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1

Optimism, Pessimism, Fatalism

Only one thing is more stupid than absolute pessimism and that is absolute optimism.

—ALBERT CAMUS

IMAGINE ENTERING a gallery. You weren't expecting to be here, but here you are. So you start wandering, this way and that. Some pictures you've seen before; others are new to you; one stops you in your tracks. You are drawn to it, and so, for a moment, you leave all thoughts of the world behind to find yourself 'in the presence of a dim canvas with a bowed and stricken and secretive figure cowering over a broken lyre in the twilight.'¹

Close your eyes, and open them again. What do you see?

According to G. K. Chesterton, your first thought will be that the painting is called *Despair*. But he also thinks that, after reading its real title and staring at it for a while, 'a dim and powerful sense of meaning' will begin to grow on you. Standing before it you will find yourself 'in the presence of a great truth.' You will perceive 'that there is something in man which is always apparently on the eve of disappearing, but never disappears, an

assurance which is always apparently saying farewell and yet illimitably lingers, a string which is always stretched to snapping and yet never snaps.' This something may be called *Hope*, as the painting's creator did, but 'we may call it many other things. Call it faith, call it vitality, call it the will to live, call it the religion of to-morrow morning, call it the immortality of man, call it self-love and vanity; it is the thing that explains why man survives all things and why there is no such thing as a pessimist.'² Without it, whatever *it* is, we are truly dead.

No such thing as a pessimist! To a scholar of philosophical pessimism, an unsettling thought—and, considering all the self-declared pessimists of the past and present, a hard one to maintain. But what does Chesterton mean? Does he mean there is no one who does not show, by the fact of living, that they value their existence; that philosophical pessimists like Schopenhauer are really optimists in disguise? Or does he mean that there is no one who does not have *some* positive expectation about the future, a belief that there is something better still to come?

In other words: *What is a pessimist?*

A Brief Tour

It depends whom you ask, and when. The terms 'optimism' and 'pessimism' have shifted considerably in meaning throughout the ages. If we turned back the pages of history and asked a person of letters from the seventeenth century, 'What are optimism and pessimism?' we would be awarded a blank stare, and rightly so, as the terms had not been coined yet. But, flipping forward to the mid-eighteenth century, we'd have more luck. We could knock on the door of Voltaire, author of a book that has 'optimism' in the title, and ask him what that strange word means.

‘My friends!’ he might tell us, smiling mischievously. ‘Optimism is a cruel philosophy formulated by the likes of Leibniz and Pope, according to whom *all is for the best* and *we live in the best possible world*. After all, if God could have created a better one, he would have done so! Or so the optimists tell us.’

But we’ve done our homework. Didn’t Voltaire himself admire Leibniz at the start of his career? Didn’t he himself agree that, while there are imperfections in the *parts* of creation, the *whole* is very good?

This might annoy him a little. ‘A man can change his mind, can’t he? Anyhow, that’s not the same as optimism. I never said that *all is good* and *all is right*, as Alexander Pope did.’³

What then is the problem with optimism? we might ask.

‘Haven’t you read my famous book *Candide, or Optimism*? “If this is the best of all possible worlds, what on earth are the others like?”’⁴

Yes, we’ve read *Candide*: that’s the book responsible for making *optimism* a household term. So did Voltaire coin it himself?

‘I wish!’ he says wistfully. ‘It was the Jesuits, of course.’

So, let’s visit the Jesuits—those clever scholars of the Society of Jesus. They grant us an interview, though we don’t know the name of the dark-robed scholar who sits before us; they like to act anonymously.

‘Yes,’ he might tell us, ‘we coined the term *optimism* for philosophers like Leibniz, who paint too positive a picture of the world. Come to think of it, we coined *pessimism*, too, for philosophers like Voltaire and that devious sceptic Bayle, who seem to think the world is very bad and hold the creator accountable! What they both forget is that the world is very bad *now*, because of original sin; but all shall be made well again at the end of times.’

Confused, we would ask more questions, but our time is up and the scholars say no more.

