

# Pessimism about the Future

## 1. OPTIMISM, AGNOSTICISM, AND PESSIMISM

Imagine that a huge asteroid is heading towards the earth. If it hits, it will immediately destroy all sentient life, and release various gases which will make it impossible for such life to evolve again. Will this be a bad thing, overall?<sup>1</sup> It is hard to deny that it will be bad for certain individuals, in that it will result in their lives being less good for them, overall. But it is equally hard to deny that it will also be good for certain individuals, in that it will result in their lives being less bad for them, overall. The asteroid's collision would of course also prevent the coming into existence of many individuals, some of whose lives would have been good overall, and others bad overall, and many will take the value of these possible lives also to be of great moral significance.

The overall value of a future may depend on more than merely the value of the well-being – what is good and bad for individuals – in that future. But well-being is clearly very important in making such judgements. One central element of overall well-being, according to any plausible view, will be pleasurable and painful mental states.<sup>2</sup> So let me begin by taking only hedonic states into account.

Many people, when asked to evaluate the impact of the asteroid's collision from a hedonic perspective, even when they are asked to ignore their own partiality to themselves and those close to them, and to focus only on the asteroid's total hedonic consequences, will claim that the asteroid's impact will be very bad overall (cf. Frick 2017: 344-5). This view we can call *optimism*. Given the numbers of beings, human and non-human, relevant to the judgement in question, and the different experiences they will have, an immediately optimistic response seems ... somewhat

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I shall avoid complications arising from the possibility of the universe's being infinite.

<sup>2</sup> I have in mind here pain which is found unpleasant – that is, 'suffering'. For a discussion of possible pains that are not found unpleasant, see Shriver 2019.

optimistic. But optimism can of course be supported by arguments, similar perhaps to those offered by Derek Parfit in his *On What Matters*. As Parfit notes (2011: 616), there may be billions of years ahead for human and other sentient beings on earth or on other planets, and it may be that in time we can eradicate suffering entirely, in which case the hedonic value of each sentient life would be at worst neutral and presumably in most cases positive. And, on the optimistic view, such an outcome would be good overall and is going to occur.

Equally, however, given the fact that judgements of value here are not only highly contested but face potentially very serious problems of unclarity, imprecision, indeterminacy, incomparability, and so on, what might seem at least as reasonable is *agnosticism*.<sup>3</sup> This paper, however, will argue that *pessimism* about the future – the view that, at least as far as the history of the earth is concerned, the asteroid’s collision would be overall good -- is *at least as reasonable* as either optimism or agnosticism.<sup>4</sup> (To be very clear: I am *not* arguing for the truth of pessimism or the falsity of either optimism or agnosticism.)

## 2. DISCONTINUITIES

If you accept optimism, or agnosticism, you believe that the future of the earth will be, or may be, good, overall, were the asteroid not to destroy sentient life. True, this future would involve some suffering; but this would be more than counterbalanced by the positive hedonic states, in the future as a whole. Now consider the scale of

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3 Theron Pummer reminds me that Hume’s Philo is an Agnostic: ‘What! no method of fixing a just foundation for religion, unless we allow the happiness of human life, and maintain a continued existence even in this world, with all our present pains, infirmities, vexations, and follies, to be eligible and desirable! But this is contrary to everyone’s feeling and experience: It is contrary to an authority so established as nothing can subvert: No decisive proofs can ever be produced against this authority; nor is it possible for you to compute, estimate, and compare all the pains and all the pleasures in the lives of all men and of all animals: And thus, by your resting the whole system of religion on a point, which, from its very nature, must forever be uncertain, you tacitly confess, that that system is equally uncertain’ (2007: 10.33).

4 For a broad and engaging historical account of pessimism as a response to the problem of evil, from the late-seventeenth century to the nineteenth, see Van der Lugt 2021.

this suffering. It will involve billions of hours of extreme agony, resulting from illness, accident, and torture and other forms of maltreatment. Here it seems not unreasonable to make the pessimistic judgement that *no amount* of positive hedonic experience could make this *vast* amount of suffering worthwhile.<sup>5</sup>

