

# Pessimism and Optimism

Fresh Treatment of an  
Old Subject

By  
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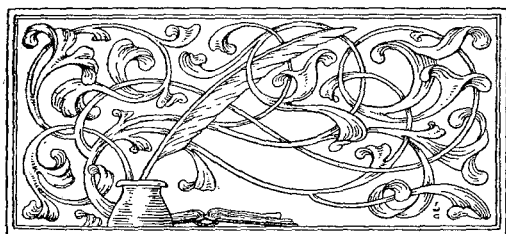


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## PESSIMISM AND OPTIMISM



HAVE I anything new to say on Pessimism vs. Optimism? Frankly, I do not know. I doubt it. But I have not re-read all the classical and semi-classical books or essays on this very old but ever new question, and do not intend to indulge unduly in or to fall back on familiar or unfamiliar quotations. I intend to deal with the subject in my own way, on the strength or weakness of my own vital experience. One ounce of such experience, honestly and candidly set forth, is worth pounds of borrowed philosophy. We do not, let me say in passing, think for ourselves nearly enough on the deeper and ultimate problems. We are content to accept and repeat what others, especially the great and famous, have said. But even when we do think for ourselves and have convictions

or opinions that represent and embody actual experience, we are too often reluctant to give straightforward expression to these convictions or opinions. We do not trust ourselves. We overestimate the value of the opinions of the so-called great men and underestimate that of our own carefully formed opinions. Great men are not always great, nor are they great in all things. They may talk rubbish and multiply words without wisdom on questions they have not studied or pondered. Any man of intelligence and fair ability who has lived, observed, read and reflected on the deeper problems of existence is entitled to opinions, and these opinions have a certain value and weight. Nor will philosophers ignore such human documents.

But enough in the way of introduction. To plunge into the subject, should one be an optimist, a pessimist, or a neutral?

Of course the question is put in a philosophical sense. There is such a thing as temperamental optimism and such a thing as temperamental pessimism. Some persons are cheerful, hopeful and buoyant by nature. Others see everything black and cannot help worrying about the past, present and future. The former may well thank the gods for the greatest gift they are able to bestow. Such natural optimists do not know what real trouble is. They may be poor, ill, pros-

pectless, but they do not take their position tragically. They believe that something will turn up. They remain confident; at the worst, they do not despair. They escape worry, the thing that kills. On the other hand, the temperamental pessimist makes the worst of every situation, and even if things, after all, go right, he has suffered so much that he manages to extract the least possible satisfaction from the happy ending.

Philosophy has nothing to say about these pessimists and optimists. It merely notes that not infrequently temperament is to some extent back of and responsible for the quasi-scientific views taken of life and destiny. John Burroughs, I think, is a temperamental optimist. However, it is possible for a dyspeptic to be an intellectual optimist and for an easy-going and epicurean lover of the good things of life to be a profound intellectual pessimist. Indeed, it has long been a truism that pessimism may degenerate into cynicism and lead to a life of indulgence and dissipation. Why not drown one's metaphysical world-sorrows in wine, woman and song?

Let us, however, put these relations and connections on one side. Let our problem be purely scientific. Is a thoughtful person of our own day driven to join the ranks of the pessimists, or may he — not to say must he — conscientiously arrive at optimistic conclusions?

First of all, it seems to me, the answer should depend on our honest belief or disbelief in a future life, in continuity, in what is called a hereafter. Really, those who firmly believe in immortality, in life beyond the grave, in a better and nobler existence for the soul in some other world, cannot be philosophical pessimists. If this short and troubled life is merely a preparation for eternal bliss, or at least for eternal freedom and serenity, of what consequence are our difficulties, disappointments, failures, losses, pains, here below? Patience, stoicism, and even cheerfulness, should be absurdly easy to the naïve acceptors of the view of orthodox theologians. Be reasonably virtuous—I say reasonably, for God is kind and merciful, we are told—and all the glories and splendors of the promised paradise will be yours forever!