So let's try our luck a century onwards, in the mid-nineteenth, and visit the most famous pessimist of all, perhaps the first one to proudly call himself by that name: Arthur Schopenhauer.

We find him, not scowling over his desk but practising his flute. We politely wait until he is finished, and ask if he will clarify the matter for us.

'Certainly!' he brightly tells us, and takes out a dusty Bible from his shelves, opening it at the Book of Genesis. 'Optimism is best encapsulated by these five words in the Bible: *and all was very good*. Pessimism is the daring challenge to that view: the incredible notion that the world is very *bad*, that suffering is at the very heart of things, that the world is something that *should not be!*' Again he flips through his Bible, reading first from the Book of Job ('Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived'), then from Ecclesiastes ('vanity of vanities; all is vanity').⁵

A little puzzled, we ask him, 'So . . . optimism and pessimism are not about the future?'

'No, my friends!' he cries. 'It is about life, and its meaninglessness, its misery. It is about *the value of existence!*'

Value-oriented

Aha! Now we're getting somewhere. Apparently, for the first centuries after their coinage, optimism and pessimism have to do not with *our expectations of the future* but with the *value of existence*. They are attempts to answer questions such as: Is life worth living? Do the goods of life outweigh the evils? Of course there is much more to be said here, as the answers to such questions can vary enormously even amongst thinkers in the same

camp. But for now we can group positive answers under optimism, negative ones under pessimism.

Elsewhere I've called these *value-oriented optimism and pessimism* (sometimes also known as *philosophical optimism/pessimism*) and argued that they have everything to do with the age-old problem of evil: the question how a good God could allow the existence of evil and suffering in the world.⁶ After all, the old optimists of the eighteenth century wanted above all to defend the Creator against attacks by sceptics who asked uncomfortable questions. Such as: If life is not worth living for some creatures, then why did God create them? Or: If life on the whole is overwhelmingly bad, how is creation justified?

To ward off such challenges, the value-oriented optimists took different roads. Some argued that life on this earth is indeed pretty bad for most of us but compensated by future bliss in the afterlife (at least, for those who have deserved one). Others went further and tried to prove that even life in this world is very good for most, or even all of us. Some even went so far as to argue that there isn't a single creature for whom life is not worth living (otherwise, God wouldn't have created it).

The most famous of all answers was that given by G. W. Leibniz, in his *Essais de Theodicée*, which is where we get the term 'theodicy' (from the Greek *theo* [God] + *dikē*, [justice])—or the attempt to vindicate God against those who would make him responsible for the (moral and physical) evils of life.⁷ Leibniz admitted there is suffering in creation but argued that if we looked at the whole cosmos across time (including possible aliens on other planets and the eternal bliss of the blessed), we would see that we live in the best of all possible worlds.

Leibniz asks us to imagine a great pyramid, in which are contained all the different worlds that God could possibly have created. The pyramid extends infinitely downwards, because

there is no limit to possible worlds. But there's just one world at the very top of the pyramid, and that's the world that's *better* than any others. It isn't perfect, but it's superior to all alternatives. This is the best of all possible worlds, and it happens to be the world that you and I are living in. How do we know this? Simple: we know this is the best possible world because it's the world God in fact created. Had there been a better world, then God would have created that one. Had there not been a best option, then God would not have created any.

There were some who fell in love with this dizzying vision of reality, among them the French mathematician and philosopher Emilie du Châtelet (who was also Voltaire's longtime lover and companion). Others were less enthused, and much ink was spent by generations of scholars to either attack Leibniz's uncompromising *optimism* or defend it.

