *fancy bit of reasoning* consists in pointing out that other species once dominated Earth (dinosaurs) and that they went extinct because their existence was even worse than ours and thus unsustainable. .

<sup>144</sup> This criticism is wrong insofar as it is based on an assumption that the pessimist questions but that Moynihan assumes and never truly defends; that existence is one thing and that existing sufferers are a different thing altogether, that you can have one and not the other. But for Schopenhauer, recall, existence *is* suffering in virtue of the essence of existence. So while the existence of particular sufferers is a contingent fact, the true nature of existence itself –what he called *will*– is not contingent but necessary. In turn, this *will* is the unending and eternal essence of existence, of everything that exists. Further, this will is defined by lack, want, desire, insatiability and lack of purpose –and this is suffering. One can, of course, question, debate and reject this view. But *if* it is accepted then it follows that because existence is predicated on suffering there can never be such a thing as an objectification (an individual) of the will without it simultaneously being in a state of suffering. If there is such a thing as an individual, then that individual's essence is suffering. The two go hand-in-hand and cannot be separated. Again, there is no need to accept this metaphysical view, but it is incumbent on those that reject this to engage with it. For these reasons, a debate on the merits of transcendental idealism (at least as Schopenhauer understood it) is necessary in order to claim that existence and the existence of suffering are two distinct things that cannot be conflated. Having said this, Hartmann's pessimism (which I earlier defined as hedonic) is –with some caveats in regards to Schopenhauer's transcendental idealism and our ability to *cognize the will* that need to be kept in mind (see note 48)– an heir to this line of thinking and so he is not really conflating existence with the existence of suffering as much as claiming that existence is necessarily linked to suffering in such a way that there is no way to separate them (he not only has metaphysical reasons for this –the unconscious– but empirical biological reasons for making this claim).

Towards the end of that section, Moynihan concludes by saying that “one would hope that we now find such reasoning inadmissible, recognising that it may be morally desirable to try to eradicate *suffering*, without that meaning that it is moral to eradicate *sufferers*” (278). This is unclear, at best. The way Moynihan presents the pessimist point of view vis-a-vis suffering and sufferers lends itself to thinking that pessimists favour taking it upon themselves to eradicate sufferers. In other words, that a pessimist would euthanise others. This misinterpretation contributes to dismissing pessimism on grounds that it is *inadmissible reasoning*. No pessimist – at least no Weltschmerz pessimist – has ever thought that eradicating sufferers was a moral course of action, or even a recommended one. If a sufferer is to stop suffering then that is to be achieved by voluntary, conscious actions on the part of the sufferer herself. Moynihan constructs a straw man and then proceeds to show how morally reprehensible pessimism is in virtue of its supposed desire to *eradicate* sufferers. However, a proper reading of pessimism makes clear that if humanity is to become extinct, then this will happen on its own terms, in full and complete understanding of our existential predicaments. Never is eradication or death (much less death on a wide scale) something that needs to be imposed on others. Furthermore, an extinction event need not only be voluntary, but Hartmann is clear in that it must meet a series of other conditions. This is an essential point that I will discuss ahead.

Ultimately, Moynihan poses the question thus: is it reasonable to take seriously a philosopher that proposes that we all go extinct? Do we really want to consider the arguments of those philosophers that want to end *your* life, mine and that of all other human beings? Posed with such a question, Moynihan thinks that few people will agree that we should consider them and therefore no serious in-depth engagement with them seems necessary<sup>145</sup>. A cursory acknowledgment and dismissal is enough.

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<sup>145</sup> It seems that the main reason he includes these two Weltschmerz philosophers is for revealing how –in his mind– counterintuitive the pessimist arguments are and that, although it is important to be familiar with them, in practical terms they are irrelevant or *plainly wrong*. While I cannot attribute intentions, this is a plausible reading insofar as, something I already discussed at some length, people tend towards optimism and to agree with the idea that, overall, life is good. Because of this natural inclination, ERM philosophers think there are no good reasons for engaging directly with their pessimist views. In this debate between pessimists and those that value life, pessimists have already lost before they present their arguments. If my reading on this is correct, then most of us will already have discarded pessimism before we familiarize ourselves with their arguments. As a consequence, it appears that the only support ERM philosophers need to provide for their view that life is good comes in the form of tables, statistics, diverse facts and typographies.



Still, the fact that he does give them space makes reading his book the more interesting and engaging one among ERM philosophers.

## 5.1 Existential Risk and Existential Suffering

Up to this point I have said that life as something valuable in itself is an idea uncritically accepted by most. Yet, this statement requires some additional probing and questioning. This is because if it really was that clear that life is valuable and something evidently in need of protection, then where does the need to actively promote the value of life through philosophical arguments arise? Why does an entire academic discipline need to devote itself towards disseminating, calculating and quantifying the goodness of existence over nonexistence? Who is the intended public? Presumably, all of us. And we need to be told (or reminded) that life is good because, perhaps, deep down we are not really convinced that life is so great. For this reason the overall desirability of existence may not be an evident or uncritically accepted truth –we therefore need to come to its defence. Indeed, no one denies that bad things happen in the world and that humans and animals suffer. The philosophical differences lie in the explanations and in how much suffering there actually is. The *problem of evil*, optimism and pessimism are all answers to the same question: what are we to make of the suffering in the world? Faced with the undeniable fact of suffering, it is possible that ERM philosophers may have come together because they have realized that a new contemporary defence of existence is needed. And that defence would take the form of this new discipline called *Existential Risk Management*. Could this be the case?

As it turns out, the answer is *no*. This is because ERM philosophers do not do this –they do not really engage with arguments about the inherent value of life. Instead, the idea that life is generally good and that existence possesses much value is a premise only lightly defended by them. More often than not, it is simply accepted that life is good. This suggests that ERM is not really about convincing people that life is good and that therefore the arguments they present in defence of our continued existence have a different purpose. What is that purpose?

One possibility is that these arguments are directed at the elites that resist implementing the required changes that would prevent the catastrophic anthropocentric risks that we currently face. In other words, it is already true that most people may accept the claim that existence is good—including those in power. Yet in spite of this (for reasons that I will not explore because they far exceed the scope of this work but are possibly related to the protection of wealth, power, privileges and a certain hubris brought on by the position of influence they occupy in society ), those same people in power may not be willing to do anything about it because they value present wellbeing over potential future wellbeing. Ord does suggest something along these lines when he says that “the attention of politicians and civil servants is frequently focused on the short term. Their timescales for thought and action are increasingly set by the election cycle and the news cycle. It is very difficult for them to turn their attention to issues where action is required now” (60). If this is the motivation behind the ERM project—spurring people into action—then insisting on the value of life and on the accomplishments that humanity could achieve far out in the future is but a *means*, only a way to make those in power react to the many threats that we are currently facing. It is a way to pressure them, to force them into action. We do not need to be convinced that life is good. We only need to be *reminded* that it is.

Another possibility—or possibilities—is that as Ord says, there are in fact *several* reasons that would seem to justify the urgency of presenting the ERM project. What these reasons all have in common is that they are directed at people that do not take existential risks seriously (58)<sup>146</sup>. So if Ord is correct (that although there are different reasons for promoting ERM they are all directed at those that do not take the threats seriously), then it is crucial to not conflate two distinct issues here; the preference of existence over nonexistence and the need to convince people that our lives are at risk and that we should do what we can to ensure our survival.

Although the two issues appear related, there are subtle differences between them that need to be taken into account. It is one thing to convince people that life is overall good, that existence is preferable. This is what, for example, Leibniz tried to do. And it is another to tell people that our lives are actually at risk, that our disappearance is a real possibility, that it may be

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<sup>146</sup> Among these reasons, Ord says that some politicians feel unable to address these issues and are therefore overwhelmed into inaction. Another is that the market is unable to effectively deal with these risks. Also, ERM requires global cooperation but governments are ill-suited for cooperation at such a scale. He also mentions a bias known as the *scope neglect*. This makes reference to “a lack of sensitivity to the scale of a benefit or harm” (60-61).

violent and that we should therefore take very seriously the threats that we face. And this is what the ERM philosophers largely do. For these reasons it is correct to say that ERM philosophers are not so much interested in convincing us that life is good, given that we *already* know that it is good, as convincing us that it is under threat. This is, perhaps, why they dedicate much less time to defending the idea that existence is in itself a good and more time telling us how much we would lose with our extinction and how much we would gain with our continued existence. Quite tellingly, Ord says that

Almost all of humanity's life lies in the future, almost everything of value lies in the future as well: almost all the flourishing; almost all the beauty; our greatest achievements; our most just societies; our most profound discoveries. We can continue our progress on prosperity, health, justice, freedom and moral thought. We can create a world of wellbeing and flourishing that challenges our capacity to imagine. (44).

For the ERM philosophers life is filled with possibilities and those possibilities are largely good and positive. They do not seriously consider that the future will bring about more bad than good –something that the *s-risk* philosophers do– because the present itself does not contain more bad than good and, if anything, the goods have been *increasing* (more people are literate, more people live longer healthier lives and so on). So, for example, Ord reminds us that “before the Industrial Revolution, just one in ten of the world's people could read and write; now more than eight in ten can do so. For the 10,000 years since the Agricultural Revolution, life expectancy had hovered between 20 and 30 years. It has more than doubled to 72 years” (18). Life, on these parameters, is only getting better and one can justifiably expect that these positive upwards trends will continue for as long as humans continue to exist<sup>147</sup>.

