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INTRODUCTION

Philosophy in a Minor Chord

But after [all philosophical systems] have completed their demonstrations and sung their song of the best world, then at last comes, in the back of the system, as a late avenger of the illusory, like a ghost out of the grave, like the stone guest to Don Juan, the question of the origin of evil, of monstrous, nameless evil, of the terrible, heart-breaking misery in the world:—and they fall silent, or have nothing but words, empty, resounding words, in order to close such a heavy account.

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER¹

IT BEGINS WITH an observation.

Say that you were walking the earth for the first time, and your eyes were wide with wonder.

Around you, you perceive the beauty of creation, the trees and plants and flowers, ‘the wild world of beauty and complexity and dark magic’, ‘this strange little garden leafing and blooming in the frozen, fiery tempest of cosmic reality’, and all things singing with ‘the soft music of the world’.² Around you, too, the strange splendours of the animal world, where the lion and the antelope run wild and free, where ‘the birds of the sky nest by the waters; they sing among the branches’; ‘the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number’.³ Above you, ‘the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands’; while science lets you ‘read about this speck of glittering planet in gravitational thrall

1. Schopenhauer, *Über den Willen in der Natur* (*Hauptwerke*, III.423). Adapted from Cartwright’s translation (‘Schopenhauer on Suffering’, 60).

2. Kingsnorth, *Confessions*, 160; Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, 86; Monk of Enlli, cited in Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, 29.

3. Psalm 104:12; and Psalm 104:24–5 (New International Version).

to a star at the fringe of a whorl of galaxy in a roaring surging universe'.⁴ Within you, you perceive 'the moral law', as wondrous perhaps as the 'starry heavens' above you; the 'gorgeous blossoming of consciousness' we call *thought*.⁵ By the time you have observed it all, you are already deep in love.

But something happens. The serpent enters the garden. You see the lion eat the antelope. You see the natural world devastated by floods and earthquakes. You see things brushed off from the game of life like so many flecks of dust. You see drought in the thirstiest of regions, while the rains pour endlessly into the sea. You see everywhere reminders that 'nature does not love us or want us to be happy: Lyme disease, birth defects, and the everyday theatre of wild suffering'.⁶ You scan the news for trials and tribulations on every scale imaginable, from personal to national to global; you have traced the spread of a strange new virus across the earth. You read about the 'crimes and misfortunes' of history; you have travelled the world and taken home with you the sight of beggars in the street.⁷ Or you are struck down yourself, by illness or addiction or bereavement, with 'Darkness and Dimness and a bewildering Shame, and Pain that is utterly Lord over us',⁸ and sit sorrowful among the ashes like a latter-day Job.⁹ Until you cannot help but say, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that single sentence: 'I see evil on earth.'¹⁰

What happens then? Do we speak, or do we fall silent? If we speak, what do we say; how do we say it?

This book is about the question what happens next, once evil has been perceived. It is also about the kinds of questions that arise in the wake of this perception, if it is a philosopher asking them. Is life worth living? Do the goods of human existence outweigh the evils? Could it ever be said, for any being, that it would be better for it never to have been? How could God have created a truly miserable creature? Indeed, if life is as bad as it seems to be, how could God have created us at all; how dare anyone ever create another person?

Such questions form part and parcel of what has been known, for centuries, as *the problem of evil*, and the various ways in which they have been

4. Psalm 19:1; Robinson, *Givenness*, 82.

5. Kant, *KpV* 5:161 (the famous passage was also inscribed on Kant's tombstone in Kaliningrad); Robinson, *Givenness*, 143.

6. Purdy, *After Nature*, 10.

7. Bayle, *Manicheans*¹.D.

8. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, cited in Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, 210.

9. Job 2:8.

10. Rousseau, *Emile*, IV, 278: 'Je vois le mal sur la terre.'

answered have created the competing philosophical traditions known as *optimism* and *pessimism*. These are terms that have lent themselves to many misunderstandings, especially on the side of pessimism, which has become so pejorative a term that, these days, to call someone a pessimist is often enough to undermine their position.¹¹ This tendency to take pessimism less than seriously is both understandable, since pessimism intrudes so darkly into our existence as to lead us to ask whether life is in fact worth living at all, and deeply mistaken, since this tendency withholds from inquiry one of the deepest parts of our being: our capacity to suffer. A large part of the aim of this book is to clear up some of these confusions, and try to do justice to both sides of the debate, to optimists as well as pessimists, by uncovering what I call the *moral background* of their arguments: the way their ideas are crucially rooted not in abstract metaphysics, but in a deep and widely shared concern over how to speak truthfully, meaningfully, and compassionately about human (and sometimes even animal) suffering.

But what exactly is pessimism; what is the problem of evil?

The Problem of Evil

The ‘problem of evil’ designates a specific kind of question posed by philosophers, theologians, and the curious of mind, 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. Possibly the shortest and nicest formulation ever written comes from Marilynne Robinson: ‘If God is God, why does he permit evil and suffering and death?’¹²

If God is God—but who is God, or what is God? That is, what are the attributes that are hard to square with ‘evil and suffering and death’? Traditionally, there are three: omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. In the classic formulation of the dilemma or ‘trilemma’ of evil attributed to Epicurus (ca. 300 BCE), the problem then becomes as follows:

Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent.

Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?¹³

11. Dienstag, *Pessimism*, ‘Preface’ and chapter 1.

12. Robinson, *Givenness*, 268.

13. This formulation cited from Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, 74. Originally attributed by Lactantius to Epicurus in his *De ira dei* and cited by Bayle in *Paulicians*^{1.E}.

For evil to exist, God must be either unaware of it (so not all-knowing), or unable to prevent it (so not all-powerful), or unwilling to prevent it (so not perfectly good). A wonderful set-up for one of philosophy's favourite puzzles, Epicurus's formulation is most striking in that the parameters have scarcely altered since then: these are still the main terms of the debate as it is carried out today.¹⁴ But some things have changed, and tracking these shifts and changes will form a large part of this book—especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the problem of evil is like a house stripped down and partially rebuilt, its inner and outer workings reinvented almost entirely.

For one thing, there have been shifts throughout the ages in which of God's attributes receives priority, and we can group certain 'theodicies' accordingly (*theodicy* being the label used, after Leibniz, to denote any systematic response to the problem of evil).¹⁵ Thus Steven Nadler has grouped the seventeenth-century philosophers Malebranche and Leibniz together by virtue of their prioritisation of God's wisdom and understanding (i.e. his omniscience), in opposition to Arnauld, who instead prioritises God's power and sovereignty (i.e. his omnipotence).¹⁶ To these, a third line could be added in the form of philosophers such as Bayle, whose name will be a red thread throughout this book, and who ardently gave the greatest weight to God's goodness above all other characteristics, as Rousseau would in his wake.¹⁷ Kant in turn supplies an alternative trichotomy of divine attributes—holiness, goodness, and justice—which he relates to three distinct kinds of conflict, three kinds of problem of evil.

