

Moral Pessimism and Human Value¹

I Introduction

It is easy to conclude, on even a brief survey of our world, that things are not going well. The world that humans have created is at least disappointing, especially given our manifest talents and good intentions. And at worst, the suffering and failures we bring about can feel too horrific to be bearable. Most of us have experienced the odd bursts of pessimism about the human world. In this paper, I want to take this pessimism seriously as an outlook on the world and explore what – if anything – it has in its favour. I seek a moral position that is both clear-sighted about the problems of our human world, that takes them appropriately to heart, but which does not collapse into cynicism or misanthropy and which retains a commitment and motivation to the standards set by value. Perhaps such a position is psychically unstable or incoherent; perhaps it cannot be fully taken to heart itself. This will be part of the issue to be explored. This paper presents some early and necessarily schematic thoughts; much of the defence of the position and of the relation between its claims, as well as the necessary exploration of its metaphysical foundations, will have to wait for another occasion. So this paper is a *prolegomena* to a future project, if you will. I hope only to set the position on the table, persuade you that it is worth taking seriously, and then explore one of its consequences partly to see if they present a potential reason for it not to be on the table at all.

I first set out a rough account of Moral Pessimism, briefly defend it as a reasonable and not obviously morally corrupt option, and then explore the apparent tension that is raised when we set it alongside one of our most basic and deep moral commitments – the commitment most of us share to humans having a special and unconditional value.

¹ Acknowledgements: Lawrence Blum, Frans Svensson, Laurence Bloom, Khatija Haneef, Richard Flockemann, Ward Jones, Tessa Dewhurst...

II Moral Pessimism

There has recently been some writing on pessimism as an attitude, character trait or set of beliefs. My account of what I call ‘Moral Pessimism’ draws on all of them, though it differs in the details from all.² Pessimism in the sense that concerns me claims that the effect of our human presence is not overall good, that things are going more badly than well, because of some necessary feature of human nature. My concern is therefore with the quality of our overall presence in the world, how agents whose lives are structured around a commitment to morality, can yet have such damaging effects and, in Paul Prescott’s terms, be such that through their presence, the ‘good does not prevail over the bad’.

So, taking my starting-point from a paper by Prescott, Moral Pessimism (or just ‘Pessimism’) can, roughly, be characterized first by a set of related claims or beliefs (later I shall add another dimension to this cognitive one). These are:

- i) While important values are intelligible and are possible for humans to realize, it is highly unlikely that they will be realized by and in humans, or realized to a lasting and significant extent, and in a way that outweighs the bad. In Prescott’s terms, Moral Pessimism claims that it is unrealistic to expect the “good to prevail over the bad”; or in Stewart Sutherland’s terms, to expect “the triumph of good over evil”.³
- ii) Values are unlikely to be realized, and humans and states of affairs are unlikely to improve significantly, because of some inherent and essential feature of human nature. Human nature is such, that it is unrealistic to expect the ‘good to prevail over the bad’ as a result of our agency and presence in the world.

As a consequence, Moral Pessimism holds, quoting from Stuart Hampshire,

- iii) that moral progress “is not to be expected except within very narrow limits”, and that “social and historical change would be superficial in their consequences.”⁴

² In offering an account of Pessimism, I draw on the following work, though I do not rely on the details, and in many respects differ in the details: Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism*, and ‘The Pessimistic Spirit’; George Harris, ‘Pessimism’; Paul Prescott, ‘What Pessimism is’; Roger Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism*; Stewart Sutherland, ‘Optimism and Pessimism’; Stuart Hampshire, ‘Morality and Pessimism’.

³ Prescott, throughout ‘What Pessimism is’; Sutherland, ‘Optimism and Pessimism’, p.538 and elsewhere.

⁴ Hampshire, ‘Morality and Pessimism’, p.22.

In broad terms, then, Moral Pessimism is a view about the relation between human nature, value and moral progress. I am particularly interested in pessimism regarding our *moral* abilities and nature, and their effects on the world (understanding ‘moral’ broadly), not the ubiquity of pain, suffering and other disvalue more generally in the human and natural world. It is therefore concerned with human-originating disvalue, rather than being a general view on the disvalue in the world, or a focus on the suffering of existence, that suffering is the lot of the living.⁵

Claim (i)

The first claim is a claim about the intelligibility of value talk and the possibility of humans realizing or creating value, whether in themselves or externally. I will use the term ‘to *realize* value’ to capture all the relations to value humans can stand in – production, recognition, cultivation and instantiation in character and action, respecting or honouring. Moral Pessimism is neutral regarding what value is or where it is located (eg. in actions, states of affairs, character), and about whether we should be pluralists or monists about it. It is not committed to the view that the only proper response to value is one of maximising. It says, simply, that whatever value is and wherever its bearer(s) when located, its realization is unlikely to prevail over disvalue.