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<sup>147</sup> This forward movement of human history is, recall, something already found in Hegel. This idea was then later taken up by Marx who argued that it is society that is progressing forward. Hegel and Marx both agree that because of this forward movement the future is hopeful and good. This is something the ERM philosophers embrace –though they (as we can see in their arguments) appeal primarily to facts and data in order to defend the idea that we are moving forward and provide no ultimate reasons that explain this forward progression (For Hegel, this reason is found in the deployment of a *world-spirit* and for Marx it is *class struggle* that moves us forward). It is important to remember that the pessimist von Hartmann also agreed that we are moving and progressing towards better stages of human life but he still (or in spite of this) maintained that the final result of this forward movement was the realization that happiness is impossible and that for this reason nonexistence is always preferable to existence. The really interesting point that Hartmann brings up is that progress need not entail optimism or hope in a better future.

Still, and momentarily setting aside arguments about the value of existence, to say that many great things may happen if humanity was to continue existing into the future does not appear to be an unreasonable position to hold—at least on a first reading. Such is the strength of this intuition that appealing to it as the main reason for ensuring our continued survival is an important approach within the ERM project. Our future survival is essential and if we were to not take steps to reduce the risks we face then,

we [could] lose our entire future: everything humanity could be and everything we could achieve. But that is not all. The case that it is crucial to safeguard our future draws support from a wide range of moral traditions and foundations. Existential risks also threaten to destroy our present, and to betray our past. They test civilizations' virtues, and threaten to remove what may be the most complex and significant part of the universe (Ord, 35).

Three important points stand out. First, that humanity is great in virtue of everything that we have accomplished and even more important in virtue of “everything we could achieve”. Second, it would appear that humanity may occupy a very special place in the universe. The absence of any real evidence for the existence of any advanced alien civilization may suggest that we are indeed quite unique<sup>148</sup>. A certain responsibility seems to follow from this recognition of our uniqueness. Third, the emphasis on the value of humanity as a whole and not on the individual life of any particular human. As Ord made clear, “it is not *a human* that is remarkable, but *humanity*”<sup>149</sup> (12).

In an effort to present the ERM project as scientific, objective and purged of any emotion or psychological traits (a supposed *philosophical failure* that is often mistakenly attributed to pessimists), the argument about the value of human existence is presented in a scientific veil possibly meant to convey a sense of authority that philosophical arguments on their own are

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<sup>148</sup> This is related to what is known as the *Fermi paradox*, something I will touch on in chapter 5.2.1

<sup>149</sup> Recall that as I mentioned at the start of this work, there are many moral and political concerns that the ERM field raises. This quote by Ord is one of them. By placing the moral focus on humanity in general and not on any particular human, the inherent dignity and worth of each individual life is devalued somewhat—particularly when it is weighed against the value of the human species as a whole.

unable to provide. Ord said that the expected value of the future is indeed tremendous and, crucially, the truth of the proposition could be expressed thusly:

$$EV(future) = \sum_{i=0}^{\infty} (1-r)^i v = \frac{v}{r} \quad 150$$

This assumes that value and risk are quantifiable elements that can be incorporated into a formula meant to yield an objective result. This sort of mathematical/scientific approach to value and risk are dominant strategies within the ERM community but instead of being a strength or an advantage, it can often be a weakness because of the many questions and issues it does not address –primary among them the question of whether we are ever justified in claiming that existence is valuable and, even if we can make that claim, then whether or not that value can ever be *quantified*. And if it could, who gets to decide what elements ought to be counted and how much weight they should be afforded?

Ultimately, the motivation behind the existential risk project is “not *doomy pessimism* but resolute optimism concerning our collective future.” (Moynihan, 21, italics mine.) Further to this, according to Ord, his book “is not pessimistic (...) it does not represent an inevitable arc of history culminating in our destruction [because] our potential is vast. We have so much to protect” (9). This is revealing insofar as it seems to draw a stark and insurmountable dividing line between pessimists and optimists<sup>151</sup>. Not that such a line has not been drawn before, but in this case it can lead to some misunderstandings in particular because it can misconstrue the

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<sup>150</sup> This formula appears in Appendix E (273) and is read thus:  $r$  is the amount of existential risk, that is the risk that we will not make it into the next century.  $v$  is the amount of value at the start of a new century. As Ord explains, “for example, if the risk each century was one in ten, the expected value would be ten times the value of a single century. This leads to a surprising implication: that the value of eliminating all existential risk this century is independent of how much risk that is” (273).

<sup>151</sup> In this case, the use of the concept *pessimist* seems to be more in line with psychological pessimism than philosophical pessimism and is therefore not making any reference to the philosophical tradition. Given this, there does not appear to be any room for a fruitful philosophical discussion on this matter until the matter of just what *pessimism* is resolved. This is something I have done in this work and as such is an important contribution to the issue at hand.

pessimist answer to the ERM project. We doomy pessimists *can* get behind this project and support its ultimate aims even though our reasons for doing so are very different.

After all, and given these facts about human progress, why would we *not* want to make sure that we continue to exist and that future human beings are given the chance at living very good lives –long lives filled with knowledge and art and countless other pleasures. ERM philosophers are primarily optimistic about the future and this is made very clear when Ord boldly claims that “humanity’s future is ripe with possibility (...) we know of almost no limits to what we might ultimately achieve” (36). While this may seem like a noble position to hold, it quickly becomes apparent that because ERM philosophers focus exclusively on the survival of the human species, they are blind to the lives and the conditions of the countless many other beings that inhabit our planet and, in the face of a global catastrophic event, will very likely also face extinction. This is particularly important because in the face of a cataclysmic event caused by humans, the moral responsibility for the suffering, death and disappearance of countless beings, falls squarely on us. The ability to *turn a blind eye* to the suffering and extinction of other species is, however, something humans are quite good at. Already we have caused (directly or indirectly) the disappearance of countless species and yet no extended moral outrage exists.

The question of animal life and extinction merits a detailed and thorough discussion – discussion that the ERM philosophers have chosen to not engage in. The failure to address this issue in any depth is a real problem for the entire ERM field because insofar as a large part of their project depends on questions about the value of life and the moral worth of human beings, one can (and *should*) ask two things: First, why limit the scope to human beings? Two, what can we say about the value and moral worth of the other beings? ERM is largely silent on this. So why do the ERM philosophers focus only on human survival? It is because, as they say, we have the ability “to do good, to pursue justice, to comprehend nature, and to produce beauty (...) if unobstructed, the future would very likely bring forth entirely novel domains of mind and experience, of aesthetics and value, beyond current comprehension” (Moynihan, 22). No other beings, so it seems, can do these things. And being able to do these things is precisely what, in their minds, bestows value. This is, at the very least, a highly debatable premise and as such is a rather weak starting point for any philosophical argument.

When questions about biodiversity and its worth do appear, its value is merely instrumental. Ord says that “from the perspective of existential risk, what matters most about biodiversity loss is the loss of *ecosystem services*. These are services –such as purifying water and air, providing energy and resources, or improving our soil– that plants and animals currently provide for us, but we may find costly or impossible to do ourselves” (188)<sup>152</sup>. Animals (and plants) provide services for us and their continued existence is valuable only because they are in the best position to continue to provide those services<sup>153</sup>. Of course, when an entire academic discipline dedicates itself to the exaltation of human uniqueness and reaffirming the value that we –and only we– bring to the universe, it is not surprising that the worth of the rest of the inhabitants of this world would be reduced to mere means for our benefit<sup>154</sup>. In contrast, recall that the philosophers dealing with *s-risks* do quite strongly factor animal suffering and take their pains in consideration when pondering the future risks that we may encounter.

The anthropocentrism of the ERM project makes it clear that their concerns are not about existence as a whole or about suffering as such. Instead it is about a narrow view of value –the sort of value that only humanity has and can create. However, it is unlikely they regard this as a shortcoming insofar as the project itself is premised on the idea of human worth. It is the framework within which they carry out their project.

This is why, as Bostrom argues, we should endeavour to make “improvements [that] might come from many sources, including developments in educational techniques and online collaboration tools, institutional innovations such as prediction markets, advances in science and philosophy, spread of rationality culture, and biological cognitive enhancement” meant to

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<sup>152</sup> It is revealing that, for a philosophical project that presents itself as forward-thinking and innovative, Ord, for example, is not able to imagine an economic system where market forces are not working to distribute goods. He says that he cannot imagine any natural resource that can provide long lasting benefits to us and that, at the same time, would escape the market forces that would “ration our consumption” (117). It looks like even though we may become a space-faring civilization, with advanced technology beyond what most of us are able to conceive now, we will still be governed by market economies.

<sup>153</sup> Schuster and Woods make the observation that “existential thought need not be treated as exclusive to the human species” (80). I already hinted at this issue when I suggested animals may also ponder existential questions. That it is treated as an exclusively human capacity reveals an important shortcoming of the ERM project.

<sup>154</sup> Benatar rightly points out that oftentimes when animal extinction is raised as a concern it is done through human eyes. He says that “the popular concern about animal extinction is usually concern for humans—that we shall live in a world impoverished by the loss of one aspect of faunal diversity, that we shall no longer be able to behold or use that species of animal. In other words, none of the typical concerns about human extinction are applied to non-human extinction” (n. P 197). In this Benatar is correct.

prevent our extinction. These are some of the essential mitigation measures that we can adopt in order to prevent any catastrophic scenario, along with global climate actions, the building of asteroid defence systems and so on.

Bostrom does appear to admit and recognize that his defence of a continued human existence is not based on any *conceptual* truth. He acknowledges “that it is on no account a conceptual truth that existential catastrophes are bad or that reducing existential risk is right. There are possible situations in which the occurrence of one type of existential *catastrophe* is beneficial—for instance, because it preempts another type of existential catastrophe that would otherwise certainly have occurred and that would have been worse”. Ultimately, Bostrom has adopted a “perspective of utilitarianism (combined with several simplifying assumptions)” in order to defend his view but in so doing he avoids directly dealing with existential questions that are not reducible to calculations or comparisons.