This ties in with another kind of shift we can trace throughout thinkers grappling with theodicy, having to do with the question of what really

14. Though there are changes in the *kinds of evil* that are considered most problematic, and the debate has become increasingly formalised, with, for example, distinctions between 'logical' and 'evidential' problems of evil; for an overview, see Adams and Adams, 'Introduction', Michael Tooley's entry 'The Problem of Evil' in the SEP, and Newlands, 'Hume on Evil'.

15. While I appreciate Paul Rateau's reservations with regard to the widespread use of 'theodicy' outside Leibniz's very particular philosophical project, I follow contemporary usage of the term as designating any systematic attempt to answer the problem of evil (see Rateau, 'The Theoretical Foundations', 93).

16. Nadler, 'Choosing a Theodicy', and his *Best of Possible Worlds*, chapter 6. In fact, the Jansenist Arnauld thinks it is mistaken to even distinguish God's wisdom from his will (Nadler, *Best of Possible Worlds*, 161–2).

17. In fact, many authors in the centuries that follow consider goodness the most relevant attribute—such as Hume and also Schopenhauer, who defines the problem of evil as 'the contradiction between the goodness of God and the misery of the world' (*WWR*.I.407n.).

constitutes a *problem* of evil: Wherein lies the *problematic* bit? Kant, again, thinks there are three kinds of problems having to do with three kinds of ‘counterpurposiveness’ (*Zweckwidrigkeit*): three kinds of observations about the world that we interpret as bad, evil, or unjust. First, there are *moral evils*, which we nowadays think about when we call something or someone ‘evil’: bad actions, bad people. How could God in his holiness have created humans as bad as they are, or as capable of badness? Second, there are ‘the countless ills and pains of the rational beings of the world’, which philosophers generally classify under *natural or physical evils*: things like death, illness, earthquakes, and misfortune. How could God in his goodness allow such bad things to happen to his creatures? Third, there is the observation of *misalignment* between the two: the fact that wicked people often go unpunished or even prosper, and what this seems to suggest about the deeper injustice of things. How could God in his justice permit that ‘the depraved [should] go unpunished in the world’?¹⁸

This third category is especially interesting, since it did not tend to feature in earlier ‘taxonomies’ of evils—which is not to say that it was not in question throughout the history of theodicy. In fact, the observation of misalignment is a crucial dimension to the deep moral investment shared by many of these thinkers, on all sides of the debate (optimists and pessimists, theodicy and anti-theodicy),¹⁹ from Bayle to Schopenhauer and beyond. Most of the time, however, this misalignment extends further than it does in Kant’s version: the problem is not just that the wicked prosper but, equally, that *the righteous suffer*.²⁰ Misalignment generally addresses two opposed yet connected moral outrages: a Rufinus—the fourth-century Roman consul whose prosperity and depravity caused the poet Claudian to doubt providence; and a Job—a bad person prospering, and a good person suffering.²¹ The idea is that our sense of cosmic indignation or existential doubt arises at its strongest when we witness the suffering of the good or the prosperity of the wicked, what Schopenhauer calls *poetic injustice*:

18. Kant, ‘Essay’ (8:256–62).

19. ‘Anti-theodicy’ was originally defined by Zachary Braiterman as ‘any religious response to the problem of evil whose proponents refuse to justify, explain, or accept as somehow meaningful the relationship between God and suffering’ (Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz*, 31). I follow N.N. Trakakis [‘Anti-theodicy’ (1) and (2)] in allowing for non-religious interpretations of the project of anti-theodicy, which I will define, even more loosely, as any rejection of theodicy on moral grounds.

20. Kant does, in fact, see this as a problem, but of a different kind; see chapter 7.

21. Bayle discusses Flavius Rufinus in his dictionary article *Rufinus*; see my *Bayle, Jurieu*, 180.

[Such a view] sees the wicked man, after misdeeds and cruelties of every kind, live a life of pleasure, and quit the world undisturbed. It sees the oppressed person drag out to the end a life full of suffering without the appearance of an avenger or vindicator.²²

While some scholars see misalignment as ‘the intractable question’ of theodicy,²³ I disagree: far from being the major or fundamental problem of theodicy, misalignment represents only one of its more striking instances. As I hope to show throughout this book, the deepest and darkest thinkers on the problem of evil will question not only why the wicked flourish, but why the wicked *suffer*, and more than this: *why the wicked are wicked at all*. Can we help the way we have been created? Is it not one of the greatest misfortunes in life to have been born with such a constitution as to make our happiness depend on the suffering of others? How can God be responsible for *any* of our evils, whether moral or physical, aligned or misaligned; or how can we save him from this responsibility? Under what conditions do we believe creation, of any kind, to be justified—and were those conditions met by God? Are they met, for that matter, by those of us choosing to create (that is, *procreate*) in modern times?

Such arguments have a striking force far beyond the debates in which they were first formulated, interrogating the very value of existence as well as the ethics of creation, and it is precisely in such questions (I will argue) that pessimism proves its point, its meaning, its urgency, and its continued relevance for us today. Throughout this book, in tracing the various shifting ways in which the problem of evil is formulated and conceived, I am also interrogating the background sense of why and how such questions matter, if they matter at all.

A third shift has to do with the kinds of things that qualify as evils, and which of these are considered most problematic. After all, how do we decide what constitutes an evil or an ill? The categories of *moral* and *physical* (or *natural*) evil are often considered to be more or less static, as though our understanding of them were the same now as it was in the early modern age. In fact, the similarity of the names conceals a thick mass of work and argument that is going on behind the scenes, by which the categories we know now are constantly invested with new meanings. The very relationship between moral and physical evil is a deeply fraught one.

22. Schopenhauer, *WWR*.I.353; see also *WWR*.I.253–4 on poetic injustice.

23. E.g. Neiman, ‘Metaphysics, Philosophy’, 158: ‘The fact that moral and physical evils have no intelligible connection—that it is, very often, wicked people who thrive while righteous people suffer—is the intractable question.’

Originally closely linked by the Augustinian narrative that interpreted all physical evils (suffering) as punishment for moral evils (sin), the two categories came to be disentangled in the course of the seventeenth century, with dire consequences for the older Genesis-inspired narrative and the very concept of original sin. One result of this disentangling was that physical evil or suffering in general begins to play an increasingly important part in the story I am trying to tell. For while physical evil, for most of the history of theodicy, used to be the lesser problematic kind of evil, it ends up being the *more* problematic kind, and is still seen as such today.²⁴

This rise in prominence of the concept of suffering is closely related to the story of pessimism, and is itself marked by a series of theoretical revolutions. For one thing, Bayle reinvents the concept of physical evil by defining it as whatever is experienced as such, resisting any tendency to explain away such evils by arguing they could have been prevented or are otherwise justified as a form of punishment. The result is a highly modern conception that not only gives full weight to the experience of the individual sufferer, but also extends suffering to a much-neglected category in the theodicean debate: that of animals. Aside from this, the category of physical evil is itself deepened and unfolded into the two subcategories of pain and sorrow, of physical and psychological suffering, and in another modern moment, the latter gradually come to include our very dispositions. We can now be said to suffer not only the things that happen to us, but also the feelings we experience internally, and the very temperament that disposes us to feel that way.