As a matter of fact, few really believe in the orthodox heaven, paradise and eternal bliss. Such conceptions are what Spencer called pseudo-conceptions. They are not actually formed; men think they have formed them and then stop thinking about them. The fear and dread of death are universal, as Samuel Johnson bluntly asserted. Vague and nebulous notions, or shadows of such notions, regarding a future life yield precious little comfort. We cling to life desperately, because we cannot face the idea of annihila-

lation, of the destruction of our personality. It is mere mockery to tell us, by way of consolation, that matter cannot be destroyed, and that dissolution of a living body means but a change of form. What we yearn for is assurance of continuity. John Smith wants to know himself as John Smith after death, to remember his sublunar adventures, his friends and his achievements. Spiritualism owes all its interest and fascination to the alleged evidence it brings of continuity in this positive, human sense. Psychical research has nothing to do with metaphysical juggles and phrase-making. We go to the medium to be placed in touch with the departed, to hear that all is well with them and thus receive assurance that all will be well with us after death. Yet it is utterly impossible to frame a conception of life beyond the grave. Bernard Shaw has pointed out that no theologian and no religious artist ever succeeded in describing even one day spent in paradise by the good and pure souls who are supposed to dwell there eternally. Of course, it is pure childishness to talk of playing the harp all day or of singing ceaselessly the glory of the Creator. We cannot imagine life without work, struggle, study, activity. We know that even play and amusement depend for their zest and pleasure on work and exertion. The sort of heavenly existence that is hinted at by the conventional theologians would

drive all the spirits to commit suicide in a fortnight, if spirits can commit suicide.

I seem, perhaps, to be contradicting myself. I said a moment since that an assurance of continuity, of life beyond the grave, would banish pessimism and make every intelligent person a thoroughgoing optimist. Now I am denying that it is possible to form an idea of life after death, or even of one day in paradise. In truth, however, there is no logical contradiction here. It is a fact within everyone's experience that we cling to life so long as we possess vigor enough to enjoy physical and intellectual satisfaction. It is a fact that we shrink from the thought of annihilation. And it is also a fact, finally, that we are unable to frame any idea or notion of life after death. Each of these facts, as William James properly insisted, is entitled to attention and weight. The contradictions are not in my argument; they are in the reality and nature of our experience.

Now, many have long ago discarded as wholly puerile the idea of immortality or personal continuity. They have discarded it with keen regret, and that regret has never left them. I have no fear of dying, for, after all, it is very easy to die, as Carl Schurz and thousands of others have recorded, and as trustworthy medical testimony abundantly establishes. Men sick unto death may seem to us to be in agony; they themselves,



however, feel little or nothing. An English writer of standing recently reported the remarkable fact that after what seemed to him in his trying vigil a terrible night of intense pain and suffering for the patient, his father, the latter said cheerfully in the morning: "I have had a very comfortable night and feel better." If it takes no courage to face natural death, or even death due to acute disease, what else is there to fear? The rest is silence and oblivion. After what I have said of heaven it is hardly necessary for me to dismiss the conventional and crude notions of hell, punishment of the disembodied spirit, etc. What we dread and recoil from, then, is annihilation and extinction. Nature has implanted this dread for her own purposes. If we find a case where it does not exist, we find a case where nature is through. The individual has become useless and worse to the species, to society, and if he is ready and anxious to go, so, probably, is everybody around him anxious that he should go, should make room for a healthier and more serviceable individual.

Now, this fear of the inevitable annihilation of our personality cannot fail to make for gloom and pessimism. We, therefore, wisely forbid ourselves to think of the matter. To brood over death, our own or that of any one we love and admire, is to render life impossible. We frown on what we call

morbid and depressing ideas. Still we must not let such adjectives usurp the place of thoughts when the question is scientifically discussed. It is absurd to take the image of Death to the banquet hall or to the social and artistic function, but there are times when the issue should be faced without flinching. When we so face it, naïve, shallow optimism takes flight.

