

UTOPIIC PESSIMISM:  
THE MESSIANIC UNDERPINNINGS OF THE ANTINATALIST POLEMIC

by

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## ABSTRACT

JOSHUA R.MILLER. Utopic pessimism: the messianic underpinnings of the antinatalist polemic. (Under the direction of DR. JOANNE ROBINSON)

Pessimism in the west was made into a system by Arthur Schopenhauer. It has never been a popular philosophy but provides rich insights into the nature of human desire and the possibility of happiness in a materialistic cosmos. Antinatalism, the idea that birth has a negative rather than positive value, has been a component of pessimism since the beginning. In the last ten years antinatalism has been developed into a system of its own. This new antinatalism magnifies the antinatalist observations of earlier forms of pessimism into a moral rallying cry. Today's antinatalists go so far as to recommend a voluntary extinction of the species through an avoidance of reproduction. This paper explains the pessimistic background of modern day antinatalism while at the same time showing the ways in which modern antinatalism makes use of utopian and messianic hope in its moral response pessimistic philosophy. This paper further claims that pessimistic philosophy is only consistent with itself to the extent that it remains descriptive. The antinatalist solution to the problems of existence engages in a messianic optimism that is not allowed to the secular pessimistic mind.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	v
CHAPTER 1: PESSIMISM	1
CHAPTER 2: ANTINATALISM	20
CONCLUSION	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	55

## INTRODUCTION

I think human consciousness is a tragic misstep in evolution. We became too self-aware. Nature created an aspect of nature separate from itself - we are creatures that should not exist by natural law... We are things that labor under the illusion of having a self, that accretion of sensory experience and feelings, programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody, when in fact everybody's nobody... I think the honorable thing for our species to do is to deny our programming. Stop reproducing, walk hand in hand into extinction - one last midnight, brothers and sisters opting out of a raw deal.

-Rustin Cohle<sup>1</sup>

Socrates famously said that the unexamined life was not worth living.<sup>2</sup>

Philosophic pessimists contend that Socrates got his formulation exactly backwards. It is only when life is thoroughly examined that its unworthiness becomes apparent. In the roughly 2500 years since the death of Socrates a great deal of examination has occurred. Science has revealed a world where humankind is decentralized. Galileo, Darwin, Einstein and Hawking have revealed a universe without a center.<sup>3</sup> The cheerleaders of atheism are quick to argue that life retains meaning, purpose, morality and goodness in the absence of deity and design.<sup>4</sup> Others argue that life is the purpose of the cosmos and that we should feel more special than ever, God or not.<sup>5</sup> Creationists seize on this

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<sup>1</sup> Pizolatto, N. (2014). Long Bright Dark [Television series episode]. In True Detective. New York, NY: HBO 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Jowett, Benjamin. *The Works of Plato*. New York: Modern Library, 1956. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Galilei, Galileo, and Maurice A. Finocchiaro. *The Essential Galileo*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 2008.

Darwin, Charles. *The Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection of the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. New York, N.Y.: New American Library, 2003.

Einstein, Albert. *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory*. Emporium Books, 2013.

Hawking, Stephen. *A Brief History of Time. Updated and Expanded Tenth Anniversary ed.* New York: Bantam Books, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Mariner Books, 2008.

Hitchens, Christopher. *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve Hachette Book Group, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Barrow, John D., and Frank J. Tipler. *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.

confusion to show that the discoveries of science endanger humanity's place in the cosmos and should therefore be rejected or ignored.<sup>6</sup>

The pessimist has a different answer. The pessimist sees life as essentially frustrating. Consciousness, self-awareness, and rationality, that is, the very things that make us human are the causes of our dissatisfaction. Human beings evolved abilities that allow us to plan for the future and learn from the past. This ability has allowed our species to dominate the planet in a way that no other life form has ever done (with the exception perhaps of bacteria before the first mass extinction event.) But this ability comes with a price. Knowledge of the future creates the possibility of want while knowledge of the past introduces the experience of regret. Dissatisfaction and true suffering result from these advances in consciousness.

The idea that consciousness is a curse is central in the thought of pessimists.<sup>7</sup> With each advance in consciousness, with each increase in our awareness and knowledge of the world around us, the capacity for suffering increases.<sup>8</sup> The plant has limited consciousness and therefore no suffering. The insects, even the most intelligent, appear to suffer less than birds. The bigger the brain, the more aware of the world, the worse life becomes. A dog chained to a tree on a cold and rainy day elicits a level of sympathy greater than a cockroach that is smashed under foot. Humans have been endowed with dramatic capacities for awareness and self-knowledge. These "gifts" allow our organism a greater capacity for survival but also increase our capacity for suffering. Worry about coming calamity and regret over past mistakes touch the lives of all persons. Those who

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<sup>6</sup> Numbers, Ronald L. *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*. Expanded Ed., 1st Harvard University Press Pbk. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Saltus, Edgar. *The Philosophy of Disenchantment*. Underworld Amusements, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> I am using consciousness here as defined by an awareness or knowledge of one's self and surroundings. [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/consciousness](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/consciousness)

endeavor to sublimate their mental anguish by increasing knowledge can very easily find that they have only enlarged their ability to suffer.

For the pessimist, the quest of western thinkers to unravel the mysteries of life has revealed a world devoid of mystery.<sup>9</sup> In our desire to examine life and discover the truth of our place in the world we have destroyed our place in the world. Within the western tradition, humans have long considered themselves central to the cosmos. By displacing this illusion and replacing it with the idea that we are the result of blind mechanistic forces, pessimists have come to realize that human life and the cosmos itself are malignantly useless.<sup>10</sup>

That the majority of people will disagree with this dour assessment I have no doubt. The pessimistic position is considered mopey and over the top. People have no use for it. The pessimist is an Eeyore that everyone is better off ignoring. All humans rely on invented mental strategies that get them through the day and help them to believe in a better tomorrow. Religion, scientific and social progress, personal goals and spiritual narratives, art, literature and politics all help to obscure the bare nature of our animal existence.<sup>11</sup> When someone comes along and makes a mockery of these cherished human institutions and declares moral anarchy there is bound to be some push back.

What is more, many who agree with the pessimistic assessment of the world respond with a sense of moral duty. The antinatalists argue that the world is full of suffering and there is no hope of alleviating human misery apart from working toward the end of human life altogether. Since changing the world for the better is out of reach and

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<sup>9</sup> Cioran, E. M., and Richard Howard. *A Short History of Decay*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Ligotti, Thomas. *The Conspiracy against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror*. New York, NY: Hippocampus Press, 2011. 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

since human consciousness, even in material abundance, is plagued by dramatic forms of suffering, the antinatalists argue that we must cease reproducing and wait for the eventual extinction of the species. Only in extinction will humanity be free of its misery.

In this paper, I present the pessimistic argument that the cosmos is a horrible place for human beings to live. I then show how the antinatalists have appropriated this argument and use it to advance their proposed solution; eliminating suffering by eliminating the species. I trouble the logic of antinatalism by showing the ways in which it is internally inconsistent. I then conclude by suggesting that the only consistent response to the conclusions of pessimistic philosophy is to seek to adjust the self to the world rather than attempting to adjust the world to the desires of the self. That is, in order to survive the conclusions of pessimism one must attempt to consciously become unconscious of those conclusions.

In chapter one, I lay out the pessimistic argument against the goodness of life. I examine the illusory nature of happiness and the problem of suffering or evil. I further explain the idea that human consciousness is a mistake of evolution similar to the antlers of the Irish Elk (a creature that went extinct for evolving too magnificent a crown). In chapter two, I argue that antinatalism is an inconsistent response to this worldview because it depends upon humans acting rationally in order to advance the interests of the species as a whole. Acting according to reason for the good of others is something that pessimistic philosophy denies humanity, as a whole, to be capable of. Finally, in my conclusion, I suggest that there is nothing within the pessimistic worldview that can offer a solution to the despairing assessment pessimism makes regarding the nature of life and

the world. The best thing the pessimist can do is to remain silent, and not spoil the fun the optimists are having.

A note of disclaimer, this paper is dealing with philosophical concepts that do not make sense outside of their western, Euro-American context. Antinatalism and atheistic pessimism are very much reactions to ideas within western versions of Christianity and philosophy. To think that this paper intends a universal application or audience would be to misunderstand it. Even within western civilization the majority of people continue to believe in the governing myths of progress, religion and political hope. This paper is not intended to undermine those beliefs for the governing majority but to show how pessimism, in its denial of those myths, is unable to offer less mythological alternatives. This paper's only social utility is as a cautionary statement of what can happen to a person who takes Socrates at his world and tries to examine life. Such a person, especially in our postmodern age, is very likely to discover an absence of meaning rather than its glittering reality.

## CHAPTER 1: PESSIMISM

Life had overshot its target, blowing itself apart. A species had been armed too heavily – by spirit made almighty without, but equally a menace to its own well-being. Its weapon was like a sword without hilt or plate, a two-edged blade cleaving everything; but he who is to wield it must grasp the blade and turn the one edge toward himself.<sup>12</sup>

Peter Zapffe

In the seventh book of the Republic Socrates tells an inspiring and well beloved story about the importance of philosophy and the ways in which the philosopher is the uninvited benefactor of humanity. In the story, humans live within a dark cave. Chained and immovable they sit, day after day, staring at shadows that pass on the wall before their eyes. They imagine that these shadows are reality and have developed elaborate systems to explain the shadows and their movements. One day a prisoner becomes free of his bonds and comes to see the cave for what it is, a prison of illusion. He sees for the first time that the shadows on the wall are unreal and that they are merely reflections of a reality within the cave. Upon leaving the cave he discovers that there is an entire world that exists beyond the confines of his former cavernous abode. After the initial pain of adjusting to the light of day he comes to understand reality and is liberated from the life of illusion he once suffered.<sup>13</sup>

The goal of education then is to recreate the experience of the man released from the cave. Many freshmen read this story when embarking upon an education in the humanities. Their education, they are promised, will liberate them from the shadows of

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<sup>12</sup> Zapffe, Peter. "The Last Messiah." *Philosophy Now*, March 1, 2004, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Jowett, Benjamin. *The Works of Plato*. New York: Modern Library, 1956. 265-270.

illusion and imagination and bring them out into a larger world where they are free to walk and live in the light of truth. This opportunity, they are assured, is a very wonderful gift. While the masses of ignorant people continue their lives believing that the imaginary is the real, those with a liberal arts education have the privilege of encountering reality outside the cave.

So long as reality was associated with God, and God was associated with truth and goodness, this story made sense. As soon as God is banished from reality the question of whether reality is good or not becomes relevant. Once God is abandoned as the organizing principle behind the pursuit of truth one must ask whether the truth about reality is good. The answer is no longer self-evident. The purpose of this chapter is to pessimism's answer to that question. Although answers in the affirmative exist in abundance, I will present the pessimistic negative in order to explain the foundations of antinatalism.