The crucial ingredients, then, of the traditional problem of evil are the identity of God with his attributes, on the one hand, and the overall ‘fact’ of evils, on the other—but within this overall framework, the central questions are often drastically different. For this reason (as I will argue in chapter 1), it is perhaps somewhat deceptive to speak of *the problem of evil* at all, when in fact there are almost as many different *problems* of evil as there are thinkers formulating them. For the sake of brevity, convenience, and the like, I have chosen to continue to use the common label, but I do so on strongly Wittgensteinian assumptions: my ‘problem of evil’ works more like a ‘family resemblance’ class, gathering overlapping categories,

24. This is the overwhelming tendency in contemporary philosophy of religion and has been the trend throughout the twentieth century; see, e.g., C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, and the contributions to Adams and Adams’s collection *The Problem of Evil*, but also the recent volume edited by N.N. Trakakis, *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue*, where ‘the problem of evil’ is sometimes equated with ‘the problem of suffering’ (as in Stump, ‘The Problem of Suffering’; see also her *Wandering in Darkness*).

than as a single category that can be clearly defined (it cannot). Part of the challenge, throughout this book, will be to tease out these different underlying questions and problems and concerns, and to do so in a way that clarifies more than it confuses. As such, I will be treating the problem of evil mainly as a problem of suffering, sometimes as a problem of creation, sometimes as a problem of suicide, and sometimes not as a problem at all.

The connecting factor or common thread throughout these debates is perhaps not so much the formal framework (how can a good God, etc.), but the sense that all of this *matters* in some deeply significant way. For some reason, philosophers have continued to dust off the old creaking question of evil throughout the ages; to pick it up, tweak its bits, and do something new with it, in an ongoing attempt to either make sense of the evils of existence or to unmake the sense made of them by others. As Susan Neiman writes, and here I agree:

Two kinds of standpoint can be traced from the early Enlightenment to the present day, regardless of what sort of evil is in question, and each is guided more by ethical than by epistemological concerns. The one, from Rousseau to Arendt, insists that morality demands that we make evil intelligible. The other, from Voltaire to Jean Améry, insists that morality demands that we don't.²⁵

Throughout, this sense of ethical concern (which I interpret somewhat differently) is paramount: a concern that is partly directed towards the creator, but partly, and increasingly, also towards *the creature*; and the latter category begins to include more beings as the debate progresses. Thus, while animals had traditionally been excluded from the 'problem' posed by evil and suffering, by the time Charles Darwin muses on the question, the balance is overturned entirely:

That there is much suffering in the world no one disputes. Some have attempted to explain this in reference to man by imagining that it serves for his moral improvement. But the number of men in the world is as nothing compared with that of all other sentient beings, and these often suffer greatly without any moral improvement. A being so powerful and so full of knowledge as a God who could create the universe, is to our finite minds omnipotent and omniscient, and it revolts our understanding to suppose that this benevolence is not unbounded, for

²⁵ Neiman, *Evil*, 8. Her sympathies lie with the former option; mine (as will become clear) rather with the latter.

what advantage can there be in the suffering of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time?²⁶

If there is one thing that connects the authors loosely classified as ‘pessimists’ in this book, it is this concern to give due weight to the suffering of others, and to let evils, moral and physical, stand as a kind of cosmic residue, ‘the remainder, or the insoluble precipitate,’²⁷ which sticks to our hands just when we have washed them of all other problems. If there is one thing that connects the authors of the opposing tradition categorised just as loosely under ‘optimism’, it is the sense that this very effort gets something fundamentally wrong, not just about our conception of God and the cosmos, but about what it is to be human, and what it is that a human being needs to live fruitfully and undesperingly within this fractured world.

Pessimism and Optimism

But what exactly is pessimism, or optimism for that matter? These are terms that we have all used and encountered in daily life, and their meanings may seem nothing other than straightforward. Like so many other terms, they mean something different in philosophy than they do in everyday life, and in fact they often mean different things in philosophy itself. So much the worse for philosophy, we might say. But this would be too quick a judgement for, as I will argue, the most common use of optimism and pessimism is also the least interesting one, turning them into somewhat empty concepts, easy labels to stick on one’s opponent’s coat without another thought. ‘Optimism’ (in its common sense of thinking things are going to get better) is often used as shorthand for a kind of naïvety or wishful thinking, in which case the converse concept of pessimism is one of heroic realism and maturity, of being brave enough to live without illusions: ‘Despair is my *virtue*, and my health.’²⁸ At the same time, ‘pessimism’ (in its common sense of thinking things are going to get worse)

26. Darwin, *Autobiography*, 90. See also Darwin’s letter to Asa Gray (22 May 1860): ‘There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidæ* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice’ (*Darwin Correspondence Project*, Letter no. 2814). See Nagasawa, ‘The Problem of Evil for Atheists’, 152–3.

27. Schopenhauer, *PP.I.64*.

28. ‘Le désespoir est ma *vertu* à moi, et ma santé.’ André Comte-Sponville, *Traité du désespoir et de la béatitude*, 20 (my translation).

tends to be used as shorthand for despair, fatalism, giving up, giving in to doom. The converse concept of optimism is, then, one of heroic persistence, of *not* giving up, of maintaining courage even against all odds: ‘optimism over despair’!²⁹

There is also an underdogish tendency of both sides to suggest that fashion favours the opponent. The critics of pessimism do not tire of reminding us that pessimism is ‘always fashionable’, though it is much rarer for them to give concrete examples of these strident fashionable pessimists.³⁰ It is with more justification that the defenders of pessimism, such as Joshua Foa Dienstag, criticise the critics in turn for associating pessimism with fatalism or passivity, almost without argument, when in fact pessimism is a philosophical tradition in its own right, one that stands out for its ability to spur political activism.³¹

It seems, then, that both concepts, optimism and pessimism, lend themselves to the kind of exaggeration that is at the same time a deflation, one that flattens these terms until they become almost trivial, denoting little more than a mental attitude, an outlook on day-to-day life. The result of such lazy theorising is a tendency not to take the other side seriously, and to let what could be a meaningful inquiry come to a halt in a silly caricature. And what an inquiry this could be! For both concepts can also be taken to mean something much more profound and interesting, and it is this profundity that has tended to motivate their advocates, not just now but ever since their original conception in the eighteenth century. Pessimism, at its best, is more than a shrug of despair; optimism, at its best, more than a gesture of confidence. Throughout this book, I will try to recover some of those original meanings, setting aside the traditional oppositions, the trivial (*naïveté/fatalism*) and the psychological (*cheerful/glum*), to come to a deeper grasp of the two competing philosophical concepts of optimism and pessimism. But as I mentioned, even philosophers do not agree on how to take these terms. Two overall conceptions can be discerned in modern discussions of the topic, which I will call *future-* and *value-oriented* (I unpack these terms in more detail in chapter 2).