Voltaire attacked. Twice. First, in his famous 'Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake' of 1756, which contrasts the devastation of that natural disaster that struck Lisbon in 1755 with the optimistic philosophies of Leibniz and Pope. And again, in his novel *Candide, or Optimism*, whose characters are put through all manner of suffering and violence, from torture, rape, executions, slavery, plague, and natural disasters, in order to drive home the point that optimism is 'a cruel philosophy hiding under a reassuring name.'⁸

But does this mean Voltaire was himself a pessimist? Hardly. Other philosophers like Pierre Bayle and David Hume went much further in their demonstrations of the badness of existence. For Bayle, and for Hume after him, the point is not just that the evils of life outnumber the goods (though they believe this is also the case) but that they *outweigh* them. A life might consist of an equal number of good moments and bad moments: the problem is that the bad moments tend to have an intensity that

upsets the scales. A small period of badness, says Bayle, has the power to ruin a large amount of good, just as a small portion of seawater can salt a barrel of fresh water: similarly, one hour of deep sorrow or intense pain contains more evil than there is good in six or seven pleasant days.⁹

It was against that bleak vision that thinkers like Leibniz and Rousseau emphasised the goods of life, and the power we have to seek out the good in all things, for if we learned to adjust our vision we would see that life is in fact very good: that ‘there is incomparably more good than evil in the life of men, as there are incomparably more houses than prisons,’ and that the world ‘will serve us if we use it for our service; we shall be happy in it if we wish to be.’¹⁰ Just as the pessimists believed the optimists were deceived in their insistence on the goods of life, so too the optimists thought the pessimists’ eyes were skewed towards the bad: each side accused the other of not having the right vision.

Fast forward a few centuries, and we find that this version of the debate on optimism and pessimism continues in contemporary philosophy: not just in the philosophy of religion but also in the secular debate on whether procreation is morally justified. After all, if life is indeed overwhelmingly bad, as the pessimists argued, are we justified in creating new persons? At what precise point is life too bad, or too uncertain, to pass on?

But while philosophers still speak of optimism and pessimism in this older, value-oriented way, this is not how the terms tend to be used in everyday life. If we asked a person living today, ‘What is optimism or pessimism?’ it is likely they would respond that it has to do with expectations of the *future*. And this brings us to the second sense of both optimism and pessimism, which is oriented not on the value of existence as a whole but on the future in particular.

Future-oriented

Consider these uses of the terms ‘optimistic’ and ‘pessimistic’ in everyday language:

I’m optimistic about our chances of developing this technology by 2030.

We are optimistic that we will do well in this tournament.

I’m pessimistic about my chances of keeping my job.

I’m pessimistic about the state of the economy.

Nowadays, when we say we are optimistic or pessimistic about something, it usually has to do with our expectations of the future or of something happening in the future. For instance, if we say ‘I’m optimistic about X’, this suggests we think it’s likely that some event X will come to pass. Or, if X is a project, it suggests we are confident the project will succeed. Conversely, if we’re pessimistic about X, we think that the event will not come to pass, or the project is likely to fail. This is also how newscasters speak about economic projections, or scientists describe scenarios: whereas a ‘pessimistic’ scenario assumes everything goes wrong, an ‘optimistic’ scenario assumes everything goes right.

So are these terms just value-neutral descriptions of our expectations about something happening or not happening in the future? Not quite. For instance, consider the following examples:

I’m optimistic that I will lose money on this investment.

I’m optimistic that there are hard times ahead of us.

I’m optimistic that I will fail my exams.

If you think these sentences sound strange, even funny, you are right: no one with a correct understanding of the English language would use the term ‘optimistic’ in this way (unless they

were trying to make a joke). But *why*? If I am confident that X will happen (and X = ‘I lose money in an investment’), why would it be inappropriate to say I am *optimistic* about it?

Apparently, even though we think X is likely to happen, we wouldn’t say we’re *optimistic* unless we also *hope for* it to happen. We reserve the term for things we *want* to come about, things we consider good or useful or beneficial. We wouldn’t say we’re optimistic about a disaster occurring, even if we’re confident that it will; conversely, we wouldn’t say we’re pessimistic about something unless it’s somehow bad for us.

So the terms are not value-neutral after all. Optimism is the expectation of something *good* happening; pessimism the expectation of something *bad* happening. This is also the case when we use the terms more generally. For instance, if we say we are optimistic about the future, it suggests we expect the future (in general, or in some specific way) will be *better* than it is now; if we say we are pessimistic about the future, we expect it will be *worse*.

But in none of these cases does the expectation of something bad happening suggest we *want* it to happen. On the contrary, we use words like ‘pessimistic’ for things that we *think* or *fear* will happen, though we *hope* they don’t. We use them for situations we would like to prevent.