According to pessimistic thought the truth regarding the nature of human existence and our place in the universe is bad and should be avoided rather than pursued. The more aware of reality we become the less happy we are. The obvious critique of such a position is that it is basically saying that anyone who is happy with life is ignorant of reality or somehow less conscious than pessimists are. The arrogance of such a position is unavoidable but it is tempered by the fact that pessimists do not see their advanced knowledge as something to be envied. Schopenhauer says that man finds "satisfaction in

life to the extent that he is dull and obtuse” and if happiness is the goal of life, then “the advantage is to the brute.”<sup>14</sup>

This chapter has two parts. First, I lay out the argument that human experience is dreadful. This is true for the pessimist regardless of whether one is wealthy or poor, hungry or full, privileged or disadvantaged. Second, I show that happiness, to the pessimist, is only made possible by the fact that we are able to create and maintain powerful illusions that color the nature of existence in such a way that its terribleness is obscured from vision. The function of this chapter is to provide a background for my discussion of the antinatalists in the next chapter. By definition, antinatalism is rooted in pessimism. Many of the arguments advanced in this chapter will be repeated in the next. This would appear redundant, but without taking seriously the claims of pessimistic philosophy it is impossible to understand the solution offered by antinatalism.

#### On The Badness of Human Life

Arthur Schopenhauer is considered by many to be the father of pessimism. Many people, even professional philosophers, only know of him because of his influence on other thinkers and artists, including Nietzsche, Wagner, Freud, Proust and Wittgenstein. His style has long been considered too literary for philosophers while at the same time being too philosophical for literary readers.<sup>15</sup> While his metaphysical system has been largely discredited, his observations on the self and the nature of human life continue to inspire rigorous thought.

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<sup>14</sup>Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Studies in Pessimism*. “On the Sufferings of the World”. Accessed October 28, 2015. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/chapter1>.

<sup>15</sup> Janaway, Christopher. *Schopenhauer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. Preface.

Schopenhauer was born in 1788 in Danzig and died in Frankfurt in 1860.

Schopenhauer was a contemporary of Hegel but found Hegel's writing to be too abstract and lacking in common sense or examples from daily life experience.<sup>16</sup> Schopenhauer's writing stands in stark contrast to Hegel as Schopenhauer appeals to the lived experience of the common man on almost every page. Schopenhauer is also known as the first German philosopher to incorporate eastern thought in a philosophical system.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of Schopenhauer for this paper lies in his observations regarding evil. Prior to Schopenhauer, evil (read suffering) was the absence or privation of the good.<sup>18</sup> That is, good and evil were metaphorically understood to be like light and darkness. Darkness is the absence of light in the same way that evil is the absence of good. The reason Christian thinkers, from Augustine to Leibniz, thought in these terms was in order to protect the goodness of God. If evil were substantial, and God created all that is, then God would have created evil. A completely good God could not create evil and therefore evil must be the absence of the good that God created.

Schopenhauer flips this formulation and argues instead that evil is positive and real while happiness and goodness are merely the absence of suffering.<sup>19</sup> This paradigm shift alters one's entire understanding of the cosmos and is not possible until one has fully abandoned the idea of a provident and good creator. In other words, so long as one

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>17</sup> "Schopenhauer." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed October 28, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Aquinas, Thomas. "Question 49. The Cause of Evil." SUMMA THEOLOGICA: The Cause of Evil (Prima Pars, Q. 49).

Augustine. "On the Holy Trinity; Doctrinal Treatises; Moral Treatises." – Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Accessed October 28, 2015.

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf103.iv.ii.xiii.html>.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, and Roger Ariew. *Philosophical Essays*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1989. 114.

<sup>19</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Studies in Pessimism*. "On the Sufferings of the World". Accessed October 28, 2015. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/chapter1>.

is committed to the idea that a good God created the world it is impossible to see evil or suffering as the foundational reality of creation. It becomes much easier to see the physical world in negative terms once the idea of a creator is removed and the world becomes a product of chaotic and irrational forces. Instead of seeing goodness as foundational and evil as the aberration from the norm, Schopenhauer says that the basic quality of human life is evil. That is to say, what we call happiness is merely the satisfaction of some need or want. Needs and wants are experienced as evil and the satisfaction of those needs and wants are experienced as good. For instance, satiety is simply the satisfaction of hunger, health is the absence of illness, comfort is the absence of discomfort and so on.

The majority of human happiness is the satisfaction of simple animal needs and wants. Our complex brains allow us an increased ability to satisfy animal needs and an opportunity to experience pleasures that are inaccessible to animals. The knife cuts both ways, however, as our minds also provide forms of suffering that are unique to humans. The forms of happiness that we share with the animals are all bodily. They consist of the satisfaction of bodily drives i.e. hunger, sex, the desire for shelter and so on. The forms of happiness and suffering that are unique to humans are side effects of our ability to imagine and remember. The pleasures include pride, the creation and consumption of art, the esteem of one's peers, happy imaginations of the future, fond remembrances of the past, intellectual achievement and so on. The sufferings that are unique to humans include the frustration of ambition, disappointment, remorse, and especially boredom. These are not exhaustive lists by any means. The point is that whether the pleasure is

bodily or mental it only exists as the satisfaction of some desire. Without lack or want, that is, without evil and the sufferings of privation, there could be no happiness.

This picture of human life becomes even more bleak when one considers what happens when the drives are stilled. Once there is an absence of desire boredom is quick to make an appearance. Boredom is what makes human life truly disappointing. While the vast majority of any human life is characterized by an attempt to satisfy needs and wants, if the situation were changed and a world were created wherein all desires were satisfied, a state of unbearable boredom would follow.<sup>20</sup> Boredom becomes its own form of suffering as there is often no cure for it. Life, for Schopenhauer, oscillates like a pendulum between need and boredom. Need is experienced as the pain of lack. Satisfaction quickly gives way to boredom. Imagined future happiness turns out to be illusory once the possession of the desired object is secured. Then, this dissatisfaction creates a new need, a new wish, and the process of desiring and working toward possession begins anew.<sup>21</sup>

The common response to boredom is to simply invent new or expanded desires. This is how the majority of persons never come to realize their pitiable state. Schopenhauer describes the life of the majority by saying, “this is the life of almost all men; they will, they know what they will, and they strive after this with enough success to protect them from despair, and enough failure to preserve them from boredom and its consequences.”<sup>22</sup> Since most persons never become aware of the fact that their existence

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<sup>20</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Studies in Pessimism*. “On the Sufferings of the World”. Accessed October 28, 2015. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/chapter1>.

<sup>21</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur, and E. F. J. Payne. *The World as Will and Representation*. New York: Dover, 1969. 319.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 327.

is always oscillating between experiences of suffering, the unexamined life remains worth living.

The unworthiness of life is further elaborated by the idea that satisfaction and happiness are in themselves illusory. Happiness is never felt with the same intensity as pain. If such a statement seems overly pessimistic let the reader consider the experience of two animals, one engaged in eating the other. The pleasure that is achieved by satiating the hunger of the animal that is eating pales in comparison to the pain experienced by the animal being eaten.<sup>23</sup> This example makes two points. Firstly, that pleasure is never as intense in the memory or experience of any person as is pain. Secondly, that pleasure often, if not always, requires the pain of some other being. These two considerations when combined reveal the pitiable nature of life on earth.

Christopher Janaway, professor of Philosophy at the University of London, and author of many books on Schopenhauer calls Schopenhauer's assertion that happiness is illusory the "negativity of satisfaction thesis".<sup>24</sup> Janaway explains it this way, "attainment of what one strives for is not accompanied by any positive feeling. Satisfaction is not only dependent upon one's having suffered, but is itself merely the temporary absence of suffering, which soon yields again to suffering."<sup>25</sup>

The picture that Schopenhauer paints of human life is reminiscent of Buddhism's "all life is suffering."<sup>26</sup> Human life is marked by need or want. These needs and wants produce desires. These desires motivate action. Action, if successful, satisfies the desire

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<sup>23</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Studies in Pessimism*. "On the Sufferings of the World". Accessed October 28, 2015. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/chapter1>.

<sup>24</sup> Janaway, Christopher. "Schopenhauer's Pessimism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, 331-332. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 331.

<sup>26</sup> Keown, Damien. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. New ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

temporarily and this is what we call happiness. This happiness is not, as is commonly understood, an addition of something positive to the individual. Rather, it is merely the temporary cessation of the suffering of want. If a new desire does not move in quickly to motivate yet more action, the experience of the individual is one of boredom. The experience of boredom is itself another form of suffering that again produces action in the hope of returning to a neutral state. Happiness is not the positive apprehension of something *good* it is simply the temporary absence of things that are *bad*. Badness, then, is the essential character of human life. Goodness, on the other hand, is simply the temporary suspension of badness.

Such a pessimistic assessment of human life will never be accepted by a majority of people. Humans are generally pretty happy with life and even claim to be happier than the average person.<sup>27</sup> This sense of wellbeing is grounded in powerful illusions regarding the nature of life and the goodness of existence. In order to look at why it would be that human beings could so uniformly misunderstand the nature of their own existence it will be helpful to examine the contribution of another pessimistic philosopher, Peter Wessel Zapffe.

#### On the Illusory Nature of Happiness

Peter Zapffe was a Norwegian philosopher who lived for over one hundred years (1899-1990) and dedicated his life to considering the “ever burning question of what it means to be human.”<sup>28</sup> His writings have remained largely unknown and apart from a short essay entitled “The Last Messiah” none of his writings have been translated into

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<sup>27</sup> Matlin, M. and Stang, D. *The Pollyanna Principle*, 141-4.

See also Benatar, David. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Tangenes, Gisle. "The View From Mount Zapffe." *Philosophy Now*, March 1, 2004, 35.

English. Zapffe describes the problem of human existence by creating a narrative wherein evolution outdid itself. Like the “Irish Elk” whose antlers became too large to allow for swift escape from predators, the human mind grew in its abilities beyond the point necessary for survival and became a burden to its owner.<sup>29</sup> Like a monkey who has over developed its climbing skill so as to climb past the bananas in the tops of the trees and into the empty air above, the human mind has developed an ability of thought and analysis so great that it can see life in all of its “tragic dullness.”<sup>30</sup> This leads to the inescapable conclusion that life, when examined honestly, is hopelessly tragic.

For a life to be tragic two things must coincide, “a desire to secure a just and meaningful world; and intellectual honesty.”<sup>31</sup> So long as the desire to secure a better world remains by itself there will be heroic activity. A sacrifice of all partial or selfish interests will be made in order to pursue the goal of a more human world. This is not tragic, but heroic. If intellectual honesty prevails then cynicism occurs and there is no tragedy. A human life is only tragic when one both desires a more just and meaningful world and realizes that such a hope is ill founded. As Voltaire is claimed to have lamented, “We shall leave this world as foolish and as wicked as we found it on our arrival.”<sup>32</sup> These tragic persons are the most to be pitied because they both desire a better world and realize its impossibility. Much better to be satisfied with the world as it is or else be unaware of its immovability.

In his essay, “The Last Messiah,” Zapffe describes the human condition and the ways in which happiness is only made possible through limiting the power of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur, and T. Bailey Saunders. "Author's Introduction." In *The Wisdom of Life*, 2. Dover ed. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2004.

consciousness. For Zapffe, happiness is a byproduct of limiting the amount of awareness one has of the world. Zapffe begins his short essay with a story that in many ways mirrors the cave story of Plato. Zapffe tells the fable of a cave man who awakens to go hunting. When he steps out of his cave he sees *himself* for the first time.

He saw that he was naked under the cosmos, homeless in his own body. All things dissolved before his testing thought, wonder above wonder, horror above horror unfolded in his mind. As the beasts arrived at their waterholes where he expected them of habit, he felt no more the tiger's bound in his blood, but a great psalm about the brotherhood of suffering between everything alive. That day he did not return with prey, and when they found him by the next new moon, he was sitting dead by the waterhole.<sup>33</sup>

Zapffe here is channeling Plato's allegory of the cave, except this time, the light of truth is fatal rather than liberating. He is also making reference to the creation myth of the Christians, which claims that it is knowledge that invites sickness and death into the world.