Of these two conceptions, the *future-oriented* version stands closer to the everyday understanding of optimism and pessimism as having

29. This is the title of a recent book collecting interviews with Noam Chomsky.

30. Robinson, *Givenness*, 29: ‘Cultural pessimism is always fashionable, and, since we are human, there are always grounds for it. It has the negative consequence of depressing the level of aspiration, the sense of the possible.’

31. Dienstag, *Pessimism*.

something to do with our expectations about the future. But it should be noted here that the two terms, under this conception, are not necessarily symmetrical. Whereas optimism implies a systematic expectation of progress and improvement, and a level of confidence in human perfectibility (that things will get better if we make them so), this does not mean that *pessimism* entails the converse belief: a systematic expectation that *things will get worse*. As Dienstag argues in his book exploring the political–philosophical tradition of pessimism, pessimists define themselves precisely by their resistance to such expectations: ‘*The pessimist expects nothing*’.³² Pessimism, in this view, implies a lack of any systematic belief about the future, or at most the contrary belief that we cannot know or expect anything from the future, considering our human limitations. At most, pessimists express a deep awareness that we are locked in time, and that the quality of being thus locked is a central part of the human predicament. As Schopenhauer argues, belief in decline is as unwarranted as belief in progress: ‘In this world of the phenomenon, true loss is as little possible as is true gain.’³³

A greater symmetry exists in the other conception of optimism and pessimism, which I call *value-oriented*, and which applies itself to questions such as whether life is worth living, whether the goods or evils weigh out in life, and how to weigh them adequately. On this conception, ‘pessimism is a judgement of value regarding life or reality as a whole, which results from the conflict between man’s *supreme* value and the supposed facts of life’ (the same would go for optimism).³⁴ While Dienstag, in the only modern book-length study of philosophical pessimism to date, focuses purely on future-oriented pessimism, I will engage mostly with value-oriented pessimism (and optimism), which I will argue is the more fundamental kind, and is also how these terms were originally conceived.

As the title of this book suggests, I will be saying more about pessimism than optimism, a focus I believe to be justified by my sense that pessimism is by far the more misunderstood of the two: in all the history of philosophy, it is perhaps the intellectual tradition most prone to confusion, exaggeration, and misrepresentation. Of the two traditions, pessimism is also the less studied, to such an extent that it might be called a

32. *Ibid.*, 40; his emphasis.

33. Schopenhauer, *WWR*.I.184.

34. Krusé, ‘The Inadequacy of the Hedonistic Interpretation’, 395.

shadow tradition, one that has been considered mostly negatively as the counterpart of optimism, in the shadow of which it has always seemed to stand. My focus on pessimism is further necessitated by the fact that I will be studying these questions in tandem with the problem of evil, from which they often spring, and while the problem of evil has as much to do with the goods of life as with the evils, the goods are not where the *problem* resides.

But the two traditions go hand in hand, and in discussing the philosophical interest in pessimism throughout the centuries, I will necessarily also be discussing the philosophical interest in optimism, a tradition that has also lent itself to much exaggeration and dulling down by its critics and opponents. The risk, in trying to achieve a more meaningful view of pessimism, is that our sympathies simply shift from one side to the other, so that optimism is flattened in the same proportion as pessimism is deepened. This, I fear, is what happens in some parts of Dienstag's book, which, in the course of complicating our conceptions of pessimism, ends up painting a too simple (and sometimes caricatural) picture of optimism.³⁵ This is a tendency and temptation against which I will be constantly on guard, and that I will counter by trying to do justice to the deep moral intuitions and investments that stand behind the projects of such arch-optimists as Leibniz and King. My aim is to excavate a deeper understanding of pessimism, but my hope is that in the course of making pessimism more interesting, this will make optimism more interesting too.

The outcome of this attempt, to lift the curtain just a little, is that I will end up conceiving of optimism and pessimism in sets of shared concerns rather than in purely theoretical commitments: concerns having to do with the status of creaturely experience against the cosmic perspective, but also with the question of how to speak sensitively and meaningfully of human (and sometimes animal) suffering, over and against the question of how to explain suffering in a way that can justify existence. A large part of my argument will be that there is a profound intellectual *but also ethical* drive in both positions, giving us a reason to take both sides deeply seriously. Interestingly, while both traditions are marked by a number of distinct concerns, they are also bound together by a twofold moral focus that powers the majority of their confrontations, having to do with *hope*, *compassion*, and *consolation*. These, I argue, are the axes or orientations

35. As in this passage: 'Optimism is to time what metaphysics is to space. It projects perfection elsewhere, or, more properly, elsewhen. It teaches one to despise the here and now, which ultimately means to despise oneself' (Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 41).

that form a common moral horizon shared by both optimism and pessimism, but do so unbeknownst to either side: a long history of mutual misunderstandings begins here.

Discovering such moral impetus in optimism may be less surprising to us than finding it in pessimism, which so often is seen as a kind of hardened arrogance or intellectual self-indulgence. And sometimes, it must be admitted, it is just that. But for most of these philosophers, their pessimism is marked by a sense of urgency, of deep personal investment. Reading them, we gain the sense that all of this *matters*, and matters deeply; that far from being a facile or fatuous provocation, there is something very pivotal and personal about their pessimism: it doesn't just matter, it matters *to them*. It is this element of existential questioning, this personal dimension, that sets pessimism aside from most other philosophical topics; it does the same for the problem of evil. There are times when, reading into these dark matters, we will come across a deepening, a widening of sorts, something as hard to define as it is to miss, something having to do with the *point of pessimism*, which, when present, is what makes pessimism worthwhile, and, when absent, marks the moment when pessimism (like optimism) slips into its own unfeeling parody. This is why, throughout this book, I will be unthreading the moral concerns that appear and disappear and reappear throughout these debates—concerns that, perhaps more than the theoretical foundations, give a continuity and focus to both traditions, from the seventeenth century to today. By unearthing these ethical commitments, I hope to afford an entirely new perspective on pessimism as a tradition that has not only its own epistemological and methodological concerns and presuppositions but, crucially, its own sets of virtues and moral aims.

Plato famously lets Socrates say that 'wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder'.³⁶ To which Schopenhauer added that this wonder or 'astonishment' in turn begins with an awareness of evil, of suffering, of the darker side of life: 'philosophical astonishment is at bottom one that is dismayed and distressed; philosophy, like the overture to *Don Juan*, starts with a minor chord'.³⁷ Pessimism, for Schopenhauer as for other pessimists, not only leads us to recognise this dark side of existence: it leads us to philosophy itself.

36. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d; see also Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b.