Why, then, would it be better to be an ‘optimist’ than a ‘pessimist’?

A ‘Duty’ of Optimism?

I ask this question because it’s very common to hear the terms ‘optimist’ and ‘pessimist’ used in ways that are highly emotionally and morally charged. When we call someone an optimist, it’s usually praise: this is why politicians and entrepreneurs are

particularly keen to insist that they are optimists, or even to speak, following Karl Popper, of a ‘duty of optimism.’¹¹ Conversely, to call someone a pessimist is usually to deride, denounce, deflate them. ‘Pessimism is for losers’, as one book title has it.¹²

The result is that the terms are associated not only with expectations or attitudes towards the future but with character traits and moral attributes. Being an ‘optimist’ is generally considered a virtue, or something to be admired, whereas being a ‘pessimist’ is closer to a vice. These associations have a long historical lineage: the value-oriented optimists of old were quick to fault the pessimists for ingratitude, weakness, pusillanimity. And no matter how these terms have changed in meaning over the ages, the same suspicion clings to the concept of ‘pessimism’ today. We still tend to associate optimism with will-power and determination; pessimism with weakness and giving up. Consider this quote often attributed to Winston Churchill: ‘A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.’¹³ In fact there is no evidence Churchill ever said this, but it is indicative of the kinds of assumptions that are held about pessimism. Pessimists are ‘doomsters and gloomsters’, they see the difficulty in everything, they tend to be passive and resigned, and they let their disposition get the better of them instead of ‘manning up’ and believing in a better future; whereas optimists are active, bold, courageous, doers, and go-getters.

There are several reasons why we should be suspicious about such associations. For one thing, on this view the question of optimism and pessimism is purely a matter of personal temperament or disposition. But if this is true, and some people have an innate tendency to always look on the dark side of things, while others are naturally predisposed to have a cheerful outlook even in the direst circumstances, then it is all the more unclear why

the latter disposition should receive our praise and the former our blame. After all, we do tend to appreciate traits such as friendliness and a sunny disposition, but we also value compassion and sympathy, as well as the ability to show emotions like sadness and anger. It is hard, perhaps, to be friends with someone who never smiles, but at least as hard to stay friends with someone who is *always* smiling, even when we share bad news with them—or with someone who responds to our personal tragedies with statements such as *it's all for the best*.¹⁴

But in fact it is not the case that we conceive of optimism and pessimism *purely* as personal dispositions: this is belied by the way we use these terms, and by the fact that optimism is so positively charged and pessimism so negatively. When we praise someone for their optimism, or when someone praises themselves by saying 'I am an optimist', this suggests that optimism is not simply an innate disposition but a cultivated character trait—something we can train and develop, like a virtue; something we can pride ourselves on if we have achieved it. To speak of a 'duty of optimism' is to suggest that we *ought* to be optimists, that we must *always* believe in the achievability of success, even against all odds.

For instance, it is very common to hear a phrase like the following: 'All evidence points to things turning out badly for X, *but we have to be optimistic*.' But then we still have a problem. Why should it be considered a virtue for someone to declare their optimism *even against the facts*? In fact, would this not be a misuse of the very term 'optimistic', which we usually employ when we *expect* a good thing to come about? If a person told us they were 'optimistic about X' *in blatant disregard of the facts*, would we trust their judgement? Immanuel Kant famously argued that we should never tell lies, because if we universalised our action and imagined a society in which everyone lied, then we could not

trust anything anyone ever said. Similarly, if we lived in a society where everyone was optimistic about everything, because the alternative was not socially acceptable, then we would have no reason to believe anyone's expressions about anything.