This expansion of consciousness would have led to the extinction of humanity if all humans had responded in the same way as this hunter. Very quickly after developing consciousness, though, humans began to develop means of limiting consciousness. Religion is one of these means of limiting consciousness but there are more. Zapffe lists four methods that humans use to reduce their level of consciousness; Isolation, Anchoring, Distraction and Sublimation.

Isolation involves banishing disturbing thoughts from one's mind. People are encouraging isolation when they ask things like, "Has anyone ever told you that you think too much?" What they are really saying is that it's better not to think about things

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<sup>33</sup> Zapffe, Peter. "The Last Messiah." *Philosophy Now*, March 1, 2004, 35.

like death and futility. Isolation begins in childhood when adults avoid taboo subjects with children. This allows children to maintain illusions about the world for as long as possible. Isolation is a strategy that is based in the idea that if we avoid thinking about something then it goes away. People who avoid thoughts about death or futility provide good examples of this strategy for limiting consciousness but everyone practices isolation in different ways. Isolation is unavoidable. Were it not for isolation we might all become trapped in depressing thoughts and never accomplish anything today for fear of what might happen to us tomorrow.

The second strategy of consciousness limiting that Zapffe offers is anchoring. Anchoring is the process whereby we make ourselves feel eternal and stable. We avoid feeling the weight of the contingency underlying all that we do by anchoring our sense of self in institutions, places, things or relationships that appear to have substance. Culture is, for Zapffe, an elaborate anchoring project.<sup>34</sup> Our Gods, our people, our land, our freedoms, our way of life, all of these “ours” anchor us in the cultural world. They keep us from the feeling like the hunter in Zapffe’s fable who found himself to be homeless in his own body.<sup>35</sup> While Zapffe focuses primarily on cultural ideas, he does mention the physical, environmental methods of anchoring. Children don’t have ideas to hold on to, but their home or their street or the familiar faces of their parents become “*matters of course* to the child.”<sup>36</sup>

Hannah Arendt expresses a similar thought. Arendt was a German Jew who escaped Europe during the Holocaust. Arendt rejected the title philosopher and

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<sup>34</sup> Zapffe, 37.

<sup>35</sup> “Any culture is a great, rounded system of anchorings, built on foundational firmaments, the basic cultural ideas.”- Zapffe, 37.

<sup>36</sup> Zapffe, 37.

considered herself instead a political theorist because her thoughts concerned “not man in the singular” but men as a whole.<sup>37</sup> Her thoughts on the banality of evil did much to explain why the holocaust was possible. She describes the way that human beings maintain a coherent sense of self through maintaining relationships to their things. “Men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their identity by being related to the enduring sameness of objects, the same chair today and tomorrow, the same house from birth to death.”<sup>38</sup> For Arendt, anchoring is a method of retrieving one’s identity and maintaining a sense of coherence in a world of constant flux and ever present contingency. Even through the radical changes of the holocaust, persons can feel coherent and maintain a sense of identity so long as they maintain attachment to physical objects that tie them to their past. This attachment to physical objects becomes more important if ideas and cultural norms are radically changing.

A third method of consciousness reduction is distraction. This is perhaps the most common and easily accessible way to reduce one’s level of consciousness. Movies, work, hiking, careers, drugs, alcohol and the writing of master’s thesis are all ways of being distracted from being overwhelmed by the conclusions of a clear consciousness. Idle hands are the devil’s playground because idleness underscores the essential uselessness of human existence. Making goals and moving forward make life seem meaningful. As Schopenhauer made clear, nothing satisfies for long and we always have to be working on or toward something new in order to avoid a sense of boredom or futility.<sup>39</sup> What’s important to note about distraction as a method of dulling the consciousness is that it is

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<sup>37</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. Introduction.

<sup>38</sup> Arendt, Hannah, and P. R. Baehr. *The Portable Hannah Arendt*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. 173-174.

<sup>39</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur, and E. F. J. Payne. *The World as Will and Representation*. New York: Dover, 1969. 370.

more about what we are distracting ourselves from than what we are distracting ourselves with. Whether the desire is to get in shape, get a good job, have a baby or just take another hit of heroin, the motivation is the same. Namely, to distract oneself from the terminal condition of all humanity.

While it is true that there are many other motivations for action than an effort to distract oneself, Zapffe would argue that these motivations simply function as further distractions.<sup>40</sup> For instance, a person might argue that they want to succeed in their career in order to provide for their family. To accomplish this they set goals for themselves. As soon as one goal is achieved another goal takes its place. This tendency to move forward and accomplish more and more is not only a desire to stay busy and productive. It also exhibits a need to escape the fundamental truth of what we are, i.e. animals that are aware of our impending demise and the end of all our projects. Zapffe describes the situation this way “whenever a goal is reached, the yearning moves on; hence its object is not the goal, but the very attainment of it... the human yearning is not merely a ‘striving toward’, but equally by an ‘escape from.’”<sup>41</sup> The distracted person wants to be free of their own “unendurable condition.”<sup>42</sup> According to Zapffe, this flight from awareness of what we are provides the foundation of even the religious yearning.<sup>43</sup> According to Zapffe, awareness of our condition equipped with unsatisfiable desires for a nonexistent fulfilment is the deepest, unexplored stratum of the human soul.<sup>44</sup> With this in mind, he argues that a majority of our activity is ordered toward distracting ourselves from the sad reality of what we are.

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<sup>40</sup> Zapffe, 38.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 38.

A final strategy for limiting the negative effects of an overabundance of consciousness is sublimation. It is this method that Zapffe says is the least common. In sublimation, one takes their deepest fears and tries to gain control over them by coming dangerously close to them in theory or art. By describing the futility of life in an intellectualized or artistic fashion, we gain a sense of dominance over our fears regarding the extremely limited nature of our possibilities. Zapffe focuses on intellectual pursuits in his explanation of sublimation. Sublimation, for Zapffe, is the thinking man's version of distraction.

Sigmund Freud, especially in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, does an excellent job describing the ways in which human beings sublimate their desire for pleasure in order to live within society.<sup>45</sup> While his examples of sublimation and distraction were certainly inspiring to Zapffe, it is important to notice a vital difference. For Freud, humans are primarily frustrated because they have desires that society does not allow them to fulfil. They sublimate these desire by working toward a more just world or attempting to come up with solutions for what went wrong with humanity. For example, a bookish man is unable to get the sexual partners he desires and so begins a movement of social justice in order to increase his social standing. The desire to work for social justice, is for Freud, simply a sublimated sex drive. In distinction, Zapffe would say that human beings who experience the tragic are frustrated because they desire purpose and meaning *essentially* and not as a reaction to being frustrated in their material or animal drives.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Freud, Sigmund, and James Strachey. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010. 43-56.

<sup>46</sup> Tangenes, 34.

Humans who have all their material needs met are capable of desiring something more out of life. This “something more”, be it justice, equality for all, liberation from oppression for the mass of poor workers, is perennially out of reach. The tragic sequence of life begins with the “devastating realization that existence will *never* become satisfactory in terms of meaning and justice.”<sup>47</sup> Thomas Ligotti, a horror writer whose book *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* is largely responsible for a revival of interest in Zapffe’s thought says that this tragic awareness of the perpetual brokenness of both ourselves and the world is “the knowledge we ‘enjoy’ as the most intelligent organisms to gush from the womb of nature. We feel shortchanged that there is nothing else for us than to survive, reproduce, and die.”<sup>48</sup> Instead of ever coming to this realization, a majority of humans anchor themselves in broad cultural projects, they isolate or ignore this knowledge by pure will, they distract themselves with goals and activities and they sublimate their pain by describing in exquisite detail the exact nature of their condition and thereby feel themselves to be superior to their existential dread.

These mechanisms of limiting consciousness provide the foundation for a great deal of what passes for human happiness. The unexamined life is worth living. The examined life, the pessimist concludes, is not. The question then becomes what to do with such alarming knowledge. Pessimists have historically lamented the fact that humans are made to exist, and therefore suffer, in the first place.<sup>49</sup> While there are entire books dedicated to antinatalism today, pessimistic philosophy contains odes to the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Ligotti, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Studies in Pessimism: On the Sufferings of the World*. Accessed September 17, 2015. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/chapter1.html>

Zapffe, 39.

Hartmann, Euard Von. *Philosophy of the Unconscious*. Florance, Kentucky: Routledge, 2011.

antinatalist impulse embryonically. Before addressing the arguments of today's antinatalists it is important to look at Eduard Von Hartmann, who is the first philosopher to develop a pessimistic system with an explicitly antinatalist response to the evils of life.<sup>50</sup>

#### Hartmann: Antinatalism in Utero

Eduard Hartmann (1842-1906) grew up wanting to be a military man but was ultimately unable to pursue this dream due to a knee injury. Instead of military service Hartmann dedicated his life to philosophical speculation. His desire was to reconcile rationalism and irrationalism with the idea of the unconscious mind. Hartmann has a reputation for pessimism but his pessimism is tempered by a hope for the future and a progressive notion of history that is similar to Hegel's.<sup>51</sup>

Hartmann lays out his view of the history in his *Philosophy of the Unconscious*. Hartmann sees the problems of human suffering as consistent with the nature of the universe and not as something related to a flaw in humanity or human civilization. Hartmann understands all living things to be comprised of two elements: the unconscious and reason. The unconscious is the driving force of life. It corresponds to Schopenhauer's idea of will. Reason is the ability to think about and direct the will. His combination of evolution and philosophy to predict the future of our species is reminiscent of another disciple of Hegel, Marx. Marx's idea of the inevitability of revolution indicates a strong

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<sup>50</sup> Hartmann's worldview has been discredited due to its metaphysical interpretation of evolutionary history. His pessimism and the sense of futility in his thought have ensured that only a minor audience will ever read Hartmann. Even though he has been largely forgotten, no discussion of antinatalism is complete without mentioning his hope for a voluntary extinction of humanity.

<sup>51</sup> "Eduard Von Hartmann | Biography - German Philosopher." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Accessed November 2, 2015.

faith in the rational and human centric nature of the cosmos and the evolutionary process. In the same way, Hartmann predicts the triumph of reason over the unconscious.

Hartmann sees evolution as the process whereby reason gains dominance over the unconscious. This heightening of consciousness reaches its peak with human beings, who then go through a series of “illusions” before finally being liberated from the drives of the unconscious. These illusions concern human ideas and hopes for happiness. The first illusion regarding happiness is that it can be found in the here and now. This kind of happiness would be the happiness (*eudaimonia*) of Aristotle who sees human flourishing as activity consistent with virtue.<sup>52</sup> This illusion is inevitably destroyed by people’s lived experience. Virtue just isn’t enough. Suffering, death, injustice, starvation and sickness come for the virtuous and evil alike. This world will never provide the satisfaction that humans seek.

In response to this disillusionment the human race enters second period of illusion. The next illusion is that earthly life is inherently miserable and evil but that there is another life after death where true happiness exists eternally. This illusion comes to an end with the advent of science and globalization. It becomes ever harder for the thinking person to sincerely believe in a life after death, much less an omnipresent, omnipotent God of love who oversees the unfolding of the human drama.