37. Schopenhauer, *WWR*.II.171.

Maps and Methods

It is traditional at this point to discuss some historiography, to supply a helpful (if tedious) overview of the state of scholarship to date. I don't intend to be so helpful, in part because such overviews have been adequately supplied by other authors before me, and in part because it will be more fruitful and enjoyable for everyone if I engage with the literature as we go along, in the specific contexts where it will be most relevant.³⁸

Having said that, I will here briefly draw attention to two authors whose names will be recurrent guests throughout this book, and whose own books each supply a kind of map into the dual debates of pessimism and the problem of evil: Joshua Foa Dienstag's *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (on pessimism) and Susan Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (on the problem of evil). Both will feature a lot in the pages and especially the footnotes to follow, where I will cite them mostly to offer my own adjustments to their central historical and philosophical arguments. This may give the impression that I am primarily critical of these works, which is assuredly *not* the case. Both are works of the kind we call seminal; they have been enormously helpful in shaping my own thoughts on these matters, and the current book is intended as a complement to rather than a replacement of either study. If disagreements nevertheless ensue, these are themselves based on deeper agreements and affinities, especially in the background understanding that these questions matter in ways we are only beginning to understand.

With that disclaimer, here are my problems. To begin with Neiman's work on the problem of evil: this is an approach that, like my own, combines historical and philosophical perspectives, and indicates a major shift in the development of the problem of evil, which she links to Voltaire and Kant in particular. My deepest concern with this narrative is that the historical argument does not work: Neiman, like many others before her, places far too much weight on Voltaire and the Lisbon earthquake, when in fact, as I will argue, by the mid-eighteenth century most of the major innovations in the debate on evil had already been set in motion or even carried to their furthest conclusions. Far from being theological dead wood in the seventeenth century, the problem of evil was reinvented and re-explored by some of that age's best philosophers, such as Malebranche,

38. See especially chapter 1 (for sources on the problem of evil in the history of philosophy) and chapter 2 (for sources on pessimism); and see later chapters for sources on these issues in specific authors.

who put physical evil firmly back on the agenda, and Bayle, who drew from this a pessimism that would haunt thinkers for decades, maybe centuries, to come. To her credit, Neiman does devote some pages to Bayle, but does so without recognition of precisely those innovations that were so troubling to optimists such as Leibniz and King: the case for pessimism made in the heated pages of Bayle's article *Xenophanes*.³⁹

More generally, her approach misses some of the key developments in the longer debate on evil, especially its reorientation to *physical evil* and its widening of that category by the inclusion of psychological and (sometimes) animal suffering. Neiman is right to stress the sharpening of the distinction between moral and physical evils throughout the eighteenth century, but this distinction hinges crucially on a number of conceptual and methodological innovations, for which Bayle supplied the groundwork in basing his discussion of physical evil not a priori on the concept of sin, but a posteriori on the observation of experience. These deeper, subtler developments within the debate on physical evil (which is also a debate on pessimism) precede the Lisbon earthquake by half a century and serve to explain not only how Lisbon could have the impact that it did, but also why philosophers today still tend to think of physical evils as the more problematic part of the problem of evil, the most robust 'remainder' or 'precipitate' (Schopenhauer) that remains once all other problems (or evils) have been dealt with. Hence, throughout this book, I will offer several critical adjustments to Neiman's theory (to which I am nevertheless sympathetic) that 'the problem of evil is the root from which modern philosophy springs.'⁴⁰

Moving on to Dienstag's work on pessimism, I cannot stress enough the importance of this study, especially since there is hardly any literature on the philosophical tradition of pessimism, and I share several of Dienstag's starting points. The main distinction between our approaches (aside from my combining this topic with the problem of evil) has to do with the conception of pessimism that is at the basis of our studies. While Dienstag sees the pessimist tradition as driven mainly by a *future-oriented* pessimism, I believe it is *value-oriented* pessimism that is better placed

39. Bayle remains a philosopher rarely studied in sufficient depth, which may be due to the simple fact that there's so much of him, and yet so little available in modern translations. Popkin's *Selections*, which seem to be Neiman's only primary source for Bayle, do not include articles such as *Xenophanes*, though Jenkinson's selection of *Political Writings* does.

40. Neiman, *Evil*, 13. Neiman is excellent on moral evil (see also her *Moral Clarity*), and so another way of framing the contrast is to see my book, which focuses on *physical* evil, as a complement to Neiman's work on *moral* evil.

to make this claim. As such, I take issue with Dienstag's suggestion that value-oriented pessimism is at most a subcategory or more trivial extension of the main future-oriented variety, and that to understand pessimism as saying something about the value of existence or the weighing of goods and evils is mistaken.⁴¹ Against this, I will argue that we can also trace, with equal or even *greater* justification, a sophisticated modern pessimist tradition in terms of the evaluation of existence as a whole, in which the weighing of goods and evils has its proper place. Far from being a superficial pursuit, furthermore, this evaluative exercise is something to which these thinkers are deeply committed. Fundamental to this tradition, again, is the sense that much is at stake in answering these questions; that they *matter*, and matter deeply.

This may seem to be a minor point, but it feeds into a wider problem that shadows Dienstag's project as a whole, which is ultimately a problem of circularity. Having chosen a specific conception of pessimism (as future-oriented), Dienstag uses this to reconstruct a coherent pessimist tradition, but the very choice of this conception of pessimism is itself based on a specific and necessarily selective reading of not only the tradition (in which Bayle, Hume, and Voltaire are absent) but of the very philosophers he makes central to his argument (especially Schopenhauer). As such, his argument becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. It is what makes his approach so very appealing and coherent, but it is also what limits it.⁴² By reason of this starting point, Dienstag's project excludes entrenched philosophical pessimists on either side of the tradition (from Bayle to Benatar), while it places a figure as ambiguous as Rousseau at the heart of the modern pessimist tradition. (On my interpretation, as will become clear, it is rather Bayle who should have this place, while Rousseau is more rightly featured among the optimists.) The result of this disagreement about our starting points is that I will be critiquing Dienstag, too, throughout this

41. See, e.g., Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 6n.: on the 'misconception' of conceiving pessimism as 'merely positing an excess of pain over pleasure in life'. This is itself an exaggeration: value-oriented pessimism does more than posit an excess of pain; it tries to *weigh* (not calculate) goods and evils in a more meaningful (though ever problematic) way.

42. It could be argued, of course, that I'm open to the same critique, choosing to start with value-oriented pessimism and then reading it into the sources in order to form something like a 'tradition'. While I'm aware of this risk, which is intrinsic to the exercise of intellectual history, I nevertheless believe my approach to be warranted by those very sources: if we take into account what self-proclaimed philosophical pessimists consider to be pessimism, and with which other authors they align themselves, then it turns out that value-oriented pessimism is the dominant form in the history of philosophy, with future-oriented pessimism as a kind of offshoot, secondary and derivative.

book, not in an attempt to discredit his work as a whole, but to complement and continue his argument into the wider tradition of value-oriented pessimism, which is itself so closely linked to that other debate: the problem of evil.