Moral Pessimism is therefore not nihilism or scepticism about value, and as we shall see, this insistence that value can be realised is important in distinguishing Moral Pessimism as both a distinctive and morally acceptable outlook. However, what makes this view of value *pessimistic* it that it also claims that while value can be realized, it will probably fail to be realised in a significant way. Humans can, but only rarely do, realize value in lasting or significant ways, and gains in one area are offset by significant losses in another. The good will not prevail, and the good we do realize does not outweigh the bad. This claim is compatible with

⁵ One reason I label my account ‘Moral Pessimism’ is to distinguish it from the pessimism of, for instance, Schopenhauer and David Benatar, which is focused on the facts of suffering, however they are caused. Of Schopenhauerian pessimism, Joshua Dienstag writes: “Although there may be, to these pessimists, some particularities of our culture that accentuate our susceptibility to suffering, the sources of that suffering are such that all are subject to them. Human beings inhabit a universe that they would be justified in calling malevolent if it could be shown to have an author” (*Pessimism*, p.43). A similar kind of pessimism, explored by George Harris, says that “given the facts of human suffering, it would have been better that human life as a whole never evolved, which is not say that life lacks intrinsic value but that there is not enough intrinsic value in life in comparison with the intrinsic evil of suffering to underwrite the affirmation of life” (‘Pessimism’, p.272).

accepting that there has been local moral progress in certain areas of human endeavour.

Pessimists can celebrate the obvious moral and legal gains of our times, but hold that such local progress is not evidence for overall progress towards the good, nor for its prevailing over or outweighing the bad.

We can add a bit more substance to these central ideas: Firstly, the notion of ‘prevailing’ is, once again, Prescott’s. To say that ‘the bad prevails over the good’, he says, includes prospective and retrospective conditions: The claim includes certain expectations for the future, and certain explanations – that “the past and present are such that the bad can be expected to predominate or persist relative to the good”.⁶ There is therefore a narrative context to the comparison. While Prescott does not put it this way, we could say that the present and future state of value of the world is rendered intelligible by the past actions and presence of humans; and that human nature is causally implicated throughout the narrative. Secondly, ‘progress’ is a normative word; it does not capture just any change of state, but a change from worse to better. Things can also fail to progress overall in a moral sense, while changing or progressing in non-moral respects; change is not the same as progress, and not all progress is moral progress. So Pessimism might see overall change, with some local moral progress, where others – particularly those impressed by the radical developments in technology – see overall progress.⁷ Importantly, Pessimism is not committed to the view that things are going *worse*, that we are in inevitable moral decline. While things might not get better, they need not be getting worse. The badness in the world might change location or mode, while remaining steady in quantity.

Finally, and probably most difficult to defend, is the claim that the good humans create, or the quality of their response to value, does not ‘outweigh’ the bad. How do we judge overall effects and over what time-frame? How much of a kind of value does it take to ‘outweigh’ another kind? While these are familiar issues for consequentialism, Moral Pessimism ought not to be hostage to squabbles over the measurement of value. Furthermore, one’s views on the amount and quality of value in the world are probably already coloured by whether one is optimistic or pessimistic by temperament; and the kind of view of the world at issue here is not one that can be settled by calculations. For these reasons, a less numerical view of ‘outweigh’ is needed, and it can perhaps be reached by thinking in more colloquial ways: The good does not

⁶ Prescott, ‘What Pessimism is’, manuscript. p.11.

⁷ For more on the notion of moral progress, see Dale Jamieson, ‘Morality’s Progress’.

‘make up for’ the bad; it does not render the bad less painful or less significant; the good is not enough to keep us going, to keep us of a sunny disposition. The idea is not, however, one of justification. Moral Pessimism is not the idea that the good cannot *justify* the bad. It is, rather, that it cannot ameliorate or render it more bearable; it cannot soften our overall view of the axiological state of the world, humans’ responsibility for it, and the quality of human nature itself. More strenuously, those receptive to religious notions might say that we are not redeemed by the good we do realize.