After the illusion of postmortem happiness is let go, there is one final stage of illusion through which the human race must pass. This stage is marked by a belief that the physical world can be remade through human ingenuity and intelligence. This remaking of the physical world will lead to happiness and human fulfilment in a future

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<sup>52</sup> Darnoi, Dennis N. Kenedy. *The Unconscious and Eduard Von Hartmann A Historico-critical Monograph*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967. 92.

materialist utopia. The people who would be captured in this illusion are people like Karl Marx, Francis Bacon, Richard Dawkins and others who think that the flourishing human society we all desire lies just around the next bend in the river of time.

This third stage is the one in which, according to Hartmann, human beings found themselves during his time. Eventually, human beings will come to see through this illusion as well, because no matter how much progress is made the essentially frustrating aspects of human existence can never be eradicated. Old age, sickness and death will always be with human beings. Even if immortality becomes a possibility human existence would not be made significantly better by it. With Schopenhauer, Hartmann argues that the only things that humans find pleasurable relate to the absence of suffering.<sup>53</sup> There is nothing inherently good in the universe. Food is good, because it satiates hunger. Sex is good, because it satiates lust. Shelter is good because the lack of it is bad. All good things are only good because the lack of them causes pain. Once the basic needs and wants of the human race are satisfied the corrosive and miserable nature of existence will become apparent to all. As Hartmann notes, once the “palpable external ills of human life are removed the more evident it will be that the source of pain and suffering is existence itself.”<sup>54</sup>

Once human beings reach this level of disillusionment they will be ready to collectively work toward their own liberation. Reason will have conquered the unconscious will to live. Humans will discover that “we call life good not because it is so

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<sup>53</sup> Von Hartmann, Eduard. *The Philosophy of the Unconscious*. Vol. 3. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1893. 59.

<sup>54</sup> Hartmann, Euard Von. *Philosophy of the Unconscious*. Florence, Kentucky: Routledge, 2011. 114.

but because we are instinctively attached to it.”<sup>55</sup> Hartmann’s idea of liberation is that once consciousness is sufficiently heightened, human beings will discover that existence is evil and will work together collectively to eliminate life. Hartmann is not specific regarding the way in which human beings will do this, but he is confident that they will. Three conditions will precede the end of all life. First, human consciousness will be sufficiently heightened in the species that all, rather than just a few, will see the folly of existence and the futility of our attachment to life. Second, the unconscious element in life will be concentrated in humans. In other words, the world process will be completely dominated by human will. Finally, humans will be able to communicate universally so that all humans can work together to bring an end to the planet. In the meantime, there is nothing to be done but to wait. Some future generation will see the foolishness of existence and erase all life from the planet, until then, live life as your peers do. Reproduce, work, study, but don’t be illusioned as to the possibility of happiness.

Hartmann marks a transition in pessimistic thought. With Hartmann, pessimism becomes cosmic in that it sees existence itself as problematic rather than the result of some flaw in human nature. Furthermore, Hartmann declares that the sufferings of humanity can only be solved by the extinction of the species. Hartmann’s philosophy is colored by these two key elements: a belief that all conscious existence is problematic and that the only solution is extinction or death. These two pillars of Hartman are essential elements of later antinatalist thought as will be shown in the next chapter.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 8.

## CHAPTER 2: ANTINATALISM

He who lives to see two or three generations is like a man who sits sometime in the conjurer's booth at a fair, and witnesses the performance twice or thrice in succession. The tricks were meant to be seen only once; and when they are no longer a novelty and cease to deceive, their effect is gone. If children were brought into the world by an act of pure reason alone, would the human race continue to exist? Would not a man rather have so much sympathy with the coming generation as to spare it the burden of existence? Or at any rate not take it upon himself to impose that burden upon it in cold blood.<sup>56</sup>

-Schopenhauer

Antinatalism is straightforward in what it proposes: an avoidance of reproduction.

Zapffe spends the majority of his essay, *The Last Messiah*, explaining the limitations of human consciousness, but the purpose of the essay is to introduce the Messiah who will deliver humanity from its pitiable fate. Zapffe declares that humanity will one day be liberated from existence by the last Messiah. "When many saviours have been nailed to trees and stoned on the city squares, then the last Messiah will come".<sup>57</sup> The last Messiah's voice will "enclose the globe" and his "strange message" will resound from the hills and canyons,

-The life of the worlds is a roaring river, but Earth's is a pond and a backwater.  
-The sign of doom is written on your brows- how long will ye kick against the pin pricks?  
- But there is one conquest and one crown, one redemption and one solution.  
- Know yourselves- *be infertile and let the earth be silent after ye.*<sup>58</sup>  
(Bulleted list in the original.)

In this chapter, I will examine the thoughts of three modern day applicants to the job of last Messiah. Each of these thinkers addresses the problem of human existence and

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<sup>56</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Studies in Pessimism: On the Sufferings of the World*. Accessed September 17, 2015. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/chapter1.html>

<sup>57</sup> Zapffe, 39.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 39.

offers as a solution the prospect of avoiding reproduction. I will begin with David Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been*, which argues that human life is inherently a burden. Suffering always outweighs pleasure, and so, new persons should not be brought into existence. Sarah Perry picks up where Benatar leaves off by examining systems of meaning and how they insulate us from the evils of life. Since systems of meaning are based in illusions about the nature and possibility of legitimate hope, they are unreliable buffers, and do not provide adequate justification for new life. Finally, I will look to Lee Edelman, who argues that children are instrumental in forming of systems of meaning and that these systems are inherently violent. This makes Edelman unique in his antinatalism in that children are to be avoided, not for their sake, but for ours.

After explaining the arguments of the antinatalists, I will argue that the antinatalists are guilty of the same types of utopian thinking whose failure led to pessimistic philosophy in the first place. I will trouble the logic of their arguments by focusing on the limits of the animal nature we all share. I will question the extent to which humans are free to modify themselves. If people are incapable of changing their core behaviors, (reproduction, over consumption, and violence) then, any talk encouraging them to curb such behavior is redundant.

Beginning With Benatar:

“Each one of us was harmed by being brought into existence. That harm is not negligible—and considerably worse than most people recognize it to be.”<sup>59</sup>

-David Benatar

David Benatar is professor of philosophy at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Benatar has made a name for himself by embracing controversy. His writings

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<sup>59</sup> Benatar, David. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. VII.

include defenses of corporeal punishment of children as well as critiques of feminism.<sup>60</sup> His idea that feminism leads to a second sexism has received intense scrutiny and disagreement. Perhaps none of his positions are as dramatic or controversial as the one he defends in his book *Better Never to Have Been*. In this book, Benatar provides the first sustained work of academic philosophy focused on defending the idea that having children is always an immoral act.

The crux of Benatar's argument is that life is not worth living because the negative always outweighs the positive in human life. Since life is not worth living, inflicting existence on a nonexistent being is to cause a harm that would not otherwise be caused. Therefore, we have a moral duty to avoid reproduction because we have a moral duty to avoid causing harm. After spending a chapter addressing objections to the idea that you can inflict harm on a being that is nonexistent by making them exist, Benatar moves into his argument that life is an evil rather than a good and that we should avoid creating or bestowing life on others. I would like to separate the two points of Benatar's argument. That is, I deny the correlation between the observation that life is a harm with the moral duty to avoid giving life.

The first point that Benatar makes is that no one has children for the sake of the children.<sup>61</sup> Jim Crawford, an acolyte of Benatar, says very simply that "the reasons we have children are ALL selfish ones."<sup>62</sup> Children are not the reason people have children. We have them to improve our marriages, or because everyone else is having them, or

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<sup>60</sup> Benatar, David. "Corporal Punishment." *Social Theory and Practice* 24, no. 2 (1998): 237-60.  
Benatar, David. *The Second Sexism Discrimination against Men and Boys*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Benatar, David. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 2,8.

<sup>62</sup> Crawford, Jim. *Confessions of an Antinatalist*. Charleston, West Virginia: Nine Banded Books, 2014. 129.

because we want to be a parent to someone or create a little friend. In other words, people become parents because they want to *be* parents or they want to *have* children.<sup>63</sup>

The question is whether such motivations are enough to justify the creation of new human beings. If life is more bad than good, many people would say parental desire is not enough. The fourteen year old who wants to have a baby is thought to be making a poor and possibly immoral decision because the existence that she can provide for a child as a fourteen year old mother is not acceptable to those of us who have children after the tender age of fourteen. By this rational anyone who lives at a lower standard of living or is less equipped for parenting than we currently are is unjustified in having children. If reproduction is about the parents, antinatalism (avoiding reproduction) is about the children.<sup>64</sup> Antinatalists recognize that we are all fourteen year old mothers. No one is capable of protecting a child from the evils of the world or providing a standard of living for them that will insulate them from the considerable pain involved in living. According to Benatar, once we are aware of our inability to protect our children from the harms of existence we should ignore our programming and refuse reproduction.<sup>65</sup>

The first objections to the idea that life is a burden that parents cannot lift for their children tend to be declarations that life is good, that things are all right, or that life beats the alternative. These and any number of other clichéd phrases are meant to underscore the goodness of daily life and are used to discredit the pessimistic perspective that existence is a burden. People, generally, do not regret their existence (even the children of fourteen year olds). If people do not think of their lives as regrettable, how can life be

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<sup>63</sup> It should be observed that a large number of children are unplanned, and questions of choice or reasons for parenting obviously have very little bearing on the existence or nonexistence of the majority of children.

<sup>64</sup> Benatar, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 10.

a harm? Such common sense responses to the idea that life is a harm should be expected and psychologists have done considerable research explaining why people think so highly of life. Benatar's argument that life is a harm is not based in emotion but cold rationality. Evolutionarily, there is an advantage to individuals who think life is worth living. Benatar offers three factors that contribute to our rosy view of existence, the Pollyanna principle, adaptation and comparison.

The Pollyanna principle describes our gene deep tendency toward optimism. The Pollyanna principle exhibits itself in many ways. For instance, when people are asked to recall and list life events, they tend to list a much greater number of positive experiences than negative ones.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the expectations people have of their futures are often much higher than what they can reasonably expect.<sup>67</sup> Ironically, "most people believe they are better off than the average person."<sup>68</sup> Benatar offers extensive footnotes of psychological research that show the effect of the Pollyanna principle on people's self-assessments of happiness.

Adaptation names the ability humans have of adjusting their sense of wellbeing to their circumstances. When something objectively negative happens to a person, i.e. job loss, illness, or death of a loved one, there is initially a significant drop in happiness. After a short time, however, people return to their previous baseline of declared happiness. Expectations, it seems, are pretty modifiable, even though the process of modifying them is rather unpleasant.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Matlin, Margaret W., and David J. Stang. *The Pollyanna Principle: Selectivity in Language, Memory, and Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Pub., 1978. 141-4.

<sup>67</sup> Taylor, S., and Brown, J., 'Illusion and Wellbeing: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health', 196-7.

<sup>68</sup> Benatar, 66.

<sup>69</sup> Benatar, 67.

Adaptation and the inbuilt optimism of the Pollyanna principle make seeing life as a mistake pretty difficult. Comparison is another mechanism that is used to obscure the awfulness of life. Basically, we do not compare our existence against a theoretical perfect existence but against the lives of our peers. People are more likely to compare themselves to others who are worse off than they are.<sup>70</sup> Even when people don't compare themselves to those worse off, they are still blinded by comparison. Judging one's happiness by comparison to others causes us to be blind to the negative aspects of life that are shared by everyone. Having to work for a living or clean the dishes after using them, don't bother us as much as they would if these frustrations weren't shared by all of us. In summary, the fact that most people don't regret their existence is no indication of whether existence is regrettable.