This leads me to a third criticism, which is directed equally (and I hope not too unfairly) at both Neiman and Dienstag. It is curious, considering the closeness of their topics, that their books hardly overlap. This, again, has to do with their specific orientations: Neiman focuses primarily on the problem of *moral* evil, Dienstag on the tradition of *future-oriented* pessimism. These approaches, again, are highly valuable in their own right, but they miss something vital about their subject matter, something that emerges only once the two topics are studied in connection with each other. Once the focus is placed instead on *physical* evil (the problem of suffering) and *value-oriented* pessimism (the question of whether life is worth living), we find that these two issues are crucially interconnected, to such an extent that it makes little sense to study one without the other: it is only by an appreciation of this connectedness that either tradition can properly be understood. It is from this intersection between pessimism and the problem of evil that this book takes its cue.

HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, SYMPATHY

This brings me to a word on method. The originality of this study, again, lies first and foremost in its consideration of both topics at the same time and in connection with each other, both historically and philosophically. This dual orientation of my work, which has one foot in the discipline of history and another in that of philosophy, places it in the twilight fields known as intellectual history, the history of ideas, and the history of philosophy, labels that are all to some extent appropriate but to which I prefer not to commit myself (some chapters will have me move more in the direction of intellectual history, others in that of philosophy and its history). My method, for this reason, is a fluid one, consisting mainly of in-depth analysis of specific sources in connection with each other, by which I seek to trace the inner mechanics of these debates as they develop over time. Contextually, I have maintained a rather light touch (maybe too light for some readers), choosing to focus primarily on the ideas of the philosophers in question, and on the intuitions and preconceptions that are active in the background—sometimes boldly stated, sometimes only subtly implied. Methodologically, then, this book would seem to fit most comfortably in the history of philosophy, where the emphasis lies on *philosophy*.

This has other consequences too. It may be clear by now that the point of this study is partly historical, partly philosophical, but also partly ethical or evaluative. It is marked throughout by an attempt to *de-trivialise* certain questions, to place them in a new perspective, on the assumption that at least some of them are up for re-evaluation. To some extent, reading my way into these debates was like learning a new language, a new way of thinking, and my primary concern throughout the writing of this book has been to open up these debates and ‘translate’ these modes of thought in such a way that they may still speak to us today. This is a far from straightforward exercise: after all, the results of the dual debates of pessimism and the problem of evil are not necessarily of the kind any of us might find convincing. In the words of Paul Ricoeur: ‘One might say that the problem of evil offers at the same time the most considerable challenge to think and the most deceptive invitation to talk nonsense, as if evil were an always premature problem where the ends of reason always exceed its means.’⁴³ The same could equally be said of pessimism and optimism, with the result that, throughout this book, we will be going back and forth rather a lot between the nonsensical and the profound.

For this reason, I have attempted to maintain what might be called a *hermeneutics of sympathy*, by which I mean simply the effort to give these authors the benefit of the doubt as much as possible, even when they seem just silly or ridiculous or outrageous (at times even *immoral*): to try to do them justice nonetheless.⁴⁴ This is something I believe to be all the more required because the topic in question is such an *unsympathetic* one, especially in the case of pessimism, which continues to raise eyebrows and suspicions of poor taste. (‘Why not *optimism*?’ some people ask me, sometimes with concern, when I tell them what I’ve been working on.) But the many misunderstandings of philosophical pessimism have done just as much damage to the reputation of philosophical *optimism*, which is all too easily dismissed as just silly and deluded (we still tend to read Leibniz through Voltaire, who probably didn’t really read Leibniz in any depth at all).⁴⁵

43. Ricoeur, *Symbolism*, 165.

44. This can be taken as a more morally invested version of the ‘principle of charity’; I am inspired here by Ricoeur’s intuition that any hermeneutics of suspicion must be offset by a hermeneutics of intention or sympathy: ‘Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.’ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 27.

45. At least, not before attacking ‘optimism’ in *Candide*: see chapter 3.

This is a dance that has characterised the cultural clash between optimism and pessimism from the beginning, both sides failing miserably to take the other seriously and, in particular, to recognise in the other the presence of a deep ethical impulse, a moral drive. It is in an attempt to recover something from their encounter that was lost by virtue of this misunderstanding that I employ a hermeneutics of sympathy—towards the pessimists but *also* towards the optimists (which is sometimes the more challenging part). These thinkers are seldom lazy or uncaring: they tend to have good reasons for thinking and writing as they do, even if these reasons seem almost incomprehensible to us now. For this reason, I ask the reader to adopt some of the same ‘sympathetic’ attitude as we explore these many voices, even when they try to drown each other out.

However, trying to be generous in our interpretations does not mean that our sympathies need to be equally distributed, if such a thing were even possible. Again, in the words of Paul Ricoeur,

nobody asks questions from nowhere. One must be in a position to hear and to understand. It is a great illusion to think that one could make himself a pure spectator, without weight, without memory, without perspective, and regard everything with equal sympathy. Such indifference, in the strict sense of the word, destroys the possibility of appropriation.⁴⁶

Appropriation may be too strong a word, or perhaps not: part of the aim of this book is indeed to draw something out of these debates and traditions that may still serve us today. As such, there is also a *dialogic* aspect to this exercise, and in several ways. For instance, Pierre Bayle may not have been able to respond to Rousseau’s critique of pessimism, but we can nevertheless reconstruct a hypothetical response and, true to Bayle’s own practices, continue this conversation across the centuries.⁴⁷ As such, there is a dialogic aspect to my method, not just in my own interrogations of these authors, but in my attempt to bring in voices from the past (and sometimes the future) to cross-examine later thinkers; the reader should not be surprised to hear Bayle’s voice asking questions in a chapter on Schopenhauer. If this exercise is historically suspect (and I think it is not, since all of these authors are elaborating on common themes), it is also philosophically valuable.

46. Ricoeur, *Symbolism*, 306.

47. See my *Bayle, Jurieu*, chapter 1, on Bayle’s own dialogic method.

But this book is also dialogic in the deeper sense of drawing out these ideas into modern times, picking them up, and turning them around to see if they are still able to speak to us. This may at times incur me the charge of overinterpreting, to which I respond with the words of someone who used to teach me philosophy:

Let it be said from the start that such an interpretation is violent, to which I should immediately add, that *any* interpretation is violent. In the conversation with history the latter always appears as the history *of and for us*.⁴⁸

And maybe, at heart, this is really all this book intends to do: simply to continue a conversation.

The Question

More specifically, this is a book about a question, or a set of questions, having to do with the dark side of existence, ‘the terrible side of life.’⁴⁹ Are there more evils than goods in our lives? Is life worth living for all of us, for any of us? Why do some people choose death despite their blessings; why do some people choose life despite their sufferings? Do animals suffer as we do? Are we responsible for our own happiness? *Is it better never to have been?* The various ways in which these questions have been answered throughout the centuries have created the competing philosophical traditions known as optimism and pessimism. This book traces the intersection of the debate on the problem of evil with the debate on pessimism from the late seventeenth century onwards, seeking throughout to evaluate pessimism on its own terms. My main thesis is twofold.