Intimately connected with this question is another—the existence of a moral purpose or moral order in the universe—and one, I hardly need add, of concern and significance to us humans. Some thinkers have defined Religion as the conviction that there is a purpose in the universe and that the purpose is good from our point of view. Be this definition adequate or inadequate, the feeling that there is such a purpose, that we can grasp it, obtain certainty of it, and humbly co-operate with cosmic forces in furthering that divine purpose, would undoubtedly cheer and inspire us, and even perhaps reconcile us to *personal* annihilation. It would lend dignity and meaning to human existence. But, alas, we have absolutely no evidence of moral purpose or order in the universe. Moral ideas are purely human; they have reference to the life of the race on this planet and the conditions of social peace, security and co-operation. Nature is indifferent to our welfare. The cosmic forces are neither moral nor immoral.

Would the destruction of the earth be "immoral" from any point of view? This destruction is conceivable through a variety of causes, and while recent science claims to add some millions of years to the career of the living organisms on our little whirling globe, ultimately the processes of evolution will be halted and those of dissolution set in motion.

Meantime earthquakes, landslides, volcanic eruptions, icebergs, tidal waves, cyclones, floods, and like phenomena of blind nature serve to remind us that even evolution is not for us a grand, uninterrupted, onward and upward march. Our best laid plans are upset by the chapter of elemental and physical accidents. Economy and scientific management are excellent things for us, but Nature evidently cares little about our efforts and successes in those directions. She wastes on a staggering scale, and she too often wastes at our expense.

I am aware, of course, of the periodic discussion of the problem of Evil. When a great and apparently senseless calamity occurs, and it is found impossible to draw moral lessons therefrom, conventional religionists tell us that, while the ways of Providence are mysterious, it is certain in a general way that evil is necessary to discipline and the building of human character; that we are punished for our sins, or for our good. An

iceberg sends a liner to the bottom, and a thousand poor immigrant men, women and children are drowned. Fire destroys an orphan asylum with several hundred of its young inmates. We are asked to believe in these cases that such calamities tend to elevate our habits and morals. Why Italian or Slav emigrants of the poorest and most ignorant classes should suffer death for the sins of idle American millionaires who are responsible for the too luxurious equipment of transatlantic steamers, is not at all clear. Why children should have to be burned in order to impress lessons of safety and care on middle-aged trustees and managers of orphan asylums, is equally difficult to understand. Finally, the lessons in question do not seem to be easily mastered or retained for any length of time. These alleged solutions of the problem of evil outrage our reason and our moral sentiments. We do not really accept them; some of us merely pretend to accept them to avoid a painful subject and terminate futile discussion. The honest answer in all such cases is, We do not know, we cannot understand. This is agnosticism, but we must add in honesty that, at any rate, all appearances indicate that Nature and her elemental forces are absolutely unmoral.

Let us stop to consider, at this point, two recent and meant-to-be weighty utterances on this subject. Ernst Haeckel, the vener-

able agnostic philosopher, has lately published a book on "Eternity: Thoughts About Life and Death." The war, he says in it, has proved the absurdity of conventional religious doctrines. He continues:

The war has reduced to an absurdity the doctrines of providence and predestination. In view of the deaths of such masses of people, in view of the fact that daily thousands die in open battle, in trenches, in air machines, submarines, hospitals, and prison camps, all of them carried away by blind chance, and others owing their escape to the same blind chance, the illusion that the destinies of men are in the care of an omnipotent intelligence with carefully arranged plans, is an idea which cannot be entertained.

And he offers the Germans the comforts of the monistic religion of reason. That religion is based on "the knowledge and recognition of the eternity and indestructibility of the cosmos." Not of humanity, not of our solar system, but of the cosmos. Now, in the name of simple candor, has anybody ever found, can anybody ever find, consolation in the contemplation of the indestructibility of the cosmos—a mere name for something we cannot even conceive, since we cannot conceive infinite space, any more than we can conceive the end of space and the beginning of something that is not space? Moreover, have we, can we have, knowledge of the eternity of the cosmos? Certainly not. We only know that the destruction and disappearance of the cosmos is as inconceivable as eternity. Haeckel is using terms

without meaning. He is an agnostic, if he is anything, and his monistic religion of reason is an empty phrase.