In order to address more philosophical evaluations of life quality, Benatar tackles three common evaluation strategies. Hedonistic, desire fulfilment and objective list theories all judge the quality of one's life, but do so in different ways. Hedonistic theories judge a life's quality by the amount of pleasure when compared to the amount of suffering in one's life. Hedonistic theories anchor quality of life in mental states. If you place indifferent mental states on the side of negative mental states it is overwhelming how low the quality of the average life is from the hedonistic paradigm. For much of the day we are either hungry, but not yet able to eat, tired but not yet able to sleep or bored but unable to find effective distraction. Pleasure is relatively rare. Considering this, hedonism as a tool for judging quality of life is pretty useless. Pleasure, while great, is too rare to justify the idea that life is good.

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<sup>70</sup> Brown, Jonathon D., and Dutton, Keith A., Truth and Consequences: the Costs and Benefits of Accurate Self-Knowledge', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21/12 (1995) 1292.

Desire fulfillment theories argue that the percentage of one's desires that get fulfilled when compared to those that go unfulfilled determine the quality of a life. This way of measuring quality of life is odd because desire is so malleable. The old adage, be careful what you wish for, shows the oddness of basing ideas on the quality of life on the fulfillment of desire. What if I desire something and get it, only to find out that it's not really what I wanted; a college degree, a spouse, a family, a house in the suburbs and so on. These things are markers of the happy life and as such it is easy to desire them. Many people who get these things do not feel satisfied upon getting them, and the experience of getting something you always wanted and being disappointed in it is among the most distressing experiences of first world existence.

Finally, objective list theories compare lives to lists of accomplishments or features that are deemed to accompany a happy life. The term objective is a funny choice since it implies that there is an objective list of accomplishments or attributes that account for quality of life. This is a dubious assumption in a postmodern age. Nevertheless, objective list theories tend to focus on virtue or the lack thereof. One list marking the signposts of a happy life includes "moral goodness, rational activity, the development of one's abilities, having children and being a good parent, knowledge and the awareness of true beauty."<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, lives of low quality are marked by, "being betrayed, manipulated, slandered, deceived, being deprived of liberty or dignity, and enjoying either sadistic pleasure, or aesthetic pleasure in what is in fact ugly."<sup>72</sup> Such lists, while labeled objective, are of course not objective at all and are only helpful to the extent that

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<sup>71</sup> Griffin, James, *Well-Being* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 67.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

they provide an arbitrary standard by which to compare one's life in order to feel good about living.

While Benatar takes time to address the philosophical assumptions underpinning discussions of quality of life his argument against life really boils down to the idea that life contains more harm than good. Some lives are filled with far more harm than good, but all are harmful. By becoming a parent, one is playing roulette with a fully loaded gun. No matter what, the child you produce will suffer the harms of life. Benatar argues that, as moral creatures, human beings have an obligation to avoid causing harm while no such obligation exists in the other direction. We should not hurt anyone but we are not obligated to cause others to feel an increase in pleasure. To use Benatar's own words, "While there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, there is no duty to bring happy people into being."<sup>73</sup> Since we have a duty to avoid causing harm, but no corresponding duty to bring happy people into existence, and since we know that all people suffer harm, we must not create new people.

The problem with Benatar's logic is the premise that humans have a duty to avoid causing harm. Causing harm arbitrarily is to no one's advantage but a chief element of pessimistic philosophy is the idea that causing harm is an unavoidable aspect of living.<sup>74</sup> By eating meat, driving a car, consuming fossil fuels to power a computer while writing a book on avoiding harm, Dr. Benatar contributes to the suffering of countless persons. The degradation of the environment by factory farming and the conveniences of modern life redound to the suffering of millions who inhabit islands and low lying areas and yet "moral persons" like Dr. Benatar do these kinds of things all the time.

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<sup>73</sup> Benatar, 32.

<sup>74</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Studies in Pessimism*. "On the Sufferings of the World". Accessed October 28, 2015. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/chapter1>.

The fact that not causing harm is an impossible standard does not disqualify it but does make it a little ridiculous. The trouble with Benatar's talk of duty is the word duty itself. In what possible way does it make sense to speak of an animal having duties? A duty is a moral or legal obligation, a responsibility.<sup>75</sup> Does a dog have a duty to its pups? Does a bird have a duty to its eggs? Such language is ridiculous on its face. We do not speak of animals as having duties. There are only successful animals and unsuccessful animals, not moral and immoral ones, or dutiful and irresponsible ones.

Animals have drives that they either indulge or ignore. Since we are animals, we do not have duties any more than a dog or cat does. We have drives; to reproduce, to eat, to defend ourselves and so on. We may or may not give in to all these drives based upon our individualized circumstances, but in a material world speaking of duty is playing pretend. We have no duty to our fellowmen, they aren't even our fellows, just other animals competing for the same resources. Causing life is the same as causing harm. Life is harm. If causing harm fulfils a drive or meets a need or satisfies an itch, there is nothing within a pessimistic worldview that can discourage one from causing that harm.

In the day to day lives of human beings hundreds of things are done that cause harm. Shopping on Amazon, driving cars, smoking cigarettes and eating cholesterol all cause harm and the wealth to consume in such harmful ways is made possible by the further harm suffered by those beneath one on the social and economic scale. Not much thought is given to the harms we inflict on people. If action that caused harm was to be avoided at all costs then hardly any action at all would be possible. Benatar raises important points to consider but ultimately fails to convince this reader of the idea that one's desire to avoid harm should determine whether or not one should reproduce.

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<sup>75</sup> Merriam-Webster. Accessed September 23, 2015.

### Pursuing Purpose with Perry

Even the best human lives include substantial suffering. A typical person experiences considerable pain, loneliness and boredom in his lifetime. What is it that justifies the human species in reproducing itself despite all the suffering?<sup>76</sup>

Sarah Perry

Sarah Perry's author description states simply that "Sarah Perry is a housewife in San Antonio, Texas. This is her first book."<sup>77</sup> Her blog is subtitled with two questions, "Should we make new people?" and "Should we force people to stay alive?"<sup>78</sup> Without an academic pedigree, her only authority comes from the people who have read her. Jim Crawford and Thomas Ligotti have both highly recommended her book as an adequate defense of antinatalism and pro-suicide ethics. Perry's writing style is less academic than Benatar's but to some this might be a strength.

Perry picks up where Benatar leaves off. Her focus is on the meaning making systems that humans use to justify life in the face of its unpleasantness. Benatar argues that life is a harm whether people realize it or not. Since life is a harm it should be avoided rather than multiplied. Perry argues that life is a harm but that this doesn't matter in the face of meaning. Humans can suffer or inflict harm if it is to a purpose. The problem arises, though, when it is discovered that purpose and meaning are illusory. Meaning and purpose do not exist in a material cosmos.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, we should avoid reproduction because life is a harm and the ways in which we justify existence to ourselves and each other are illusory. The illusory nature of meaning therefore holds the

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<sup>76</sup> Perry, Sarah. *Every Cradle Is a Grave: Rethinking the Ethics of Birth and Suicide*. Charleston, WV: Nine-Banded Books, 2014. 31.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 217.

<sup>78</sup> Perry, Sarah. "The View from Hell." Accessed November 3, 2015.

<sup>79</sup> Perry, Sarah. *Every Cradle Is a Grave: Rethinking the Ethics of Birth and Suicide*. Charleston, WV: Nine-Banded Books, 2014. 40.

potential of causing the further harm of disillusionment and discouragement. Perry outlines her argument in five main points.

1. People have an innate need for meaning.
2. The meanings that people find in the world are illusory.
3. Since meaning is both necessary AND illusory, people protect their sources of meaning by imbuing them with sacred untouchability.
4. One of the most sacred and universally held beliefs is that life is a “desirable and precious gift.”
5. Having the courage to question the sacredness and value of this belief can lead to “new ways of conceiving humanity and compassion, especially with respect to suicide and procreation.”<sup>80</sup>

In order to understand Perry’s argument I will explain and clarify each of her five points.

The first point of Perry’s schema is perhaps the most interesting. The ways in which humans ground their experience in meaning are multifarious while at the same time representing a nearly universal need. Humans have the capacity to predict the future and remember the past. As mentioned in the chapter on pessimism, this ability causes humans incredible amounts of suffering. This suffering goes above and beyond what other suffering sentient beings experience. Since humans know that life is full of suffering they require justification for the living of life. “Why get out of bed in the morning?” is a question often directed at pessimists who deny meaning and purpose. This “why” reveals how even a simple action, like getting out of bed, can require abstract justification. Life is hard. Humans require justification if they are going to do hard things. Meaning is the way humans tend to justify life.<sup>81</sup>

The best kinds of meaning are cultural meanings. These have the advantage of being unquestioned and therefore provide a grounded basis for action. Christianity, the goods of democracy and freedom, the goodness of life, the specialness of human intelligence, or the value and promise of science are all examples of common cultural

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 79.

meanings that people appeal to in their daily lives. Meaning is not limited to broad cultural expression. There are individualized meanings as well. In fact, millennials, among the least religious generations in American history, are often immune to many of the cultural meanings that inspired previous generations.<sup>82</sup> People who have lost their affiliation with cultural meaning carry what Perry calls a “heavy modern self.”<sup>83</sup> This self is heavy because it is responsible for creating the meanings and justifications required to get through life on its own rather than relying on the preexistent meanings of a culture. Individualized meanings can be personal religion, health and fitness goals, career or family goals or social work aimed at improving the plight of the “oppressed.” Anything can function as a meaning so long as it gives justification for the living of life.

Whether individualized or cultural, meanings function similarly. Perry offers four main features that all meanings share. All meanings are infective, maintain a sense of false permanence, offer an illusion of control and tell some kind of story. To say that meaning is infective is to say that we tend to adopt some or all of the meanings of those that we associate with. If we associate with Christians, we tend to become Christian. With atheists, atheist. With liberals, liberal. The social order both creates and maintains sources of meaning. People adopt the meanings of their social groups and then rely on the social group to help them maintain those meanings.

Meanings appear to be permanent, that is, they seem to be firm and something that can be relied on, i.e. freedom is good for everyone, or Christ is the Lord yesterday, today and tomorrow. In fact, systems of meaning are always undergoing change and modification in the face of reality, but the experience of someone in a system of meaning

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<sup>82</sup> "Religion Among the Millennials." Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS. February 16, 2010. Accessed September 24, 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Perry, 37.

is an experience of anchoring and stability. Similarly, meanings offer an illusion of control. Whether in the form of a cholesterol pill or a Hail Mary, systems of meaning offer their adherents a sense that they have some form of control over their environment. While cholesterol pills are not illusory in the way that Hail Marys are, both feel far more effective than they are in reality. It is this feeling of effectiveness that is illusory.

Finally, systems of meaning tell stories. The stories of the creation, fall and redemption combine to tell the Christian story and explain why the world is as it is. These stories also promise a state of future fulfilment where all will be well. In similar way, personal narratives function to explain our difficulties and promise future relief from them. The stories we tell ourselves almost always promise some ultimate fulfilment in the future, this future fulfilment doesn't exist and never comes.<sup>84</sup> The stories we tell ourselves keep us going.