This widespread failure of ERM philosophers to deal with the more complex moral, ethical and existential issues surrounding our continued existence was something that John Leslie grappled with. Although he was a defender of the idea that we should save humanity from extinction he was also able to wonder, *why not extinction?* He asked if it was the case that there is no real need to address this question in any great detail because avoiding our extinction is some sort of objective truth that we should easily accept just as we accept that “three fives make fifteen?” (155). While the ERM philosophers certainly seem to think this is the case, Leslie argued that we should not make this assumption. Rather we should defend this idea. And the best way to do this, according to Leslie, is by engaging with meta-ethical philosophy. In so doing, however, he ends up appealing to a naturalist view of ethics whereby there are ethical facts and truths that are objective. This is why “ethical truths would continue to be true even if the universe vanished. In an absence of all actually existing things it could be ethically required, for instance, that this empty situation *not* be replaced by a world consisting merely of people being burned alive” (168)<sup>155</sup>. In this way it is an ethical *truth* that we should worry, care and take into consideration the well-being and interests of others.

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<sup>155</sup> This commits Leslie to platonism, a commitment he embraces. This is why he says that “two and two makes four is independent even of the existence of objects to be counted, let alone of people to count them” and thinks that this same reasoning can be applied to ethical statements (169).



Whatever we make of his conclusions on this matter (be it that we agree or disagree with them), the interesting point here is the engagement with such questions and the philosophical effort he deploys in order to provide the best reasons for holding that existence is good and that we should do what we can to protect it.

## 5.2 How the Pessimist Can Support the Existential Risk Project

In my previous discussion on the question of redemption as it appears in the Weltschmerz philosophers, I have already foreshadowed what their stances would be in the face of human extinction and how it would be best to achieve their stated goals of nonexistence. In this chapter I will provide further details on this topic.

As we have seen throughout, the ERM field has an antagonistic position towards pessimism. And if it is not antagonistic, then it is indifferent to their arguments. In the few cases where ERM philosophers do engage with pessimism, they do so only sparingly and oftentimes it is only treated as historical curiosity, a sort of fringe thought. As a consequence it is never treated seriously which is why its main claims are either misinterpreted or only lightly addressed. But as I have argued up to this point, pessimism has much to say on the question of existence, suffering, and its overall worth and even if we do not agree with the points they raise, it is undeniable that they have unique and interesting insights into existence as a whole. It behooves anyone interested in existential questions to look at the Weltschmerz philosophers. This is why, when it comes down to the question of whether or not we really should do whatever we can in order to preserve and protect the future of humanity, pessimist thought can provide, at the very minimum, an opportunity for philosophical pause and can help us consider *why* we think it is incumbent on us to ensure that humanity does not disappear.

This opportunity for further and careful philosophical deliberation is what the unique contribution that pessimist thought can provide to the ERM project consists of. And pessimism is in a position to do this because while its ultimate goal is at odds with the ultimate goal of ERM, it is also the case that, along the way, pessimism and ERM can agree that we should take steps to alleviate suffering and the existential threats we face.

The reason why pessimists are able to be on board with the existential risk project (or at least not oppose it) is because, even though they would welcome the end of humanity (as a way to end our collective existential suffering) it is also the case that pessimists support reducing pain, anxiety and existential suffering in general and by extension the sufferings associated with the existential threats we face<sup>156</sup>. What we see here are what appear to be two values at play. On one hand, it would be good if no more humans existed. On the other hand, for those already existing it is good that we do what we can to alleviate their (our) suffering. As it turns out, these two values, when properly understood, work well and complement each other. In other words, if the ERM project can help alleviate a source of suffering, then there is nothing precluding pessimists from agreeing with this. After all, and as everything we have seen up to this point shows, why would pessimists oppose alleviating suffering and helping prevent a catastrophic *violent* event that would bring about tremendous amounts of pain and death *not only* to the human species but to the rest of the animal kingdom?

An insightful way to better grasp the point I am making on behalf of pessimists here is to consider what a pessimist would say in regards to the many public health measures that are enacted with the purpose of staving off death and disease. There is no reason at all why any pessimist would oppose, for example, vaccine research or deployment in order to prevent death and disease. Further, there is no reason why any pessimist would ever oppose the development of drugs and anesthetics that would reduce pain. It is a deep misunderstanding of pessimism to think that because they claim that nonexistence is preferable to existence, then the hurt and suffering of all beings is of no, or little, concern.

Given that compassion is at the root of pessimism and that, as Schopenhauer said, the suffering of one is the suffering of all (insofar as we all belong to the one same undivided universal essence called *will*), it follows that we have no reason to willingly impose suffering and death on others (unless we want to hold that we have reasons to impose suffering and death upon

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<sup>156</sup> Contemporary antinatalists, such as Benatar, are likely on board with this position –that we can reduce suffering and therefore we can oppose the extinction scenarios that ERM philosophers envision. The same, however, cannot be said of all the philosophies of disquiet. Specifically, current human extinction movements such as The *Voluntary Human Extinction Movement* and the *Church of Euthanasia* that I mentioned in passing in chapter two may not oppose any catastrophic event that would end human life, even if it were to be violent and imposed on us against our will.

ourselves) in spite of the overall badness of existence<sup>157</sup>. Ultimately, as Bahnsen said, pessimists are motivated by sympathy and they will do all they can to alleviate the suffering of their fellow human beings (in Beiser, 283) and, I add, to animals as well.

So while it is true that no such thing as moral duties are to be found in the pessimism of Schopenhauer –or in any Weltschmerz philosopher– the concept of compassion is important. As Shapshay puts it, compassion is defined “as feeling *immediately* another’s suffering, as one typically feels only one’s own.” (RS, 153). And this idea, that the suffering of the other is also my own suffering is what makes compassion central to Schopenhauer’s ethics. While it is not my purpose to enter into a detailed discussion around Schopenhauer’s ethics and his justifications for his claim that compassion is fundamental, for our purposes at hand it is enough if we understand that, as Shapshay says, “drawing on his transcendental-idealist metaphysics (...) he supports the claim that an outlook and a practice of compassion is not merely the expression of common moral intuitions about what is right and good, but is further an expression of metaphysical wisdom. In other words, the compassionate person has got it metaphysically, objectively right” (RS, 174). An understanding of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics leads one to understand why compassion is so central to his ethics and why it is so clear that under no circumstances does imposed death or extinction follow from his pessimism.

Pessimists agree that human extinction is desirable if and only if three conditions are met. First, it is not enough to simply *want* to end life. In addition to this desire, our movement towards annihilation must be motivated by a clear understanding of our existential predicament. Our extinction is not philosophically justified if it is motivated by a profound sense of despair, depression or other associated emotions. What this means is that pessimists expect that we humans will one day come to understand just how undesirable our existence is and only after

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<sup>157</sup> This is a position shared by antinatalists, in particular by Benatar. He says that there are two types of extinction and the difference he draws is helpful in highlighting the moral difference between voluntary extinction and imposed extinction. He differentiates between *killing-extinction* and *dying-extinction*. The former is the result of direct action either by others (for example humans killing off an entire species) or by a natural catastrophic event. The latter is when a species fails to replace its population and so *dies off* (195). There are important moral differences between these. As he says, “humans killing their own species to extinction is troubling for all the reasons that killing is troubling [yet] although we can regret somebody’s death from natural causes at the end of a full life span, we cannot say that any wrong has been done, whereas we can say that a moral agent killing somebody, without proper justification, is wrong” (196).

coming to this profound philosophical realization, will extinction be considered. Extinction, then, is an *enlightened* extinction.

Second, it must be a *voluntary* extinction. Killing others (humans or animals) or having death imposed upon us by an external force as a way to hasten our disappearance are not measures advocated by pessimists.

Third, this extinction is not conceived as a violent or abrupt ending –it is an extinction meant to be carried out by intellectually enlightened beings through, in all likelihood, nonviolent means. This seems to make it likely that the sort of extinction pessimists favour is one obtained primarily by ending procreation (antinatalism) because this is a nonviolent way of ending human life. I say that extinction by ending procreation is *likely* because while all the Weltschmerz philosophers argue that informed, peaceful and voluntary extinction are essential conditions required for achieving nonexistence, antinatalism is not the only way to go about this. Voluntary collective suicide is not a scenario necessarily ruled out –except perhaps in the philosophy of Schopenhauer who, recall, is opposed to suicide on philosophical grounds.

Given this clear stance in regards to our extinction, what are we to make of animal extinction? Recall that for pessimists the wretchedness of existence and the overall misery of life is a truth that applies not only to humans. Insofar as nonexistence is preferable to existence, then this is the case for all beings that inhabit the earth. And just as human extinction is ultimately the best course of action (as it is the only way to end existential suffering), then it follows that animal extinction is also the best course of action. Yet, special care is needed whenever we talk of animal extinction. I say this because the power that the human species exerts over the rest of the animal kingdom is enormous and we have largely used it to inflict death and abuse upon them, usually for our own species advantage. Already countless species have gone extinct because of our actions and many more are in danger of becoming extinct<sup>158</sup>.

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<sup>158</sup> A Reuters report states that “Scientists count 881 animal species as having gone extinct since around 1500, dating to the first records held by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – the global scientific authority on the status of nature and wildlife. That’s an extremely conservative estimate for species extinction over the last five centuries, though, as it represents only the cases resolved with a high degree of certainty. If we include animal species that scientists suspect might be extinct, that number shoots up to 1,473. The bar is high for declaring a species extinct – a sobering task that scientists are already reluctant to do”. Furthermore, in 2018 an article in The Guardian reported that “Humanity has wiped out 60% of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles since 1970, leading the

The massive disappearance of entire species is done without their consent and through violent means –sometimes directly (hunting them to death) or indirectly (destroying their habitats). And, as is clear by now, one of the essential conditions set forth by pessimists for extinction is *informed* consent. There are no circumstances where forced and imposed extinction is acceptable (and recall that this is why pessimists can support the ERM project).