Haeckel also offers us the beauty of resignation, of brave acquiescence in the unavoidable. True, resignation and acquiescence are more dignified than unmanly, futile resistance, wailing and kicking, but what relation is there between our conceptions of human dignity and character and the alleged certainty of the indestructibility of the cosmos? None whatever. Would want of human dignity, would weakness and cowardice be justified in any way by knowledge that the cosmos is not eternal, and that, say, in a billion years it will come to an inglorious end? An agnostic who talks as Haeckel does makes himself ridiculous.

Mr. Arthur Balfour, who would have no difficulty in puncturing Haeckel's shallow metaphysics, would not, however, accept agnostic empiricism as a satisfactory refuge. Balfour is one of our subtlest philosophers and dialecticians, and he has been pursuing and assailing unbelief with tenacity and vigor. In his latest volume he describes agnostics as men who exhibit a singular combination of arrogance and timidity. His own views are summarized in the following short paragraph:

If we would maintain the value of our highest beliefs and emotions, we must find for them a congruous

origin. Beauty must be more than an accident. The source of morality must be moral. The source of knowledge must be rational. If this be granted, you rule out Mechanism, you rule out Naturalism, you rule out Agnosticism, and a lofty form of Theism becomes, as I think, inevitable.

We must, if we can, trace our beliefs and emotions, whether high or low, to their origins. In fact, we cannot call one belief or emotion high, and another low, unless we know their origins, their natural history, strength, character, and place in the whole complex of our beliefs and emotions. But suppose we cannot explain or account for certain beliefs and emotions? Mr. Balfour admits that we cannot account for beauty. Well, then, why not stop there? Ah, he says, beauty cannot be an accident. We know what accident means in human speech. But what is a cosmic accident? Does Mr. Balfour mean that beauty, as we feel it, must have had a creator? This is so naïve and crude that it is not unfair to ask the very old and crude question, Then who created the Creator? Was the Creator an accident, or was He self-created?

But this is not all. Beauty cannot be an accident, says Mr. Balfour. Can ugliness be an accident? Would there be beauty without the conception of ugliness? If beauty was created, then ugliness was also created. If the source of beauty must be beautiful, the source of ugliness must be ugly. If the

source of reason must be rational, the source of unreason and stupidity must be unreasonable and stupid. If the source of morality must be moral, what of the source of immorality and crime?

Mr. Balfour is playing with words. He is crudely anthropomorphic without realizing it. He talks of a lofty Theism, but there is no real idea behind the term. Can he form a conception of an overruling, guiding intelligence?

Contemplation of the cosmic order, therefore, does not contribute to optimism. We have to fall back on ourselves, on Humanity, on our own moral ideas and sentiments, on the kind of social order we have been dreaming of and laboring for, on the arrangements and relations we are seeking to establish in our habitat. Is Humanity steadily advancing and progressing? Does each generation leave the world better—at least a little better—than it finds it? Are we wiser, nobler and happier than the people of the mediæval or ancient world? There are those who, unable to embrace any existing religious faith, advocate the worship of Humanity. Comtism, it is true, has but few full-fledged disciples to-day, but there are men who, without professing Positivism in its full and original sense, believe that Humanity, with a capital H, is worthy of something like worship. A number of years ago Herbert Spencer and Fred-



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eric Harrison carried on a spirited and interesting controversy on Comte's Religion of Humanity, and this very question of the worth and character of the human race necessarily became a prominent feature of the debate. Spencer was neither a cynic nor a pessimist, but his dissection and exposé of this proud race of mortals were as withering as they were masterly. No foolish or pointless indictment of man, as man, was attempted. But Spencer was concerned to show to the Positivists that humanity was not exactly an object of worship or ecstatic adoration. The little book which gave permanent form to this controversy, carried on originally in periodicals, is unfortunately out of print, but there are copies of it to be found in the larger of our public libraries.