Moral Pessimists therefore see numerous changes through history, but do not equate change with overall moral progress. They acknowledge the good where it is found, and accept that it is intelligible to speak of value, and yet hold that alongside it, and in a sense bearing more gravity and presence in our assessment, is disvalue, which the good can never outweigh or ‘triumph over’.

Claim (ii)

It was natural above to introduce the religious notion of redemption. Not only is the good defeated by the bad, but *we* are not redeemed by the good we do. Our selves or character, in virtue of our shared human nature, is what is at issue, not only our actions. We might say that our nature occasions *shame*, as well as *guilt*.⁸ The second claim, in offering an explanation for the first, allows us to explore this further. The second claim says that the failures in (i) are explained by something in human nature. There is some *moral* flaw inherent in human nature – inherent in what it is to be human – such that the ‘good does not prevail over the bad’. This is not a contingent failing; necessarily, human nature is such that overall, the good will not prevail over the bad (barring divine or otherwise radical intervention that redeems or changes human nature; I set this possibility aside in this paper).

Claim (ii) therefore provides an explanation for the observation and prediction of Claim (i). A fully developed Moral Pessimism would need to provide a meta-psychological and/or metaphysical foundation for (ii), and depending on this foundation, different versions would give claim (ii) a different status – as a conceptual or empirical claim, for instance. Whatever the foundation, it is an essential element of Moral Pessimism that the sad ineptitude of humans is

⁸ The standard view of these emotions sees guilt as occasioned by what we do; shame by who we are.

explained by a necessary feature of human nature; our failures are not accidental and they will continue while humans in their current form remain. At the same time, our flawed nature does not *determine* our actions; we will not *necessarily* go wrong, and we can and do also go right. Like many other aspects of our nature, we have a powerful tendency that is actualised often, but which we can individually counteract.

Kant's account of what he calls the 'radical evil' in human nature is one secular attempt to provide a deeper explanation for the failures that Moral Pessimism notes.⁹ Humans are evil by nature, he argues, and by 'evil' he means we have a deep and abiding propensity to subordinate our moral duties to our non-moral goals. The will freely chooses to adopt a 'meta-maxim' to prefer "the self-centred realization of its own happiness to the moral actions it knows it is duty-bound to perform."¹⁰ Perhaps the most familiar and developed accounts, however, are found in theology: It is, after all, natural to express (ii) in religious terms by saying we are 'fallen' or that we are marked by 'original sin'. While there are significantly different interpretations of this doctrine, Stephen Mulhall writes that they all agree on the following:

... human nature as such is tragically flawed, perverse in its very structure or constitution. Human beings are not only naturally capable of acting – even perhaps disposed to act – sinfully, but are always already turned against themselves, against the true and against the good, by virtue of their very condition as human. Hence, that sinful orientation will distort and ultimately invalidate any efforts they might make by themselves to alter that orientation...¹¹

Mulhall calls this a condition of structural perversity, and our perversity is essential to Moral Pessimism's view of human nature, on both a secular and Christian interpretation: We not only go systematically wrong, but we go wrong despite our best efforts, in the face of our own interests, and in the face of our recognition of what is good and true. As Mulhall writes, we are

⁹ Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. See Seiriol Morgan's illuminating interpretation of Kant's account in 'The Missing Formal Proof', and the essays in Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik (eds.), *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*. In *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, Stephen Mulhall explores attempts by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein to offer a secular account of our perversity. Schopenhauer provides another secular account; and psychoanalytic theories perhaps another.

¹⁰ Morgan, 'The Missing Formal Proof', p.66.

¹¹ *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, p.6.

therefore “always already errant before any particular errancy”; we are “basically oriented away from the truth”.¹²

Moral Pessimism parts company with the religious account of our perversity, and retains its pessimism, at the point at which that account offers a solution. According to Christianity, the only available solution to our perversity lies in our “attaining a certain kind of orientation to the divine”.¹³ Our redemption is not up to us – that is part of our perverse state – but through God, it is possible. Moral Pessimism not only rejects this particular solution (though it sympathises with the view that our redemption could not be something we could achieve alone); it rejects the possibility of a solution at all; that is part of its being *pessimism*.