Could there be such so-called *discontinuities* of value (see Griffin 1988: 85-89; Skorupski 1999: 94-101; Dorsey 2009: 40; Arrhenius and Rabinowicz 2015: 231-2)?<sup>6</sup> Consider first what we might call *good-good* discontinuities. Some, influenced by J.S. Mill's discussion of higher and lower pleasures, might claim that the enjoyment of certain experiences, such as reading a novel by Jane Austen, is more valuable than that of any number of purely bodily pleasures, such as that of drinking lemonade on a hot day. These bodily pleasures are of some value, and the more of them the better; but any number of them could never outweigh the value of reading the novel. Now consider *bad-bad* discontinuities (see Gurney 1887: 181-2). Imagine you face a choice between a year of agony, and some number of years of pain from a hangnail. Here some will claim that any number of years of hangnail pain is less bad than the agony (cf. Pummer 2013: 37). Given that there may be good-good and bad-bad discontinuities, there seems no reason to rule out the possibility of *bad-good* discontinuities (see Harris 2002: 279; Benatar 2006: 63-4; Brülde 2010: 566-7; Tomasik 2017). Indeed, given the very different natures of pleasure and pain, they may be even more plausible than those just mentioned.

But it has to be admitted that the difficulty of judgements involving such large numbers of good and bad experiences could speak in favour of agnosticism. A pessimist response to these doubts, then, might focus not on the vastness of suffering, but on the smallest amount that might plausibly ground a claim of bad-good discontinuity.<sup>7</sup> Consider, for example, the experience of severe torture by

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that such pessimistic judgements enable one to avoid many practical questions depending on the probabilities of different outcomes.

<sup>6</sup> Note that a proponent of a desire or preference account of well-being may also speak of discontinuities, such that the fulfilment of one desire is discontinuously better or worse than the fulfilment of some other.

electric shock.<sup>8</sup> One person, recently subjected to this form of torture in a Chechnyan prison, described it as ‘like they are breaking every bone of every joint in your body at the same time’ (Rainbow International 2017). Nor is the suffering purely a matter of physical pain. A victim of torture in Brazil in 1970 wrote: ‘It is ... impossible to tell how one feels while being tortured but it isn’t only pain’ (das Flores 1970). The ‘non-physical’ components of such torture are Aristotelian ‘processes’, and unlike purely physical pain are not ‘complete’ at a single time (see Ackrill 1965). An episode of such torture is likely to involve dread, terror, panic, humiliation, degradation, despair, and many other negative states. These episodes sometimes involve the victim’s becoming unconscious and then being woken up several times for more torture. How long a period would have to be to be sufficiently ‘complete’ to ground a plausible discontinuity is hard to say, but let me stipulate a period of one hour. It seems to me as reasonable to claim that such a period cannot be counter-balanced by any amount of positive hedonic experience as to claim that it can. Let me call this the *T-discontinuity*.

Recall that so far we have been putting only hedonic states into the balance. Assume now that there are non-hedonic elements of well-being, such that, after the asteroid passes, people will be benefited through accomplishing certain goals, participating in personal relationships, and acquiring and using knowledge. Again, given the severity of the suffering in the excruciating torture, it seems not unreasonable to judge that *no* amount of such goods could counterbalance that suffering.<sup>9</sup> And the same argument applies also to alleged non-welfarist values, such as aesthetic goods, which might be claimed to add to the overall value of the

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7 A pessimist might also claim that worries about large numbers support the claim that pessimism is not unreasonable (and at least as reasonable as either optimism or agnosticism).

8 Mayerfeld (1999: 25) sees torture as the paradigmatic form of suffering; see also 38, esp. the quotation from Jean Améry at n. 52; Kagan (2015: 266).

9 It might be suggested that our descendants may enjoy pleasures, or other goods, which we cannot imagine but which would counterbalance the suffering in an hour of torture. But it is also the case, of course, that unimaginable bads may be created, sufficient to ground another bad-good discontinuity here; see Althaus and Gloor 2019. In other words, these two possibilities can be taken as cancelling each other in our calculations. See also n. 13 below.

universe. Consider for example lives of great artistic creativity. It may be suggested that the mere existence of such lives in the history of some world makes that world better than it would otherwise have been, independently of any increase in the creator's own well-being or the well-being of others. There may also be value in the objects they create, or, say, in natural beauty. Again, it can plausibly be claimed that, if there are such goods, even their combination with positive hedonic states is insufficient to outweigh the badness of an hour of extreme torture (see Hedenius 1955: 100 (trans. Knutsson 2020: n. 17)).

### 3. THE T-DISCONTINUITY: TWO PROBLEMS

There is one especially serious and well-known objection to claims asserting discontinuity: that they cannot explain why a tiny non-evaluative difference, around a threshold, could be of such huge evaluative significance.<sup>10</sup> Assume that the pessimist is claiming that one hour of electric shock torture is above the threshold, while one hour of hangnail pain is below it. Now consider a spectrum of periods of one hour running from hangnail to torture, each of which is very slightly worse than the preceding hour. At some point, it might seem that we must move from continuity to discontinuity, that is, from a stage at which there will be some finite amount of goods that can counterbalance the badness of the period in question to a stage at which *no* amount of goods can do so. The two stages might differ only in that, say, the voltage used in one of the shocks was slightly higher than that used in the period earlier in the sequence.