Spencer first glances at the intellectual traits of the respectable and educated classes—leaving out the lowest—and then turns to the moral traits of these same classes. He finds nothing that calls forth the emotion of adoration. Many of the manifestations, he says, excite an emotion nearer to contempt. He refers to our politicians, our educational systems, our newspapers, most of our fiction, our worship of militarism, our glorification of wholesale murder, etc. Space limits forbid quotation.

But Spencer's arraignment is by no means complete. It is easy to give other

illustrations. Think of what man, the creature that is so proud of his reason and his godlike faculties, has managed to do with Sex. What really refined individual does not envy the birds, insects and animals their lack of self-consciousness in regard to the instinct that perpetuates life and the functions and organs that nature has developed and made her instruments of species and race preservation. Man alone is ashamed of Sex. Man has degraded the sex instinct, thinks of it as something obscene, filthy, and unworthy. It may not be alluded to even distantly in polite and cultured society. Vulgarities and unprintable smut characterize most of the average person's talk about sex, and even educated people will bandy coarse stories and disgusting jokes about the organs and physical act of procreation. Poets rave about love; painters enthrone and ensky madonnas; the attraction between the sexes is indubitably at the root of our aesthetic pleasures, our delight in beauty and grace and perfection. But love has a physical basis, and it is of this physical basis that we are so absurdly, so irrationally, so indecently ashamed. Religious teaching that sharply separates body and spirit, that apologizes for the demands of the flesh and makes all allowances for lower instincts and appetites, is largely responsible for this attitude toward

Sex, but surely other factors are not without guilt.

Man is ashamed of other natural functions of the body. There are times and occasions when this attitude directly imperils his health and his sanity, but health is heroically sacrificed to a sickly and decadent fastidiousness.

Turn, now, to the life of the overwhelming majority of human beings. What is it? What is it worth? One third of everyone's life is absolutely lost or wasted in sleep. Sleep is a necessary evil, but when a third of life has to be spent in unconsciousness, we may well complain of the unreasonableness of the arrangement—that is, if we really value *life*. Of the two thirds of our earthly span controlled by consciousness, sixty or seventy per cent is spent in tedious, unpleasant or uncongenial routine or toil, and in going to and from the scenes of such routine and toil. What is left of life that is interesting, significant, human? How much time has any one for meditation, for study, for the enjoyment of beauty? How many take pleasure in their work? How many ever know the joy of creative and artistic effort?

But the mention of pleasure and joy suggests other thoughts that are far from cheerful. What are the pleasures and amusements of the great majority of people? Drinking, prize fighting, gambling, indecent conversa-

tion, cheap and crude humor, lurid, unreal, and artificial melodrama, thinly veiled appeals to sex and sex passion—this is what the world lives by in the sphere of recreation and entertainment.

Half-cultivated persons are often even worse off. They cannot enjoy the shallow and sensational forms of entertainment, yet they are not developed enough to appreciate and delight in the finer manifestations of intellect and art. They are condemned to ennui, and life becomes intolerable to them. They actually envy the poor and the rough, simple laborer and peasant their "natural" existence, as if intelligence and refinement were not equally "natural"! To die ignorant, says Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*, that's the real tragedy. Well, millions of these tragedies are witnessed every year by those of us who have a little learning and a little interest in the higher things of life. And what can we do to mend matters? We have established popular education, have provided the millions with venal, silly, and misleading newspapers, and instead of simple, guileless ignorance, we have a brazen ignorance that thinks it knows, thinks it thinks.

But it is unnecessary and in fact impossible to exhaust the list of special counts against the defendant, Humanity. Let me say generally and briefly that when we stop to think of the horrors and atrocities of

aggressive, needless, avoidable war, the horrors and cruelties, the drudgery and monotony, of industry and peace, the ravages of venereal disease, the pollution of millions of homes through these diseases, the pain, suffering and deaths caused by them, the scandals and suppressed scandals of the divorce courts, the perversion and abuse of the sex impulses, the murders, lynchings, and other brutal crimes committed daily, the horrors of our prisons and jails, the futility and mockery of much of what we call law and justice, the iniquity and revolting unfairness of our system of wealth distribution, the vices of the idle rich, the brutality and degradation of the so-called lower classes, the self-satisfied stupidity and wretched tastes of the middle classes—when we think of these and a hundred other things, we cannot but smile sadly at the suggestion that Humanity might be substituted for an Unknowable Power, which some call God and others prefer to leave unnamed and unpictured, as the object of our religious worship.