Whether one offers a secular or religious grounding for the value failures of claim (i), the perversity of human nature must be central, in order to (partly) distinguish Moral Pessimism from other related views and, more significantly, in order for it to be both a description and (partial) explanation of the human condition and itself a moral view of ourselves. Our perversity is partly what makes our condition not only lamentable for all concerned, but also tragic. We *can* recognise and respond to value; part of ourselves is oriented towards the true and the good. Nonetheless, despite this, we still go systematically wrong in ways that are not simply a matter of bad luck, but that are essentially tied to our own nature.

Claim (iii)

In the light of the first two claims, Claim (iii) is a call for us to be less optimistic and expansive in what we expect in the way of social and moral improvements. In the character and actions of human beings, and in the institutions we create for ourselves, we should not expect the good to prevail. It is naive to think that there will be a time in which “the vision of a just or pure society will be realized”, as Sutherland puts it.¹⁴ Social experiments to change us for the better will invariably fail or give rise to other problems, because human nature is not malleable in the way some social engineers believe, and because their efforts to improve their situation will despite their good intentions not meet with significant success.

¹² *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, p.10.

¹³ *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, p.6.

¹⁴ Sutherland, ‘Optimism and Pessimism’, p.539.

It is therefore easy to see how Pessimism can give rise to conservatism not only about the prospect of changing human nature, but about change in general. The pessimism of Roger Scruton, Michael Oakeshott and, perhaps, Stuart Hampshire, is expressed in a more general conservatism. It finds in our traditions and common mores some stable wisdom, and not only ossified, unthinking ways of going on; it is respectful of tradition and authority. Hampshire uses his version of pessimism to argue against the optimism of utilitarians, who wish to tinker with “acceptable and respectable” ways of life in the name of greater social utility.¹⁵ Scruton cautions us “to temper hopes that otherwise might ruin us”;¹⁶ to cultivate a dose of bracing pessimism against an unscrupulous optimism about a future endlessly open to manipulation and improvement:

When we envisage situations that involve a reshaping of human nature, so that all those features that traditional morality was designed to regulate – aggression, fragility, mortality; love, hope, desire – either disappear or are purged of their costs, then we conjure worlds that we cannot understand and that do not in fact contain us. What looks to the optimist like a gain in freedom is seen by the pessimist as a loss of it.¹⁷

However, while Pessimism is committed to the view that human nature is not significantly malleable, it need not say the same about our institutions and social structures. We might be able to improve (if not perfect) them – they are clearly in need of it in realizable ways – and we have a duty to try. Institutions are susceptible to being, and probably will be, flawed because they are our creations, but creations need not share in the faults of their creator (or vice versa). While being cautious about change, Pessimism can still call for it where it is possible; it is certainly not committed to tradition and authority out of fear of change. Further, it need not commit us to *political* conservatism in its current form – in favour of free market capitalism; suspicious of welfare systems. More probably, it might counsel that we protect ourselves against our own nature through the construction of a social welfare network that can catch those who will invariably fall through the cracks. We might, equally, accuse conservatives of unjustifiably

¹⁵ Hampshire, ‘Morality and Pessimism’, p.21.

¹⁶ Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism*, p.19.

¹⁷ Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism*, p.18.

cheerful optimism in their view of humans as able to do whatever they wish as long as they try hard enough, work hard enough and have the right kind of work ethic. People, we might caution, are just not like that.

Claims (iv)-(v): Pessimism as an Attitude

So far, I have been exploring the beliefs that mark a Moral Pessimist. However, the discussion so far has already suggested that Pessimism usually involves more than the holding of certain beliefs; it is also a stance or attitude, a structuring view and interpretation of the world, with affective, volitional and behavioural aspects. This richer view allows Joshua Dienstag to argue that pessimism “offers an active answer to the question of how best to live in a world that it is difficult to love.”¹⁸

The world comes to Pessimists in a certain way, and they interpret and assess it in ways different from an optimist, so Moral Pessimism can involve more than the cognitive dimension captured in the beliefs (i), (ii) and (iii). For instance, the pessimist sees the world half empty, as it were, rather than half full, of value; it is a world already more marked out and made noticeable by the bad than the good, though he delights in the good where he finds it. We could therefore add (iv) and (v) to our list of characteristics of Moral Pessimism:

iv) The Moral Pessimist responds to the human-caused failures of the world with resigned disappointment rather than dismissal or bitterness, and to humans with mercy and gentleness rather than condemnation.

v) While not actively expecting or seeking out the bad, the Moral Pessimist is not surprised by it. However, she appreciates the good where it is found, insists on its importance, and insists that we ought to strive to realize it.