So what exactly is to be done with animals? Can they ever give consent to voluntary extinction? At this point I cannot provide a detailed answer but further research is likely to reveal an answer(s) along these lines: On Schopenhauer's account of extinction, there is a possible reading where disappearance of the last human being will also entail the disappearance of all animals in virtue of his version of transcendental idealism (see chapter 3.1). This, of course, depends on one accepting transcendental idealism, a task for a separate discussion. On Hartmann's account, the answer will remain unknowable to us insofar as he thinks we are in no position to say how we or the universe itself will come to an end (see chapter 3.2) but once it does, animals will disappear alongside everything else. And finally, in the case of Mainländer, the universe itself and everything that exists is inevitably headed to death and so ultimately no active participation on our part is needed in order for animals to disappear (see chapter 3.3). All this to say that this is ultimately an open line of research that is likely to yield insightful perspectives.

Setting aside the specific animal question for the time being, human extinction should only be undertaken as a final act of redemption that meets the three conditions we have just seen (voluntarily, informed and peaceful), with the requirement for *informed* extinction being the first, essential condition. This is because only by being informed and intellectually aware of our existential conditions can willful and voluntary extinction follow. Reaching this point of intellectual enlightenment is important for all the Weltschmerz philosophers. Mainländer, recall, goes as far as to argue that we should aim to create the most just, fair and advanced human society possible *before* our final disappearance comes about (he advocates for such things as free education, less work hours, equal and fair wages, ample leisure time available to everyone, and so on). Only in such a world will humanity realize that its ills were never *solely* social or political

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world's foremost experts to warn that the annihilation of wildlife is now an emergency that threatens civilisation." Up to date numbers will likely reveal higher numbers.

ills. Rather, our suffering is rooted in our metaphysical essence as individual, fragmented wills that search for, and will only rest when, complete nothingness is achieved.

Beyond this agreement on the voluntary and enlightened nature of our final demise, pessimists differ on the precise means they envision for attaining that extinction. And while it is true that they disagree on *how* extinction is to come about in practical terms, it is also true that they agree that our end will be largely a peaceful affair. Yet, this peaceful movement towards nonbeing is conceived as either a matter of *individual* action (Schopenhauer and at times Mainländer) or *collective* action (Hartmann and at times Mainländer).

### 5.2.1 Extinction in Hartmann

Ultimately, the road to voluntary extinction is open and there is room for interpretation, debate and further precisions. While we have already seen that Mainländer does not commit to any specific method for attaining extinction, it seems that Hartmann takes the same uncommitted approach. When it comes to *how* everything will come to an end, he says that,

Our knowledge is far too imperfect, our experience too brief, and the possible analogies too defective, for us to be able, even approximately, to form a picture of the end of the process; and I beg the gentle reader not to take the following for an apocalypse of the end of the world, but only for hints which are to prove that the matter is not quite so unthinkable as it might well appear to many at the first blush. (*PUC*, 135)

The *end of the process* is unknowable. As discussed in the chapter on Hartmann, it will be up to those humans placed in the position of ending everything to decide just *how* that end comes about. But what we do know, what we *can* say is that the final act will be collective. Once we reach and overcome the third and final stage, humanity as a whole (not just this or that individual) will have understood that all illusions are dead and that hope for a happy life is to be abandoned (117). At this point, humanity will have “seen the folly of its endeavour; it finally forgoes all positive happiness and longs only for *absolute painlessness*, for nothingness,

Nirvana” (118). Only when humanity comes to long for this absolute painlessness, collective action will take place. This means that

The redemption, the turning back of willing into non-willing, is also to be conceived as *act of each and all*, not as *individual*, but only as cosmic-*universal* negation of will, as the act that forms the end of the process, as the *last movement*, *after* which there shall be no more volition, activity or time. (131).

For this coordinated action of *each and all* to take place and for this action to be *effective* at bringing about the actual end of *all volition*, Hartmann lays out three conditions.

First, “the *largest part* of the Unconscious Spirit manifesting itself in the present world is to be found in humanity” (135). This means that the biggest part of all existing life must be human life. As a consequence of this, if the will is to be found anywhere it will be found in humans (likely not yet *exclusively* so, but as Hartmann says, *largely* so). This condition seems to be rather unproblematic. As a matter of empirical fact, growing numbers of species are becoming extinct and the number of humans continues to rise. The expectation of Hartmann is that “one day in a remote future, humanity may combine in itself such a quantity of spirit and will, that the spirit and will active in the rest of world is considerably outweighed by the former” (137). This gives us tremendous power and puts squarely in our hands the future of the will and all of existence. Because most of the will will be concentrated in us, by negating that will the “whole kosmos [shall] disappear at a stroke” (136). In this case, there is no doubt that when humanity denies the will, it will take all of existence with it into nothingness. In the terms expressed by Schopenhauer, all *half-shades* will cease to exist once we do.

Second, all of mankind must be convinced of “the folly of volition and the misery of all existence” (137). This is a condition that I have already referenced and is shared among all the Weltschmerz philosophers. It is a condition that is central to the main issue at hand; that humanity (not necessarily all, but a vast majority) must fully comprehend and accept the pessimist truth about our existential predicaments in order for voluntary extinction to be carried out.

Third, there must be a “sufficient communication between the peoples of the Earth to allow of a *simultaneous common resolve*” (139). Given that Hartmann favours collective action it is no surprise that he would expect there to be some sort of way to carry out the coordination required for unified action. As it stands, this condition –as is the first one– is quite unproblematic as it is something already *actual*. That is, instantaneous world-wide communication is here.

### 5.2.2 Extinction in Schopenhauer

What can Schopenhauer add to the question of extinction? First, it is important to recall that his view on redemption is essentially an individualist one. This is an important area where von Hartmann and Mainländer depart from Schopenhauer, though there is room in Mainländerian metaphysics to argue for the *effectiveness* of individual action as well (Mainländer did take his own life as there was no need for him to wait for the rest of humanity to accept *the truth* of his philosophy). For Schopenhauer, the individual solution to the problem of existence, which essentially means that no coordinated action is required amongst us, is the preferred *means* through which the end of the world will be obtained. If anywhere he makes it clear just how the full extinction of humanity and the world itself would come about, it is here where he say that,

Voluntary and complete chastity is the first step in asceticism or the denial of the will-to-live. It thereby denies the affirmation of the will which goes beyond the individual life, and thus announces that the will, whose phenomenon is the body, ceases with the life of the body. Nature, always true and naive, asserts that, if the maxim became universal, the human race would die out; and after what was said in the second book about the connexion of the phenomenon of the will, I think I can assume that, with the highest phenomenon of will, the weaker reflection of it, namely the animal world, would also be abolished, just as the half-shades vanish with the full light of day. With the complete abolition of knowledge the rest of the world would of itself also vanish into nothing, for there can be no object without a subject. (WWI, 380)



This passage is very interesting because Schopenhauer seems to be saying that the universe itself will disappear if humanity were to do so. Where Hartmann argued that some sort of final coordinated action would be required for everything to end, Schopenhauer seems to say that such coordination is not required; it is enough that humans die out even if it is *one by one* and spread out through the years. Taking into account his interpretation of transcendental idealism it does not seem surprising to say that if humans are gone, then there would be no world. Yet, two careful distinctions need to be made here.

The first distinction, that I will not go into great detail herein, is that it is not clear if Schopenhauer really holds that all weaker reflections of the will (animals, plant life, inorganic things) will also vanish once the strongest reflection of the will (humans) are gone. It is a matter of debate and interpretation to determine just what Schopenhauer really has in mind when he claims that if the human subject is gone, then the rest of the world will also be gone. While this does seem to be what he is saying in the quote above, it turns out that in WW1, section VII he also says that “animals existed before men, fishes before land animals, plants before fishes and the inorganic before that which is organic (...) the existence of this whole world remains forever dependent on that first eye that ever opened, were it *even that of an insect*” (30, italics mine). In other words, he clearly seems to suggest that even if an insect, and only an insect, were perceiving this world, then this world would actually *be*; no humans required. So what is it? At this point, I will not attempt to resolve these competing claims.

The second distinction, and the more important one, is that even if humans were to disappear and even if as a consequence of this all beings were to also vanish, it is still *not* the case that the *world itself* would cease to be. The *real* world will continue to be, for the real world has no start and no end –indeed the category of time does not even apply to the real world. Two points to remember here. One, this world of objects and beings is representation (phenomenon) and as such is wholly dependent on there being a subject that perceives it. Two, the real world is *will* and its existence does not depend on any objectification of the will nor on any perceiving subject in order to *be*. For this reason, what vanishes when *we* (objectifications of the will) vanish is the world of representations and not the world in-itself<sup>159</sup>.

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<sup>159</sup> Another possibility to consider, and as far as I am aware Schopenhauer does not but Hartmann certainly does, is that there may be other highly evolved and intelligent beings living on other planets. We may be *half-shades* of

These two distinctions only serve to show that, ultimately, the question of extinction is a matter not wholly resolved in Schopenhauer. While he is clear in claiming that the only way to effectively deny the will is through the ascetic lifestyle, this leaves the matter up to the individual. As a consequence what happens with the other beings and with existence itself is not evident (do the *weaker reflections* of the will, like animals, effectively die out or not?). And even if the world of representations could cease to exist, what about the real world, the will? If it has no end, no beginning and it is not subjected to cause and effect, then does this mean the will cannot, ever cease to be? If so, could the will give rise to new advanced intelligence once humans have come to pass thus starting a new world of representations?<sup>160</sup> Recall that Hartmann certainly thinks this is a true possibility which is why he thinks it is not enough for humans to die out.