What, however, is more relevant here than the question of the reasonableness of Positivism, is the effect produced on our minds and spirits by the contemplation of man as he actually is—with his superstitions, hatreds, temptations, meannesses, and shameful weaknesses. That effect cannot be uplifting and heartening. It decidedly makes for pes-

simism, just as contemplation of cosmic operations and processes, or of our chances of continuity and immortality, makes for pessimism.

With regard to man's ascent, to his progress, are we sure that it is a fact? Many scholarly thinkers are of the opinion that progress in the modern sense is a figment of our imagination. M. Emile Faguet, the able French academician and critic, ridicules the flattering conceit that progress is a law of our being. Are we, he asks, wiser than were the ancients? Are we happier than were the ancients? Is there any evidence of intellectual progress in the sense of increased mental capacity? Have we advanced in literature, in drama, in architecture, in sculpture, in painting since the best days of Greece? Are we more moral than were our ancestors thousands of years ago? All these questions are answered in the negative by Faguet and others. Wallace not only denied the claim that there has been intellectual progress in historic times — aside from the mere accumulation of facts and the invention of tools and appliances — but asserted that morally and socially the conditions of civilized humanity during the nineteenth century were the worst known to students of human annals. This is an exaggeration prompted by indignation and bitterness, and Wallace was very old when he thus condemned his own time. However,

the fact, the reality of progress, is vigorously called in question by many philosophers.

Is my conclusion, then, that philosophical pessimism is justified or even enjoined? By no means. I am no pessimist, no Schopenhauerite. I am not even a neutral "meliorist." I cannot follow George Eliot or William James in their notion that meliorism is a compromise, or golden mean. For working purposes meliorism will serve well enough, but the thinker who, like James, professes to find more than a practical point of support in meliorism, blinks the real issue. Force the meliorist to choose, to declare under which flag he is fighting, or toiling, and he will generally enroll himself among the optimists. The true, the consistent philosophical pessimist cannot be a meliorist, since he cannot attach any importance to the necessarily slight improvements and superficial changes that are within our range of accomplishment.

We are practical meliorists only if we are at bottom optimists—not flamboyant, Panglossian optimists, but moderate, sober, quiet and restrained optimists, in a new, modern sense of the term. In what sense? Well, in the sense in which Edmund Gosse says in "Father and Son" that he is thankful for life—thankful for its joys and even for some of its sorrows. In the sense of the man who sees things as they are and is yet glad, on the whole, that he is here to see, to feel, to



do, to play a modest part in the marvelous drama of life.

Life is intensely interesting. It is full of problems, of food for thought and the emotions. Many of the problems are insoluble; but there is satisfaction in grappling with and solving those that *are* soluble. Nature is what it is, humanity is what it is; but we learn to expect little of man and to be grateful to him for very small favors. Nature, we discover, cares nothing about us, but if we study her ways we can make ourselves fairly comfortable. The universe was not made for our benefit, but since we are part of it, it is pleasant to feel that so much of the universe is convertible to our use and benefit. Does not the pessimist enjoy a beautiful sunset or sunrise? Does not the pessimist fall in love and forget our discreditable treatment of sex? The delights of youth, the thrills of the awakening of sex instincts, the transports of the tender passion, the serene satisfactions of family life, the pleasures of friendly and social intercourse, the excitement and fun of travel, the enjoyment of letters and works of art, the inspiring and ennobling effects of great and sublime music, the exercise of the intellect, the acquisition of wisdom and breadth — are not these things worth living for?

