

Pessimism and The Secular Problem of Evil

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By

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Plagiarism declaration

I know what plagiarism is. I have not plagiarized this thesis or any parts of it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

Acknowledgment

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ABSTRACT

How should we respond to the prevalence of ubiquitous evil? In this thesis, I present two responses to the secular problem of evil. The secular problem of evil exists because we want to live good lives, but we are all existentially vulnerable to evil. Consequently, we can think of various ways in which evil's existence poses a problem for us. When faced with such evil, I distinguish two responses that we may adopt, namely, optimistic or pessimistic responses to the secular problem of evil. These responses may be understood as stances that we may adopt about the relative evil and goodness in the world. Once I have made a thorough evaluation of the discussion around the secular problem of evil and the responses, I will suggest that pessimism is an appealing and appropriate response that we should adopt.

To achieve the aims of this thesis, I will first clarify the kind of evil at stake in this thesis and then explain how philosophers have historically responded to this problem. Secondly, I will focus on the contemporary discussion on the secular problem of evil and show the responses are optimistic responses. Finally, I will provide a case against optimism and then show why pessimism is the most appealing and appropriate response.

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Introduction

"Is not all human life a struggle? Our lives are like that of a hired hand, like a servant waiting to be paid. I, too, have been assigned months of futility, long and weary nights of misery. Lying in bed, I think, 'When will it be morning?' But the night drags on, and I toss til dawn."¹

- Job

We may often wonder why bad things happen to good people or why there is so much pain and suffering in the world. Evil in particular matters to us because it is ubiquitous. Innumerable philosophers have long argued that evil threatens meaning.² It threatens our ability to regard the world in which we find ourselves as comprehensible.³ Most importantly, evil is of concern to us because it jeopardizes our aspirations to live a good life.⁴ Evil is, therefore, existentially problematic. We can think of many ways in which it poses a problem for us. This thesis is about finding the appropriate responses to it.

It is my goal in this thesis to consider the nature of the *secular* problem of evil. What is meant by the secular problem of evil in this context is the problem of how to find meaning in a world in which everything is touched by evil.⁵ In this thesis, I aim to provide an account of how we ought to respond to the secular problem of evil. I suggest that there are two ways in which we may respond, either optimistically or pessimistically. Optimism and pessimism are stances we may adopt about the relative evil or goodness in the world. In particular, it is an overall response (including emotions and values) to the presence of evil. I will finally suggest that pessimism is an appealing and appropriate response to the prevalence of evil.

In philosophical discourse, the problem of evil is a philosophical one that deals with trying to reconcile the existence of God with the abundance of evil in the world. If God exists and he is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, he should not permit the existence of evil. Traditionally, this problem arises when theists encounter evil and questions arise about what can

¹ This quote is from the Bible, in the Book of Job 7: 1-4

² See Van Inwagen *The Problem of Evil*

³ Van Inwagen (2006, p. 15)

⁴ Kekes (1990, p. 3)

⁵ Van Inwagen (2006, p. 16)

be said about their beliefs, particularly about God. However, as I will show in this thesis, questions about evil are not limited to God or religion; there is the secular problem of evil. This thesis will only be concerned about what can be said about evil from a secular point of view. From a naturalistic, non-theistic point of view, what can be said about evil? Furthermore, what is one to say about the relationship between evil and goodness?

To be clear, I am mostly concerned with the existential considerations about the problem of evil and how we should think and respond to existing in a world with a vast amount of evil. According to Michael Levine, there is a great truth that we can properly understand how we ought to live our lives if we properly understand the allegedly complex relationship between goodness and evil.⁶ I think that understanding the problem of evil and the kind of problems that arise under the heading of the problem of evil can enlighten us about the human condition.

Looking at the historical and contemporary discussion of the problem, I argue that there are two standpoints in the debate about how we should respond to the problem of evil. The response to the problem of evil is a debate between optimistic and pessimistic responses to evil. One way of looking at the debate is that optimists think that all or most evils can be accounted for. That is, evils are either necessary or else unavoidable parts of even the best of all practically possible worlds containing free agents subject to natural laws. For pessimists, the idea that there must be a reason for the vast amount of evil and misery is not correct; the world is just terrible. Far too many evils are irredeemable.

My thesis's primary goal is to show how pessimism is an appealing response to how we should think about evil's presence and existence in our lives. To reach such conclusions, I will be discussing both historical and contemporary responses to the problem. Focusing mainly on the contemporary discussion, I shall argue that such responses are optimistic responses. I will provide an enriched understanding of this discussion and critique some of the arguments. Evaluatively, I will then build my case against optimistic responses and defend pessimism. I will suggest that pessimism is an appealing and appropriate attitude towards the existence of evil in our lives.

Chapter breakdown:

⁶ Levine (2012, p. 151)

In Chapter One, I will develop a conception of evil. This will help me provide an enriched understanding of the kind of evil underpinning this thesis. I will also provide a historical context on the philosophical discussion on the problem of evil, focusing particularly on the discussion during the Enlightenment period. This is where I will show the two standpoints in the discussion focusing on Leibniz and Voltaire. I will show here that the two standpoints are between optimistic and pessimistic responses about the prevalence of evil. Finally, I will define and explain the secular problem of evil which is most relevant to this thesis.

Chapter Two will focus on the contemporary discussions around the problem of evil. I will show here that the discussion around the responses are optimistic responses. Most central to this chapter will be my enriched discussion of the contemporary work on the secular problem of evil. I will discuss the work of Robert Merrihew Adams and Pedro Tabensky, which will provide an overview of the central arguments around optimistic responses to the secular problem of evil.

Finally, chapter three will be the core of my work, where I present my case against optimism and finally defend pessimism. My aim here is to show how pessimism is an appealing and appropriate stance.

Chapter 1

*"Unless Suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim."*⁷

-Arthur Schopenhauer

In this chapter, I will be exploring the concept of evil. More specifically, in addition to clarifying evil as I understand it, I will explore the historical background, namely the problem of evil, focusing primarily on Enlightenment discussions on the issue.⁸ Finally, I define and discuss this thesis's central concern, namely, what I term the *secular* problem of evil.

1.1 Understanding Evil

You do not need to look very far to see the prevalence of evil in the world and even in our own lives. There is no denying that our world is plagued with problems: pain, suffering, destruction, and death are no less real, no less menacing, and no less ubiquitous today than they have ever been.⁹ Turn on the news, and you will see millions of people dying from deadly viruses; people experience evil in its various forms all over the world. Reflecting on all of the evil that exists, I agree with John Kekes, who thinks that we should take seriously the claim that evil is the most serious threat to our well-being and the strongest reason against optimism about our prospects.¹⁰ Those who have come to face evil are often left to wonder why? Why is there evil in the world? Why is there suffering and destruction, and why is there so much of it?¹¹ Although we may never truly get to the bottom of these questions, there is one particular question which I will answer in this thesis, and that is how we ought to respond to the presence of ubiquitous evil in our lives. Although we may not solve the problems that plague our world, we may adopt attitudes that help us deal with them.

⁷ Schopenhauer (2005, p. 5)

⁸ I will be looking at the discussion around the Enlightenment period because this time led to much debate among philosophers around the problem of evil and I will get into the details of this in the later sections of this chapter.

⁹ Meister (2018, p. 2)

¹⁰ Kekes (2009, p. 139)

¹¹ Meister (Meister, 2018)

In this thesis, I aim to provide an account of how we ought to respond to the presence of evil in our lives. I suggest that there are two ways in which we may respond, either optimistically or pessimistically. Optimism and pessimism are stances about the relative evil or goodness of the world. Therefore, I will suggest that pessimism is an appealing and appropriate response and defend pessimistic responses against optimistic responses to the prevalence of evil.¹² But before I answer the question of how we ought to respond to the presence of ubiquitous evil, it is pivotal that I state quite early in this thesis what I am referring to when I use the term *evil*.

According to Chad Meister, it is not entirely clear if there is one conception of evil, but we can easily grasp instances of evil when they present themselves to us. For example, severe famine, child abuse, and genocide. He further notes, the meaning of the term is multifarious and often falls short of capturing the depth and complexities it is attempting to define.¹³

Evil has been understood in many ways, and I cannot possibly do justice to the wide varieties of evil here. For my purposes, evil can be understood as the existence of undeserved, unjustified harm.¹⁴ Whatever harms any being in any manner such that it is either unmerited or pointless or both quite obviously can be regarded as a sheer gratuitous *moral minus*. This is evil. Evil *reduces* the amount and quality of well-being in the world.

Evil is a problem because of the drastic implications that it may have on any individual. Many individuals who go through various forms of evil do not recover from the kind of harm caused by evil, and at times, their lives change drastically. Their aspirations might even change. Their lives may change to the point that they no longer find meaning in the things they used to do, things they love, and things they care about.¹⁵ Sometimes, events' psychological effects have a much more lasting impact on individuals than perhaps the physical effects that they have experienced. One consequence of serious evil is that 'the individuals can no longer pursue their projects. Since the

¹² The debate between optimism and pessimism and the notion of “stance” will be explained in chapter 3 of this thesis.

¹³ Meister (2018, p. 3)

¹⁴ I choose to understand evil in this way because it shows how evil may be an existential problem, understanding that evil causes undeserved and unjustified harm, enables me to build my case to defend pessimism. I have chosen this particular conception of evil because it is relevant to this thesis which deals with the existential implications of evil.

¹⁵ I am aware that evil may have an opposite effect. However, the most interesting cases relevant to this thesis are those in which evil has impacted individuals negatively and where the existential implication of that evil leaves them to question their experiences of evil. The cases in which evil has left an everlasting mark in which no good in their lives has redeemed their suffering. Those are the cases which I am interested in. These cases also provide us with more philosophical discussion on the problem of evil.

projects were essential to the conceptions of a good life, the harm they suffer causes failure or radical disorientation of their aspirations.¹⁶ By showing how and the extent to which evil harms a person, we may see how evil poses an existential problem for us.

To illustrate the kind of harm someone may face, I would like us to imagine an active sportswoman whose whole life and meaning revolve around playing sport and teaching sport. Playing sport is their life project, and they have spent all of their time on earth doing this. Imagine this person loses all of their limbs after being involved in a car accident. They spend years trying to recover and go through various rehabilitation and physio facilities to the point they exhaust their funds and end up being financially worse off than ever before. It is not hard to imagine the kind of impact this may have on such an individual, their life changes, and they may no longer even play sports, which was such an integral part of their conception of a good life. Such an individual may respond to this tragedy with either: suicide, madness, radical reevaluation of life, desultory, dead-end half-life without hope, engagement, and attachment.¹⁷

There are basic needs that we would want to meet in our aspirations to have a good life. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, our human needs include: physiological (food and clothing), safety (job and security), love and belonging (friendship), esteem and self-actualization.¹⁸ Part of human nature is that all healthy members of our species have many of the same needs and capacities for satisfying them. We can identify a large number of things that will be harmful to everyone, always and everywhere.¹⁹

Generally speaking, evil is anything that gets in the way of our well-being. Examples include extreme poverty, inequality, and physical or emotional abuse. Evil, understood as undeserved harm, is pervasive, and it endangers human projects regardless of their merit.²⁰ The fact that evil exists and affects so many of us poses a problem. I argue that how we understand evil and the kinds of existential implications it may have on an individual will enable us to find the appropriate response.

¹⁶ Kekes (1990, p. 35)

¹⁷ Kekes (1990, p. 35)

¹⁸ Maslow (1943)

¹⁹ Kekes (1990, p. 51)

²⁰ Kekes (1990, p. 44)

As I have mentioned, this thesis aims to answer the question, 'how ought we respond to the presence of evil?' In the following section of this thesis, I will provide a historical background of the problem of evil. Providing a historical account of the problem of evil will help me distinguish the two responses that we may adopt. By showing some of the key historical discussions and debates on the problem of evil, I will show how there are optimistic responses and pessimistic responses to the problem. Focusing on these two distinct responses within the discussion will also help me narrow down the discussion on what is a broad topic in philosophy.

Various philosophers have written about the problem of evil, and their responses to the problem of evil will provide relevant and vital context to this thesis. Seeing how philosophers have dealt with the problem in the past will also aid my suggestion at the end of how we ought to respond now, dealing with the same problem.

1.2 The Problem of Evil: The historical background on the Enlightenment period

Historically, the problem of evil was mainly a problem for theists. Questions concerning the prevalence and existence of evil have always occupied philosophers, and much of the traditional discussions around such questions were particularly questions that were of concern to theologians. Although my focus in this thesis is on the secular problem of evil, I argue that the groundwork of the theological problem sets up a clear distinction of the responses philosophers have come up with. Understanding how we ought to respond to the problem needs the contextual background to how philosophers have answered the problem before.

As it is called, the problem of evil is a philosophical one that deals with reconciling God's existence with the abundance of evil in the world. If God exists and he is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, he should not permit the existence of evil.²¹ The question which it seeks to answer is: how can one believe in God when there is so much evidence of evil in the world? If there is a God, and he is omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect, it should follow that evil should not be there in the first place, but this is not the case, so how can one continue to believe that God exists? The fact that evil exists must, therefore, mean that God does not exist.

²¹ The God that I am referring to here is the traditional Christian God, hence I use the descriptions such as omniscience, omnipotence and morally perfect.

Traditionally, these problems arise when theists recognize the tension between their religious commitments and the presence of evil in the world. According to Peter van Inwagen, examples of the kind of questions that may arise for theists who encounter evil may be: "What shall I believe about God, can I continue to love God, can I continue to love and trust God, how shall I act in relation to God, in the face of this evil thing that has happened to me?"²² Much of the philosophical work done on this topic has been an attempt to come up with answers to help theists to make sense of God in the face of evil.