James Griffin, in his classic presentation of the idea of discontinuity, provides a helpful initial response to this *spectrum problem* (1986: 87-9). Griffin considers a good-good discontinuity, in which a life enjoying paintings from the Dutch school is discontinuously better than a life of any length involving only the 'kicks of kitsch'.

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<sup>10</sup> For a version of this objection in connection with bad-good discontinuity claims, see Ord 2013: sect. entitled 'Lexical Threshold NU – The Continuity Argument'.

Griffin accepts that we might allow that more years of certain lower-quality Dutch paintings are preferable to fewer of higher, but what we will not allow is the utter loss of the appreciation of *beauty*. Now consider again the spectrum from hangnail to torture. Hangnail pain lacks the quality of being *agonizing*. As we continue along the spectrum from hangnail pain to torture, experience takes on the quality of agony that grounds a bad-good discontinuity.

But is there a precise point on the spectrum at which, say, a slight increase in voltage can turn an experience from being non-agonizing to being agonizing? The pessimist might prefer to avoid this question. Assume, for the sake of argument, that there is a property of being bald, which is independent of the property of having  $n$  hairs on one's head.<sup>11</sup> We might plausibly claim to know that this person with an entirely smooth head is bald, and that this hirsute person is not bald. On a spectrum on which hairs are removed one by one from the hirsute head, we will reach a point at which we can confidently say that the person in question is bald. But whether there is a clear cut-off point for baldness is not relevant to the plausibility of the claim that the smooth-headed person is bald. In the same way, the pessimist may suggest, we know that one hour of torture is an agonizing experience, and that one hour of hangnail pain is not, and this is enough to make the pessimist account of the bad-good discontinuity at least reasonable.<sup>12</sup>

Another reason the T-discontinuity might be doubted we might call the *problem of division*. If I am offered immediate painless death, or continuing existence at a positive hedonic level for any finite period I wish, except for an hour of

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11 It might be claimed that whether a head is bald is not some 'further fact' about that head, independently of its having  $n$  hairs, whereas it is a further fact about any set of non-evaluative properties whether the value of that set falls above or below some evaluative threshold. The assumption of non-reductionism about baldness here is merely to illustrate how the pessimist can avoid answering questions about precise thresholds.

12 Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (2015: 238) argue that postulating discontinuities with sharp cut-off points is less plausible for hedonistic values than objective or perfectionist ones, presumably because the latter are so different from one another. But once we recognize that there are radical differences in kind between hedonic states, and that spectrum arguments can be applied to perfectionist values (such as the recognition of beauty), it might seem that in this respect hedonism is on a par with objectivism and perfectionism.

agonizing torture at the start, it seems not unreasonable for me to choose death. But now consider a choice between immediate painless death, and continuing existence for any finite period I wish, at a positive level except for 3600 seconds, temporally very distant from each other, during each of which I will experience a temporal slice of the experience of agonizing torture. Here, it could be said, it would be a clear mistake to choose death, rather than many, many years of positive hedonic experience, with the odd twinge of very unpleasant experience; and this might suggest that those who accept the T-discontinuity are focusing too much on the quality of experience of the first hour, in the first choice, and too little on the value of the lengthy positive period to follow.

Here the defender of the T-discontinuity might first offer a *tu quoque* response. If one accepts the T-discontinuity, it must follow that the second alternative to death is as bad as the first, and the fact that the objector denies this implies that they are focusing too much on how bad an individual second of negative experience is rather than grasping the disvalue of the sum of a number of such experiences, whether consecutive or not.

Second, they can note the distinction between the physical and non-physical components of torture. The experience of fearing and dreading the next few minutes of agony is, of course, nothing over and above a set of moments. But the badness of such an experience, it could be said, can be grasped only through imagining what it is like to go through some set of such moments.

#### 4. DIFFICULTIES IN EVALUATING SUFFERING

Optimists will of course doubt the T-discontinuity. But most of them, along with most pessimists, face a serious epistemic problem – that they have never experienced severe torture. As suggested by the Brazilian victim cited above, it may not be possible to articulate *just* how bad it is (see Scarry 1987: 3-11). According to Jamie

Mayerfeld (1999: 42; see also 103-4, 190-1), we should remember Jacobo Timerman's words:

In the long months of confinement, I often thought of how to transmit the pain that a tortured person undergoes. And always I concluded that it was impossible.