This brings us to Perry's second point, all meaning is based in illusion. This means that the foundation of all meaning is the social sphere. That is, meaning is real to the people experiencing or believing in it. It affects them emotionally and colors the ways in which they view the world. Nevertheless, meaning has no objective basis. Not everyone will agree that meaning is illusory. Religious or political persons, for instance, actually believe in the stuff they peddle. Their belief, though, is not a proof of the validity of their claims. There is not much that can be said in order to prove or disprove this second point. Meaning in life is based upon beliefs about the way the world is and the actions that must be done in the present to make the world better or ensure that we go to a better world when we die. Pessimists deny that these meanings are based in facts about the world. Perry says it this way, "It is my view that the sense of meaningfulness is itself

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<sup>84</sup> More on this in the next section on Lee Edelman's *No Future*.

an illusion, a cognitive phenomenon that is very adaptive for individuals and groups. This illusion is maintained by communities in order to organize the behavior of individuals, in part by easing their suffering.”<sup>85</sup> Meanings organize human behavior. They give ideas of a future fulfillment that present action can be directed toward. This sense of direction is the social utility of meaning.

Meanings are illusions but they are not experienced as such by their adherents. Perry uses two images to illustrate the nature of meaning. The first example Perry uses is the experience machine. An experience machine is like the movie, *The Matrix*. You get plugged into it, and it transports you into another world, a world within your mind. By being a member of the Republican Party, or part of a university, or having an active prayer life one becomes plugged in to an experience machine. These actions and affiliations make life feel worthwhile but they do so by relativizing the world and giving one an individualized place within the world. More importantly, these affiliations give people abstractions to relate themselves to. Without such abstractions humans become unable to understand and explain themselves.<sup>86</sup>

The second image Perry utilizes is from nature. She mentions that some bees are tricked into fertilizing flowers that trigger the mating instinct in them. These flowers excite the bees even more than female bees do. The flower is experienced as “better than nature, it is a *superstimulus*.”<sup>87</sup> In the same way, meaning is a kind of superstimulus. It makes the world seem better than it actually is. In reality, we are born, we reproduce (or don’t) and then we die. Meaning fills in the time periods between these three events with something more than surviving. We’re just animals doing what all animals do and our

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<sup>85</sup> Perry, 62.

<sup>86</sup> Ligotti, 13

<sup>87</sup> Perry, 75.

species will go extinct as if we had never existed. Meaning helps us forget this by providing us with experience machines and acting as a superstimulus.

Perry's third point is that since meaning is both necessary AND illusory, people protect their sources of meaning by imbuing them with sacred untouchability. A professor is engaged in the Pursuit of Truth or the Transmission of Learning, a Christian is involved in Evangelization or Discipleship, a political activist is fighting for Social Justice. These concepts (capitalized to show their sacredness) are all illusions. They exist within the mind as abstract goods in which meaning and purpose can be anchored. They give order to one's life, and they cause one to feel that life is full of purpose.

If these illusions are said to be illusions, people get very upset. They become uncomprehending. People are so committed to the meaning that grounds their action and life that they are often unable to see the silliness of their most serious values. The clearest way to see this is to look at another group's sacred things. A businessman, for instance, sitting in on a postmodern lit-criticism course will find the deconstruction of literature to be a pointless exercise in navel gazing, pleasurable to some liberal hippy types perhaps, but certainly not worth any expenditure of tax payer dollars. On the other hand, an English professor sitting in on a Goldman-Sachs board meeting might find the untrammelled pursuit of wealth for wealth's sake to be distasteful and irrational. The meeting would serve as an example of the unthinking pursuit of short term gain that people engage in when they are lacking a liberal arts education. Both people will find the other's sacred repellent, and neither will be able to see that both sources of meaning are illusory and ridiculous when viewed from the outside.

Perry's fourth and fifth points go together. They are that one of the most sacred ideas in our society is that life is a desirable and precious gift and that being brave enough to question the sacredness of this belief will lead us into new realms of understanding regarding the human and compassion. It is at this point in the argument that Perry goes from being descriptive to prescriptive. Perry argues that by recognizing the illusory nature of the idea that life is a sacred good we can come to see that suicide and antinatalism are legitimate responses to the nature of reality.

Perry becomes a parody of herself, however, when she creates a new meaning out of her desire to convince other people of her conclusions regarding the nature of life and the validity of antinatalism and suicide. She says that she believes that it is "very immoral to have babies or otherwise create aware beings."<sup>88</sup> She wants, through her life and her book, to help humanity approach "the Frontier of Occam—the highest intelligence achievable by a civilization before it figures out better ways to achieve its ends than by continuing to pursue the goals of its alien creator, evolution."<sup>89</sup> And finally, she says that "since suffering and misery are inescapable parts of life, if we are to justify creating life there must be something that outweighs suffering and misery within the space of universal judgments."<sup>90</sup>

Two points. First, Perry's sense of meaning is illusory by her own argumentation. The idea that she can convince enough people to help civilization throw off the goals of its "alien creator" evolution is an illusion. The idea that evolution is an "alien" creator or that human beings are somehow separated from the evolutionary process is a superstimulus and makes human life seem like something better than it is. That she

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<sup>88</sup> Perry, vii.

<sup>89</sup> Perry, x.

<sup>90</sup> Perry, 61.

doesn't see that she is grounding her activity in the future betterment of society in order to give her life meaning, and thereby living within an "experience machine" is a little hard to fathom.

Second, Perry never explains why it is that reproduction has to be justified. Justified to whom? Most people never abandon the illusion that life is good. One's children will most likely never abandon this illusion.<sup>91</sup> So you will not be required to justify reproducing to your fellow humans or to your children. Perry claims to be an atheist, so presumably she does not imagine that God will require justification for procreation after death. The idea of morality, as anything other than codes of social utility, is absurd in a materialist universe. Perry's project, although motivated by very clear thinking regarding the nature of life and the worthlessness of living, is rooted in superstitions like morality and the idea that human beings must be able to justify their decisions. Not to mention the fact that a large number of children are born to people who neither plan on nor think through their "decision" to reproduce.<sup>92</sup>

Ideas like "morality", or "justification" of one's behavior or "universal judgments," are hold overs from the theistic past and have no place in prescriptions of human life within a pessimistic materialist perspective. Perry knows that morality doesn't apply to animals. In a chapter arguing that nature is cruel and that people have no

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<sup>91</sup> In 1932, sociologist Ruth Cavan interviewed 7,852 children from diverse backgrounds and asked them if they had ever regretted being born. 30% said that they had. 81% of the children who regretted birth were from broken homes or had "neurotic" tendencies. Only 7% of "well-adjusted" children from intact families said that they had wished to never be born. Furthermore, this just revealed that at some point these children had wished never to be born, not that such a wish was a persistent feature of their lives. Point is, most people do not regret being born.

Cavan, Ruth Shonle. 1932. "The wish never to have been born." *American Journal of Sociology* 37 (4): 547-559.

<sup>92</sup> Unintended Pregnancy in the United States. Accessed September 24, 2015. <http://www.gutmacher.org/pubs/FB-Unintended-Pregnancy-US.html>.

obligation to follow their evolutionary drive to reproduce, Perry describes how some mother birds select the strongest chicks and then starve off the weaklings.

We do not expect macaques to be egalitarian, nor male lions to refrain from killing cubs sired by other males. We should not expect animals to raise the babies they produce to adulthood; we should not be dismayed if they, in fact, torture their young to death when it is advantageous for them to do so.<sup>93</sup>

It is strange that Perry is unable to admit that humans, as animals, are under no obligation to act “morally” other than the consequences that will be placed upon them by society.

When a human mother starves her children to death, it is no more immoral than when a Eurasian water bird does the same thing. In the same way, it is absurd to say that humans violate some immaterial moral standard in reproducing in a fully materialistic world.

Elucidating the Future with Lee Edelman<sup>94</sup>

If there is a baby, there is a future, there is redemption. If, however, there is no baby and, in consequence, no future, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing.

-Lee Edelman<sup>95</sup>

Lee Edelman is an English professor at Tufts University. He has become well known within queer theory for this book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. His combination of psychoanalysis with literary criticism and cultural theory has been praised by many including Leo Bersani. In this section, I examine the argument of the book that made him famous.

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<sup>93</sup> Perry, 196; 201

<sup>94</sup> This section will be somewhat longer than the previous two. This is unavoidable in that Edelman’s argument is far more complex than either Benatar’s or Perry’s. Edelman’s text was written to an academic audience while both Benatar and Perry’s were written to a popular one.

The majority of this section is adapted from a paper I wrote in the Spring of 2015. It is reproduced here with permission from the publisher.

Miller, Joshua. "Jouissance Is Kid Stuff: The Drive, Masturbation, and Child Rearing." In *The Danger of Hope*. Stanley, NC: Gloria Acres Publishing, 2015.

<sup>95</sup> Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, 12-13.

Lee Edelman, in my view, is the most pragmatic of the antinatalists. His argument against procreation is against the violence of meaning itself. Benatar wants us to avoid children because children suffer the harms of life. Perry wants us to avoid reproduction because meanings are illusory and without meaning life is not worth living. Edelman wants us to avoid children because children tie us to the future. The future is where systems of meaning are anchored, and systems of meaning generate violence in the present. As with the previous theorists, I would like to break Edelman's argument in half, agree with his description of the social order while denying his solution to the violence inherent in sociality.

For Edelman, the world is made up of two kinds of people, "reproductive futurists" who trade enjoyment for meaning and "sinthomosexuals" who sacrifice meaning for overwhelming enjoyment in the present. Society, according to Edelman, is always ordered in favor of the futurists. In fact, a politics based on something other than the future is "impossible, inhuman."<sup>96</sup> Politics, according to Edelman, is essentially the social project of the symbolic. We imagine a future symbolically, invest that future imaginary with the burden of ultimate fulfillment, and then fill the present with meaning by working toward the imaginary future. Queers always end up with the short end of the stick in this operation because their *jouissance* is in the present and they don't generate the children which would bind them to the future. Edelman's response to the impasse of the status quo is to say "fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized".<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 108-109.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 29.

The primary value of Edelman's text lies in its critique of meaning. Grounding the motivation for parenting or politics in meaning, is inherently violent because meaning is always rooted in an individual's fantasies of the future.<sup>98</sup> For Edelman, human beings lose access to the real world when they enter the symbolic or language bound world. By replacing direct experience with concepts, we become alienated from the world and from ourselves. In order to find a substitute for the intimacy of the lost real, we imagine a future wherein the symbolic will be at one with the real. In other words, we imagine a future state where the symbolic order and the real world coincide. This reunion, of the symbolic with the actual, would restore the lost intimacy of childhood. By placing this fulfilment in the future we create meaning in the present. Meaning is the work we do in the present to bring about the unification of the symbolic and the real in the future.

There is nothing easier than falling into a meaning based orientation. As we grow older we awaken to the fact that the world is dangerous, our lives are contingent, and that the fulfilment we expected to find in adult life was a chimera that only the pint sized version of our past self could have imagined. Rather than accepting this state of things, humans have a habit of explaining it. When addressing the fragmented nature of the human world, it is not uncommon to hear statements like, "That's not the way things were supposed to be", or "That is not how things were meant to be." Who it is that "supposed" or "meant" for the world to be one way rather than another is not usually addressed, but what such thoughts give us is the ability to assign criminality to whom or whatever messed up the world.