When it came to the problem of evil, Leibniz was among those philosophers who insisted on finding order in addition to the miserable one presented by experience.²³ For Leibniz, the current world we live in and experience is the best of all possible worlds. This assertion was no claim about the goodness of this world; it simply tells us that any other world would have been worse.²⁴ To justify or defend God, he claimed that although we might not comprehend nor fathom it, this was the best world that God could have created for us. In any other world, we would be worse off, but God's wisdom and power are so limitless that he chose this world (one that contains evil), and it is the best world he could have created. He reached such conclusions because his argument was from his principle of sufficient reason. Put quite simply; he believed that there is a reason for everything and every fact, even when we do not know those reasons. Also, in claiming that God has ordered things for the best, Leibniz puts his trust in explanation still to come.²⁵ A perfect and all-knowing God would not make a world that is not the best. He is not even capable of creating something that is not perfect. Still, as human beings, we just may never know and understand the metric that God uses to decide what is best for the world, and his best would most certainly not be our best. Leibniz' response to the problem of evil can be found in his book titled *Theodicy*; he writes:

Now this supreme wisdom, united to goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best. For as a lesser evil is a kind of good, even so, a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a greater good; and there would be something to correct in the actions of God if it were possible to do better. As in mathematics, when there is no maximum nor minimum, in short nothing distinguished, everything is done equally, or when that is not possible nothing at all is done: so it may be said likewise in respect of perfect wisdom, which is no less orderly than mathematics, that if there

²² Van Inwagen (2006, p. 5)

²³ Neiman (2002, p. 11)

²⁴ Neiman (2002, p. 22)

²⁵ Neiman (2002, p. 24)

were not the best (_optimum_) among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any...²⁶

Discussions of theodicies and accounting for evil later became a significant feature of the Enlightenment period.²⁷ This significant period in history allowed for significant intellectual reactions to the Lisbon earthquake.²⁸ The 1755 earthquake that destroyed the city of Lisbon, and several thousand of its inhabitants, shook the Enlightenment all the way to East Prussia.²⁹ This earthquake was so devastating, and as Susan Neiman describes it, it signified the collapse of the most basic trust in the world, the ground that makes civilization possible.³⁰ The devastation that followed this earthquake led to many intellectual reactions. The discussions on the problem of evil during this time focused solely on theology, where theists attempted to reconcile the existence of God with the occurrence of the earthquake.

Those who denied the reality of anything beyond brute experience were Voltaire and Schopenhauer.³¹ In particular, Voltaire wrote *Candide* and was very inspired by the earthquake in Lisbon. In ridicule of the notion that this is the best of all possible worlds, Voltaire's men and women point his case against optimism by starting high and falling low.³² Optimism for Voltaire would be the belief in Providence and that things are ordered for the best.³³

In his response to Leibniz's best of possible worlds, we find a rebuttal to Leibniz in *Candide*. It is precisely through the series of bad events that happen to the characters in *Candide* where we come to realize that this is not the best of all possible worlds. Voltaire encourages us instead not to seek Providence to answer this fact about our lives.³⁴ Questioning if this is the best of all possible worlds, he writes:

If one could ever accuse nature of despising its work, thwarting its plan, acting against its design, it would be in this instance. Is this the best of all possible worlds? Very well! If Caesar, Antony, Octavius never had this disease, wasn't it possible to

²⁶ Leibniz (1951, p. 63)

²⁷The age of Enlightenment, is a significant period in Europe which led to intellectual ideas and discussions concerning things such as God, humanity and nature.

²⁸ Neiman (2002, p. 2)

²⁹ Neiman (2002, p. 1)

³⁰ Neiman (2002, p. 1)

³¹ Neiman (2002, p. 11)

³² Voltaire (1981, p. 2)

³³ Voltaire (1918, p. 2)

³⁴ Voltaire (1918, p. 84)

*prevent Francis I from dying of it? No, people say things were so ordained for the best: I want to believe it, but it is sad for those to whom Rabelais dedicated his book.*³⁵

Because Voltaire did not agree that this is the best of all possible worlds, he expressed his worries about his characters' optimism throughout his novel. His characters experience great misfortune and suffering throughout the novel, and there seems to be no justification for all the great suffering.³⁶ When one looks at all the great suffering and misfortune that befalls the characters, they are left to question how that could possibly be the best world. This is one way in which we can see how he points to his case against optimism.

For this thesis's purposes, I will not be dealing with Leibniz and Voltaire's works in great detail; my concerns lie elsewhere. I want to show that historically we can see two ways of responding to the problem of evil. One way to respond would be that this world is the best that there is, and any other world would be worse. On the other hand, the response is there is no explanation that is sufficient other than the fact that we are just suffering right now.

Looking at the historical discussion and arguments that different philosophers make, I discern two significant standpoints in the debate about how we should understand and respond to the problem of evil. In fact, the broad discussion of the problem of evil can quite fruitfully be seen as a debate between *optimistic* and *pessimistic* responses to the problem of evil. In this thesis, optimism and pessimism are stances about the relative evil or goodness of the world. One way of framing the debate between optimists and pessimists is: optimists think that all or most evils are either necessary or inevitable parts of the best of all possible worlds. Pessimists think they are not. For pessimists, the idea that there must be a *reason* for the vast amount of evil and misery is just not correct. The world, for them, is just terrible. Far too many evils are irredeemable. Using this simple schema, we can readily see that Leibniz, for example, had an optimistic response to the problem of evil while Voltaire had a pessimistic response. Optimistic responses at their core assume that evil is in some way redeemable: there is some vantage point from which all evil can be seen as playing a role in bringing about a world that would be *worse* were it not for the evil. Pessimistic responses deny this.

³⁵Voltaire (1981, p. 84)

³⁶ Voltaire (1918, p. 84)

It is pivotal to note that the problem of evil is not only expressed in theological terms but it can also be expressed in secular terms. Questions about evil are not limited to questions concerning God or religion. The theistic problem of evil falls under the wider heading 'problem of evil,' which admits two subheadings: secular and religious. Secular problems of evil arise because our aspirations to live good lives are vulnerable to evil.³⁷ It has been argued that evil is a problem. Evil threatens our ability to regard the world in which we find ourselves as comprehensible. Therefore, in its broadest sense, the secular problem of evil is the problem of finding meaning in a world in which everything is touched by evil.³⁸

Philosophers in the Enlightenment period were mainly concerned with the religious problem of evil rather than the secular problem of evil. The Enlightenment period was more concerned with God's existence or rather trying to justify his existence in the face of evil. Now I wish to turn to the contemporary discussion of the problem of evil, which is mainly concerned with the secular problem of evil.

1.3 Contemporary secular discussions on the problem of evil: the positive function of evil

I argue that contemporary discussions on the problem of evil are concerned with attitudinal responses to the problem and are optimistic responses to the problem of evil. A central claim which some philosophers have made in a collection of essays entitled *The Positive Function of Evil*³⁹ — is that evil may have a central positive function in our lives such that without evil, our lives would, on the whole, be worse off than they would be otherwise.⁴⁰ A further claim made is that evil plays a constitutive role in bringing about certain key ethical goods, such that, were the world to lack evil, we would be even worse off than we currently are.⁴¹ I will not be engaging with all of the contributors to this collection. I will instead focus on two essays from the contribution, the paper by Robert Merrihew Adams entitled 'Love and the Problem of Evil' and Pedro Tabensky's⁴² paper 'Shadows of Goodness.' I will only be focusing on these two papers because I think they argue for a strong case of optimism about our responses to the secular problem of evil. They give a clear

³⁷ Kekes (1990, p. 11)

³⁸ Van Inwagen (2006, pp. 15-16)

³⁹ See *The Positive Function of Evil*, ed. PA Tabensky.

⁴⁰ Tabensky (2009, p. 12)

⁴¹ Tabensky (2009, p. 12)

⁴² In a conversation with Tabensky and this author, he mentioned that he is not entirely sure that he falls into the category of 'optimistic philosophers'. I explained my rationale to him, but I do not think that I convinced him of how this particular chapter would elude to his optimism.

insight into the *contemporary secular* discussion around the concerns that I have around responses to the problem of evil.

In the later sections of this thesis, I will show how, in the contemporary secular problem of evil, we can see how there is a shift towards optimism. So, I want to show the reader that the problem of evil was of theological concern, and responses were either optimistic or pessimistic. Now the problem has shifted to include discussions around the secular problem of evil, and responses to the secular problem of evil lean on optimism. The responses to the secular problem of evil are largely optimistic because they see evil as redeemable. The claim that evil has a positive function shows in a secular way, the emergence of virtue and good requires evil. I claim to view evil in this way is optimistic.

I am mostly concerned with existential considerations about the problem of evil and how we should think and respond to existing in a world with a vast amount of evil. According to Michael Levine, we can properly understand how it is that we ought to live our lives if we properly understand the allegedly complex relationship between goodness and evil.⁴³ I think that understanding the secular problem of evil and the kind of problems that arise under the heading of the problem of evil can help us develop a worldview about our existence. From a naturalistic, non-theistic point of view, what then is one to say about evil?

The secular problem of evil exists because the human condition is *existentially* vulnerable, and we can be psychologically broken. In 'The secular problem of Evil: An Essay in analytic existentialism,' Paul Prescott accurately describes the secular problem of evil. He writes:

*We have prudential interests, and these include important psychological interests. We want to live good lives and fulfill our psychological and physiological needs, but at the same time, evil exists and puts us in jeopardy. In other words, the human condition is defined by a fundamental conflict between our epistemic and prudential interest confronted with the existence of evil.*⁴⁴

In the earlier sections of this chapter, I argued that evil gets in the way of us living good lives. Looking at what both Kekes and Prescott have said about the secular problem of evil, I would formulate the secular problem of evil into these two premises:

⁴³ Levine (2012, p. 151)

⁴⁴ Prescott (2019, p. 1)

- 1) We have basic needs which we want to fulfill to live a good life.
- 2) Evil exists and gets in the way of us doing this.⁴⁵

In his paper, Prescott further claims that:

*Significant evil exists. It is pervasive, and our necessary conditions routinely fail to be met. On many occasions, in many people's lives, the world simply cannot be trusted. Once one has endorsed the claim that pervasive evil exists, the existential implications of one's convictions inexorably follow.*⁴⁶

So why does the secular problem of evil matter so much to us? Well, the secular problem of evil is a problem because it jeopardizes our aspirations to live good lives. It cries out for an explanation, outrages our senses of justice, makes us wonder about the prospects for humanity, causes us to fear for ourselves and for those we love, and naturally compels us to seek a remedy or at least amelioration.⁴⁷ We want to know why bad things happen to us, to our loved ones. It is our encounter with evil that makes us realize the fragility of human existence. It is a fact about our lives that we will encounter evil, and the question we may want to ask next is 'if it is true that evil presents a serious obstacle to good lives, what hope can we have to overcome it?'⁴⁸

I want to respond to the question: what responses should we have about the prevalence of evil in our lives? There are two options that I explore. We may either be optimistic and see evil as a necessary part of what will inevitably be a good life in the end. Or be pessimistic about our prospects for humanity. I argue that once we can adequately understand evil and our responses to it, we may be more equipped to cope with it.

1.4 Responses: Optimism versus Pessimism

In the preceding paragraph, I stated that there are two responses that we may adopt to the prevalence of evil in our own lives and the lives of others, namely, optimism or pessimism. These are two responses that human beings may adopt towards evil. The kinds of attitudes we adopt towards evil will change how we might perceive it and how we may deal or respond when bad

⁴⁵ These premises have been influenced with reference to central claims made by both Kekes and Prescott in their descriptions of the secular problem of evil.

⁴⁶ Prescott (2019, p. 14)

⁴⁷ Kekes (1990, p. 4)

⁴⁸ Kekes (1990, p. 11)

things happen in our lives or others' lives. In this particular thesis, I will understand optimism as existential optimism; according to Yujin Nagasawa, existential optimism is the thesis according to which the world is overall a good place and that we should be grateful for our existence in it.⁴⁹ Those who embrace existential optimism do generally evaluate the world as being generally overall good. The philosophers that I have mentioned (Leibniz, Adams, and Tabensky) would affirm this view about the world. In Leibniz's case, his optimism would go further and claim that this is the best world. For Adams and Tabensky⁵⁰, the claim that evil has a positive function makes their response widely optimistic, and I will expand on this in the next chapter.

I take pessimism to be, as Paul Prescott expresses it, a stance or compound of attitudes, commitments, and intentions. Certain beliefs mark this stance—first and foremost, the bad prevails over the good—which are subject to an important qualifying condition: they are always about outcomes and states of affairs in which one is personally invested.⁵¹ I am aware that pessimism is usually quickly dismissed. Most people would prefer to be optimistic because there is a negative connotation attached to being a pessimist. My aim in this thesis is to show how pessimism is more warranted when we are mainly responding to the evil prevalence, and, in the final chapter, I will demonstrate why pessimism is more warranted. I am aware and argue that it is possible to be optimistic about certain things in our lives, but pessimism is an appropriate response to facing evil. The fact that evil exists and is an obstacle to our lives should be met with pessimism.

⁴⁹ Nagasawa (2018, p. 154)

⁵⁰ Tabensky (2009) Tabensky is against the idea that his response is optimistic. Although he realizes how sad and tragic the human condition is and how terrible the world is in general. It is particularly his advocacy that evil has a positive function and is necessary which makes his view optimistic. His arguments redeem evil by making reference to the good. Which is optimistic. He goes into great detail about the tragedy of life but in the end paints a 'positive' picture that redeems evil and lastly argues that it is necessary.