It is a pain without points of reference, revelatory symbols, or clues to serve as indicators. (Timerman 1981: 32)

It is possible, then, that the comparison of very severe suffering with positive goods is analogous to that in Plato's *Republic* (582a-d) between the pleasures of the philosopher and those of the non-philosopher. Socrates plausibly suggests that the philosopher is in a better position to judge, since they have experienced the pleasures of both kinds of life. Likewise, the person best able to make an evaluative judgement on torture will be someone who has experienced it, and – the pessimist may go on to claim -- the proportion of those who accept the T-discontinuity among those who have experienced non-trivial periods of excruciating torture might well be significantly higher than that in the population at large. The proportion is of course likely to be even higher among those who are actually *being* tortured. It might be claimed that their view is unreliable: they are not in a position to make a balanced decision. But of course it could be said also that, in an important sense, they know better than anyone else what torture is like.

It may be said that these are untested empirical claims, and so cannot provide support for belief in the T-discontinuity. But this would be to misunderstand my aim in this paper. I am arguing not that we should accept the T-discontinuity, only that a pessimistic view based on it is no less reasonable than the standard views, optimism and agnosticism.<sup>13</sup> It is indeed true that some who have been tortured are likely to

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<sup>13</sup> Note in particular that I am not *denying* that there may be good-bad discontinuities, structurally analogous to the T-discontinuity, in which there is a certain experience so good that it can outweigh any amount of badness (we might call this the G-discontinuity). As it happens, I am inclined to think

deny the T-discontinuity. But here we find another epistemic problem, again in effect equivalent to one of incomparability or incommensurability of value, in that it may not be possible to *remember* just *how* bad agonizing suffering is when it is experienced.<sup>14</sup> Henry Sidgwick, for example, claims that he found it much easier to recall the unpleasantness of expecting seasickness than the nausea itself (1907: 144). Or consider this passage from Harriet Martineau's essay 'The Transient and the Permanent in the Sick-room', on the excruciating pain she suffered from a uterine tumour:

Where are these pains now? — Not only gone, but annihilated. They are destroyed so utterly, that even memory can lay no hold upon them. The fact of their occurrence is all that even memory can preserve. The sensations themselves cannot be retained, nor recalled, nor revived; they are the most absolutely evanescent, the most essentially and completely destructible of all things. Sensations are unimaginable to those who are most familiar with them. Their concomitants may be remembered, and so vividly conceived of, as to excite emotions at a future time: but the sensations themselves cannot be conceived of when absent. This pain, which I feel now as I write, I have felt innumerable times before; yet, accustomed as I am to entertain and manage it, the sensation itself is new every time; and a few hours hence I shall be as unable to represent it to myself as to the healthiest person in the house. (1844: 27-8)

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the T-discontinuity more plausible than the G-discontinuity; but there may well be good arguments for a form of optimism based on the G-discontinuity, and that form should be considered no less reasonable than pessimism based on the T-discontinuity.

<sup>14</sup> See Pearce 2013: 2.7. Comparisons are made yet more difficult by our bias towards the future (Parfit 1984: 165). A person who has experienced severe torture and is now living a happy life which they believe will be free from further torture is more likely to claim that their life is overall worthwhile than someone who has experienced severe torture and has more periods of torture to come before they move on to a happy life, even if the amounts of torture and happiness in each life are roughly equal. To avoid this bias, it can be helpful to consider hedonic experiences from a third-personal and temporally neutral point of view.

These difficulties in evaluating suffering, then, provide further support for the reasonableness of pessimism.

## 5. THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PESSIMISM

What are the ethical implications of pessimism? Imagine that you – and you alone – are in a position to deflect the asteroid. Should you do so?<sup>15</sup> Standard act utilitarianism, it might seem, will require non-deflection, but even if you are a utilitarian you are likely to be hesitant. Here it is worth considering whether you might be suffering from status quo bias. Consider this case:

*Something or Nothing.* You have the option of preventing the existence of a world which will contain many billions of lives of excruciating suffering, much worse than nothing for those living them, as well as many billions of lives of a very high quality.<sup>16</sup>

It may be that reflecting on any reluctance you might have to allow this world to come into being will result in greater readiness to refrain from deflecting the asteroid.