Of course this is an exaggeration: no one would argue that we have to be optimistic about everything all the time. But then, why this constant insistence on optimism, this pervasive fear that any expression of pessimism is the first step on the road to giving up altogether? Why, at the end of the year 2022, which brought famine to Africa, war to Europe, and searing fires to forests around the globe (not to mention the deepening climate crisis), did several Dutch newspapers choose to present issues themed around 'hope', 'optimism', and 'looking forward to tomorrow', and even to illustrate this 'new perspective on crisis' with a family happily roasting marshmallows on a forest fire?¹⁵

One reason may be that upbeat, hopeful, optimistic reporting makes us feel comfortable and relaxed, whereas dark news unsettles and discomfits us.¹⁶ But also, I think there is a common confusion underlying the fear of pessimism. When people say that 'even when the odds are against us, we have to be optimistic', what they mean is simply: all evidence is against us, *but we have to try nonetheless*. And perhaps: *if we do our best we might still stand a chance*.

But that commendable attitude is not incompatible with pessimism. It is only incompatible with fatalism.

Fatalism

Fatalism is the belief that the future is set in stone; that our actions cannot change it. This is often conflated with pessimism, on the view that to take a pessimistic stance is to disbelieve entirely in the possibility of success; that all our efforts are

bound to fail. But in fact, if pessimism is simply an expectation that some bad thing is likely to happen, or some bad situation is likely to get worse, the equation with fatalism does not follow. To have a pessimistic expectation about the future is not the same as holding that the future is fixed or that nothing can be done to change it. On the contrary: viewing the future as bleak might precisely be a spur to action, a call to arms. Even the perceived unlikelihood of success need not stand in the way of determined action, as long as action is driven deeply by other moral sources than the certainty of victory: such as duty, justice, and the need to fight for those things we hold dear.

That pessimism is not the same as fatalism is also borne out by the fact that most self-declared pessimists of the past do not subscribe to such a notion: on the contrary, they do all they can to resist it. As Dienstag has argued, to be a pessimist is not necessarily to expect the worst but rather *to expect nothing at all*.¹⁷ Pessimism, in philosophy, has to do rather with a limitation of what we can possibly know about what life has in store for us. It is, therefore, not at all a positive belief in decline but rather a negative belief, a refusal to believe that progress is a given.

Thus pessimism as a philosophical and political tradition is precisely opposed to fatalism, since the intrinsic uncertainty of life means we can expect neither progress nor decline. Interestingly, this is a view that some self-declared optimists share. Even Karl Popper, who so influentially declared that ‘optimism is a duty’, was careful to add that all he meant with this was that the *outcome is not yet fixed* and that we have to distinguish the present from the ‘wide-open future’:

The future is open. It is not fixed in advance. So no one can predict it—except by chance. The possibilities lying within the future, both good and bad, are boundless. When I say,

‘Optimism is a duty’, this means not only that the future is open but that we all help to decide it through what we do. We are all jointly responsible for what is to come.¹⁸

And again:

The open future contains unforeseeable and morally quite different possibilities. So our basic attitude should not be ‘What will happen?’ but ‘What should we do to make the world a little better—even if we know that once we have done it, future generations might make everything worse again?’¹⁹

But this combination of openness and activism, as will become clear, is in turn an attitude that many pessimists would heartily endorse. When Popper speaks of ‘pessimism’ he uses it to describe a ‘cynical view of history’, according to which ‘things always have been and always will be so’—a type of fatalism that makes activism unnecessary and, indeed, impossible.²⁰ But if pessimism is simply an evaluation about the present or an expectation about the future, *without in any way* holding that the future is fixed, then there would seem to be no reason why pessimists cannot be activists. (That this is correct, and pessimism is in no way incompatible with activism, will become clear in the next chapter.)

Of course there is a version of pessimism we might call fatalistic: if pessimism is defined as the belief that things will *necessarily* get worse, or that some bad event is *destined* to come about.²¹ We might call this Fatalistic Pessimism. But there’s a catch. If this belief is fatalistic, then so is its opposite: the belief that things will *necessarily* get better, or that some good event is *destined* to come about—in other words, Fatalistic Optimism. If the former belief or attitude is fatalistic in positing the certainty of decline, the latter is no less fatalistic in positing the

certainty of progress. To the extent that pessimism can be fatalistic, optimism can be too.²²

The notion of Fatalistic Optimism may seem strange to us today (though the belief in the certainty of progress is in fact much more common than the belief in necessary decline), but it was one of the reasons why Voltaire was so critical of optimism (as he perceived it). Voltaire thought that Leibniz's insistence that *the system as a whole is good* is a kind of fatalism: if everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, that suggests things can never get better; that we can never strive for (social, political, moral) improvement.²³ Why would we act for cultural change if we believe things are fated to get better anyhow?