First, I argue that the age-old philosophical debate on the problem of evil was reinvented and imbued with a new sense of urgency in the second half of the seventeenth century. This itself is not a very original point: many scholars have argued for some kind of ‘theodicean turn’ in the eighteenth century, beginning at least with Leibniz and ending (or *seeming* to end) abruptly in the death sentence delivered on this topic by Immanuel Kant; and others before me have pushed this development further back into the seventeenth century. My interest lies in tracing the fate of *physical evil* in particular, and in showing how the intensification and

48. Prins, *Uit Verveling*, 45, taking here a Gadamerian stance (my translation; emphasis in original).

49. Schopenhauer (*WWR*.I.252; *WWR*.II.433, 435; *PP*.I.421).

reorientation of the debate on evil created an entirely new philosophical tradition: one eventually known as *pessimism*. When the debate on theodicy burns out in the eighteenth century, pessimism continues to push some of its central questions, such as the ethics of creation and the justification of existence, which return in Schopenhauer's philosophy as well as in the contemporary anti-natalist philosopher David Benatar.⁵⁰

Second, I argue that, even from its earliest beginnings, pessimism is driven by a crucial moral orientation, which in many cases it shares with the competing tradition of optimism, and revolves around the key concepts of *hope*, *compassion*, and *consolation*. Throughout these debates, pessimists show themselves concerned to speak of suffering in such a way that does justice to the human experience and yet is able to offer something in the way of consolation, compassion, or even hope: *pessimism*, I argue throughout, *does not want to be a philosophy of despair*. This moral orientation is shared with the optimists, who are in turn concerned that pessimists place such emphasis on suffering as to make suffering worse, thus leaving no room for either hope or consolation. These concepts turn out to be crucial for understanding the inner mechanics of pessimism, and I argue that it is precisely this ethical drive that gives focus and force to the pessimist tradition, which is why pessimism may be reinterpreted as a moral source.

The central figure in all of these questions, and the main character of the cast of philosophers featured in this book, is Pierre Bayle, the French philosopher who fled to the Dutch Republic at the end of the seventeenth century and remained a household name in the canon of philosophy for a long time before he was, temporarily, displaced within the folds of history. In the past few decades, Bayle scholarship has taken flight again, but in the dearth of solid modern editions of, in particular, the *Dictionnaire*, he remains a shadowy passenger through the pages of most books. It may therefore come as some surprise that I will be placing Bayle at the heart and origins of a pessimist tradition (which I conceive as value-oriented, so with different priorities than Dienstag's future-oriented tradition), replacing Dienstag's Rousseau as the 'patriarch of pessimism'.⁵¹ I believe this placement is nevertheless warranted, both in terms of influence and orientation: not only is Bayle responsible for putting pessimism firmly on the eighteenth century's philosophical agenda, but his arguments and

50. There are many parallels between Benatar's argument against procreation and Bayle's attack on (rational) theodicy; while I do not discuss Benatar centrally, he is a recurrent visitor in the footnotes of this book.

51. This phrase of Walter Starkie's is cited by Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 49.

preoccupations bear close affinities to those of later pessimists such as Schopenhauer and David Benatar.

To trace this tradition, and ground Bayle's role in it, I will be circling around a set of recurrent questions, which stand at the intersection of these two debates: *pessimism and the problem of evil*. Such questions include the status of animal suffering, the meaning and justification of suicide, the level of control we have over our own happiness (and, correspondingly, our sufferings), the virtues of Stoicism, and a central methodological concern: How can we find out whether life's evils outweigh the goods? By revisiting these themes in a variety of contexts, we will travel ever more deeply into the core concerns of the pessimist (as well as the optimist) tradition. In doing so, I hope to reveal the inherent ambiguities and ambivalence in the position of pessimism and optimism alike, and to show how both traditions crucially depend on each other and develop in opposition to each other. I hope to show, furthermore, that far from presenting a series of trivial and purely descriptive points, these philosophers are engaged in serious and significant attempts to tackle cogent philosophical questions, having to do with the value of existence, with philosophy's relation to hope and consolation, and with the ethics of creation.

As a result of my 'bifocal' approach, some of the chapters in this book will be oriented more towards the problem of evil, others more towards pessimism, but it should be recalled that, throughout, both issues are at stake. I open with two chapters that reconstruct the first major confrontation between optimism and pessimism through the works of Bayle and Malebranche (chapter 1) and Leibniz and King (chapter 2). In these chapters, I also offer a more intricate introduction into the problem of evil (chapter 1) and pessimism (chapter 2). This 'first encounter' between optimism and pessimism sets the terms of the debate for a long time to come and is decisive for the future questions and concerns of thinkers in both traditions alike. The following chapters trace the continuation of these arguments in Voltaire and the deists (chapter 3), La Mettrie and Maupertuis (chapter 4), while connecting them to wider cultural attitudes towards the meaning and value of existence (chapter 3) and the eighteenth-century debate on happiness and Stoicism (chapter 4).

I then show how Bayle's arguments on pessimism *and* the problem of evil are taken up and developed by David Hume, who formulates a 'dispositional problem of evil' while radicalising Bayle's case against the consolations of philosophy (chapter 5). An entirely different response to Baylean pessimism (as elaborated by Voltaire and Maupertuis) is examined in the figure of Rousseau, whose writings are marked by an ongoing

attempt to formulate an ‘art of suffering’ (chapter 6). I go on to trace the culmination of the ‘theodicean turn’ in Kant’s seminal essay on the failure of rational theodicy, which articulates the problem of evil in a defining way even while claiming to close it once and for all (chapter 7). Finally, I turn to Schopenhauer’s emancipation of pessimism as a philosophy in its own right and on strictly a priori terms, while arguing that his philosophy nevertheless carries a strong debt of inheritance to the theodicean debate, and is haunted by its own concerns with justification (chapter 8).

While my approach is, again, both historical and philosophical in orientation, I insist on the historical part of my argument only for the first part of the book, where a historical awareness of the vagaries of theodicy is essential for understanding the internal mechanics of the debate on evil as well as the development of the pessimist tradition. This is also why my focus throughout is especially on the new concept of *physical evil* as suffering in general, which in its Baylean reformulation begins to push moral evil from the centre of the debate, finally replacing it as the pivotal problem of evil even to this day. But aside from this historical point, I also want to make a deeper philosophical one, having to do with the merit or credit of pessimism, as a philosophy but also as a moral source. In chapter 9, therefore, I will shed some of my caution and attempt to make the case for a valuable pessimism, out of an intuition that something very meaningful is being articulated by these authors over time, something that we lose or forfeit at our peril, something having to do not only with hope and consolation, but with a deep sense of the fragility of life.

A Note of Caution

Finally, a note of caution. These questions are of the kind that are not just philosophically but also personally interesting, by which I mean that they may be relevant to individual human beings reflecting upon the value of their lives. This bestows a sense of responsibility on the author, especially when discussing the question of suicide. As historian Róisín Healy writes,

If it is proven that an intellectual culture that defends suicide as a right and a society that views it as an understandable response to despair have contributed to the rise in suicides, great responsibility rests on the shoulders of all who discuss suicide, including historians.⁵²

52. Healy, ‘Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe’, 919. To which I would add that this responsibility exists even if such a link were never proven.