When I think of all that we have felt and experienced, when I think of what specula-

tion, study, books, have meant to me, and of what music and artistic interpretation of great plays, and contemplation of the masterpieces of architecture, sculpture and painting have meant to me; when I think of the thrills I experienced on first seeing Westminster, St. Paul's, St. Peter's, the Place de la Concorde, the Alps, the Rock of Gibraltar, the bay of Naples; when I think of what Shakespeare, Beethoven, Goethe, Wagner, Brahms, Molière, Cervantes, Heine, Spencer, Mill, Ruskin, Tolstoy, Tourgeniev, Meredith, Hardy, Henry James, have meant to me and done for me; when I think—with a smile—of the pride and satisfaction I felt when I first achieved print—with or without signature; when I think of friendships made and kept, of reform movements joined and battles fought, when I think of communion with nature, animate and inanimate, of the colors and sounds of the green country, of hill and dale, of mountain and valley—when I think of these and other similar things, I rejoice that I have lived and participated in the great drama or comedy of human existence. I, for one, am quite sure that, had I been consulted before birth about the matter and permitted to make a choice, I would have elected to enter the world and play my part in it.

Of course, I shall be told that this is at bottom irrational, and that our alleged free-

dom of choice is one of the tricks of nature, whose deluded playthings we are. But since my freedom is felt as freedom, and since I think I am free, what matters the abstract possibility of my being deceived? Deception is not deception when not discoverable.

I may further be told that my attitude is personal and individual, and that millions of human beings have not had, and are not likely to have, the sundry compensations above mentioned. What of such persons? Why should they be optimists? What makes life worth living to them? To this series of questions there are two answers. In the first place, these men and women have their own joys, pleasures and satisfactions. They have their naïve beliefs, their life of the senses. Most of them, I am convinced, would have elected to enter our world on the terms offered *them*, just as I would on the terms vouchsafed to me. In the second place, the requirements of logic are fully met when I have demonstrated, or if it be conceded, that the compensations outlined are not necessarily the rare privilege of the few, but the possible possession of the many, of all. Human science, art and intelligence, and I may add the human stock of ego-altruism and good will, should be equal to the task of rendering existence worth having to all normal men and women.


The work of improving human relations

and endeavoring to set things right is one of the noblest joys of life. The meliorist, I pointed out, is an optimist, and here it is pertinent to observe that the optimist is a meliorist for practical purposes. He works for reform and progress chiefly from love of the work, and a very moderate belief in progress suffices in his case. To repeat, he may expect little, but the little is not insignificant or contemptible to him. The work of or for reform is largely its own reward, for it means self-expression, the exercise of one's worthiest faculties and the deepest needs of one's nature.

But, it may be objected finally, granting *all* you have said, are you justified in calling yourself an optimist and your view optimistic? Are you not simply and actually trying to make the best of a very poor situation? By no means. The meliorist evades and ignores the problem. The pessimist, if he is consistent, should decide that the game of life is not worth the candle and should use his own will to override the blind cosmic will that placed him in a predicament he would have firmly declined without thanks, if we are to believe him. In other words, the true pessimist should advocate suicide, if not commit it. I say "if not commit it," for here we must recall the distinction between philosophical pessimism and temperamental or organic pessimism, and we must

make allowance for physical cowardice. Asceticism, in spite of Schopenhauer's reasoning, is not a triumph of the individual over the cosmic will. If the ascetic finds life enjoyable, he is not essentially different from the rest of us. His tastes are peculiar; that is all. If he doesn't enjoy life, and his self-denials and torments are felt by him as such, he is slowly undermining his bodily and mental health and is thus committing suicide by degrees and stages.

But he who deliberately concludes and actually feels that life is worth living *on the terms offered*; he who as he goes through existence finds the balance to be on the right side; he who is grateful for his earthly span, grateful for his joys, grateful even for some of his sorrows; he who is thus grateful regardless of the virtual certainty of utter annihilation at the end, and regardless also of his constitutional inability to comprehend the universe, to discover any purpose in it, within his definition of purpose; he who rejoices in acquired knowledge regardless of the conviction that every ultimate fact is unknowable—such a person is a true optimist. He accepts the universe. He accepts life. He has ample incentive for action. He is not divided against himself. His reason and will are in accord. He has the only true secret of the joy of life. And what more is necessary to philosophical optimism?

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