⁵¹ Prescott (2012, p. 2)

Chapter 2

*"Again, I observed all the oppression that takes place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed with no-one to comfort them. The oppressors have great power, and their victims are helpless. So, I concluded that the dead are better off than the living. But most fortunate of all are those who are not born yet. For they have not seen all the evil in the world."*⁵²

- Ecclesiastes

This chapter aims to draw attention to the contemporary discussion on the secular problem of evil. In a collection of essays in *The Positive Function of evil*⁵³ —some contemporary philosophers engage with the central claim that evil may have a positive function in our lives.⁵⁴ For purposes of this thesis, I mainly focus on two essays from the contribution, the essay by Robert Merrihew Adams titled 'Love and the Problem of Evil' and Pedro Tabensky's paper 'Shadows of Goodness.' I focus on these two essays because they argue for a strong case of optimism about our responses to the secular problem of evil. They give a clear insight into the *contemporary secular* discussion. My goal here is to provide an enriched discussion on contemporary discussion on the secular problem of evil and provide what I take to be strong objections to some of the claims.

2.1 The positive function of evil

In the previous chapter, I provided some context on the philosophical topic of the problem of evil, providing a brief historical background on the discussion around the problem of evil during the Enlightenment period. I aimed to show the reader the kind of responses that philosophers gave when it came to the problem. In this chapter, I wish to turn to contemporary discussions on the problem of evil. I claim that in the contemporary discussions, philosophers are concerned with *attitudinal* responses to the problem. In *The Positive Function of Evil*, the contributors engage with the idea that evil, broadly conceived, may have a central positive function to play in our lives. As Tabensky further explains in the introductory remarks:

⁵² This quote is taken from the Bible in the book of Ecclesiastes 4: 1-3.

⁵³ See *The Positive Function of evil* (2009), ed. PA. Tabensky

⁵⁴ Tabensky (2009, p. 12)

The central claim explored in this collection is not merely that good things follow from evil at times – a relatively uncontroversial claim – but that evil plays a constitutive role in bringing about certain key, primarily but not exclusively ethical, goods, such that, were the world fundamentally to lack evils, large and small, ethical and natural, we would be even worse off than we currently are from the ethical point of view or simply worse off all-things-considered.⁵⁵

The contributors in this collection deal with secular concerns and discuss how we ought to think about evil from a secular point of view. Most central to the discussion is evil's role in realizing goodness and the relationships between evil and goodness.

I engage particularly with this collection and draw much of my discussion because I think much can be said about the claim that evil may have a positive function in our lives. These two essays also provide us with a rich understanding of the relationship between evil and goodness. Such an understanding is crucial to the discussion of pessimism and optimism because our attitude is influenced by our evaluation of the relative goodness and evil in the world. I am particularly interested in the implications of various claims concerning the positive function of evil. To build my thesis and defend pessimism against optimism towards the presence of evil in our lives, I will respond directly to some of the claims around the positive function of evil.

In his essay, the central claim that Adams argues is that much of what we prize about loving any human person would not have existed in a world that did not contain much of the evils in the actual world.⁵⁶ Following from this, the appropriate response to this fact must be some form of ambivalence.⁵⁷ He offers us suggestions on how we should think and feel about what he considers as *necessary* evils. Adams section of this thesis will therefore provide insight into the metaphysical and causal challenges to the discussion. Tabensky defends the general claim that large and small evils in our lives are a necessary condition for living morally worthwhile lives.⁵⁸ His section provides insight into the moral and psychological challenges. In the forthcoming sections of this chapter, I will be exploring the arguments made for the positive function of evil. My aim here is to provide an enriched and better understanding of the responses to the secular problem of evil.

⁵⁵ Tabensky (2009, p. 12)

⁵⁶ Adams (2006, p. 243)

⁵⁷ Adams (2006, p. 243)

⁵⁸ Tabensky (2009, p. 46)

2.2 Adams on love and the positive function of evil

How should we think about the fact that our existence might depend on the presence or occurrence of evil? Well, Adams argues that 1) there is a virtual certainty that what we prize in loving any human person would not have existed in a world that did not contain much of the evil that has occurred in the history of the actual world and, 2) the appropriate response to this fact is some form of *ambivalence*.⁵⁹ At the beginning of his paper, Adams invites us to think about the necessary condition for evil in the lives of those we love and even in our own lives. The point he is making quite early in the paper is that some of us would not have existed without some evil in the world's history.⁶⁰ Adams's paper can be read as answering the question: how ought we respond to *necessary* evils. Necessary evil is evil insofar as it is necessary for a substantial-good.⁶¹ For Adams, the appropriate response to evil in itself may be regret. However, when it comes to evil, which is necessary for good, we ought to have positive responses such as gladness.⁶² He appeals to love as a reason for his argument for such positive responses. In this section of the thesis, I will explore and discuss Adams's argument to better understand his position. Looking at his argument, I discern two central claims. First, there is a metaphysical challenge to the counterfactual analysis of the causal history. Secondly, there is a moral challenge to how we should feel or respond to the causal history of one's existence. I do not want to dispute the metaphysical issue because that would go beyond this thesis's scope. Instead, I want to investigate which responses are appropriate. I disagree with Adams that *ambivalence* and positive emotions are appropriate towards necessary evil. But before I reach such conclusions, I will critically discuss his argument.

Adams's argument from love claims that love for a person requires that we are glad that they exist and want them to exist.⁶³ However, we can certainly know that one's loved one would not exist without some historical tragedy.⁶⁴ Love for a person requires us to be glad that certain events happened because, without those events, the loved one would not exist.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Adams (2006, p. 243)

⁶⁰ This point is relevant to my concerns because I am interested in what can be said about tragic (evil) events that are said to necessary bring about good. I am also interested in what can be said about the evil and necessity.

⁶¹ (Metz, 2009)

⁶² Adams (2006, p. 243)

⁶³ Adams (2006, p. 243)

⁶⁴ Adams (2006, p. 243)

⁶⁵ Adams (2006, p. 243)

He invites us to think about the causal history of one's existence and how some people would not have existed without some form of great or small evil having happened. To illustrate his point, he makes an example of his family history and the role the First World War had in his coming to being.⁶⁶ The point that Adams is making here is that he would not have existed had it not been for the occurrence of the First World War and because we value our own existence and the existence of those we love, not existing would be a bad thing. To relay his point further and to show how this is not only true in his life, he also states that the coming into existence of any human child depends on a multiplicity of interacting factors.⁶⁷ In each case, we will indeed find evils small and great in the causal nexus without having to go very far.⁶⁸

The example that he uses here invites us to think about several things. Firstly, it invites us to think about the dependency of our existence and the existence of our loved ones on evil. He invites us to think about causality and necessity. The idea of necessity here is that a certain event *X* is necessary to bring about *Y*. Without *X*, we would not have *Y*. If it is true that a certain (bad) event was necessary for a loved one's existence, we should be *unconditionally* glad that the bad thing had occurred because only because of that said bad event could the loved one exist. Therefore, such positive emotions to necessary evil also involve that we do not regret the bad that happened but rather be glad about it. Adams realizes that on a metaphysical level, we might question how strong dependence on evils is ascribed to our coming to be; we might even wonder whether the occurrence of the First World War was a metaphysically or absolutely necessary condition for coming to exist in the world.⁶⁹ He further invites us to think about how we ought to respond to such evils- evils in which there is a causal connection between evil and goodness. He suggests that *ambivalence* is the appropriate response.⁷⁰ Ambivalence for Adams means that we may regret evil in itself. However, evil insofar as it is necessary for good requires us to have positive emotions, and further, rationally, we should not all-things-considered wish them away.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Adams (2006, p. 244) The example can be found on page 244, in the example that Adams makes here, he explains how he would have not come to existence if it was not for the First World War because his mother's father suffered a respiratory attack which led to him changing his work and moving his family to Philadelphia. Philadelphia then became the place that his mother met his father.

⁶⁷ Adams (2006, p. 244)

⁶⁸ Adams (2006, p. 244)

⁶⁹ Adams(Adams, 2006)

⁷⁰ Adams (2006, p. 244)

⁷¹ Adams (2006, p. 250)

Adams argues from the relevant counterfactual that *had* the particular horrors of WW1 *not* been what they, then his parents would not have met.⁷² In this sense, he argues that evil was *necessary* for the good that came about his particular circumstances, namely his parents meeting. And it is this counterfactual circumstance, that introduces the responsive ambivalence regarding the horrors of the war.

Now I do not want to address the complex *metaphysical* issue of whether the counterfactual dependence of the good on the evil should be understood in the *necessitarian* way that Adams takes it. I think there are legitimate doubts about this. But exploring this will take me too far away from my concerns, which are focused on which responses are appropriate to the evil in our lives.

Adams proposes another example. He makes an example of Helen Keller.⁷³ The point of this example is to show that to love a person, oneself, or anyone else is not just to care about metaphysical identity.⁷⁴ Love engages attitudes toward the causal structure of human life.⁷⁵ I take it that what Adams is saying here is that if I love someone, I should also value the causal nexus and causal structure of their human life. We cannot for example, separate our attitudes towards actual human lives and towards the causal nexus that they presuppose.⁷⁶ Loving someone means that I should all-things-considered have positive emotions such as gladness for those things that are said to be necessary for my loved one's existence.

What I have discussed thus far can be summarised by two principles that Adams presents. The Principles are as follows:

*(R) If a state of affairs q is a necessary condition for a state of affairs p, then if one does not (or ought not rationally to) regret that p, one ought not rationally to regret that q.*⁷⁷

⁷² Adams (2006, p. 245)

⁷³ Adams (2006, p. 245) On page 245, we read about Helen Keller, who was totally and permanently deprived of her sight and hearing at 19 months. Her handicap led to a lot of loneliness and frustration. But, in the end her story was that of success. She later learned sign language by touch and graduated from a prestigious college and became well known and admired.

⁷⁴ Adams (2006, p. 245)

⁷⁵ Adams (2006, pp. 245-246)

⁷⁶ Adams (2006, p. 246)

⁷⁷ Adams (2006, p. 248)

(R) If a state of affairs q is a necessary condition for a state of affairs p, then if one does not (or ought not rationally to) wish, all things considered, that not -p, one ought not rationally to wish, all things considered, that not -q.*⁷⁸

Adams's argument about the kinds of attitudes we should have towards evil is from an all-things-considered perspective. That means, from an all things considered perspective, we should not wish all-things-considered that a bad event did not happen to our loved one if it was causally or necessarily connected to their existence. For Adams, wishing all things considered not -q is wishing away q and everything of which q is a necessary condition and not wishing, all-things-considered that not -p is not wishing away either p or any of its necessary condition.⁷⁹ For example, if I wish away the war, I would wish away my loved one's existence. But because of love, we cannot do this. Adams suggests one should be glad that a necessary evil exists; if the bad is truly necessary for the good, one has reasons to be unconditionally glad that the bad came about since only upon its presence could the good have come.⁸⁰

However, as Adams also notes, one can reject this way of making evaluations. Instead of making all-things-considered evaluations, we may adopt a particularistic way of valuing, which he terms the Manichean way of valuing.⁸¹ With this kind of value, we would try to evaluate each event in itself. The *Manichean* way of valuing would refuse to make 'all-things-considered' judgments.⁸² Instead, we would be glad of our own, and each other's, individual existence, and we would regret the First World War, without letting the causal dependence of the former object on the latter qualify in any way our evaluative attitude towards either of them.⁸³ This seems to be the way we usually make evaluations. However, Adams opposes making such evaluations because he argues they lead to a kind of emotional apartheid.⁸⁴ Ambivalence seems most appropriate for Adams because it allows us to make evaluations about the causal nexus of events.⁸⁵

Considering that Adams bases his argument on love, one is left to question whether love truly requires us to make-all-things considered evaluations about necessary evils that are part of our loved one's existence. Does love even warrant us to have positive emotions such as gladness

⁷⁸ Adams (2006, p. 250)

⁷⁹ Adams (2006, p. 250)

⁸⁰ Metz (2009, p. 33)

⁸¹ Adams (2006, p. 247)

⁸² Adams (2006, p. 247)

⁸³ Adams (2006, p. 247)

⁸⁴ Adams (2006, p. 251)

⁸⁵ Adams (2006, p. 251)

towards what is necessary for a loved one to exist? These are thought-provoking questions, and this argument may have various implications. In the forthcoming sections, I will discuss some objections to this argument.

There are two major objections that I shall discuss and consider when looking at Adams's argument based on love. I draw my first objection from Thaddeus Metz, who firstly questions whether the normativity of love forbids Manicheanism and questions whether love forbids having negative emotional reactions towards what is necessary for the beloved to exist.⁸⁶ I agree with Metz, and I am also skeptical and doubt that love for a person requires us to respond this way to a necessary evil. One reason for this is that loving a person and wishing away that a state of affairs that is necessary for their existence is not in itself incoherent. For example, as Metz explains it, he can exhibit negative emotions to the fact that mortality is necessary for his wife without failing to love her properly or wishing she did not exist.⁸⁷ It seems possible for Metz to love his wife, be glad she exists, wish she were able to live forever, and regret her morality is a necessary condition for her to live.⁸⁸

This objection casts serious doubt then, whether *love* requires us to have no negative emotional responses. It also affirms that we may wish away necessary evils without wishing away that our loved one exists. I do not see how it is problematic. Instead, we usually do that because we do wish away certain facts or events, but that does not follow that we wish our loved one does not exist. As Metz further points out, he is inclined to doubt that proper love requires the kind of coherence when it comes to wishing that is clearly demanded in the context of rational willing.⁸⁹ He further adds, while one ought not to strive for an impossible state of affairs, it is not objectionably incoherent to wish for one.⁹⁰

To illustrate my point further, if my partner were physically abused in their childhood, it would make perfect sense that I would, all things considered, wish that the abuse did not happen. There are two issues here: wishing away the bad thing does not and should not lead to the conclusion that I would wish my partner away. The second is the idea that love would not allow me any

⁸⁶ Metz (2009, p. 39)

⁸⁷ Metz (2009, p. 41)

⁸⁸ Metz (2009, p. 41)

⁸⁹ Metz (2009, p. 40)

⁹⁰ Metz (2009, p. 40)

particularistic evaluations or Manichean evaluations. It does not strike me as odd that I would lament and even wish that the abuse had not occurred.