This was Voltaire's concern: if we go about our lives believing everything *was, is, and will be* for the best, then this 'deflates our sense of the possible' (in Marilynne Robinson's words)²⁴—it makes us apathetic, it removes any drive we might have to act for change. And the same is true if we believe all *was, is, and will be* for the worst. On either end, this is fatalism, and we are right to object to it just as Voltaire did. But we should remember such fatalism can take several guises: it is perhaps more obvious to us in the darker folds of pessimism, but it is no less pervasive when dressed in the bright colours of optimism.

Climate Optimism, Climate Pessimism

The thing to be avoided, then, is not pessimism but fatalism: the belief that the future is set in stone, that there is nothing we can do to change it. Such fatalism, and this is important, can take the form of either optimism or pessimism (as we now define them)—but neither of these is *necessarily* fatalistic. Most uses of both 'optimism' and 'pessimism' suggest not certainty but

probability, or the conviction that something is *likely* to come about. This will not surprise us in the case of ‘optimism’, a term we use correctly when we voice our conviction that some good thing is *likely*, though not *destined*, to occur.

But it is all too often forgotten that there is an open-ended version of ‘pessimism’ too, a term we use correctly when we voice our belief, which is at the same time a fear, that some bad thing is likely to come about. Thus, a climate optimist might say: ‘There is every reason to believe we can turn the tide and prevent the worst impact from climate change. Our efforts to prevent climate catastrophe are likely to succeed.’ While a climate pessimist might say: ‘There is every reason to believe we cannot turn the tide and prevent the worst impact from climate change. Our efforts to prevent climate catastrophe are likely to fail.’

Both statements are oriented towards the future; both involve the expectation of something good or bad happening; yet neither one is the same as giving up. For instance, the climate pessimist may continue: ‘Our efforts are likely to fail—and *we will do what we can nonetheless*.’ Because, for all the bleak projections of what will happen if we don’t keep global warming to 1.5 or even 2 degrees, there is still a possibility that the worst consequences can be mitigated, the darkest scenarios kept at bay—and even small differences between the scenarios may make the difference between life and death for people at the front line of their effects. ‘The fight is, definitely not yet lost,’ writes David Wallace-Wells, ‘—in fact will never be lost, so long as we avoid extinction, because however warm the planet gets, *it will always be the case that the decade that follows could contain more suffering or less*.’²⁵ And as if these are not sufficient reasons for persistent collective action, here is another: quite simply, *because it is owed*—to people alive now as well as to future generations, and to the many creatures, sentient and nonsentient, with whom we share a world.²⁶

From the pessimistic premise the defeatist conclusion does not follow. If one believes the future looks dark, the logical next step is not to do nothing: it may well be to act all the more determinedly, to do what one can in resistance and perseverance against the rising storm. Conversely, if one believes the future to be bright, for instance because technology will save us, or governments will spring into timely action, is this an equal ground of motivation?

I leave this, deliberately, as an open question—one that we, as a culture, have failed to ask ourselves. And I insist upon this point: that pessimism should not be confused with fatalism; that to be pessimistic about something is by no means equivalent to saying ‘We may as well give up’. As will become evident in the next chapter, there have been plenty of deeply pessimistic activists already—and it should be clear even from the amount of despair-fuelled resistance visible today that climate pessimism is not the same as fatalism or defeatism and not logically equivalent to an attitude of inaction or resignation. History and popular culture are full of examples of resistance even without any perspective of victory but for reasons of justice and duty—because it is the right thing to do. We just don’t recognise these for what they are: an exercise of *hopeful pessimism*.