It matters not whom we choose to demonize, what matters is the inevitability of our need to blame someone for the fact that our jobs are underpaying and our lives

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 34.

unfulfilling. Since we seldom see ourselves as the cause of our own misery, we must assign the blame to someone who is different than we are. Edelman sees queers as being the go-to explanatory cause of the world's imperfection, but there are plenty of other options. Conservatives, businessmen, hetero-normative nuclear families, blacks, Arabs, Mexican immigrants, capitalists, and socialists can all be the reason the world is as it is rather than as it *should* be. All that matters is that there be a group of people we can blame, and that they be different from us.

There are two ways of responding to this vision of the world. The first is to try and reduce the number of people that are messing things up. Terrorists, murderers and warriors are all engaged in this response. The other choice is to try to increase the number of people who are similar to us in the world. Parents, college professors, evangelists and political activists are often engaged in this response. Both responses imagine a future where the others have either been eliminated or silenced. In this future, all will be well because the source of our frustration will have been wiped out or minimized. At first glance, parenting and evangelism seem to offer less violent alternatives to terrorism and soldiering. In fact, they are no less violent but they are less obviously violent because the violence has been internalized.

The problem with both of these responses is that they are rooted in the same fantastical notion of reality. Namely, that frustration in life has a source and that by dealing with the source of frustration, life can become fulfilling and satisfying. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Life is by nature frustrating because as humans we have the capacity for imagination. We can conceive of an infinite number of possibilities. The future, as a product of the imagination, is capable of holding this

infinite possibility. When tomorrow finally becomes today only one of those infinite imaginations can exist. The present, unlike the future, is limited. The real, unlike the imaginary, is limited. This mismatch, between imagination and the real, is the source of all our frustration. The human self is the nexus of the imagined infinite and the contingent, limited possibility of the real.

The take away from all of this is that we as human beings, with our unlimited desire and limited potential, are incapable of ever living up to our sense of the way things can and ought to be. The future fulfilment we so desperately hope for remains forever in the future. In the economy of future oriented meaning, there is only violence and a sense of purpose, but there is never fulfilment. For the dreamed of fulfilment to ever exist in the present, the self and the sense of meaning and purpose that gives the self its existence, would collapse. “Symbolic reality only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself. It is only, after all, to its figures of meaning, which we take as the literal truth, that we owe our existence as subjects.”<sup>99</sup>

This discussion of meaning in politics may seem to have nothing to do with parenting, but parenting is very often rooted in the same redemption narratives that inspire our politics. People who buy into a narrative explanation of their sense of alienation and lack, will seek to alleviate their sense of frustration by developing little protégés. They spawn and raise these little minions in the hopes that someday the world will be populated by versions of themselves. This is what Edelman means when he says

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 18.

that parenting is essentially narcissistic.<sup>100</sup> This attempt to wrest satisfaction from the world by endowing it with a child is itself essentially frustrating.

Both the parents and the children in this equation suffer violence. As the child becomes individuated from the parent, the parent suffers the loss of the fantasy. The parent's goal was to create a version of the self that would live on into the future and help to overcome the forces of darkness (otherness). In the process of becoming an individual distinct from the parent, the child becomes associated with the other. Not only has the parental project failed, it has failed miserably. The child has become associated with those others that are ruining life on earth. The child in this relationship suffers the violence of knowing that their validity as a subject depends upon their willingness to instantiate the values that the elder generation has spent so much time and effort instilling. It is painful to be someone's project, and to realize that acceptance depends upon fulfilling the fantasies of the parental figure.

Edelman believes that human social interaction is to a large extent defined by its dependence on schemes for achieving meaning. His response is not to propose the annihilation of the human race but instead to offer a figure that images the denied negativity, contingency, unpredictability and ironic nature of human existence. The sinthomosexual is the meaning busting figure in Edelman's worldview and is offered as the starkest alternative to meaning based parenting and reproductive futurism.

Edelman himself seems to have difficulty nailing down exactly what it is he is talking about with this figure that figures the chaos and meaningless repetitions of the death drive. Edelman makes use of several methods in his attempt to explain the sinthomosexual. He begins with an explanation of the concepts underlying

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 13.

sinthomosexuality, and then moves on to literary examples of sinthomosexuals in order to give flesh and blood to the abstraction. I will go over the explanation and then try to make sense of the examples before expressing my difficulties with sinthomosexuality as the alternative to reproductive futurism.

“Behind what is named, there is the unnameable...It is because it is unnameable, with all the resonances you can give to this name, that it is akin to the quintessential unnameable, that is to say to death.”<sup>101</sup> Upon each person, hovering above each physical reality that greets our senses, there is a name. We have given names (concepts) to everything we encounter in this world. These names structure the reality that we exist within. Beneath the name, behind the surface that is named, there is the unnameable. This unnameable is the actual thing we are encountering. It is absolutely unique and unrepeatable. Because of its uniqueness, it can never be named, because names tie objects together by their points of commonality. It is this unnameability that the sinthomosexual points to in his unjustifiable (unnameable) pursuit of *jouissance*<sup>102</sup>. By figuring the unnameable, the sinthomosexual is a figure of death; death to the ego, death to meaning and ultimately death to the race of humans. By not purchasing meaning with the rest of society, the sinthomosexual becomes the unwitting critic of society’s illusory meanings.

The word sinthomosexual is a blend of two words. The first is *sinthome* or ‘symptom’ and the second is homosexual. In order to get a grip on what the blend means, Edelman devotes several pages to explaining each of the blend’s parts.<sup>103</sup> The sinthome is

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<sup>101</sup> Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, 1954-1955, 211. (Quoted in Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, 25.)

<sup>102</sup> Edelman makes use of this term frequently. There is a short definition of *Jouissance* in a footnote on pg. 61. For now it is enough to understand *jouissance* as an overwhelming enjoyment, that exceeds pleasure, in the fulfilment or attempted satisfaction of a drive.

<sup>103</sup> Edelman, 35.

the knot where the symbolic, the imaginary and the real all come together. It is the unique union we make of our experience of the world and it is usually closely related to the form of sexuality we ultimately express. The homosexual, by engaging in a non-reproductive sexuality, is most clearly associated with his *sinthome*. The homosexual who follows his desire for *jouissance* in the face of society's opprobrium is marked by his own individual drives as opposed to the sublimated pursuits of the meaning based society he exists within.

This willingness to abandon the reproductive futuristic meanings associated with mainstream heteronormative forms of sexuality is what makes Edelman see a resonance between the *sinthome* and being queer. "Where futurism always anticipates, in the image of an Imaginary past, a realization of meaning that will suture identity by closing the gap (between the real and the symbolic), queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a *jouissance* that social reality and the futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed."<sup>104</sup> By pursuing *jouissance*, that is by pursuing "a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law," the homosexual undoes our sense of meaning in the present by showing that fulfilment and satisfaction exist not in the future union of the Symbolic and the Real, but in the present expulsion of energies that occurs in giving oneself over to the pulsions of the drives.<sup>105</sup> Humans are not satisfied by having meaning in their lives, in fact they are never satisfied with anything for long, but the closest humans come to an experience of

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 24-25.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 25.

satisfaction is in surrendering to, rather than attempting to control or redirect, the forces that drive us from within.

Edelman uses the literary examples of Ebenezer Scrooge and Silas Marner to illustrate the figure of the sinthomosexual. It was while pondering these examples that I came to conclude that the sinthomosexual is a specter, just as unreal as the future that meaning is based on. These are not characters pursuing some great *jouissance* at the expense of the social capital they lose in the process. These are characters who have been traumatized in some deep way and in compensation have developed addictions to cope with their loss of faith in the possibility of happiness. Following Edelman's lead, I will use Ebenezer Scrooge and Silas Marner to illustrate this observation.

Scrooge, abandoned by his parents in boarding school, comes to see money making and fiscal responsibility as the only form of security possible in the world. He becomes so attached to his need to work that his fiancée breaks off her engagement with him because she does not want to compete with his pursuit of money. This further reinforces his addiction and by the time we meet Scrooge, his only pleasure in life is the acquisition of wealth. In the same way, Silas Marner was deeply hurt by his excommunication from the religious sect at Lantarn Yard and fled to Raveloe to live the life of a money making hermit. He can find no joy in his life apart from accumulating wealth and counting it night after night.

Both of these characters are tragic characters. They do not refuse social interaction because they are pursuing their own *jouissance*, as Edelman implies.<sup>106</sup> Rather, these characters, exhibit in their rejection of society a rejection of those who have

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 45-47. Especially the quote on 47 that says that "The subject, must accept its sinthome, its particular pathway to *jouissance*, as its "real identity, connecting it to the Real of its being."

rejected them. Both of them were hurt. One by his parents, the other by his community of faith, both in turn rejected human society and began a solitary life of material accumulation. When Ebenezer begs his nephew to leave him alone to ignore Christmas, it's not because he loves working so much that Christmas doesn't matter to him, it's because Christmas is a time of year that causes him to remember all he has lost in the pursuit of an obsession that has become all-consuming with the passage of time. Instead of being able to enter into the festivities of Christmas, Scrooge is bound to obsessively repeat the behaviors associated with wealth creation that have given him a sense of stability in the past.

These characters reveal, in a special way, the futility of pursuing *jouissance* for the sake of *jouissance*. What drives us, what gives us “our particular pathway to *jouissance*,” is tragedy.<sup>107</sup> The unique ways in which the world breaks in upon us cause us to develop motivations, pulsions, drives and desires that we do not always understand and usually cannot explain. The question is not whether we will have drives that run counter to sociality, but whether we can find ways of managing them that still allow for a life outside the institutions that house those who can't control themselves. Pursuing *jouissance* doesn't lead to satisfaction in the long run, just social isolation.

Furthermore, Edelman overlooks the distinction between *jouissance* expected and *jouissance* obtained. By examining this difference we can come to see why sinthomosexuality fails as a response to reproductive futurism. Adrian Johnston in his essay on enjoyment for Lacan.com, uses Kant's sex and gallows story to illustrate the difference between *jouissance* expected and *jouissance* obtained.<sup>108</sup> The story goes that a

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>108</sup> He also provides one of the better explanations of *jouissance* that I've read. He says,

man is given the chance to have sex with “the woman of his dreams.” In exchange for this privilege, the man will be hanged after satisfying himself with the woman. According to Kant, the man will refuse this sexual encounter because of the future consequences of his action. For Freud, this is an example of the pleasure principle in action. The pleasure principle is a function of the ego wherein the drives of the id are directed in such a way as to reduce the amount of objective damage done to the self. If the damage done by the gallows outweighs the pleasure obtained by possessing the ideal woman, then the pleasure principle will not allow the sexual act to be engaged in.

Lacan troubles this simple, unidirectional explication of desire. For Lacan, there are subjects who are only able to enjoy sex at all if there is a gallows involved. There are persons who only fully enter the realm of sexual release when they are transgressing some sort of boundary and welcoming a social gallows.<sup>109</sup> Such a person is beyond the pleasure principle. Such a person is pursuing *jouissance*.<sup>110</sup> What is important to recognize here is that the social prohibitions against certain behaviors are necessary for

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“The specificity of *jouissance* is best established, in an initial approach to it, by contrasting it with the basic features of the pleasure principle. Based on Freud's own characterizations of it, the pleasure principle (once placed in relation to the reality principle) acts like an economic speculator, assessing potential gains and losses of satisfaction in light of possible outcomes of various courses of action. It seeks to maximize satisfaction and correspondingly minimize pain/dissatisfaction. In Freud's account, the pleasure principle qua economic speculator isn't so much a function of the primary processes within the id, but is the strategy wherein the ego negotiates with the exigencies of reality on behalf of the id (of course, the ego often performs this function unconsciously). For Lacan, the ego feels pain (in the form of anxiety, symptoms, and the like) when the homeostatic balance sheet of the pleasure principle is thrown into disorder by an insistent enjoyment than pays no heed of the speculative gains or losses of a diluted, sublimated pleasure, of a principle that routinely "sells out" enjoyment in its ongoing bargaining with its reality-level complement. *Jouissance* is "beyond the pleasure principle" precisely to the extent that it breaks off negotiations with the reality principle, that it bypasses the moderating/mitigating influence of the ego on the drives.”