My second objection with Adams's argument is his evaluation of the necessary relationship between evil and goodness, particularly where the goodness has been or will be realized⁹¹. I think he might be mistaken about how we should value certain events that are necessarily connected. As Samantha Vice explains it:

*We mistake what value is when we think that in some necessary way, goodness requires evil from the thought that evil often provides the occasion for good, nothing further follows about the value of goodness or its conceptual or metaphysical relation to its opposite.*⁹²

This means that we need not place the kind of value Adams does even on bad events that lead to good. More specifically, there is no reason to transfer to the value itself some necessary component of disvalue.⁹³ The point that I am making here and the concern I have with the example of WW1 that Adams is making is that there is a contingency about which circumstances lead to which results in the real world. The mere fact that a *particular* circumstance led to a particular result we cherish does not mean we ought to cherish the *contingent* circumstances that led to it. And the reason I am trying to give for this explanation revolves around the idea that there are other causal circumstances that could have led to this very circumstance. So, this particular historical or causal story is at most a merely *accidental* feature of the circumstances we cherish and not part of our general endorsing of the circumstances. Most importantly, we can value our own existence without valuing the conditions that make up our existence, and we need not place any kind of positive value on the mere or happenstance causal conditions of the things we value.⁹⁴

Consequently, we will see that contrary to Adams, ambivalence is not the appropriate response because firstly, as Vice argues, ambivalence is incompatible with the allure of values and repulsion for disvalue because this itself could cause some emotional and psychological difficulties.⁹⁵ Secondly, we may acknowledge the causal relation to things we value and love but feel no compulsion to come to an all-things-considered view of evil in its causal relation to a good

⁹¹ Metz (2009, p. 32)

⁹² Vice (2009, p. 167)

⁹³ Vice (2009, p. 167)

⁹⁴ Jones (2015, p. 76)

⁹⁵ Vice (2009, p. 169)

outcome.⁹⁶ Finally, in their fundamental nature, evils are not alluring. They repel rather than attract, and so they cannot be accommodated or just considered with ambivalence.⁹⁷

The way we think about the nature of necessity, especially regarding evil, will impact how we view evil in our lives. It seems there is a difference between being ambivalent about a certain causal history in the sense of not knowing how to evaluate it, on the one hand, and then being at peace with a certain causal history because you are comfortable now with what has resulted from it. Again, just because a good character or a good result has come from bad conditions, it does not follow that we should be grateful for the bad or in some way positively endorse it. Coming to be at peace with a certain causal history does not mean the same thing as coming to positively endorse it as good. Instead, it is rather coming to recognize evil as lamentable and crippling but, even that lamentable history has not destroyed the capacity for good to come out of evil. It does nothing to show that evil was somehow necessary for the good and is to be celebrated as a positive thing.

In the paragraphs above, I provided a critical discussion on Adams's paper to provide an enriched understanding of his arguments for the positive function of evil. I engaged and discussed his argument on love. Adams's argument does not work to show that evil has a positive function or that it needs to be evaluated in a positive (albeit ambivalently positive way). Now, I will turn to Tabensky's paper and look at the moral and psychological arguments for the positive function of evil.

2.3 Tabensky on the positive function of evil

In his paper entitled 'Shadows of Goodness,' Tabensky explores the general idea that the presence of large and small evils in our lives is a necessary condition for living morally worthwhile lives as opposed to bland lives significantly lacking purpose-bestowing challenges.⁹⁸ The central claim which he sets out to defend in this paper is that evil in the broad sense is necessary for goodness.⁹⁹ I am interested in this particular paper because of the discussion he provides of the complex relationship between evil and goodness. This paper deals directly with the idea that evil has a positive function.

⁹⁶ Vice (2009, p. 167)

⁹⁷ Vice (2009, p. 169)

⁹⁸ Tabensky (2009, p. 46)

⁹⁹ Tabensky (2009, p. 46)

The first part of Tabensky's argument is an epistemic one about our notions of goodness. According to Tabensky, for us to truly grasp the notion of goodness, we need the contrast of evil.¹⁰⁰ I take what he means when he sets out his claim on evil being necessary for goodness. He writes:

Goodness is compromised by the conditions that motivate us to pursue goodness and allow us to appreciate the genuine importance of goodness in the first place. Evil is part of the space that allows goodness to happen.¹⁰¹

Empirically Tabensky is making the claim that wherever there is good, there is bad. In so far as there is good, at least some evil is to be found in the vicinity.

Another key claim which Tabensky explores in his argument on the positive function of evil is his argument on the role that evil plays on morality. This part of the argument focuses on moral quality and development. This is the part of the argument where Tabensky claims that without actual suffering, without the labour of overcoming genuine hardships — the opportunity of living morally worthwhile lives would be lost.¹⁰² For Tabensky, life without evil would lead us to morally bland lives. If we were able to eliminate evil, it would mean eliminating sophisticated moral living.¹⁰³

Although this might not seem a controversial claim to make, there are quite a few implications if we accept this and think of evil in this way. I am not too sure whether we should be thinking of evil's role in our lives in this way. There is quite a lot that can be said about the claim that evil might be necessary for moral growth or virtues and the claim that life without evil would be morally bland. So, I want to discuss two central points around how Tabensky views the relationship between evil and goodness and discuss the concerns he expresses about evil being necessary for moral growth.

A world without suffering, genuine hardship, and evil would be one much like a utopian world (as one can imagine). Much of the unimaginable, unjustified suffering we see and have experienced in the world would not exist. In such a world, tragic events in history, such as the Holocaust, Rwandan genocide, and apartheid, would not have been part of our history. Now I do not want to spend too much time getting into the details of this utopian world, but we can all imagine how that world would be.

¹⁰⁰ Tabensky (2009, p. 47)

¹⁰¹ Tabensky (2009, p. 48)

¹⁰² Tabensky (2009, p. 46)

¹⁰³ Tabensky (2009, p. 57)

For Tabensky, we would end up losing quite essential features of our lives if we were to eliminate such evils and live in a utopian world. For him, without the holocaust, there would be no Primo Levi, no Hannah Arendt, no productive Western self-doubt about the very arrogance that built the factories of death.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, the cost of eliminating evils from this world, even terrible evils, is too high if one assumes that moral blandness is utterly undesirable.¹⁰⁵

I am not saying that nothing positive resulted from apartheid. I am skeptical about viewing historical events such as Apartheid or the Holocaust as a 'necessary evil.' We cannot treat the injustice that comes with Apartheid as something necessary for our history. Those who have significantly suffered from injustices may see their suffering as justified. They might see the injustice and suffering as part of their fate when it could have been avoided and changed if human wills had been different. If human beings did not seek out to create social systems initially, which would lead to inequality and injustice, much of the suffering of those who were oppressed would not exist. It is not a necessary physical law that should be accepted especially by those who suffer, because things could have been different. Most importantly, we need to entertain the idea that things would have been *better* without the suffering and injustice that resulted from Apartheid or anything we want to claim is a 'necessary evil.'

I do not think we should even place much importance on moral heroes. I can easily imagine a harmonious South Africa without Nelson Mandela, especially if that would mean the suffering and injustice suffered by many would be eliminated. There is nothing bland about that. A country where we would not need moral heroes to spend 27 years in prison, fighting for equality is most undoubtedly imaginable. Nelson Mandela did not have to go through that, and I am sure it was his choice, but that did not have to be his story if the white South Africans who were in power at that time created a more just system.

It is relatively easy to assume that a world without moral heroes would be impoverished, especially if this is the only world one has ever experienced. Therefore, to claim that this world would suffer significantly without moral heroes could be because that is all that we have experienced. Our idea of what can challenge society to grow and be better is highly influenced by the fact that we see suffering and hardships as the only way to live morally worthwhile lives. We assume that nothing

¹⁰⁴ Tabensky (2009, p. 57)

¹⁰⁵ Tabensky (2009, p. 57)

would allow for human growth in a utopian world, that nothing would allow us to exercise our moral capabilities and virtues. But that is because we are so used to seeing hardships and suffering as necessary we cannot even entertain the idea of human satisfaction and human growth without it. We want the suffering and hardships so bad that to even think of a world without it would be boring. But, what if it would not be boring. What if a utopian world allowed for the growth of our moral capabilities in much more beautiful and painless ways? Most certainly, then, if we place less importance on morality, we would wish that some evils (especially great evils) would be eliminated. I share the view that the universe as we know it is simply not worth all the evils that must occur if the moral and good are to occur and even if there are some evils which are tolerable, the amount of evil is too great.¹⁰⁶

Regarding evil as the unavoidable minimum required by moral order systematically ignores that evil actions cause malevolently motivated, gratuitous, and grievous harm; that is, more harm than is necessary to achieve whatever aims the actions may have.¹⁰⁷ Even if we do need evil in a morally ordered world, it does not mean that suffering and grievous harm is necessary. I do not want us to overlook the grievous harm.

It is also important to note that, even if the contrast between good and evil were necessary, it would not require the existence of evil; the good could be properly appreciated even in contrast with imaginative depictions of evil.¹⁰⁸ I can, for example, appreciate good food without having to go through five years of famine.

This leads me to the discussion of how we should then view the relationship between evil and goodness. Firstly, I wish to disclaim that I reject the claim that evil is necessary and that evil has a positive function in our lives in the sense that Adams and Tabensky state it does. I do not think that evil is necessary for the good; we do not need evil to know or recognize the good. To substantiate my rejection of the positive function of evil, I look at a paper by Samantha Vice, which is in the same collection of essays.¹⁰⁹ She addresses and rejects the thought that goodness is dependent on evil.¹¹⁰ And I agree with her views and basis for the rejection for a few reasons.

¹⁰⁶ Trau (1988, pp. 31-32)

¹⁰⁷ Kekes (2009, p. 151)

¹⁰⁸ Kekes (2009, p. 153)

¹⁰⁹ Samantha Vice's paper is also found in *The Positive Function of Evil*. This is one of two papers in the collection that rejects the view of the positive function of evil.

¹¹⁰ Vice (2009, p. 155)

Before I show why I wish to highlight the central claims she makes because her suggestion on how we ought to think of the relationship between evil and goodness provides us with a great starting point.

Vice's rejection of the view that goodness is dependent on evil attempts to rescue our fundamental notion of goodness from being tainted by its acquaintance.¹¹¹ Even though Adams and Tabensky see goodness and evil as dependent on one another, I would agree that we might want to separate our notion of goodness from evil and make the realization of goodness less dependent on evil. I propose separate our notion of goodness from evil, especially when discussing questions relating to the secular problem of evil. In that case, we may come to a different understanding of the role that evil plays in our lives. If we separate evil and goodness and make goodness less dependent on evil, we might have different attitudes about the occurrence and existence of evil in our lives. When evil things happen to us, we will be less likely to see them as preordained, and we might reject the idea that something evil was necessary to bring about some form of good because things could have been otherwise. Our responses to evil things then change when we separate goodness from evil.

I am not saying that nothing good ever comes out from certain situations, nor am I saying evil has no positive function in our lives. Instead, I want to suggest that we do not see evil as entirely depending on goodness. Vice makes an excellent point in her assessment of goodness; she writes:

In order for goodness to play its characteristic role in our lives- of providing ideals, the promise of progress, self-enlargement, meaning, imaginative play- it cannot be in any way dependent upon the existence or concept of evil... Evil in itself does none of these things. Instead, it destroys these things or disappoints ideals and sets back progress, it reduces the self, rendering it mean and narrow, it stops the play of imagination. Most obviously, it harms rather than benefits us.¹¹²

If we see the relationship between evil and goodness in this way, we would indeed not have a positive attitude towards evil in our lives. The existence of evil and how we view evil should be met with a negative attitude when we view evil in this way and separate it from goodness. We form a particularly negative attitude (such as pessimism) towards the actual evil without developing some necessary causal connection to the good that might appear in the future. In other

¹¹¹ Vice (2009, p. 156)

¹¹² Vice (2009, p. 167)

words, we should establish attitudes to goodness, and we should establish attitudes to badness without having an overall attitude formed by viewing the causal relationship between the two.

2.4 A critique of the positive function of evil: the 'not so' positive function of evil

There are two main points of critique that I will be exploring in my analysis of the *positive function of evil* view. First, I will argue that some of the arguments for the positive function of evil are unjustifiably optimistic responses that may *existentially* belittle evil. By supposing that some moral virtue or other good *depends* on the presence of evil, one may (inadvertently perhaps) be taking evil less *seriously* than is warranted. For example, we might think it hard-hearted, inappropriate, and simply gross to comfort a 6-year old child who has been brutally raped with the thought that perhaps some good might depend on her suffering. It fails to deal with the existential import of evil adequately. My central aim here is to expose why claims about the positive function of evil are misconceived. This critique is essential to this thesis because, as I have mentioned in the first chapter, I am mostly concerned with the existential considerations about the problem of evil and how we should think and respond to existing in a world with a vast amount of evil. To claim that evil ultimately brings about good or greater good or is necessary for goodness seems to diminish the evil. It ignores the fact that evil is, to no small extent, existentially problematic. Additionally, it ignores the experience of suffering and evil.