The Pessimist is not surprised by the bad, but is not judgmental when she finds it. Pessimism therefore responds to the world in a way that distinguishes it from other attitudes like misanthropy, cynicism or scepticism.¹⁹ The cynic, for instance, interprets human actions and intentions as always self-interested; altruism and sincere pursuit of value are an illusion; she is

¹⁸ ‘The Pessimistic Spirit’, p.72.

¹⁹ I offer an account of cynicism as an attitude in ‘Cynicism and Morality’.

coolly dismissive about, and disengaged from, human beings. Bitterness and resentment are judgmental and harsh about humans' failures, taking them as a personal affront or injury. Pessimists, on the other hand, accept the good where it is found, continue to be disappointed by the bad, and yet, while holding humans responsible, do not condemn them for their nature and its depressing effects. Our undoubted local goodness and the basic decency of most people perhaps make our failures more poignant and depressing than if they issued from monsters. The moral tragedy of humanity is that nice people nonetheless act heinously, or make quite ordinary mistakes the cumulative effects of which are enormously damaging. The Pessimist responds to this knowledge with sadness and, despite itself, some disappointment, tempered with resignation, rather than condemnation. Through no fault of our own, each one of us, in virtue of being human, is unlikely to overall 'get things right' morally, and the human species is unlikely to improve its lot and the lot of other species we interact with. Our presence on the planet is not, overall, an uplifting one. While there are many good reasons for holding each other accountable, and for valuing humans and celebrating what is good about them, there is also some flaw in human nature, such that with even the best intentions, we are apt to go wrong. While we should be held individually responsible, this view will also incline us to mercy and understanding in our judgments of individual failures.²⁰ So Pessimism is not misanthropic. As Patrick Frierson notes on behalf of Kant, "misanthropy is caused by misplaced *optimism*, a disconnect between expectations and reality. If people are evil, pessimism inoculates against misanthropy rather than causing it."²¹

Moral Pessimism is a tragic view of the human situation. If humans were only capable of producing disvalue, that would be unfortunate for everyone, but hardly tragic. The tragedy is that we are capable of allowing the good to prevail, that we can recognise and delight in it, but still systematically fail in a way that is not contingent and not realistically open to significant improvement in the future. However, Pessimism need not result in quietism or despair. We may be pessimistic about human prospects and yet, unlike the cynic, think it worth our effort to try to improve things as we can and enjoy what is on offer. Local improvement is better than none at all, and we all still have the ordinary moral duties of kindness, care, benevolence and self-

²⁰ Martha Nussbaum's approach in 'Equity and Mercy' provides an example of this.

²¹ Frierson, 'Kantian Moral Pessimism', p.53, and see, further, p.54.

perfection. Because it accepts and recognises value and so is responsive to it and its demands on us, Pessimism does not let us off the moral hook.

I am to a large extent stipulating these attitudes here, in order to develop a portrait of a distinctive kind of moral outlook on the world. The attitudes are certainly not entailed by the first three claims and someone might accept those claims and cultivate another set of attitudes in response. It might however still be objected that Moral Pessimism as described is unstable. Firstly, if we are to be motivated to do right and pursue the good, we need to believe that we are capable of realizing value. Does Pessimism not undercut this belief and so take away our motivation and then, perhaps, the reasonableness of holding us accountable for our failures? Secondly, if we believe that humans *can* realize value and should do so, why be resigned, disappointed or merciful towards our failures, rather than condemnatory? Given our perversity, would the natural response not be, rather, cynicism at best, misanthropy at worst? Moral Pessimism seems inappropriately optimistic at this point. It responds to our failures in a way that is more optimistic than its own view of our nature warrants.²²

Proofs are not available here and the critic is correct in thinking that the attitudinal features (iv) and (v) do not have to be adopted given claims (i)-(iii). The first objection is partly an empirical matter of how we are motivated, and partly a matter of the psychological and moral roles that standards and ideals play in our lives. If you believe that we can accept and orient our lives around ideals that cannot in principle be realized – because they are *ideals* and we are imperfect – then there is room for the motivation by value that Pessimism requires. Further, for each of us, it remains true at most moments of choice, that (*ceteris paribus*) we can realize value and that value gives us a reason to try. It is not obvious that knowledge of the human species' overall value record and of each one's individual failures need take away motivation and responsibility, as long as a notion of value and its practical guiding role in our lives is intelligible. If we accept that something is valuable, we at least see how it could provide reasons and see how it could play an orienting role in one's life; that is part of what it means to understand that something is valuable.²³ However, that said, this response to the objection does

²² I owe these objections to Laurence Bloom and Khatija Haneef.