This sense of responsibility is present in many of the authors in this book, in optimists as well as pessimists, though in some more than others. The debate on pessimism is itself shadowed by the spectre of Hegesias, the Cyrenaic philosopher who supposedly painted so bleak a picture of life that it drove its readers to kill themselves, as Descartes writes: ‘the false philosophy of Hegesias, whose book was prohibited by Ptolemy and was the cause that many killed themselves after having read it, as it tried to argue that this life is evil.’⁵³ ‘Maybe [Ptolemy] was right,’ Pierre de Maupertuis adds a century onwards: ‘a work that painted our evils too vividly would be pernicious, if it did not at the same time present us with ways by which they become bearable, and if it did not indicate their remedies.’⁵⁴

Such concerns become especially poignant in the matter of suicide, where written thoughts may have dramatic consequences. Here it should be noted, not for the only time in this book, that the idea that pessimists tend to promote or advocate suicide is just another common misconception clinging to this tradition with tenacity: often, it is precisely the pessimists who write most sensitively and concernedly about suicide, whereas the optimists repeatedly slide into a more callous and dismissive stance. Since part of my approach consists in an ongoing ethical interrogation of my sources, I will not hold back on evaluating their authors accordingly: where there is this horizon of concern, I will take this to be to the thinker’s credit; where it is lacking, I will consider it something for which they can and should be held accountable. On the part of the reader, furthermore, a level of awareness needs to exist that while these issues are sometimes discussed as mere items of curiosity, for some people they are questions of burning urgency, questions with which they struggle every day. For this reason, this book might not be for everyone: some bleak pages will certainly follow.

But also some brighter ones. For one thing, the pessimists tend to be rather wonderful to read. This has to do not only with their style but also with their sense of audacity, of courage perhaps, and sometimes of outright outrageousness. Schopenhauer is particularly dazzling on this score:

The two main requirements for philosophising are: firstly, to have the courage not to keep any question back; and secondly, to attain a clear

53. Descartes to Elisabeth of Bohemia, 6 October 1645, *Correspondence*, 121.

54. Maupertuis, *EPM*, xvii.

consciousness of anything that *goes without saying* so as to comprehend it as a problem.⁵⁵

I mention this striking quote because it applies equally to many of the philosophers who will be speaking in these pages, especially where they are at their most controversial, and perhaps least amenable to our intuitive grasp of life. Many of these thinkers go against the grain of truths universally acknowledged, whether in their own time or in all times, rethinking things that are supposed to be commonsensical or self-evident, things that are believed to *go without saying*. For instance, that life is necessarily worth living, or that creation is by definition a good thing, whether this means creation by God (in the case of earlier debates) or by humans (in the case of later ones).

‘Write, as though you were alone in the Universe’, Julien Offray de La Mettrie advises his fellow philosophers.⁵⁶ And again Schopenhauer:

the world wants to hear that it is praiseworthy and excellent, and philosophers want to please the world. With me it is different: I have seen what pleases the world and will, in order to please it, not deviate a single step from the path of truth.⁵⁷

What sets many of these philosophers apart is that, as in Schopenhauer’s quote, they keep no question back, and they problematise that which is supposed to go without saying: they do, more often than not, write as though they were alone in the universe. Whether or not we agree with them, this seems to me an effort worth our attention and consideration. The pessimists may not always be right in their answers, but even where they are wrong, they may still be right in the kinds of questions they ask: questions we would be mistaken to dismiss or disregard too easily. As Schopenhauer himself closes the preface to his *magnum opus*: ‘life is short, and truth works far and lives long: let us speak the truth!’⁵⁸

I end, perhaps controversially, on a personal note. As optimists have kept telling pessimists for centuries, and as today’s ‘wellness’ mentality keeps reminding us: focusing our minds too much on suffering will only make us all the more miserable; we should try to focus instead on the

55. Schopenhauer, ‘On Philosophy and its Method’, here in Hollingdale’s translation (*Essays and Aphorisms*, 117; Schopenhauer’s emphasis); see *PP*.II.8.

56. La Mettrie, ‘Discours préliminaire’, 247: ‘Écrivez, comme si vous étiez seul dans l’Univers . . .’

57. Schopenhauer, *Hauptwerke*, III.423 (my translation).

58. Schopenhauer, *WWR*.I.xvii.

good, the bright, the sunny side of life. So why this topic? Why would anyone choose to spend years of her life studying pessimism, evil, and suffering? Why, for that matter, would readers want to spend their time gazing into these dark matters? Part of the goal of this book is to give an answer to this question (which is at the same time a criticism); I hope I have gone some way towards answering it already. But to offer a glimpse of what is to come: there is more here than 'mere' intellectual curiosity: I see these as matters of a greater and deeper value than that confined to the pages of history, and in this perception there is something of a personal motivation too. *Personal*, which is not the same as *autobiographical*: let us resist throughout the all-too-common tendency to reduce pessimism to a matter of temperament or character or biography, as though the only reason to be interested in these topics is because one is personally miserable or damaged or unhappy with one's life. A *reductio ad biographiam*: surely we can do better than that.

I am reminded of what philosopher Alex Douglas writes about philosophy and hope, itself a recurrent theme throughout this book. There is a widespread assumption among contemporary philosophers that philosophy should not concern itself at all with matters such as hope or consolation; we shouldn't be exercising philosophy in order to find comfort. But what, he asks, is so wrong with hope or comfort? After all:

The blighted bagatelle of ordinary life contains more than enough to make us hard-headed and cautious in our hopes. There is no need for philosophy to join the party, and I choose to spend my time with the philosophers who don't.⁵⁹

I more than agree with this sentiment: indeed, I applaud it. But it again raises that question: Why, then, do *I* want to spend my time with philosophers who focus on the dark side of life, on its pains and sorrows and, sometimes, its hopelessness?

Strangely, for a similar reason. Because I find in these philosophers something that is missing or understated in many others, something having to do with a due appreciation of the fragility of life: with a sense that sometimes we may try to the best of our abilities *and yet we may fail* to achieve happiness or even just to avoid great suffering. This is something the pessimists knew very deeply, and it is a truth that is beginning to slip away from us in current times. But is this hopelessness? Not necessarily.

59. Douglas, 'Philosophy and Hope', 28.

Rather, it is a sense of the profound and insurmountable fragility of existence, and of hope itself. At its best and deepest, what this kind of dark thinking, which is also a *fragile thinking*,⁶⁰ achieves, is neither desperate nor passive nor fatalist: it is to open up new horizons of compassion and consolation. This, briefly, is part of my reason for delving into these dark matters. Let us begin.

60. I draw this term (in the original Dutch: *broos denken*) from Prins, 'Het wordt niet beter, het kan niet beter.'

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