I wish to turn then to the discussion on suffering. I draw an understanding from Eleonore Stump to try and fully capture a clear understanding of what is meant by suffering. In a section of a book entitled *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue* Stump writes:

A better way to think about suffering is as a function of what a person cares about. Every human person has some care about what kind of person she is and about flourishing as that kind of person. There is an objective fact of the matter about what will make a human person flourish, however. And so there is an objective element in what a person cares about, too. It has to do with her being what she ought to be, in a sense which encompasses all her well-being, not just her moral good. Consequently, part of what it is for a human being to suffer is for her to be kept, to one degree or another, from flourishing, from being what she ought to be.¹¹³

She adds what I think is a further essential part of suffering:

On the other hand, what we care about has a subjective element too, which does not have to do with our flourishing. This subjective element is something to which a

¹¹³Stump (2018, p. 13)

person is committed but which is not essential to his flourishing and may not even be compatible with it. This is a matter of what we can call "the desires of the heart," to adopt a phrase from the Psalmist. The desires of the heart are what a person loses when he is heartbroken.¹¹⁴

It is not hard to think of a few examples of evil that may occur in a person's life that may lead to suffering and inevitability keep someone from flourishing and achieving the desires of their heart. Severe poverty, abuse, and war may keep people from flourishing and from satisfying their desires of the heart. Yes, it is true, and one cannot fail to mention that suffering may lead to positive personal growth or the development of virtues. Those who suffer may go through tremendous change and transformation, where they might, for example, develop certain virtues such as courage and resilience; however, this is not always the case. A sufferer can react to his suffering negatively rather than in ways that contribute to 'adversarial growth.' Suffering *can* contribute to regeneration and growth, but it cannot *guarantee* them.¹¹⁵

When we consider this, we may be hesitant to view evil as having a positive function in any substantial sense. There is no guarantee that sufferers will overcome their sufferings or that the greater good may come, so when we want to suggest how people might respond to evil in their lives or what attitudes they should have (positive or negative). It seems it is pivotal to realize that it is false to claim that victims can always choose to respond positively to what happens to them in many instances. Where suffering seriously damages will and reason, victims frequently do not choose to respond positively to what happens to them.¹¹⁶ When looking at the philosophical literature on suffering and the trauma faced by the victims of torture, war, and abuse, we realize how such events may drastically and almost negatively impact the human psyche and their ability to make sense and find meaning in their world. When we take a more in-depth look at suffering, we may see how some of the arguments for evil's positive function are unjustifiably optimistic responses that *existentially* belittle evil. The secular problem of evil has existential implications, and arguments for the positive function of evil fail to adequately deal with the existential import of evil.

As I have expressed in the preceding paragraphs, my biggest concern or critique of the arguments for the positive function of evil is that they present a kind of theodicy that tries to explain away

¹¹⁴ Stump (2018, p. 14)

¹¹⁵ Stump (2018, p. 21)

¹¹⁶ Oppy (2018, pp. 30-31)

the problem of evil. Still, they evince a lack of attention to the hideous nature of evil.¹¹⁷ Yes, we might want to make evaluations of evil by turning to the good that it may later bring. Nonetheless, we need to acknowledge that intense suffering is frequently destructive and demoralizing (for the sufferers themselves), affecting a breakdown rather than a breakthrough.¹¹⁸ I agree with Trakakis that 'there is no doubt great personal (e.g., psychological, physical, financial) hardships are often grounds from which some of the best art has been created. But just as frequently, if not more so, sufferings and adversity function as stumbling blocks, preventing artists from excelling in their work and fulfilling their dreams. Creativity, and more broadly, human flourishing is often impeded and not furthered by suffering.'¹¹⁹

In my view, I suggest that we should not accept that great hardship is necessary for moral growth, heroism, or even other virtues. If we accept it, we might run the risk of viewing tragic and traumatic events that happen in our lives as fatalistic. I do not see why anyone would want to think of their existence like that because most evils serve no greater good, nor are they redeemable or justifiable. Those (optimists) might want to say that we should consider the good that may come out of bad situations and rejoice or be grateful for the good. But we do not have to do that. We need not weigh up or make evaluations about the good and bad like that. When making evaluations about a person's quality of life, optimists might want to turn to the good and claim that the good is way better than the initial bad. Such as the example of Helen Keller.¹²⁰ There is more that we might want to consider.

As David Benatar argued, an individual's quality of life is not determined simply by subtracting the bad from the good.¹²¹ Furthermore, how well or badly life goes depends not simply on how much good and bad there is, but also on other considerations - most prominently considerations about how that good and bad are distributed.¹²² We may often find that in many cases of victims of gross violations and individuals who continually suffer, once one reaches a certain threshold of badness, no quantity of good can outweigh it because no amount of good could be worth the

¹¹⁷ Trakakis (2018, p. 33)

¹¹⁸ Trakakis (2018, p. 33)

¹¹⁹ Trakakis (2018, p. 34)

¹²⁰ The example of Helen Keller is the one which is mentioned and discussed in Adams section of this paper.

¹²¹ Benatar (2006, p. 45)

¹²² Benatar (2006, p. 61)

badness.¹²³ He makes an example of Donald Cowart, who assessed his own life following a gas explosion.¹²⁴ Benatar explains that Cowart achieved considerable success and reattained a satisfactory quality of life. Yet, he continued to maintain that these post-burn goods were not worth the cost of enduring the treatments to which he was subjected and, no matter how much good followed his recovery, this could not outweigh, at least in his assessment, the bad of the burns and treatment he experienced.¹²⁵

I bring this particular example up because if we consider cases such as Cowart, we may see why positive responses to evil in our lives, in many cases, are not warranted. Furthermore, we might view the relationship between evil and goodness differently. This example shows that although good may come, the bad may outweigh it, and when that is the case, we cannot claim that the bad makes us realize the good. There is no scale or way of measuring the good versus the bad that will allow individuals to make positive assessments about their lives. Goodness and badness do not exist in harmony in that way; instead, badness (evil) may diminish our experience of an overall good life. And that should be met with pessimism rather than optimism. Yes, goodness may follow but at what cost? Surely a severe burn is not the only way to give rise to a successful life and personal growth or development? Indeed suffering is not the best means and is not necessary to bring about personal growth, moral heroism, and virtues.

The second point of critique is that to suppose that evil might have a positive *function* might be mistaken on the grounds that have to do with the *causal directionality* of the relation between good and evil. Perhaps the good that might result from initially bad circumstances could be *accidental* with no intrinsic or deep connection with the evil. And if it is accidental, it is inappropriate to describe the one as having a *function* in relation to the other. Having a *function* involves seeing the one, the evil, as coming into existence *for the sake of* and precisely because of its causal contribution to the good. The *teleological* implications here are complex and contested. Still, we might want to make a less strong claim about the relationship between evil and goodness or the dependence of goodness on evil precisely because it is inappropriate to causally or functionally connect them.

¹²³ Benatar (2006, p. 46)

¹²⁴ Benatar (2006, p. 63) Benatar uses this example as further considerations that affect an assessment of a life's quality which is relevant to the argument I wish to make.

¹²⁵ Benatar (2006, p. 63)

This part of my critique focuses on the complex relationship between evil and goodness. In my view, we may need a robust investigation of the relationship between evil and goodness because our understanding of this relationship will lead to forming different attitudes about the existence and presence of evil in our lives. How we view the complex relationship between evil and goodness is pivotal because, as Michael Levine has stated, we can properly understand how we ought to live our lives if we properly understand the allegedly complex relationship between goodness and evil.¹²⁶ I say that understanding the relationship between evil and goodness allows us to adopt the appropriate attitudes towards the existence of evil in our lives.

According to those philosophers who argue that evil has a positive function, they view the relationship between evil and goodness as evil depending to a large extent and necessary on the presence of large and small evils.¹²⁷ For them, evil is necessary for goodness. They redeem evil by showing that evil leads to goodness at some later stage or allows for goodness to happen.

Since we are concerned with the secular problem of evil and the existential considerations that may arise, I oppose the idea that evil has a *necessary* positive function because of the implications that this might have. Yes, evil may allow for goodness, but we cannot and should not ignore that the suffering and harm that usually comes with it is in any way necessary. There is nothing necessary about inequality. We do not need the disparity between the rich and poor to fully realize an equal society where people get to eat and can afford their basic living. Furthermore, as Benatar argues, we must not think that the redeeming features of deprivation and striving are actually advantages over more rapid desire and fulfillment.¹²⁸ We can imagine a world in which we were differently constituted such that a period of deprivation and striving were unnecessary.¹²⁹

Suppose evil is necessary, in the way philosophers who argue for the positive function of evil claim. In that case, we have all the reasons to be pessimistic about our human condition. Benatar argues that to show we require the period of deprivation and striving to gain the most from eventual fulfillment does not indicate that our lives are better for that deprivation and striving; instead, it is

¹²⁶ Levine (2012, p. 151)

¹²⁷ Tabensky (2009, p. 14) This quote can be found in the introductory remarks made by Prof. Tabensky which states the central claims concerning the collection. I have therefore used this as a general claim which is made by those (who in this collection) argue for the positive function of evil.

¹²⁸ Benatar (2006, p. 79)

¹²⁹ Benatar (2006, p. 79)

to concede an unfortunate fact about our lives.¹³⁰ It simply would be better if desire and fulfillment required less unfulfillment along the way.¹³¹ What I am trying to say here is that to show that basic moral living requires deprivation and striving in order for us to be fulfilled or to live morally worthwhile lives is a tragic and unfortunate thing about our lives which we should not be happy or glad about. For example, we may value freedom, but it would still be better not to have been deprived of freedom at all.¹³²

As I have argued in the paragraphs mentioned above, I reject the claims that assert that evil is necessary or dependent on goodness. I reject the idea that evil has a necessary positive function. I suggested how we should instead consider Vice's suggestion and separate our notion of goodness from evil.¹³³ One of the reasons why we should do this is because, in many cases, the evil that occurs in people's lives is not inherently connected in any way with the good that they experience. Evil then may have accidentally good consequences, and it may even be the condition for certain virtues. However, it has no intrinsically positive aspect, and it is not essentially connected to our notion of good or value *per se*.¹³⁴ The arguments for the necessity of evil attempt to show that evil is logically necessary. To argue that some of our simple virtues, such as moral heroism, are connected to its opposite concludes that it is logically impossible to have these virtues without their unwanted prerequisites.¹³⁵

Furthermore, these arguments insist on the connections between good and evil as logically necessary, as though things could not have been otherwise. As Schlesinger asks, why not let human nature be different, and man be made to enjoy any amount of pleasure without needing a contrast?¹³⁶ Even if evil is necessary because it enhances the overall goodness of the whole. And the universe is much better because of having evil in it. This is only so in the context of the existing laws of nature.¹³⁷ The laws of nature could have been so that the amount of advantages we enjoy remains exactly the same as at present, but there be no need to pay for it in pain.¹³⁸ In my view,

¹³⁰ Benatar (2006, p. 79)

¹³¹ Benatar (2006, p. 79)

¹³² Benatar (2006, p. 79)

¹³³ Vice (2009, p. 155)

¹³⁴ Vice (2009, p. 156)

¹³⁵ Schlesinger (2008, p. 88)

¹³⁶ Schlesinger (2008, p. 87)

¹³⁷ Schlesinger (2008, p. 87)

¹³⁸ Schlesinger (2008, pp. 87-88)

we need to look further into claims about necessity or the nature of necessity around the discussion of evil.

To place such a positive value on evil involves looking at things in retrospect and comparing the evil against the good, and then claiming that it is better the evil exists than that it does not. One way people might establish the positive value of evil is to show that because evil exists as a double-effect of good, evil possesses instrumental good sufficient to outweigh the intrinsic badness.¹³⁹ Then, there is the question of whether evaluations of evil depend so entirely on what emerges later?¹⁴⁰ I think not because such evaluations fail to deal with the existential import of evil adequately. Furthermore, I do not think that we can weigh up the good and bad in this way¹⁴¹ the bad and suffering versus the good and success that follows are incommensurable and cannot be weighed against each other. And if when people respond to such evil that may bring about good, they may wish that the evil did not occur or that they would have been better off without it.

My aim in this section of this thesis was to critique the other opposing analyses of the positive function of evil view. I discussed two main points of critique. Firstly, I argued that some of the arguments for the positive function of evil are unjustifiably optimistic responses that may existentially belittle evil. Second, to suppose that evil might have a positive function might be mistaken on the grounds to do with causal directionality of the relation between good and evil. My central aim here was to expose why claims about the positive function are misconceived. In the next chapter, I will show how pessimism may be an appropriate response.

¹³⁹ Trau (1988, p. 27)

¹⁴⁰ Smilansky (2007, p. 18)

¹⁴¹ Going back to what I said when I referenced Benatar in the earlier sections, about our evaluations of the quality of life of a person. We cannot simply weigh up the good and bad just so easily, there are other considerations that we need to make.

Chapter 3

"Optimism," said Cacambo, "What is that?" "Alas!" replied Candide, "It is the obstinacy of maintaining that everything is best when it is worst."¹⁴²

"What a pessimist you are!" exclaimed Candide.

"That is because I know what life is," said Martin."¹⁴³

- Voltaire

My aim in this chapter is twofold: first, I aim to build a case against optimism, and second, I aim to advocate pessimism as an appropriate stance and attitude towards the secular problem of evil. As I have mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, I am concerned with the debate between optimistic and pessimistic responses to the secular problem of evil. I will describe and discuss the debate between optimists and pessimists. I will then show how the optimistic response is unwarranted. Finally, I will explore the idea of pessimism as I understand and explain why it is an appropriate stance and attitude that we should adopt. The fact that evil exists and is an obstacle to our lives should be met with pessimism.