-Johnston, Adrian. "Forced Choice of Enjoyment." Forced Choice of Enjoyment. Accessed April 29, 2015. <http://www.lacan.com/forced.htm>.

<sup>109</sup> Johnston, Adrian. "Forced Choice of Enjoyment." Forced Choice of Enjoyment. Accessed April 29, 2015. <http://www.lacan.com/forced.htm>

<sup>110</sup> “The “living out of drives” in utter disregard of the consequentialism of the pleasure principle is *jouissance*.”

-Johnston, 3.

the experience of *jouissance* to be obtained. So long as a behavior carries no consequences, social or otherwise, it can be accommodated by the pleasure principle and is therefore distinct from *jouissance*. In other words, if *jouissance* is the goal of life, then we should increase prohibition rather than work on removing it. The persecution that people experience in pursuing the fulfilment of their drives, contributes to the satisfaction of those drives. The sinthomosexual likes to be punished. If he did not carry the burden of social opprobrium, his *jouissance* would be reduced and he would have to content himself with Game of Thrones and Facebook like the rest of America.

One more observation that can be gleaned from the sex and gallows story, *Jouissance* expected is always greater than *jouissance* once it is obtained.<sup>111</sup> Suppose there is a person who makes the choice to pursue his *jouissance* regardless of whether such a pursuit ends in death. What if this person finds that once he begins fucking the “woman of his dreams,” she is transformed into a sweaty human body rather than the object of his fantasies? “The man might not only find that this sexual encounter isn’t as good as he imagined it would be when fantasizing about this particular woman (i.e., the semblance of “*jouissance* expected” isn’t the substance of “*jouissance* obtained”), but that the sexual act itself is transformed from a titillating fantasy into a disgusting, mechanical activity: two sweating, grunting heaps of flesh rubbing against each other and secreting fluids.”<sup>112</sup> I contend that this is always the case. Fantasy never lives up to reality, especially in sex, but in everything else as well.

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<sup>111</sup>“The “*jouissance* expected” is an illusory, mythicized “full satisfaction,” namely, the re-finding of das Ding, the decisive, final quelling of the incessant clamoring of the drives. However, what the subject always gets (i.e., the “*jouissance* obtained”) is, at best, a pleasure that falls short of the idealized standard.”  
-Johnston, 3.

<sup>112</sup> Johnston, 4.

This raises serious questions about sinthomosexuality as a workable response to the world of meaning. I don't know much about Edelman's sex life, but to be able to conceive of a figure defined by the eternal pursuit of *jouissance* seems rather naïve. The more boundaries you cross, the less satisfying the crossing becomes. This is as true of sexual experience as it is of drugs and alcohol or the thrill of gambling or the pleasure of overeating. In most cases, people discover the diminishing return on investment that fantasy and the pursuit of *jouissance* exhibit somewhere between teen and adult. Most adults avoid staggering drunkenness not because they are afraid of the hangover, but because staggering drunkenness gets boring after a while. In the same way, sexual pursuits grow boring and mechanical over time.

While Edelman advocates a retreat from the goals of sociality in order to reduce the violence against outgroups that society is dependent on, I think that having an outgroup to despise is a vital feature of a fulfilling life. Even if the outgroup is made up of people who persecute outgroups, adversaries are necessary to make life an engaging contest. Reproduction is not a good in itself, and it is not necessary that everyone engage in reproduction by any means, but thinking that avoiding children to pursue pleasure in the present will reduce the amount of violence in society is a stretch.

All three of the authors I have explored are concerned to reduce harm. Benatar and Perry want to avoid the harms of life by not creating beings who will suffer life. Edelman wants to avoid harming outgroups by disengaging from meaning. In order to disengage meaning we must limit our connections with the future, therefore, we must avoid children (or at the very least avoid endowing children with the burden of future fulfilment). Why all this concern with reducing violence? From a pessimistic perspective

violence is an essential feature of the natural world. It is easy to root for the antelope on nature documentaries when a lion is chasing it, but why not cheer for the lion instead? Should the lion not eat?

Perhaps the problem is the cheering itself. What if instead of having to root for a side or attempt a solution we simply cease our striving and try accepting the situation. This isn't to say that acceptance is a solution to the problem of violence and suffering, but perhaps, acceptance is a more honest way of stating the problem of existence than the continued effort to only state problems we have imagined solutions for.

## CONCLUSION

Everything is pathology, except for indifference.  
Emil Cioran<sup>113</sup>

Don't call it a sign of the times when it's always been this way  
Sturgill Simpson<sup>114</sup>

Of all my seeking this is all my gain:  
No agony of any mortal brain.  
Shall wrest the secret of the life of man;  
The Search has taught me that the Search is vain.  
Omar Khayyam<sup>115</sup>

Jesus said that he was the truth.<sup>116</sup> Jesus revealed a God of benevolence and providence who cared for the least among the human race. Western thought, informed by its Christian roots, has ever since assumed that the truth was good and that the more we knew the happier we would be. For many, the opposite has been the case.<sup>117</sup> Having discovered the malignant uselessness of life it is easy for these unfortunate souls to be enraged by the removal of their illusions. As A. N. Wilson has said in his book *God's Funeral* “only those who have known the peace of God which passes all understanding

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<sup>113</sup> Cioran, E. M., and Richard Howard. *A Short History of Decay*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012. 75.

<sup>114</sup> Sturgill Simpson, “Voices”, from *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*, © 2014, High Top Mountain Records. Compact Disc.

<sup>115</sup> Khayyam, Omar, and Richard Le Gallienne. *The Rubaiyat*. New York: John Lane Publishers, 1901. 43.

<sup>116</sup> John 14:6

<sup>117</sup> Severn Mathis, a recent member of the Religious Studies department at UNCC described his disappointment with the “knowledge” he’d gained at university this way, “Every semester I deconstruct for the sole purpose of deconstructing. I do it without paying any mind to how such an expenditure of leisure time, bought with the labor of the rest of my society, will in turn benefit anyone else. I used to think I was doing real work—something of value. Now, I see that I’m just a self-soiler, so unhappy with my own inability to hold anything sacred that I engage in sullyng everyone else’s precious things. Academia presented an expensive way for me to sublimate that discontent. I get other people who need to do it too to approve of this costly coping strategy—reassure me that there’s a value to it—and then talk about how god damn dumb everyone else is after class.”

From -“CONFESSIONS OF AN UNSATISFIED SELF-SOILER” by Severn Charles Mathis

can have any conception of what was lost between a hundred and a hundred and fifty years ago when the human race in Western Europe began to discard Christianity.”<sup>118</sup>

The loss of Christianity was mitigated by the hope that humanity could somehow become liberated from structures of violence and power.<sup>119</sup> With God out of the way, society could begin the process of saving itself. Many of these hopes have been dashed by the continued presence of war and economic instability as well as increasing evidence of environmental degradation.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, there is ever more evidence that global economic liberalism leads to increased inequality and injustice the world over.<sup>121</sup> It is easy to adopt a pessimistic perspective with God out of the picture and human ingenuity falling behind our need for fresh ideas. Having been disappointed so many times in the last hundred years, hope is hard to come by.

In his book, *Meaning in History*, Karl Lowith makes an argument that the enlightenment hope of future fulfilment is a degraded form of Christian eschatology.<sup>122</sup> Lowith reminds us that instead of inspiring hope for a better tomorrow, history offers us a “sober insight into our real situation: struggle and suffering, short glories and long miseries, wars and intermittent periods of peace. All are equally significant, and none reveals an ultimate meaning in a final purpose.”<sup>123</sup> Those of a pessimistic bent, having abandoned Christian hope and unable to purchase secular progressive alternatives, seek in

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<sup>118</sup> Wilson, A. N. *God's Funeral*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. 4.

<sup>119</sup> Marx, Karl. "Theses On Feuerbach." Accessed November 5, 2015.

<sup>120</sup> "Risk of Global Financial Crash Has Increased, Warns IMF." Accessed November 5, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/oct/07/risk-global-financial-crash-increased-imf-emerging-economies-eurozone-stability-report>.

"Global Warming Is Irreversible, Study Says." NPR. Accessed November 5, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99888903>.

<sup>121</sup> Gray, John. *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism*. New York: New Press :, 1998.

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<sup>122</sup> Lowith, Karl. *Meaning in History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

vain for a project to replace the world building of Christian or enlightenment imperialism. Antinatalism is the most common response to pessimistic malaise, but relies upon a naïve hope in humanity's ability to transform itself through reason and self-control. Such hope smarts of the same utopian optimism that was rejected by pessimistic philosophy in the first place.

Pessimism is a dead end. It offers a picture of the world, perhaps the most accurate of available pictures, but a picture nonetheless. As a picture, the pessimistic world is static. The future may contain cleaner drinking water and longer life expectancy or the exact opposite. To the pessimist it matters not. Human existence is a burden regardless of the material quality of that existence. The nature of the human psyche is such that it doesn't matter whether one lives in poverty or wealth, justice or injustice. One is always in need.<sup>124</sup> When one is not in need, one is bored.<sup>125</sup> Colin Feltham, at the conclusion of his book laying out the pessimistic perspective is right to say that for the pessimist, "self-deception is all that remains."<sup>126</sup>

Optimism, or some kind of muted progressivism, goes down easily for the majority of persons and shouldn't be critiqued by those who cannot enter the brightness of such indefatigable hope. For those who find themselves among the pessimistic few, stoicism may provide a way of living in the pessimistic void created by the vacation of meaning. Epictetus was born a slave but died a free beggar in the early Roman Empire. His *Enchiridion* or manual, provides advice to those who want to discover the secret to happiness in this world. His great work begins with an admonition of humility. "Of things

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<sup>124</sup> Freud, Sigmund, and James Strachey. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010. 43-45.

<sup>125</sup> Gray, John. *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007. 163.

<sup>126</sup> Feltham, Colin. *Keeping Ourselves in the Dark*. Charleston, West Virginia: Nine Branded Books, 2015. 255.

some are in our power, others are not...If then you desire anything not in our power, you must be unfortunate (unhappy).”<sup>127</sup>

If one acknowledges the conclusions of pessimistic philosophy, it is far better to accept the world as it is than militate against it in an imaginary hope. It matters not whether the hope is for the willing extinction of the human race or the transformation of human society into a universal brotherhood. Recognizing what is in our power and only desiring that which we are capable of controlling is far more conducive to happiness than attempting to remake the world according our infinite desire for more justice and equality. If we accept the thinking of Schopenhauer and the pessimists who came after him, we are left with very minimal available reactions. We can be kind to our neighbors and coworkers. We can engage in friendly ways with our children. We can help to encourage the optimistic illusions of those around us rather than attempting to deconstruct worldviews which we are unable to replace. Essentially, pessimism reveals a world with a future that is not significantly different from its past. It is beyond our ability to change this world. We just have to decide whether and how we want to live in it.

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<sup>127</sup> Epictetus. *Enchiridion*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004. 1-2.

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