In the end it is not quite clear just how Schopenhauer envisions the end of all existence. And it is to Hartmann's credit that he confronted and struggled with this issue. Not only did he ask himself *how* an *effective complete* denial of the will was possible but—as we saw above—he also laid some specific requirements that need to be met in order for all of existence to end. In this way, Hartmann's perspective solves most of the issues that Schopenhauer left unexplained (namely, how we can effectively *ensure* that humans go extinct and that existence itself ceases to be).

Still, beyond this specific (but important) unresolved point, what is really relevant to the question of human extinction is the *voluntary* aspect that Schopenhauer makes clear at the start and that all pessimists embrace. Nonexistence, if it is to accomplish the goal of eliminating suffering and striking a definitive blow to the will, to the essence of the world itself, is to be accomplished by a conscious decision by an individual in absolute control of their understanding.

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them. As such, absent humankind, they would be (or become) the *highest phenomenon of the will* and this would ensure the continuance of the universe.

<sup>160</sup> This raises some related questions that arise from Schopenhauer's metaphysics. In *WW2*, he claims that "the will as thing-in-itself is entire and undivided in every being" (325). This could be read as *every individual contains the entirety of the will in themselves*. While this would be coherent with the idea that the will is eternal and *one*, not subjected to individuality or plurality, it seems to leave open the possibility of saying that when an individual ceases to be *so does the will* which is to say the existence itself vanishes (insofar as that individual contained the entire undivided will within them). This, however, would be mistaken because while each individual contains the will in its entirety it is also the case that upon death, that will remains untouched in its essential unity and *oneness*. This is consistent with his general claim that representations *come and go* but the will remains *timeless*.

This is a fundamental point that needs to be clear, for if it is not, then philosophical misunderstandings, confusion and outright mistakes can occur. Leslie, for example, makes the erroneous claim that Schopenhauerian pessimism can lead to acts of mass murder. As he interprets it, if the pessimism that is defended by Schopenhauer was to become a generally accepted philosophy, then “it is only a short step to thinking that we ought to make [our planet] lifeless” (11). Context is important here. Leslie is saying this in his section “Risks from Philosophy”, right after a brief discussion on *threats associated with religion* and where he says that some religiously inclined person in a position of power may act to bring about our demise (or may refuse to act in order to prevent our demise) because of a religious belief in the coming of God (10). His statement about Schopenhauer comes right after this. This makes his statement misleading and tendentious because he is saying that if some global leader acted on Schopenhauer’s philosophy then (as in the religious person awaiting Judgement Day) nothing would prevent her from taking concrete direct action to eliminate all human beings. And if any doubts remain he says that given “Schopenhauer’s gloomy conclusion (...) the political leader could consider lever-pulling a duty, and start to pull” (172)<sup>161</sup>.

A proper reading of Schopenhauer, however, would reveal that there is no scenario, no philosophical argument or suggestion whatsoever that would encourage or justify such a course of action. On one hand, there are no moral duties or obligations of any sort in his philosophy. As he made clear, “no precepts, no doctrine of duty are to be expected (...) we shall not speak of “ought” at all, for we speak in this way to children and to peoples still in their infancy, but not to those who have appropriated to themselves all the culture of a mature age” (*WWI*, 272). So there can be no *duty* to consider *lever-pulling*. And on the other hand, and this is really the most important point here, compassion is a driving ethical sentiment in the pessimism of Schopenhauer and this makes any talk about *lever-pulling* deeply misguided at the very least.

It is because of all of the above that we can say that the main reason for the pessimist support of the ERM project lies in that the threats humanity faces lead to, generally speaking, violent, abrupt endings that we have not consented to and that entail distress and suffering. And there is nothing in the philosophy of these pessimists that favours violent death –the caveat is

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<sup>161</sup> *Pulling the lever* here refers to a political leader being able to “create planet-wide nuclear explosions just by pulling a lever” (171).

that in the case of Mainländer the role of violence within his metaphysics is a somewhat contested one. This is an important point that I will address ahead because *if* violence is not anathema to his philosophy then this would differentiate him from the other Weltschmerz philosophers. So while this may be a grey area, what is indeed a more clear-cut difference between him and the other Weltschmerz pessimists is that his philosophy seems to leave open the question of suicide and an argument could be made that sometimes (or always?), suicide is a violent act.

If it is true that suicide is always violent, then it is not a stretch to say that, perhaps death, indeed *all death* regardless of when or how it comes about, is always a violent event. In his book, *Tractatus Logico-Suicidalis* (2017), the Swiss philosopher Hermann Burger said that there is no such thing as a *natural death*. Rather, death is a declaration of war against life (24) and death is always murder –*biological murder* (39). If we accept this point of view, then an argument could be made that *all* death is always a violent death. But even if this were true (that all deaths are violent), it does not follow that all deaths are equally violent. There are deaths that are much more violent than others. Also, it does not follow that (because biology *murders* us) there are no deaths that can be prevented. Indeed, there are many deaths that can be prevented at determined points in time, though ultimately no death, ever, can be prevented.

Still, and most importantly, there is nothing in pessimism that defends death when it comes against our wishes –even if that death were a *peaceful* one (provided that –and setting aside momentarily what I mentioned above in regards to the violent nature of all deaths– there is such a thing as a peaceful death). Rather, death is seen as a source of suffering and, because it is inevitable, we should attempt to come to terms with this fact about existence. Still, coming to terms with our inevitable demise does not entail that we should be indifferent to death when it is thrust upon us against our will (even if in many cases this is exactly what ultimately and inevitably happens to most of us –we die when we do not yet want to die). Even in the case of Mainländer, who hung himself when he received his first copies of *Philosophy of Redemption*, he did so willingly and only as a result of a deep acceptance of the consequences that follow from his philosophical views.

### 5.2.3 Extinction in Mainländer

Having said all this, I now need to address the question in regards to the role of violence in the metaphysics of Mainländer. There is some suggestion that he does in fact *not* oppose violent death and annihilation at all. This seems to be the reading that Baquedano makes. This reading is possible because there is some textual support for this. At one point Mainländer says that a thinker reading through the pages of history

will never again read a page of history with astonishment, and less with regret. He will not ask himself, what were the inhabitants of Sodoma and Gomorra guilty of that they had to disappear? What fault had the 30,000 humans that, in a few minutes, were annihilated by the Riobamba earthquake? What was the mistake of the 40,000 human beings that encountered a carbonized death in the destruction of Sidon? This thinker will not lament the loss of the millions of human beings that the Germanic migrations, the Crusades and all the wars that have launched towards the night of death. Humanity complete is doomed to annihilation [*Die ganze Menschheit ist der Vernichtung geweiht*]” (Baquedano trans, 348).

It is possible to read this passage as an endorsement of violent death. Yet it seems to me that a more charitable reading would claim that Mainländer is principally calling on us to accept the fact that violent and apparently *senseless* death on large scales have happened throughout history. And Mainländer’s metaphysics can help us make sense of these events in order to understand *why* they have happened so often in history. Wars, famines and natural disasters are bound to happen because, as we saw in chapter 3.3, we exist in order to enter into conflict and waste energy so that nonexistence can be achieved, so that the universal cosmic plan can be successfully carried out. But to claim that we exist to achieve the nothingness that God desired is not the same as encouraging us to quickly achieve that goal (death) by *actively* starting wars, killing people, causing famines and so on. And this is the essential distinction that we should keep in mind. Mainländer is only explaining *why* such things have happened which is why it does not follow that we *should* kill or actively favour the death of others. This is, it seems to me, the more accurate reading because it better coheres with another important pillar of his

philosophy: that we should welcome and *actively work* for the creation of a highly advanced society where people will live free, plentiful and fully realized lives –what he called the Ideal State [*idealer Staat*] (Baquedano trans, 254).

However, and to muddy the waters a bit more, Mainländer does seem to suggest that attaining that ideal society may be brought about with some violence<sup>162</sup>. Yet in spite of this ambiguity, the fact that he thinks we should all be afforded dignified lives where we are able to devote ourselves to intellectual progress as well as fruitful physical work and where every individual will enjoy all the benefits that the State can offer to its citizens speaks to his concern about the well-being of others. (Cornejo trans, 235)<sup>163</sup>. Furthermore, and highly relevant to this point, is his insistence that the movement towards the ideal society should be motivated by love for our fellow human beings. As he says,

If being just and charitable has been a commandment of God for human beings, with the same authority [gleichen Autorität], the destiny of humanity demands justice and love for each human being's neighbour. It turns out that, despite the dishonesty and inclemency of many, the movement towards the ideal State will still be fulfilled, but it demands from every human justice and love for our neighbour so that this movement can be carried out more quickly [rascher]. (Baquedano trans, 254)

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<sup>162</sup> In reference to the attainment of that *idealer Staat*, Baquedano quotes the following from Mainländer “*nothwendige, mit unwiderstehlicher Gewalt sich vollziehende Bewegung der Menschheit*” (Mainländer, 211) and crucially translates it as “from here results a necessary movement of humanity that is done with an irresistible violence, which no power is able to stop or deviate” but Cornejo translates it as “this makes manifest a movement of humanity, that it fulfilled with a force necessary and irresistible, that no power can stop or deviate.” (Cornejo trans, 232). At issue here is the use of the word *violence*. Baquedano uses it and Cornejo does not. The importance of this passage lies in that it highlights and recognizes how violent history is and that this is an inescapable condition of existence. In this case, the Baquedano translation is preferred and I have my supervisor Corey Dyck to thank for this.

<sup>163</sup> A possible interpretation on the role of violence in the attainment of the Ideal State may be as follows. Just as many revolutionaries throughout history have defended the role of violent revolt in the overthrow of systems in order to implement *new ones*, he may be simply saying the same thing. That a violent revolution may be needed in order to create a new society. If this is the case, then this has no direct or obvious bearing on the role of violence in bringing about the annihilation of all of humanity.