Now of course there can be degrees and variations and even mixtures between these two alternatives—climate optimism, climate pessimism—and for each, there is a fatalistic version. Optimistic climate fatalists reveal themselves by statements like the following: ‘Humanity will *certainly* resolve climate change; our efforts are *destined* to succeed.’ While pessimistic fatalists might tell us: ‘Humanity will *certainly* not resolve climate change; our efforts are *doomed* to fail.’ Climate fatalism thus has two varieties: an optimistic and a pessimistic kind. Among the former we might count certain varieties of techno-optimism,

which stakes such a conviction in technological solutions that it deflates the need for either individual or collective change, while among the latter, we may include the advocates of what some have called ‘climate stoicism’ and ‘deep adaptation’—the belief that instead of acting to minimise human suffering we should ‘learn to accept and adapt’: accept that ‘we’re doomed’, and adapt by means of a ‘daily cultivation of detachment.’²⁷

Strictly speaking, even these fatalisms do not equate inaction or passivity, as will become clear—but there is a real risk in such views, and it is this risk that writers emphasising the need for hope or optimism are getting at when they warn against pessimism or despair. Namely, the risk of believing *that there’s no point in acting*, as either the crisis is unsolvable or it will be solved for us. This is a risk worth combatting and a battle that must be waged on two fronts. Optimistic fatalism poses as much a risk as pessimistic fatalism; the danger of deflatedness threatens on both sides. In the words of novelist China Miéville, ‘There is bad pessimism as well as bad optimism.’ Against those who would tell us there is no point in acting, ‘there are sound scientific reasons to suggest that we’re not yet—quite—at some point of no return. We need to tilt at a different tipping point, into irrevocable social change, and that requires *a different pessimism, an unflinching look at how bad things are.*’²⁸

We should never pretend that there is no use in acting. Even if in some way the disaster is already upon us, our actions now can prevent some of the worst outcomes and have a direct and measurable impact on those alive and suffering *now*. But neither should any of us feel pressured to tone down our concerns about the future or the nature of the very real threat that is upon us.

This is especially important to remember in the debate on climate change, where it is all too common to hear questions such

as ‘Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future?’ or statements such as ‘We have to be optimistic, at all costs.’ For while there is nothing wrong in principle with saying we are optimistic or pessimistic about something—in so far as we are describing our personal expectations, our hopes and fears—something goes awry when a culture requires its members to express optimism at any cost, whereas pessimism is considered so suspect as to be shunned, as if it were a vice, a dereliction of duty.

And this is where the cruelty of optimism reveals itself: not only in imposing the burden of having to express one’s optimism or hopefulness, even when it is not felt, but in overemphasising the amount of control we can have over our own affects and attitudes. ‘If we let ourselves be negatively affected,’ it simply means we have achieved ‘insufficient reorientation in our ways of thinking and attitudes towards ourselves and our relationship with the world,’ as one scholar tells us. ‘The experience of harm—having been negatively affected—simply means that we are to be blamed for not yet having become sufficiently aware of our attachments.’²⁹ But, as the pessimists of the past would be the first to remind us, to deride pessimism, or to dismiss people who are in the depths of despair, is to pile suffering upon suffering: it is to add to this despair the burden of being responsible for it.

In an age when entire islands are sinking into the sea, vast stretches of land and wood are swept away by storms of wind or fire, and cities by floods; when we are losing species more quickly than we can count them, and people young and old stand weeping in the streets—it is crucial that all of us living through these times are able to express, freely and sincerely, our beliefs and attitudes, even (and perhaps *especially*) when these moods are dark. The insistence on positive, optimistic, hopeful narratives comes with its own risks and burdens, whereas the repression of negative,

pessimistic, even desperate counternarratives is truly dangerous, as it charges the already burdened with the duty of optimism.

And so it seems that something is to be gained in encountering these terms again, reacquainting ourselves with them as if for the first time, and asking ourselves: Why are they so important to us? What do we mean when we speak of *optimism* or *pessimism*? Is it true that we feel comforted by optimism, whereas pessimism threatens our repose? And if it is true, is it also right?

Whatever our answers to such questions, one thing is clear: in an age of climate crisis and ecological devastation, pessimism has a role to play.

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