3.1 Facing Evil

Before I discuss the debate between optimism and pessimism, it's imperative to remind the reader that this thesis is mostly concerned with the existential considerations of the secular problem of evil. There are various ways in which we may be vulnerable to evil, but we all face evil at some point in our lives. To illustrate my point, I turn to John Bishop, who shows what I think it means to 'face evil.' He writes:

Consider the person who seeks to live a meaningful, happy, and worthwhile life and recognizes that living well requires living virtuously— according to widely shared views about what that means. Now, there are many things that may interfere with a person's achieving this aim, and which people consciously recognize as obstacles to human fulfillment. These are evils. Human beings are animals who come to be aware of evils—of obstacles, or what they take to be obstacles, to their living well. Thus, evils come to be a problem for lived human existence—an existential problem.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Voltaire (1918, p. 33)

¹⁴³ Voltaire (1918)

¹⁴⁴ Bishop (2018, pp. 44-45)

So, facing evil is being aware of that which gets in the way of us living well, and once we are aware of how evil is pervasive in our lives, questions of how we ought to think about our lives and existence seem to follow. Evil creates obstacles for us, and the kinds of attitudinal responses we ought to have towards it warrant further discussion. There are two options that I will explore in this chapter. We may either be optimistic or pessimistic in the face of evil.

I argue for adopting specific attitudinal responses to the secular problem of evil because I am inclined to believe that we may be more equipped to cope with it once we understand evil and form the appropriate attitudes. So, what does it mean for one to adopt an attitude towards something?

As Ward Jones explains, attitudes have a core evaluative component: one's attitude toward something embodies one's evaluation of it.¹⁴⁵ Also, to adopt an attitude toward a thing is to take on characteristics in relation to it that may have deep significance in the quality of one's life.¹⁴⁶ Thus, when we make specific evaluations about evil, we develop individual attitudes towards it.

3.2 Pessimism and Optimism: an overview

I understand pessimism and optimism as attitudes that individuals adopt about evil and goodness. We may adopt these attitudes either upon our evaluation of evil and goodness in our personal experience or upon the evaluation of evil and goodness in the world as a whole. Pessimists and optimists make evaluations and judgments about the amount of good and bad there exists. We can illustrate this distinction as follows: optimists might view the glass as half full while pessimists view the glass as half empty. I think this is a straightforward way in which we can understand pessimism and optimism.

In philosophy, there are various ways in which we may understand the debate between optimism and pessimism. According to Benatar, one kind of optimism or pessimism is about the facts; here, pessimists and optimists agree or disagree about what is or will be the case.¹⁴⁷ He also distinguishes the second kind of optimism or pessimism, which is not about the facts, but about an evaluation of the facts; here, optimists and pessimists disagree about what is good or bad.¹⁴⁸ For example, an

¹⁴⁵ Jones (2015, p. 63)

¹⁴⁶ Jones (2015, p. 65)

¹⁴⁷ Benatar (2006, p. 173)

¹⁴⁸ Benatar (2006, p. 173)

optimist might agree that there is more pain than pleasure but think that the pain is worth the pleasure. On the other hand, pessimists might agree that there is more pleasure than pain but deny that even that quantity of pleasure is worth the pain.¹⁴⁹ The general idea here is that optimists and pessimists disagree about the facts or the evaluations of the facts, and optimists tend to have a more positive evaluation than pessimists.

Another way of understanding the debate between optimism and pessimism, particularly in the context of the problem of evil, is this: optimists think that all or most evils can be accounted for, or that is, all evils are necessary or inevitable parts of the best of all possible worlds. Pessimists think they are not. For pessimists, the idea that there must be a reason for all this misery and such a vast amount of evil is not correct. The world, for them, is just terrible. Far too many evils are irredeemable. Moreover, optimistic responses at their core assume that evil is in some way redeemable: there is some vantage-point from which all evil can be seen as playing a role in bringing about a world that would be worse were it not for the evil. Using these descriptions, we can therefore analyze how Leibniz, Adams, and Tabensky (to a certain degree) are optimistic.

3.3 A case against optimism

In this thesis, optimism refers to a specific kind of attitude that some philosophers have endorsed when it comes to responses to the problem of evil. Therefore, I understand optimism as *existential* optimism. According to Yujin Nagasawa, existential optimism is the thesis according to which the world is overall a good place and we should be grateful for our existence in it.¹⁵⁰ Those who embrace existential optimism do mostly evaluate the world as being generally overall good. Philosophers such as Leibniz and Adams are examples of philosophers who embrace existential optimism.¹⁵¹ It is crucial to clarify that existential optimism does not suggest that the world is thoroughly and entirely good or that every person's life is good. Instead, existential optimism says that the world is overall good and that we should be happy and grateful to live in it.¹⁵² Nagasawa provides a clear and straightforward illustration of existential optimism. He says:

¹⁴⁹ Benatar (2006, p. 173)

¹⁵⁰ Nagasawa (2018, p. 154)

¹⁵¹ I think it's important that I mention that existential optimism is not only embraced by theists. There are also non-theistic philosophers who embrace existential optimism. Nagasawa also makes this clear. Tabensky, for example endorses existential optimism.

¹⁵² Nagasawa (2018, p. 159)

*Suppose that positive things in the world and life are painted yellow, while negative things in the world and life are painted grey. Existential optimism says that although there might be parts of the world and people's lives that are painted mostly grey, overall, the whole picture is painted mostly yellow.*¹⁵³

As a reader, you might wonder why one would go against optimism. Why wouldn't one want to view the world as overall good and see the world as painted mostly yellow? Because, yes, there is so much good in the world, but as Susan Neiman argues, those who point out the ways in which the world is not the best at least acknowledge the pain of others, even if they cannot alleviate it.¹⁵⁴

3.4 On the quality of life

Now, there is nothing wrong with looking on the bright side and focusing on the positive and good. When something bad happens to us, we generally do that, and we focus on the good that has followed after. When making assessments about their lives or the quality of their lives, most people would quickly claim that their life is overall good rather than bad. Our tendency to do this (focus on the good or positive) can be explained by a psychological phenomenon. Moreover, as Benatar argues, it is unsurprising that people's reports of their overall well-being are unduly optimistic because the building blocks of that judgment are similarly prone to an optimism bias. For example, people are (excessively) optimistic in their projections of what will happen to them in the future.¹⁵⁵ With regards to their recalling of past experiences, there is a greater recall of positive experiences than there is of negative ones. One reason for this may be because negative experiences are susceptible to cognitive processes that suppress them.¹⁵⁶ Consequently, this shows that people may be mistaken in their evaluations of just how good their lives are. Given the bias towards optimistic evaluations of our own lives, our judgments of how good life really is cannot be trusted.

There are several features of human psychology that can account for the favorable (positive) assessments people usually make of their own life's quality, and the most general of these psychological phenomena is called the Pollyanna Principle.¹⁵⁷ The Pollyanna Principle is a tendency towards optimism; it is an inclination to recall positive rather than negative experiences.¹⁵⁸ For example, someone who loses their parents at a very young age might later

¹⁵³ Nagasawa (2018, pp. 159-160)

¹⁵⁴ Neiman (2002, p. 136)

¹⁵⁵ Benatar (2017, p. 68)

¹⁵⁶ Benatar (2017, p. 68)

¹⁵⁷ Benatar (2006, p. 64)

¹⁵⁸ Benatar (2006, p. 65)

positively view their lives as good because, although they lost parents, they learned independence and, therefore, become successful and later have a family of their own. This kind of assessment of one's life may lead us to be quite mistaken about how good our lives really are or have been. It also distorts our sense of reality by making us believe that things were not actually that bad (when they really were) by pointing to the positive.

A second psychological phenomenon that may explain our bias towards optimism and positive evaluations of one's quality of life is known variously as *accommodation*, *adaptation*, or *habituation*.¹⁵⁹ If one's self-assessments were reliable, if one's condition improved or deteriorated, one would perceive one's condition to have improved or deteriorated to that degree; self-assessment would then remain fixed until there was a further improvement or deterioration, in response to which one's self-assessment would also adjust. However, this is not the case. Our subjective assessments do respond to shifts in our objective conditions, but the altered self-assessment is not stable. As we adjust to our new condition, we cease to rate our condition as we did when it first improved or deteriorated.¹⁶⁰ Benatar convincingly shows that if someone were to lose their home, they might view this as a decline in their quality of life. After some time, they might find temporary accommodation with family and adjust to this new life. Therefore, one might judge their life to be much better now than when they first lost their home. Still, this does not take away the fact that the person remains without a home.

Our inclination towards optimism is quite ingrained in human psychology; this makes sense why it is much easier for individuals to reach positive evaluations about their lives even after they have suffered greatly. In many cases, people choose to ignore just how much suffering they experience in their lifetime. We go on with our lives and carry on each day, missing just how much of our lives are characterized by negative mental states.¹⁶¹ Examples of such negative mental states that we may face daily are hunger, thirst, and stress.¹⁶² We go through various negative mental states, and the severity of which might differ but most of our days are filled with such negative mental states. We do not spend much of our time lamenting these mental states, especially if there are no chronic conditions, but they are there, and we experience them every day. But, as Benatar argues,

¹⁵⁹ Benatar (2017, p. 69)

¹⁶⁰ Benatar (2017, p. 69)

¹⁶¹ Benatar (2006, pp. 60-70)

¹⁶² Benatar (2006, p. 70)

because of Pollyannaism, we tend to overlook the bad (especially the mildly bad); people are so used to the discomforts of daily life that they overlook them entirely, even though they are so pervasive.¹⁶³

I must clarify that this is not to say that every human being overestimates his or her life quality. Some people have accurate assessments, but these are the minority and very likely include those who do not take issue with my grim view about the quality of human life.¹⁶⁴ Also, it is not to say that we should not trust people's assessments or their quality of life or that their assessments are irrelevant. Instead, it is to note that even if an overly optimistic subjective assessment makes one's life better than it would otherwise be, it does not follow that one's life is actually going as well as one thinks it is.¹⁶⁵ If one views their life as generally good, it does not mean that it is as good as they have made it out to be.

I wish to show, given the discussion on people's assessments of the quality of life, that there is a bias towards optimism. This bias leads to people overestimating just how good their lives are; further, this leads to further implications where people do not realize how bad things are and how tragic life generally is.

In his book entitled, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*, David Benatar sets out arguments to show just how bad life really is and just how much the bad prevails over the good in our lives. One of his arguments is that our lives contain so much worse than good, partly because of a series of empirical differences between bad things and good things. For example, the most intense pleasures are short-lived, whereas the worst pains can be much more enduring.¹⁶⁶ I think part of understanding the relationship between the good and bad in our lives is understanding that it is not just about the amount of good or bad there is. We may experience a lot of pleasures in life, but most of these pleasures are short-lived. We may feel well-rested after a nap, but fatigue and exhaustion may last so much more longer. Even after a massage, our body may ache again. Most of life's simple pleasures are merely temporary. Secondly, the worst pains are also worse than the best pleasures are good.¹⁶⁷ There is no doubt that this is true; given a choice,

¹⁶³ Benatar (2006, p. 71)

¹⁶⁴ Benatar (2017, p. 70)

¹⁶⁵ Benatar (2017, p. 71)

¹⁶⁶ Benatar (2017, p. 77)

¹⁶⁷ Benatar (2017, p. 77)

most people would choose to feel pleasure rather than pain. If you were to put someone's foot in boiling hot water while you massage their back, we know which sensation would be more dominant, and we know that anyone would pick a quick massage rather than a burning foot.

Moreover, as Benatar shows, if we consider the temporal dimensions of injury, illness, and recovery, we find that a person may be injured in one minute but take a long time to recover.¹⁶⁸ In some cases, there is no recovery.¹⁶⁹ We are quickly and quite easily susceptible to fall ill or suffer an injury. Think about how long it might take to recover from an illness and how long it might recover from an injury. I might lose my hand's function today. It will take days of rehabilitation and therapy to get the hand working again, and that will not only impact me physically, but it may impact me mentally, and that may even take longer.

Benatar demonstrates in various ways that there is just a general decline that characterizes the majority of one's life.¹⁷⁰ Also, things are stacked against us in the fulfillment of our desires and the satisfaction of our preferences.¹⁷¹ For example, I want to succeed in life and get into my desired career, but poverty and inequality may get in the way of that. We may then find even when I have achieved some of my desires, and I will be met with dissatisfaction because it may turn out to be not what I imagined or the environment that I am in is not even healthy, after working so hard to be in it. Or I might find that once I have achieved a certain desire, I have no time to enjoy it, and I will have to move onto the next wish.