For these reasons, it seems to me that violent imposed extinction does not cohere well with Mainländerian metaphysics. Instead, the extinction of humanity will come about as a voluntary act carried out by intellectually advanced human beings.<sup>164</sup>

Even though, as we have seen thus far, just how our ending will come about is uncertain because it will be up to future humans to make that decision, the pessimist signs point towards extinction by ending procreation (and in the case of Hartmann, an additional step is required after having adopted an antinatalist lifestyle). In this way, humans will die off *naturally*, peacefully and of their own will, not through any violent or abrupt means –which is exactly what existential risk philosophers want to avoid<sup>165</sup>.

#### 5.2.4 A Noble Lie

Still, an argument could be made that humans may never decide to stop procreating. They may decide to never become extinct. If humanity was ever to decide that the best course of action is to continue to move forward propelled, perhaps by any of the existential defence mechanisms

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<sup>164</sup> I do not claim to have definitely settled this point about Mainländer's relation to violence. This question merits a more detailed exploration as it remains a matter of scholarly debate. Baquedano does a very good job of highlighting all these concerns and addressing them in her "Preliminary Study" (chapter 4) called "Reject the legitimacy of the use of violence as a philosophical discourse tool". In that chapter (that was previously published in "Revista de Filosofía Areté", 2021, Vol. 33, number 1, pp. 7-26) she highlights multiple points of concern. I want to reference a couple of them here. Baquedano argues that Mainländer favours the military lifestyle. For example, she says that he "gives us a glimpse of his attraction for the regular movements of members in military units as well as an attraction for strong military instruction, all of which he considers beautiful" (52). She also claims that there are nationalistic expressions found through his work. All this, and the previous footnote where I make reference to the violent movement of history, lend support to the claim that Mainländer may not, at the minimum, oppose violence as a means to achieve certain goals. But ultimately, even Baquedano thinks that Mainländer is ambiguous on the role of violence when we consider human extinction so the balance could go either way (that he does or does not exalt violence as a means to achieve nonexistence). In regards to this ambiguity she says that, regrettably, "in his ethical-political analysis, *it is not always clear how it is possible to prepare human beings for death*. In the antechamber of a country that helped create the First World War and was one of the largest responsables for the barbarities committed during the Second World War, we miss any explicit allusions in his work that would separate it from an education about death that would involve any indoctrination or training program that would incite the people, a people, a country or its armed forces to annihilate another people." (50, italics mine). In keeping with my thesis as I have developed to this point, and for the reasons I have presented (his desire for a utopian society motivated by *love* for others and where people will *decide* that life is not worthwhile) and because he explicitly says that "no one can determine in which form this [death] will come about" (Baquedano trans, 345), I continue to hold that he does not prescribe or recommend taking any violent measures in order to achieve the end of existence. Just how this comes about is for humans to decide, unless so much time passes that the universe ends up dying on its own (a possibility considered by modern physics as well).

<sup>165</sup> This *ending* via ceasing to procreate is also the view supported by Zapffe.

we have seen so far thereby obscuring the truth about existence, then what of it? What if humans were able to largely manage and control the inherent suffering of existence –either through these mechanisms or some other way– what should we make of this? In other words, could humanity live long into the future in a state of denial about reality if such denial proved itself strong enough so as to create the illusion of happiness? What if one of Hartmann’s illusions was not superseded (perhaps we revert to a previous illusion) or what if a fourth illusion was added? I do not think a straight-forward answer is available. In large part because this raises questions about the value of truth itself. Are we willing to sacrifice truth for some greater good? When? Why? What would that *greater good* be? Also, further questions would arise; is existential suffering so overwhelmingly present and obvious that there is nothing we could ever do as a species to mitigate its effects or come to terms with it in such a way that *will denial* or outright extinction no longer appear as acceptable forms of redemption? These many questions will remain, for now, unanswered. I merely point them out because it is important to keep these possibilities in mind when pondering our future. The existential truth may be as the pessimists claim: that existence is essentially about suffering. But this truth does not in of itself entail that we accept it as such and much less does it compel us to do anything about it.

In his dialogue *Tristan and a Friend*, Italian philosopher poet Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) has a decidedly pessimistic take on this question<sup>166</sup>. He believes that humans are not now, and perhaps not ever, prepared to accept the existential truth that the pessimist reveals. He says that

the human race always believes, not the truth, but what is, or so it seems, to its benefit. The human race, which has believed and will go on believing so many foolish things, will never believe that it knows nothing, is nothing and has nothing to hope for. No philosopher who taught one of these three things would make his fortune or found a school, especially among the ordinary people [humans are] always ready to hope for the best, because they are always prepared to change their opinion of what is best as necessity governs their lives (187).

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<sup>166</sup> Leopardi was much admired by Schopenhauer. In *WWR2*, he said that on the topic of the vanity of life (the *nothingness* of life) “no one has treated this subject so thoroughly and exhaustively as Leopardi in our own day. He is entirely imbued and penetrated with it; everywhere his theme is the mockery and wretchedness of this existence. He presents it on every page of his works, yet in such a multiplicity of forms and applications, with such a wealth of imagery, that he never wearies us, but, on the contrary, has a diverting and stimulating effect” (588).



If what Leopardi is suggesting above is the case (and thereby humanity will never accept the truth that pessimism reveals), then the voluntary disappearance of the human species will likely never come to fruition.

When we consider the possibility of lying to ourselves about the reality of suffering in order to obtain a *greater good* (in this case it would be to ensure that we do not end human existence), Plato already made a similar argument in *The Republic*. There he appealed to what is known as the *noble lie*. When arguing for the ideal city, Plato said “we want one single, grand lie which will be believed by everybody –including the rulers, ideally, but failing that the rest of the city (...) people would take a lot of persuading” (book 3, 414 b-c). The reason for this lie is that it serves a greater good, a greater purpose.

As Malcolm Schofield explains it, the noble lie is “a myth of national or civic identity –or rather two related myths, one grounding that identity in the natural brotherhood of the entire indigenous population (...) the other making the city’s differentiated class structure a matter of divine dispensation (...) if people can be made to believe it, they will be strongly motivated to care for the city and for each other” (138). So while the specific issues raised by Plato are a different matter altogether, the point I want to make here is that one *could* argue that if the truth about the wretchedness and overall undesirability of existence could be hidden (again, perhaps by employing some of the defence mechanisms that I have already mentioned or by creating some alternative narrative about life), then humanity would be able to continue to extend its existence into the far future making it possible for, perhaps, large numbers of human beings to have *relatively* good lives. The motivations for this may be diverse. Perhaps the governing elites need humans (for selfish or greedy reasons) to exist in large numbers and to populate worlds wherever possible. Perhaps some enlightened governing power might decide that, for our own good, we should not accept that nonexistence is preferable. Still, there is no way of knowing if such a *noble lie* could bring about some positive outcomes or even if it is desirable for this to be the case. Whatever the case may be, it is an interesting scenario to keep in mind when looking at the intersection between pessimism and the existential risk project.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> At this time, I have no defined position on this matter. Even though my initial intuition is that truth is valuable in itself and should therefore (in most cases) be made known and acted on, I suspect that a good case could be made for the idea that, on existential matters, knowing the truth and then deciding to ignore it for some other perceived greater truth or, perhaps, for purely pragmatic and expedient reasons may be justified. In the first *Matrix* film (1999) there is

### 5.2.5 Extinction by Boredom

The idea that we could all one day collectively decide to simply cease to exist and die out may seem extravagant and farfetched. The conditions required by pessimists in order to carry out our extinction (these being deep philosophical insights into our existential predicaments) may be very hard to obtain. I do not intend to dispute this point nor is it my intention to argue that achieving the requisite philosophical knowledge is a straight-forward matter. I also do not intend to defend the idea that human extinction is an easy or uncomplicated conclusion to accept even if and when such philosophical insight is achieved. On the contrary, voluntary human extinction does indeed seem to be an idea that runs counter to some very deeply held intuitions and sentiments about the value of life.

While I have discussed at some length some of the reasons that may explain why so many of us resist the pessimist conclusion, at this point I want to make one final suggestion. Perhaps an idea like voluntary human extinction will be much more appealing to future generations of humans. By this I mean that, maybe, in some distant future humanity will have attained higher levels of knowledge and as a consequence we will have, in general terms, reached a point where the futility of all existence will be much more evident<sup>168</sup>. Maybe reaching such a point is the inevitable outcome of any sufficiently advanced civilization on *any* planet in any place in the universe. And if what I am suggesting is plausible on any level, this may also help explain what is known as the Fermi paradox<sup>169</sup>.

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a character that goes by the name of Cypher. Having accessed the truth (that he lived in a computer simulation and that reality was a harsh world devoid of any luxuries such as tasty food) and after having lived for a long period in the harsh *real* world, there is a point where he decides that he would rather go back to living in a lie, to living in a computer simulation so long as he could have the *illusion* of actually experiencing certain pleasures like the tasty foods he was missing so much (though his experience of taste is no illusion, it is real). I am hesitant to say that Cypher's choice is the *wrong* one. This also reminds us of Robert Nozick's *experience machine* thought experiment.<sup>168</sup> In saying this I am clearly appealing to von Hartmann's idea that humanity progresses towards ever higher levels of knowledge and as it does it rids itself of the illusions that keep us alive. As a result of this ridding ourselves of these illusions, the desirability of our extinction may be much more evident and easier to accept.