Utilitarian beneficence is entirely impartial, and many believe that we have duties of partiality to give the well-being of those close to us greater weight in our decision-making, alongside permissions to give our own well-being greater weight.<sup>17</sup> It would not be unreasonable, however, for a deontological moralist to claim that

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15 For an important analysis of practical pessimism in general, see Bergstrom 1978; and for an excellent discussion of practical pessimism based on risk-aversion, see Pettigrew 2022.

16 William James offers us a case involving only one innocent sufferer: '[If] the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris's utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a specific and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain' (1948: 68).

17 As noted in connection with similarly momentous choices by Harris 2002: 284.

there are some sacrifices one is required to make, of the interests of those close to one or indeed of one's own interests, in order to prevent great – indeed discontinuously bad – harms to strangers. Further, given that the benefits to be achieved by deflection will be at great cost to innocent individuals, it could also plausibly be argued that justice, at least in this respect, speaks in favour of non-deflection. As Schopenhauer says: 'that thousands had lived in happiness and joy would never do away with the anguish and death-agony of one individual'.<sup>18</sup> Even on deontological assumptions, then, the pessimistic view that you should not prevent the collision is not unreasonable.

Note, however, that this pessimistic view concerns only the future of the earth. It is highly probable that the universe contains very large numbers of sentient beings on other planets. Bernard Williams, in 'The Human Prejudice', agrees that the impartial point of view leads to a pessimistic conclusion, suggesting that:

[I]f for a moment we got anything like an adequate idea of [the suffering in the world] ... and we really guided our actions by it, then surely we would annihilate the planet, if we could;<sup>19</sup> and if other planets containing conscious creatures are similar to ours in the suffering they contain, we would annihilate them as well. (2006: 147)

Currently, of course, we do not have the technology for such annihilation of other planets. According to a less parochial version of pessimism, then, it may that what

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Parfit (2011: 611). (See also the James passage quoted above in n. 16.) Schopenhauer uses this example to illustrate his earlier claim that *no* evil can counterbalanced by good (Schopenhauer 1966: 576). On his next page, Parfit goes on to say that he is 'weakly inclined to believe that the past has been in itself worth it'. Parfit's next claim, however -- 'But this may be wishful thinking' -- could be taken as an expression of agnosticism rather than optimism. For a recent and suggestive interpretation of Schopenhauer as claiming that compensation can take place only between evils and goods that are experientially related, see Simmons 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Williams speaks here of active annihilation, rather than passively allowing the destruction of the world through refraining from deflecting the asteroid (see also e.g. Harris 2002: 272). He does not, then, appear to believe that the kind of agent-related considerations he discusses under the headings of 'integrity' and 'negative responsibility' (Williams 1973: 93-118) undermine the claim that we have reason actively to destroy the world.

we should do is develop what have come to be called in the science fiction community 'berserker probes', designed to eliminate as much life involving severe suffering in the universe as possible and to minimize the probability of such life's evolving.<sup>20</sup>

It might be claimed that, if these are the implications of pessimism, then it is so out of line with our moral intuitions that it has to be dismissed as unreasonable. But it is just a mistake to think that the *mere* fact that some principle has counter-intuitive implications counts against it. Reasons, in the form of general principles, have to be provided to support the judgement about the particular cases in question; and at this point the pessimist can argue that the axiological theories underlying non-pessimistic views are absent or in various respects lacking, or at the very least no more reasonable than those underlying pessimism itself. We have to beware of our perpetuating a 'human prejudice', similar in its unreflectiveness to other prejudices, based on, for example, sex or race, which emerges in an unwillingness to take seriously the idea that the universe would be better without us and other sentient beings like us.

Parfit concludes his discussion of whether the future will be worth it with the suggestion that we can give our lives meaning by preventing suffering (2011: 617-18). If there were no goods to counterbalance suffering, he suggests, the most effective way to prevent suffering would be to have no children. There is, as Williams points out, a more effective way. And even if there are many very great

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<sup>20</sup> Note that this development will itself increase the risk of 'astronomical' amounts of suffering through the development of AI; see Gloor 2018. It has to be admitted by the pessimist that, if we assume that advanced civilizations are likely to converge on the normative truth, a version of 'Fermi's paradox' arises: it counts *to some extent* against pessimism's reasonableness that we ourselves have not already been annihilated.

goods in life, and very many great goods independent of well-being, it may be that the most meaningful lives we could live would involve putting all available resources into developing the means to destroy other sentient life in the universe. Note once again: I am advocating not this position, but merely the view that it is not unreasonable. If it is not unreasonable, especially given the costs of significantly decreasing existential risk, pessimism about the future deserves serious and immediate attention.<sup>21</sup>

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