For many people, this is not a problem; that is just the way that life goes. All of this does not mean that life is bad. As Benatar says, it is not surprising that we fail to notice this heavy preponderance of bad in human life.¹⁷² The facts that have been described are deep and intractable features of human life. Most humans have accommodated to the human condition and thus fail to notice just how bad it is.¹⁷³ I think that Benatar is merely showing that there is so much that may be revealed to us if we uncover the bias towards optimism. He elucidates this point clearly and says:

All this occurs against the backdrop of an optimism bias, under which we are already inclined to focus on the good more than the bad. The fact that we fail to notice how

¹⁶⁸ Benatar (2017, p. 77)

¹⁶⁹ Benatar (2017, p. 77)

¹⁷⁰ Benatar (2017, p. 78)

¹⁷¹ Benatar (2017, p. 79)

¹⁷² Benatar (2017, p. 82)

¹⁷³ Benatar (2017, p. 82)

*bad human life is does not detract from the arguments I have given that there is much more bad than good. Human life would be vastly better if pain were fleeting and pleasure protracted; if the pleasures were much better than the pains were bad; if it were really difficult to be injured or get sick; if recovery were swift when injury or illness did befall us; and if our desires were fulfilled instantly and if they did not give way to new desires. Human life would also be immensely better if we lived for many thousands of years in good health, and if we were much wiser, cleverer, and morally better than we are.*¹⁷⁴

If we look closely, we may find that life is not as good as we make it out. Given our psychological tendency of Pollyannaism, it is evident that there is an error that tends towards the overestimation of how good life is.¹⁷⁵ This is not to say that there is no good in the world or our lives but to point out that our lives, in fact, life overall, might not be as good as we make it out to be. And, even armed with various optimistic coping mechanisms, the quality of human life is not only much worse than most people think but actually quite awful. This may not be true in every minute or even hour of (human) life—there are moments of relief and pleasure—but taken as a whole, it is an unenviable condition.¹⁷⁶

One philosopher who was particularly renowned for his pessimism was Arthur Schopenhauer.¹⁷⁷ Schopenhauer noticed that there is much to marvel at and much to be despondent about. He observed that we live our lives in a state of constant striving. And this constant striving inevitably leads to dissatisfaction.¹⁷⁸ We have certain desires that we are constantly striving for, and once we do achieve these, we are met with dissatisfaction. Life is just going back and forth between striving and boredom.¹⁷⁹ For Schopenhauer, the only time we get to experience happiness in this world is when we are temporarily freed from suffering.¹⁸⁰ Looking at all the suffering in the world, Schopenhauer was not ready to accept Leibniz's claim that this was the best of all possible

¹⁷⁴ Benatar (2017, pp. 82-83)

¹⁷⁵ Benatar (2006, p. 74)

¹⁷⁶ Benatar (2017, p. 91)

¹⁷⁷ See, *The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer Studies in Pessimism*, Vol 4, trans. B. Saunders.

¹⁷⁸ Schopenhauer (2005, pp. 9-10)

¹⁷⁹ Schopenhauer (2005, p. 10)

¹⁸⁰ Schopenhauer (2005) trans. B. Saunders. Schopenhauer is not claiming that one cannot be happy, we can and do experience happiness when there is an absence of suffering and whenever our desires are fulfilled however this is shortly followed by boredom and dissatisfaction. The suggestion is that one can be happy if they sacrifice their desires. If we can properly deal with our desires we may be happy. Or semi-satisfied with life. There is a connection between the suggestions Schopenhauer makes and Buddhism teachings. However, an in-depth discussion on this warrants for a different study or a full-thesis.

worlds.¹⁸¹ Instead, the fact that he had observed so much suffering led Schopenhauer to the conclusion that this is not the best; instead, it seems that we all exist just to suffer.¹⁸²

Suppose it is true that human psychology and our psychological tendencies such as Pollyannaism inhibits individuals from truly seeing the horrendous evil and suffering in the world. In other words, if psychological phenomena lead people to a bias towards optimism, in that case, this should be enough to build a case against optimism. Even Schopenhauer thought that it would be possible to persuade optimists against their belief that this is the best-of-all-possible-worlds.¹⁸³ He writes:

*If we were to conduct the most hardened and callous optimist through hospitals, infirmaries, operating theatres, through prisons, torture-chambers, and slave-hotels, over battlefields and to places of execution; if we were to open to him all the dark abodes of misery, where it shuns the gaze of cold curiosity, and finally were to allow him to glance into the dungeon of Ugolino where prisoners starved to death, he too would certainly see in the end what kind a world is this meilleur des mondes possibles.*¹⁸⁴

As I have mentioned, we need not look too far at the great suffering that exists because even our own lives are constituted so much by negative mental states. What is important to note is that all that optimism does is block these out and claim things are better when they really are not. Moreover, optimists make valiant attempts to paint a rosy picture to put a redeeming positive gloss on the human predicament.¹⁸⁵

Merely looking at the bright side and pointing out the positive should not be the stance that we take towards the prevalence of evil because it may lead to denial about the great amount of suffering brought by evil. When we accept optimism when it comes to the problem of evil, claiming that evil is necessary and brings about greater good involves sometimes making justifications even for some of the most gratuitous evils in the world. I am not sure why one would commit to that. Instead, one should reject any such justifications that would argue for evil as being necessary. We should not easily accept that this is the best of possible worlds if our existence in it

¹⁸¹ Schopenhauer (2005, p. 12)

¹⁸² Schopenhauer (2005, p. 12)

¹⁸³ Schopenhauer (1969), trans. E.F.J. Payne

¹⁸⁴ Schopenhauer (1969), trans. E.F.J. Payne. ‘meilleur des mondes possible’ translated means ‘the best of all possible worlds.’

¹⁸⁵ Benatar (2006, pp. 88-89)

involves so much pain and suffering. The amount of suffering is just too great, and the greater good does not justify the presence of ubiquitous evil.

One possible criticism of *my* criticism of optimism is that it is insufficiently nuanced in the weighing up of things (for example the weighing up of pleasures versus pains). I do not really distinguish between the *quality* of the pleasures and pains and the significance we attach to this. that it is not merely a calculus of *physical* pleasures and pains, but rather a far more nuanced weighing up of different kinds and significances of pleasures and pains.¹⁸⁶

It is imperative that I clarify that accepting pessimism and rejecting optimism is not simply about adding up pains and pleasures and deciding which one to go with, both pessimists and optimists may weigh pain and suffering against other life-qualities.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, as Benatar explains, it is not only the ratio of pleasure and pain that determines the quality of life, but also the sheer *quantity* of pain and once a certain threshold of pain is passed, no amount of pain can compensate for that.¹⁸⁸ It is not only about the *amount* of good there is, there are other considerations, most prominently considerations about *how* the good and bad are distributed.¹⁸⁹ Another distributional consideration is about the *intensity* of the good and bad, for example, a life in which the pleasures were extraordinarily intense but correspondently few, in frequent and short-lived might be worse off than a life with the same total of pleasure.¹⁹⁰

3.5 Defending pessimism

It is my view that the reason many individuals adopt and accept optimism has to do with the common misconception of what pessimism is. A common misconception of pessimism is that people think being a pessimist involves being depressed, nihilistic, or being in despair, which gives pessimism a negative look and makes optimism much more appealing. However, we should not then merely choose optimism because it paints a rosy picture of the human condition. Accepting and adopting pessimism does not necessarily entail being in constant despair or being depressed; one may be happy but still, deny that life is worth all the suffering. We should not assume that

¹⁸⁶ This criticism was brought to my attention by Mr. Francis Williamson.

¹⁸⁷ Dienstag (2006, p. 37)

¹⁸⁸ Benatar (2006, p. 46)

¹⁸⁹ Benatar (2006, p. 61)

¹⁹⁰ Benatar (2006, p. 61)

optimism is the right view merely because it is cheery, just as pessimism cannot be the right view because it is grim, which view we adopt must depend on the evidence.¹⁹¹

In this section of this chapter, I bring forth my arguments and explore pessimism as a stance and attitude to the secular problem of evil. Thus far, I have discussed the secular problem of evil and why it leads to existential problems. When faced with such existential problems, I have also shown that optimism is not the most appealing response we should adopt and provided several arguments to point to my case against optimism. In the forthcoming paragraphs, I will explore the idea of pessimism as I understand it and show my appraisal of it as an appropriate response.

3.6 An account of pessimism

The account of pessimism entailing this thesis is drawn mainly from the works of Paul Prescott, 'What Pessimism is' and Joshua Foa Dienstag's *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*. I think these two works provide a clear and concise understanding of pessimism and are interlinked in their discussion on pessimism. Therefore, I take pessimism to be, as Prescott expresses it, a stance or compound of attitudes, commitments, and intentions. Certain beliefs mark this stance—first and foremost, the bad prevails over the good—which are subject to an important qualifying condition: they are always about outcomes and states of affairs in which one is personally invested.¹⁹² Also, pessimism is an attitude, or perhaps a trait, wherein a person emphasizes adversity or misfortune. Pessimists expect things to turn out badly and approach the world with caution. These expectations appear to entail views—if not developed theories—about the world, the possibilities for which it allows, and the relative balance of good and bad it contains.¹⁹³

Pessimism is a philosophical doctrine and a psychological state or condition. We can treat pessimism as a thesis and a psychological condition.¹⁹⁴ Pessimism can thus be understood as a stance which one adopts. According to Prescott, being pessimistic requires the individual to hold certain views¹⁹⁵ and meet psychological conditions; consequently, he maintains that pessimism is more of a stance than a mere state or doctrine.¹⁹⁶ A stance evokes both a "standing place or vantage

¹⁹¹ Benatar (2006, p. 210)

¹⁹² Prescott (2012, p. 2)

¹⁹³ Prescott (2012, p. 1)

¹⁹⁴ Prescott (2012, p. 3)

¹⁹⁵ For example, an individual might hold the view that the bad prevails over the good.

¹⁹⁶ Prescott (2012, p. 3)

point" as well as "an attitude adopted in relation to a particular subject."¹⁹⁷ A stance is, therefore, something that one adopts. In particular, one adopts the belief that the bad prevails over the good.¹⁹⁸ To say that the bad prevails over the good is to say that the bad is greater than the good.¹⁹⁹ Pessimism as a stance is marked by the beliefs that define pessimism. Like the stance itself, these beliefs can be implicit or explicit, an unreflective (and typically unarticulated) background that underwrites various presuppositions, or a consciously held policy or position.²⁰⁰

As Prescott further states, pessimism is accompanied by a judgment of futility, or a recognition that "the world prevents the actor from realizing his [or her] ... intended end."²⁰¹ In such cases, states of affairs found in the world render certain goals and values unattainable—i.e., beyond the scope of human intervention.²⁰² Life for pessimists is therefore just constant striving (as Schopenhauer puts it) and, the world in which we find ourselves is actually inhospitable to such aspirations. To elucidate the extent of the negative aspects of existence, Nick Ward writes:

*The universe in which we live may itself be considered a negative aspect of existence. The vast majority of the universe is absolutely antithetical to human life, completely and often instantly lethal to us. Even large portions of our own planet, which many people like to think of as our comfortable and safe home, are deadly, from deep oceans to high altitudes, to extremes of temperature. At the risk of anthropomorphizing, the universe may even be said to be hostile to human life, and indeed all known life. Evolutionary pressures constantly weed out the unlucky, forcing us to actively work against the forces of nature to stay alive in an unending battle.*²⁰³

He further makes a pivotal point about pessimists and the evaluation of badness, and he ascribes pessimistic evaluations to the negative aspects of consciousness. Here he says:

A common theme for pessimist philosophers is the negative aspects of consciousness. The existence of consciousness in humans opens us up to a lot of the badness of life, especially since it allows us to recognize a lot of badness that would be beyond our knowledge or experience without consciousness, from a recognition of our mortality or the temporal limitation of things that we value, to things like regrets, dilemmas, and anxieties. Debatably one of the most terrible effects of consciousness is the ability to feel existential pains. While these are by no means the only downside of

¹⁹⁷ Prescott (2012, p. 3)

¹⁹⁸ Prescott (2012, p. 3)

¹⁹⁹ Prescott (2012, p. 8)

²⁰⁰ Prescott (2012, p. 4)

²⁰¹ Prescott (2012, p. 4)

²⁰² Prescott (2012, p. 4)

²⁰³ Ward (2020, p. 111)

*consciousness, they are perhaps the most philosophically relevant and personally interesting.*²⁰⁴

We might consider pessimism as a rejection of progress if 'progress' is meant the eventual triumph of the good or the unqualified melioration of the bad.²⁰⁵ However, although a judgment of decline may accompany pessimism, it is pivotal to note that it need not be. For example, if one holds things are getting worse with respect to certain conditions—and thereby holds out little hope that things might get better—one would be rightly considered pessimistic.²⁰⁶ Looking at how things are right now in the world, how things have been, pessimists have little or no hope that things will get better. Therefore, as Prescott explains it, to hold that bad prevails over the good is a comparative judgment that displays both prospective and retrospective features or conditions. Prospectively, it requires certain expectations— i.e., that the bad will be (or will likely be) greater than the good. Retrospectively, it presupposes certain explanations—e.g., that the past and present are such that the bad can be expected to predominate or persist relative to the good.²⁰⁷

The pessimism and optimism I discuss here is a proposed stance that one takes particularly towards the prevalence of evil and the human condition. It is concerned with existential concerns such as the meaning of life and the relationship between good and evil in the world. Further, the pessimism here is concerned with the vast amount of suffering, given that pessimists agree that our existence is to be principally one of suffering. When making evaluations about goodness and evil, the pessimists will remain skeptical about the suffering involved in the attainment of the good.