<sup>169</sup> The origin of the Fermi Paradox is attributed to physicist Enrico Fermi (1901-1954) who, having realized the tremendous potential for advanced civilizations to exist, was puzzled by the lack of evidence for their existence. Given that the logical conclusion is that aliens exist and yet we have not seen them, there seems to be a paradox here. This led him to ask *where is everybody?* The question posed thusly has led many to attempt an answer. Among the answers that have been offered are; that they are already here (ancient astronaut theories, that we are their descendents, and so on); that they are indeed out there, but they have not contacted us yet (or perhaps they have but we do not know how to recognize their communications); that they exist but have made no contact either because we are the most advanced civilization at this moment; that any advanced civilization has gone extinct due to natural or created catastrophes (this would make humanity unique in the cosmos). This last possibility is in line with my

As such, cosmic silence and the apparent absence of any advanced alien society might be explained because such a highly developed species would choose to voluntarily become extinct before they ever had the chance to venture off beyond their local planetary systems<sup>170</sup>. And this would only be the logical result –a pessimist would say– of any civilization that would question existence and its own place within it. Of the many possible solutions to the Fermi Paradox, the astronomer Milan M. Ćirković proposes something similar to what I have just suggested: that a sufficiently advanced civilization may decide that existence is not worth continuing. While a pessimist would say that the decision to go extinct will likely come about due to the realization that life is inescapably suffering and that nonexistence is preferable to existence, Ćirković proposes what he calls the *Thoughtfood Exhaustion Hypothesis*. It states that

intelligence (...) functions only as long as there is significant new content to process. If exponential growth of knowledge and understanding, which humanity has been experiencing during at least the last 500 years, continues for the foreseeable future, it might push against the limits set by the world itself. It is quite possible that the world (...) is of finite complexity and that it is possible for an advanced civilization to reach the state of knowing everything (worth knowing) in a period of time that is short by evolutionary and astronomical standards. Co-evolutionary feedback between biology and culture [something like pessimist philosophy perhaps?] could further accelerate the downward path (...) isn't it possible that mind reacts to the true lack of new inputs in a manner similar to body reacting with true lack of nutrients by rather *quick extinction*? (164, brackets and italics mine)

Given a long enough time frame, a species could come to know absolutely all there is to know about existence. While this in and of itself does not necessarily provide the sufficient motivation to put a voluntary end to an entire species, it does give very good reasons for doing so<sup>171</sup>. So if something along these lines is possible then, perhaps, while existential boredom may

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suggestion that any sufficiently advanced civilizations may simply choose to become extinct (<http://abyss.uoregon.edu/~js/cosmo/lectures/lec28.html>).

<sup>170</sup> Or at some point in the past they did venture off into the universe and then became extinct. In this case, while there appears to be cosmic silence *for us now*, this silence was not always the case.

<sup>171</sup> Such a species could perhaps find other reasons for living. Having obtained complete knowledge, life could centre more intensely on the personal. Love, family life, art and other activities of this sort may make life

be at the origin of the universe –as Mainländer argued for– it could also be at the end of the universe and existence itself.

### 5.2.6 The Strong and Weak Stances

It is now clear that while the pessimist can agree that we should take measures to reduce the existential risks we face, they are *not* motivated to do so by a desire to extend human existence as far as possible because life is a *good* that needs to be protected. So while the idea that preserving humanity is a good in itself may be the primary motivation of those involved in contemporary ERM philosophy, it is not the case with the pessimists.

Suppose this is the question that a pessimist is asked to answer: faced with a catastrophic event –either anthropocentric or natural– that would bring about death, suffering and pain on a global scale to all humans, and quite certainly to countless animals, would you agree or disagree that we should do what we can to avoid such an event? I suggest that the most likely answer a pessimist would give is the following; *yes, we should do what we can to prevent such an event from happening*. Beyond this initial agreement, however, pessimists will diverge when it comes to determining what –if anything– a pessimist should actually *do* in concrete terms, beyond merely *nodding* in agreement. So, for example, does the pessimist set aside, momentarily, his arguments in favour of extinction and of the wretchedness of existence as a whole? Or does the pessimist actively support all and any measure we take in order to prevent our demise (as the ERM project does)? Perhaps the pessimist says they agree, leave it at that, and then continue to develop and engage the philosophical (and non-philosophical) community with her arguments about the overall undesirability of existence and the preferability of nonexistence over existence?

In the broadest terms possible, there are two answers, two possible positions that the pessimist can take when faced with the question. First, the pessimist will *actively want* to avert these existential threats (what I call the *strong stance*). Second, they will, at a minimum, not *actively oppose* the measures taken or advocated and perhaps only *nod in agreement* with the

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worthwhile. Furthermore, such a species may find other reasons, unknown or unimaginable to us, for continuing to live.

measures taken to prevent our extinction (what I call the *weak stance*). Having said this, it is not my purpose to attempt a prescription or propose a *correct* view on this matter. Still, it seems to me that the most plausible position to take is the strong stance.

In the case of Mainländer, however, he is likely closer to the weak stance. As I briefly explored elsewhere in this work, there is a plausible argument to be made that he would not oppose death and destruction even if it came about through war or any other catastrophic event. But even in this case, and as I read him, he would not *actively* oppose the ERM but would instead likely remain silent or neutral. At the most, if he were to say anything, he could say something like *if violent death is to come, then you are free to try and stop it but you may be unsuccessful. If you are successful you have only postponed the inevitable. And if you are unsuccessful, so be it for it is the destiny of the universe to end and disappear.*

Aside from the particularities found in Mainländer's pessimism, most pessimists will likely want to contribute to existential risk deterrence by whatever means they consider useful and philosophically coherent as a way to avoid future pain and suffering. One way to accomplish this would be to do what I have done in this work. At the same time, however, the pessimist will make clear that the agreements with ERM end there and that the list of disagreements is rather long and pertain to fundamental questions about the value of life.

Regardless, what really matters here is that I have been able to show that pessimists will *not* oppose ERM<sup>172</sup>. So ultimately, whether or not this translates into some sort of active participation –the strong stance– or instead it means that the pessimist will not oppose the project –the weak stance– is really a matter of interpretation.

What is important to point out is that in the case where a pessimist opts for a strong stance, then this support does not translate into unconditional support. This means that the support would be *conditional* and single-issue. In turn, this conditional single-issue support

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<sup>172</sup> By opposition I mean a *philosophical opposition*. As I mentioned above and as I briefly surveyed in passing on page 6, a hypothetical *pessimist opposition* would take the form of arguing in order to show that ERM philosophers are wrong for trying to avert the threats we face. Saying, for example, that ERM is an “unethical, philosophically misguided or pointless endeavour” (see page 6). Consequently, if some *preventable* catastrophe is about to happen (for anthropic or natural reasons), then the *opposers* would say we should do nothing to prevent this or stand in the way. So if, for example, it were to become evident that nuclear war was about to break out, then we should do nothing to prevent this. As I have argued, it is unlikely that a pessimist would do this.

means that while the pessimist would agree with the general principle that we should do what we can to eliminate the existential threats we face, the agreements end there. The reasons offered for averting our annihilation, the overall positive evaluation of life that ERM philosophers make and its human-centric focus are all issues that the pessimist will push-back on. There is really no room for agreement on those issues. So a pessimist would say *yes*, let us take measures to protect ourselves from these impending threats. But no, this does not mean that life is a *good*, that existence is preferable to nonexistence or that human life is any way superior or more worthy than other forms of life on Earth. As I suggested above, a model of what a strong stance may look like is the work I have done herein.

In the case of adopting the weak stance, the pessimist will most likely retreat back into her philosophy and not not engage or acknowledge the work being carried by ERM philosophers. This stance, it seems to me, is the least desirable if only because not engaging with a philosophical discipline that deals with some of the same issues pessimists deal with is a disservice to philosophy overall. It would be, for contemporary pessimists, the same mistake that ERM philosophers make when they disregard historical pessimism.

# Conclusion

I have argued, and made the case, that in spite of their condemnation of life, pessimists will agree that we should avoid human extinction when that extinction is imposed on us against our will.

In order to do this, I have started by laying out a clear understanding of what philosophical pessimism is. To accomplish this I drew several distinctions. The first one was between pessimism in the colloquial sense –or what is also known as psychological pessimism– and pessimism in the philosophical sense. Although there are some overlapping coincidences between the two, the differences are greater. In a nutshell, psychological pessimism is a personality trait, a personal disposition often associated with moods or temperaments. On the other hand, philosophical pessimism is a system that purports to explain the origins and the ubiquity of existential suffering.

Conflating and equivocating between the different concepts of pessimism is common in non-philosophical as well as philosophical debates. This led me to the second distinction I made. Contemporary antinatalism is sometimes grouped with pessimism. As is the case with psychological pessimism, although there are certain similarities between them, there are also essential differences. The main ones being that antinatalists do not participate within the hundred-year conversation that pessimists have been having. Furthermore, some of the issues that pessimists concern themselves with are not acknowledged by antinatalists –these being metaphysical claims about the essence of existence and how it is related to the suffering that permeates all life.

The third consideration I raised is that pessimism is also, according to some scholars, a tradition that traces its roots in the known *problem of evil*. In this instance it is argued that pessimism and the *problem of evil* constitute, in great measure, one same philosophical tradition. While, as with the cases above, there are important shared concerns, the questions that pessimists ask are different than the ones asked by those trying to address the problem of evil.

For the above reasons and with the purpose of maintaining pessimism as a philosophical tradition that is different from the perspectives I mentioned above I proposed to group all

philosophies that in one way or another touch on some of the same questions –suffering and the value of life– as *philosophies of disquiet*. This family of philosophies includes pessimism, antinatalism, the problem of evil, existential nihilism, perhaps existentialism, and is also open to other perspectives that ask similar questions.