By adopting a pessimistic attitude, one does not think that there is no good in the world, but only that it does not outweigh the bad. Therefore, one may accept that there is good in the world but still think that the good outweighs the bad or think that the suffering is not worth it. On the other hand, optimists may look at all the goodness that exists and claim that it is worth all the suffering or that one day it will be worth it. The pessimists acknowledge the vast amount of suffering in the world and acknowledge just how much the human condition is continually susceptible to suffering. The simplest way to characterize the pessimistic reaction to the human condition is with words like "absurd" or "contradictory." The absurdity of existence is illustrated by the persistent

²⁰⁴ Ward (2020, p. 111)

²⁰⁵ Prescott (2012, p. 6)

²⁰⁶ Prescott (2012, p. 6)

²⁰⁷ Prescott (2012, p. 8)

mismatch between human purposes and the means available to achieve them: or again, between our desire for happiness and our capacity to encounter or sustain them.²⁰⁸

To concede that the world is not designed for our benefit is, at least potentially, to concede an awful lot. It leaves in its wake the challenge of underwriting our deep and abiding commitments—personal, practical, and theoretical.²⁰⁹ It may sound as though pessimism leaves us with no hope about our prospects as human beings occupying this world. In fact, you might think my goal is to depress you and leave you in despair about achieving your aspirations or even happiness. However, as I aim to show, adopting an attitude of pessimism need not lead us into despair. It should be clear that to embrace pessimism is not to embrace despair. While pessimism can lead to despair and may even serve as a necessary condition, something more is required for a person to arrive at despair.²¹⁰ Thus, my goal is for my reader to see, as Dienstag explains, that pessimism can be—and has been—energizing and even a liberating philosophy. While it does indeed ask us to limit and eliminate some of our hopes and expectations, it can also provide us with the means to better navigate the bounded universe it describes.²¹¹

I am aware that pessimism has been and might still be quickly dismissed. No-one wants to hear that bad will prevail over the good (as the theists might have us believe) or that the world is inhospitable to their aspirations and happiness. We all want to hear that the good will triumph over the bad. I mean, we are always told to look on the bright side and focus on the positives. I consider people's refusal to adopt an attitude of pessimism has a lot to do with the misconception of what it means to be a pessimist. Pessimism has been commonly confused with 'negative' psychological dispositions such as nihilism and cynicism. Most people generally view pessimists as self-pitying and depressed individuals who respond with self-pity because they have been dealt with a hard hand in life. I think it is, therefore, pivotal to discuss what pessimism is *not*. And once we distinguish it from the negative associations we have attributed it to, we will be less inclined to dismiss it and less likely to view it as a mere temperament not worthy of philosophical discussion. Those who have quickly criticized pessimism have done so because of their misguided assumptions of what it means to be a pessimist. As Dienstag argues:

²⁰⁸ Dienstag (2006, p. 33)

²⁰⁹ Prescott (2012, p. 18)

²¹⁰ Prescott (2012, p. 13) One would need an abandonment of hope to reach to the level of despair.

²¹¹ Dienstag (2006, p. x) See preface of this book.

*Pessimism's critics have often assumed that it must issue in some sort of depression or resignation. But this assumption says more about the critics than about their targets. Who is it, exactly, that cannot bear a story unless guaranteed a happy ending? Pessimists themselves have often been anything but resigned. Indeed, they have taken it as their task to find a way to live with the conclusions they have arrived at and to live well, sometimes even joyfully. If this cannot be true for all of us, it is not the pessimists who are to blame, but the problems they grapple with.*²¹²

As I have mentioned, pessimism has often been confused with nihilism. One view of nihilism states that nothing is of sufficient value because, practically speaking, nothing of sufficient value can be realized by human beings. Values may exist and may even merit our deepest commitment. But the world is hopelessly inhospitable to their realization. Experientially, on this view, nihilism gives rise to despair.²¹³

Another common misconception about pessimism is that one implication of accepting it would mean giving it all up and possibly even consider death an escape. However, pessimists do not recommend suicide. Instead, they may recommend something similar; a withdrawal from life into a hermitage of inactivity and pure thought or pure sensation.²¹⁴ Evaluatively, we come to realize that, indeed, pessimism merely warns us to acknowledge our limitations- but it does not urge us to collapse in the face of them.²¹⁵

Additionally, Dienstag distinguishes two poles of responses available to a pessimistic diagnosis. Namely, resignation on the one hand and what he refers to as spontaneity or futurity on the other hand.²¹⁶ Spontaneity, or futurity, is a form of self-conduct that values the life we are given in spite of the pessimistic diagnosis of its condition. In the face of great suffering, this kind of pessimist does not retreat but rather advances willingly into hostile territory, not to die gloriously but instead to "live dangerously" and to die necessarily.²¹⁷

3.6 Pessimism: lessons from the pessimists

²¹² Dienstag (2006, p. x) This is found in the preface of this book.

²¹³ Prescott (2012, pp. 11-12)

²¹⁴ Dienstag (2006, p. 36)

²¹⁵ Dienstag (2006, p. 22)

²¹⁶ Dienstag (2006, p. 40)

²¹⁷ Dienstag (2006, pp. 40-41) Dienstag clarifies that the response of spontaneity or futurity should not be viewed as a rejection of pessimism or as a kind of optimism. Instead, this response should show that pessimism should not be equated with depression or nihilism.

I suggest, therefore, that we move on from associating pessimism with depression and despair. Once we do that, we may be more accepting of pessimism. As Dienstag so beautifully elucidates it:

*Pessimism's goal is not to depress us but to edify us about our condition and to fortify us for the life that lies ahead. To build proper fortifications, one must have a proper sense of the enemy and his weapons. For the pessimists, it is fundamentally our time-bound condition that threatens. Pessimism is a philosophy of self-conduct; it suggests an approach to a universal problem that any individual will have to modify in the course of taking it up.*²¹⁸

If we see pessimism, how Dienstag describes it, why wouldn't we want to be fully and best equipped to deal with the human condition and what lies ahead? From my understanding, pessimism does not evoke despair but instead prepares us to deal with the world in which we find ourselves, a world filled with evil and suffering. The thing about optimism, it makes us complacent. It 'forces' us to accept and be grateful that this is the best-of-all-possible worlds for us; pessimism, on the other hand, is an idea that challenges our notions of order and meaning in dramatic ways. It asks us to alter radically our opinion both of ourselves and of what we can expect from politics.²¹⁹ It does not simply tell us to expect less. It tells us, in fact, to expect nothing.²²⁰

Pessimism asserts that the bad prevails over the good. It highlights the prevalence of evil in our lives and in our world. Our lives looked at from a different perspective are not as good as we make them out to be. This is not to imply that all lives' quality is poor, simply that either most lives are bad or have sufficient reason to be considered bad.²²¹ As Ward further argues, pessimism makes it possible for us to hold that the universe is ambivalent and indifferent to our problems, triumphs, and very existence, while still holding that the quality of human life is overall poor.²²² While by no means a cheerful thought, it does seem at least plausible that this could represent the actual state of reality.²²³ In the first chapter of this thesis, I argued that we should take Kekes's claim seriously that evil is the most serious harm to our well-being and the strongest reason against optimism about our prospects.²²⁴ I think that pessimists are able to do just that; they take seriously the ways in

²¹⁸ Dienstag (2006, pp. xi-xii) See the preface of this book.

²¹⁹ Dienstag uses the word 'politics' here, I want to say use the word 'world'. Pessimism therefore asks us to alter radically our opinion of both ourselves and what we can expect from the *world*.

²²⁰ Dienstag (2006, p. 5)

²²¹ Ward (2020, p. 109)

²²² Ward (2020, p. 112)

²²³ Ward (2020, p. 112)

²²⁴ Kekes (2009, p. 139)

which the world is inhospitable to our aspirations and well-being, and for them, that is enough to go against optimism.

In my previous chapters, I have shown how evil poses several problems for us and how the human experience involves so much suffering, and now I merely bring pessimism forth as an antidote, a proposed stance from which to grapple with a world that we now recognize as disordered and disenchanting.²²⁵ Suppose it is true that evil is pervasive and a true obstacle in our lives. We can be guaranteed that it will continue to do so; evil will continue to be prevalent. If this is the truth about the human condition, this need not lead us into despair, but instead, a heightened awareness. I want my reader to view my advocacy for pessimism as a kind of anti-theodicy. By this, I mean a refusal and rejection of optimistic justifications concerning the problem of evil. That means rejecting arguments and justifications which try and give gratuitous evil a vantage point or in some way try and redeem evil or claim that is necessary in the strong sense. Therefore, a pessimist rejects any justifications brought on by optimists that seek to redeem evil or justify it and accepts just how disordered and disenchanting the world really is. Once a pessimist gets to this point, they may approach the world differently.

Upon further evaluation, there is so much that we can learn from pessimism. Once we accept that the world, we find ourselves in is indeed grim, we may see how pessimism may be a liberating philosophy. While it does indeed ask us to limit and eliminate some of our hopes and expectations, it can also provide us with the means to better navigate the bounded universe it describes. Further, instead of blaming pessimism, perhaps we can learn from it; rather than hiding from the ugliness of the world, perhaps we can discover how best to withstand it.²²⁶

Pessimism teaches us to expect less from our world and lower our expectations about the human condition because we realize that the world does not necessarily care about us and is not in the business of making sure we remain happy and achieve our aspirations. In fact, the world is quite inhospitable to such aspirations, and we are constantly met with disappointment. Pessimism, therefore, helps us to deal with such disappointments by telling us to expect less. Dienstag elucidates this point further:

²²⁵ Dienstag (2006, p. xi) See the preface of this book.

²²⁶ Dienstag (2006, p. x) See preface of this book.

The pessimist expects nothing-thus he or she is more truly open to every possibility as it presents itself. A pessimist can recognize and delight in the fact that we live in a world of surprises-surprises that can only strike the optimist as accidents and mishaps, disturbing as they do a pre-ordered image of the world's continuous improvement. This openness to the music of chance lends to the pessimist an equanimity that might strike an outsider as callous. The optimist, on the other hand, must suffer through a life of disappointment, where a chaotic world constantly disturbs the upward path he feels entitled to tread.²²⁷

Pessimists then have an advantage because they may deal with life's disappointments because they do not expect much from life. There is a sense of equanimity even when life may come with surprises.

A further valuable lesson that we may learn from pessimism is how to become sympathetic to others' sufferings. If pessimists acknowledge the various ways in which evil is pervasive and just how much suffering there is, and if suffering is something which they regret. Then, this should at least make them sympathetic to others; they may not be able to end all of the sufferings in the world. Still, they may learn how to be sympathetic to those who also share the burden of the human conditions. They may also find ways to minimize some of the sufferings that others may experience. This is one of the ways that pessimism may be a liberating philosophy. It accepts that the world is one of suffering but does not collapse or retreat. Instead, we can find ways in which we can help others. It is possible to hold that the bad prevails over the good and have pessimistic views about the human condition and still care about others or find ways to alleviate some of the sufferings. This is not to say that optimism does not lead us to be sympathetic about others' suffering. Instead, I mention this to advocate and appraise pessimism.

In this chapter, I set out to build a case against optimism. I posed various arguments first to show that there is a bias towards optimism. This bias makes us unaware of just how bad our lives are and how pervasive evil is. In various ways, then we may see just how the bad prevails over the good. I then set out an account of pessimism and explore it as a stance and attitude we should take towards the prevalence of evil. My aim in this chapter was to explain my appeal to pessimism as an appropriate response to the secular problem of evil and show why it is an appropriate response.

²²⁷Dienstag (2006, p. 40)

Chapter 4

Conclusion

*'Let us cultivate our garden.'*²²⁸

*'Let us work, said Martin, without disputing; it is the only way to render life tolerable.'*²²⁹

- Voltaire

The philosophical discussion on the problem of evil is a rich one, containing so much literature whether we look at the historical and ancient discussions or the contemporary discussion. One can almost guarantee that questions concerning the prevalence of evil will continue. Whether we are in search of meaning for our existence or just mere understanding of the human condition. In this thesis, I narrowed down the discussion of the problem of evil, focusing particularly on the secular problem of evil. I made three distinct and central moves. First, I set out a conception of evil, and here my aim was to define evil as I understand it. Once a definition was established, I set to provide some context on the philosophical discussion of the problem of evil by providing historical background on the philosophical discussions centering on the Enlightenment period. I then turned to define this thesis's central concern, namely, the secular problem of evil.

Looking back at the historical discussion of the problem, I discerned two significant standpoints in the debate about how we should respond to the problem of evil. The broad discussion, I argued, can be seen as a debate between optimistic and pessimistic responses to the problem of evil. One way in which I framed the debate was as follows: optimists think that all or most evils can be accounted for, that is, all evils are necessary or inevitable parts of all possible worlds. Pessimists think they are not.

My second move in this thesis was to focus on the contemporary discussion of the secular problem of evil. Looking at the various contributions made by some philosophers in a collection of essays in *The Positive Function of Evil*. I focused particularly on two essays, namely, Robert Merrihew Adams's essay titled 'Love and the Problem of Evil' and Pedro Tabensky's essay 'Shadows of

²²⁸ Voltaire (1981, p. 59)

²²⁹ Voltaire (1981, p. 59)

Goodness.’ My goal here was to show how the contemporary discussion around the secular problem of evil leans on optimistic responses to the secular problem of evil. Most importantly, however, I formulated a critique of such optimistic responses and demonstrated how, to some extent, such optimism is unwarranted, specifically to the prevalence of evil.

Given the discussion on individual assessments of the quality of life, I argued that there is a bias towards optimism. This bias leads to an overestimation of how good life really is. If it is true that there is a bias towards optimism, then people may be mistaken in their evaluations of how good life is. Given this bias, assessments of our lives and our judgments about how good life really is cannot be trusted. When we see just how bad life really is and how optimism falls short, we may see how appealing pessimism is.

Finally, I set out to build a case against optimistic responses to the secular problem of evil and then advocate why pessimism is an appealing and appropriate response. Here, I set out my arguments to show how optimism falls short and how pessimism is the most liberating response. In a sense, I asked my reader to consider pessimism as a stance one should take to respond to the prevalence of evil. The hope is that once one adopts such an attitude, they may be well equipped to deal with the prevalence of evil.

This thesis was about the secular problem of evil, and I proposed a response to it. I hope that the appeal to pessimism may be more apparent. I am aware that pessimism might not be well received, and critics might see pessimism as a self-pitying philosophy, but I believe that much more work and further discussion needs to be done on the nature of pessimism. I did not discuss varieties of pessimism here, which could also appeal to the reader, there is not just one kind of pessimism, and a discussion on the varieties of pessimism is warranted. To concede that pessimism is an appropriate stance may have existential implications and introduces us further to further philosophical problems such as the problem of suicide, questions about how we ought to live our lives, and think about life and death may arise. A discussion of pessimism might, for example, bring up questions about the meaning of life and suicide. Future research on this topic will therefore investigate existentialist work such as those of Arthur Schopenhauer and Albert Camus as they both respond to the pessimistic diagnosis.

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