Finally, and as a way to strengthen the pessimist tradition more generally, I divided pessimism into three great categories based on what each philosophy considers as the source of our sufferings. Using this criteria, I identified three pessimist perspectives: metaphysical, hedonic and teleological. This last category –teleological pessimism– is a new perspective that I am proposing. As such, it is a pessimism that is not an alternative to other pessimisms but a complement to them. This pessimism is intended to support the claims made by pessimists more generally: that nonexistence is preferable to existence. Teleological pessimism is an interesting perspective that will benefit from further exploration and development, something I intend to continue developing. In the end, I have offered a series of arguments that support the overall pessimist view of existence: that life is overall a wretched state of affairs and that nonexistence is preferable to existence.

In broad terms, the pessimist tradition, or the philosophies of disquiet more generally, do seem to be enjoying a level of resurgence today –and by *today* I mean the last few years or so starting in 2020 coinciding with the appearance of the Covid pandemic. Yet, while humans have long pondered and questioned their own existence and have asked why it so clearly seems to be that suffering and pain present themselves as inescapable aspects of life, the urgency of these questions has waxed and waned throughout history. As I have argued herein, the early Greeks thought long and hard about these questions and these same worries were once again taken up by German philosophers in the 19th century –only this time with philosophically rigorous arguments and debates that served to establish pessimism as a unique and insightful tradition once and for all.

Some contemporary philosophers conceive of and *do* philosophy in ways that do not require them to engage in any substantial form with the history of philosophy. While I am in no position to evaluate the merits of practicing philosophy in this way, it does seem to me that, at



the very least, there are instances where such a failure to engage with history is a weakness<sup>173</sup>. Examples of these instances would be where the issues being raised, debated and analyzed have a strong historical background and where such a background is highly relevant to the contemporary discussion. This is, as I have argued here, precisely the case with pessimism and the ERM project. ERM philosophy asks questions about human worth (or rather assumes certain premises about human worth). Yet when they address these questions, they do so *ahistorically*, unaware that a tradition precedes them.

By bringing to bear the long and detailed philosophical insights that pessimism can contribute to the questions about the *worthiness* and the value of existence, we are in a much better position to evaluate the ERM project and determine its philosophical contributions. Ultimately, nothing is gained—at least in philosophical terms—by simply assuming that we all prefer existence to nonexistence and that, subsequently, it follows rather unproblematically that we should do whatever we can to prolong human existence. On the other hand, if the value of existence is rigorously questioned then whatever answer is finally achieved on the issue of the question of its worthiness will be a well-thought and hence much stronger position.

Given the pessimist perspective on life, the most important contribution to current philosophical scholarship that my dissertation makes consists in showing that pessimists can still be on board with the ERM project. In practical terms, I have shown what the *strong stance* vis-a-vis ERM looks like and I did so because this dissertation is an instance of the strong stance.

Ultimately, these two areas of philosophy, each with their own perspectives on the value of life, can benefit from having a conversation with each other if only because it can help to deepen and advance our philosophical knowledge about existence itself and its value. Indeed, pessimism can be a cautioning voice and it can bring some much needed clarity to the ERM field. This is particularly important because ERM philosophers are much too quick to assume that we all want to advance human existence and that our disappearance from the universe would be a *bad* thing. They have uncritically taken up a starting point and then proceeded to construct

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<sup>173</sup> There may well be areas of philosophy where engagement with the history of philosophy is not necessary. This may be the case where the area under study is so new or different so that its history is very recent or negligible. There may be other situations where the history of the subject matter may be of little relevance to the issues as they present themselves in the contemporary debate. For these reasons, it is unwise to make any sort of blanket comment on this.

an entire discipline around it. This is not to say that assuming such a premise (that human existence is a good worth promoting) is not entirely without merit. It is only to say that such a premise is questionable and that it needs a more robust defence on their part.

In closing, an essential point to keep in mind is that even if we are to reject the main ERM premise (that human life is of great value), we can still agree with their conclusion: that we should take steps to avert and defeat the existential threats we currently face. In other words, starting from a purely pessimist premise (that nonexistence is preferable to existence) we can come to the same conclusion: we should take steps to avert and defeat the existential threats we *currently* face. In this way, pessimism proves to be an important school of thought that has relevance and can contribute to the contemporary debate around the value of human existence and the worthiness of our continued existence.

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Van der Lugt, Mara, *Dark Matters: Pessimism and the problem of Suffering*, 2021, Princeton University Press

Von Hartmann, Eduard, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, 2010, Routledge

—, *On the History and Justification of Pessimism*, 1880, Oxford

Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 2010, Simon and Schuster

Wolf, Susan, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, 2010, Princeton University Press

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# Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Ignacio L. Moya

**Education:** Ph.D Philosophy, 2023  
University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada

M.A., Philosophy, 2009  
Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON, Canada

B.A., (Honours), Philosophy, minor Political Science, 2008  
University of Guelph, Guelph, ON, Canada

## **Peer Reviewed Papers, Book Chapters**

Boredom as a reactive and revolutionary emotion: The case of Chile (Co-authored)  
Isegoría: Revista de filosofía moral y política, No. 65 July-December 2021, pgs 1-14

Trust, suffering and the fragility of human existence  
Chapter in book “(im)Possible Trust”, published by RIL Editores and Universidad Adolfo Ibañez, ISBN: 978-956-01-0573-8, September 2018, pgs: 79-91

Personal identity, dialogue and extension: why there is no self without the Other  
Intus-Legere Filosofía, December 2013, Vol. 7, No.1, pgs: 59-77

The Primacy of Space in Heidegger and Taylor: Towards a unified account of personal  
Appraisal: The Journal of the Society for Post-Critical and Personalist Studies, October  
2009, Vol. 7, No.4, pgs: 17-24

## **Peer Reviewed Conference Presentations**

56<sup>th</sup> Western Canadian Philosophical Association Annual Conference (WCPA)  
Arthur Schopenhauer and Suicide  
October 25, 26, 27, 2019

University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada  
14<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Study of Persons  
When do I die? The concept of extended death  
May, 2017  
Universidad de Calabria, Calabria, Italy

International Conference: What makes us moral?  
Inescapable Morality: Where the self ends and the others begin  
June 24, 2011  
VU University, Amsterdam, Netherlands

62<sup>nd</sup> Annual Northwest Philosophy Conference  
The Extended Self as a Centre of Gravity  
October 2, 2010  
Willamette University, Salem, Oregon, USA

10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Study of Persons  
Martin Heidegger, Charles Taylor: Towards a unified account of personal identity  
August 6, 2009  
University of Nottingham, Nottingham, England

### **Invited Papers and Book Chapters**

Philipp Mainländer and How Boredom Created the Universe (Forthcoming, October 2023)  
Chapter in the book “The History and Philosophy of Boredom”, Routledge Philosophy

Teleological Pessimism  
Hénadas, Revista internacional de pesimismo filosófico, 2019-2020, Vol. I, pgs: 183-197

### **Invited Conference Presentations and Seminars**

118<sup>th</sup> American Philosophical Association (APA), Central Division  
Happy people as decoys in Schopenhauer  
February 26, 2021

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Pessimist Conference

Eduard von Hartmann and the three illusions

September 10, 2021

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

#### 1<sup>st</sup> International Congress on Human Diversity

Power and diversity

December 4, 5 2017

Plural y Ciepes, Santiago, Chile

#### 8<sup>th</sup> Philosophy Colloquium: Trust in contemporary Society

Trust and the Fragility of our existence

November 7, 8, 9, 2016

Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Viña del Mar, Chile

### **Public Philosophy**

Life is Valuable. Or is it?

The Philosophical Salon, May 1, 2023

Pessimism and Human Extinction

APA Blog, Series on Pessimism, November 8, 2022

Stop Dissing Pessimism – It's Part of Being Human

The Conversation, August 18, 2022

### **Books**

Entre Infinitos

Book published by RIL editores, ISBN 978-84-18065-38-5, March, 2021

Pesimismo Profundo

Book published by Libros de Mentira, ISBN 978-956-9136-56-6, July, 2018

## **Teaching Experience**

Co-instructor, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada

Evil, Suffering and Pessimism: An Introduction to Modern Philosophy – Winter 2023

Teaching Assistant, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada

Power, Oppression and Privilege – Fall 2022

Critical Thinking – Fall 2020

Death – Winter 2020

Big Ideas – Fall 2019

Introduction to Philosophy – Fall 2018, Winter 2019

Adjunct Professor, Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Chile

Philosophy of Charles Taylor – 2014

Philosophy of the Environment – 2016, 2017

Philosophy of Emotions – 2015

Globalization and Multiculturalism – 2015

Knowledge and Reality: between empiricism and rationalism – 2017

Adjunct Professor, Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Chile

Arguments and Critical Thinking – 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017

Ethics – 2016

Adjunct Professor, Universidad Nacional Andrés Bello, Chile

Philosophical Anthropology – 2014, 2015, 2016

Logic – 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017

Philosophy of Language – 2016

Ethics – 2015, 2016

History and Philosophy of Science (online) – 2014

Adjunct Professor, Universidad San Sebastián, Chile

Ethics – 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016

Adjunct Professor, Universidad Central, Chile

Philosophical and Anthropological Foundations of Education – 2014, 2015

Critical Thinking – 2011

History of Social and Political Thought – 2010

Teaching Assistant, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada

Values and Society – Winter 2009

Teaching Assistant, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada  
Knowledge and Reality – Fall 2008

**Other Academic Activities**

Judge, 2022 Ontario High School Ethics Bowl

Judge, 2022 Ontario Junior Ethics Bowl

Research Assistant, New Narratives, 2021

Standing Member, International Society on Boredom Studies

Anonymous Reviewer, Cuadernos de Pesimismo, 2021

Anonymous Reviewer, Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio, 2018

Anonymous Reviewer, Intus-Legere, 2017

Editorial Board Member, Henadas: International Journal of Pessimism, ISSN: 2696-550X