²³ I express this in vague terms deliberately, so as not here to commit myself to some form of externalism about reasons.

raise the issue of a possible tension between reflection on our individual attempts and failures and reflection on our species failures. I will return to this in Section V.

The possibility raised by the second objection must also be granted. It is natural to feel not merely disappointment, but anger and sometimes hatred towards human failure, and towards humans themselves for their failures and the perversity that is at its root. There is nothing in claims (i)-(iii) that rules this out. However, the attitudes of Pessimism are not ruled out either, and they are not obviously psychologically impossible to cultivate and maintain. They would be less personally corrosive and exhausting than anger, condemnation or despair, and so have at least those prudential reasons in their favour, as well as the moral reasons provided by the virtues of gentleness and compassion. The crux, I think, is how we react to our perversity, and this can go both ways: We can take it to provide a reason for anger, disenchantment and despair – how can we let ourselves off the moral hook given that we recognize value and can realize it, and still, obdurately, go wrong? Or it can provide a reason for disappointed compassion: What sad creatures we are that despite being able to recognize and realize value, we still, obdurately, go wrong. Neither is by logic required of us.

III Defending Moral Pessimism

A full defence of Moral Pessimism would require a number of tasks: First, we need evidence in favour of Claim (i) and, further, reasons for thinking that the data is best interpreted as concluding that the ‘good will not prevail over the bad’. Further, how do we make sense of that notion, how do we judge ‘overall progress’, and how do we conclude that it is not occurring? Second, we need reasons for thinking that a necessary flaw in human nature is a reasonable and powerful explanation (or, more strongly, the best explanation) for (i) – rather than prolonged bad luck or ineptitude, or situational factors, for instance. And then we need a plausible meta-psychological or metaphysical grounding for (ii). Thirdly, we would need to argue that the attitudes of Moral Pessimism as I set them out here are reasonable, psychologically stable, and consistent responses to Claims (i)-(iii), that nonetheless do not erode motivation. I cannot here offer anything like a full defence along all these lines, but I shall try to address some more general worries and defend Moral Pessimism very roughly.

Pessimism does not seem obviously unreasonable to cultivate as an attitude and set of beliefs. The twentieth century alone, it might be thought, is enough to convert us all to pessimism and its carnage is depressingly recent in our history, not some early aberration from which we are thankfully progressing. The Holocaust, says Robert Nozick, is sufficient to desanctify humans.²⁴ The Holocaust certainly provides justification for pessimism, in a way that other instances of injustice and brutality, taken one by one, might not. The particular quality of the horror of the Holocaust suggests something irredeemable about human nature, which was always there; some quality that cannot be weighed against other, better qualities; that nullifies whatever is good about us. The Holocaust aside, however, our history as a species is generous with its horror and failures.

Examples are bound to be controversial and open to different interpretations. Pessimists worry where others celebrate. They worry about the effects on human sociability and deep friendships of the heralded information revolution, for instance; they see in the information revolution the good, but also the bad, the shallow and the misguided. They are skeptical of the more baroque pronouncements of the transhumanism movement. Why think, against all evidence, that we are wise and compassionate enough to know what we are doing with our growing technological powers this time around? There is no reason to think moral virtue and wisdom has grown alongside our growing knowledge in other areas. Pessimists are struck both by the fact that humans need institutions to keep ourselves in check – to ‘civilize’ us – and the fact that our institutions can trap us and render necessary change impossible. They note that increases in welfare in developed countries are gained at the expense of the environment and of developing countries; and they note that as those countries increasingly develop economically, the environment becomes worse affected. It is difficult to think of ways of extricating ourselves from the logic and tenacity of our own development. Gains in one area of life seem offset by failure and loss in others; our technological advancement provides deadlier and more efficient ways of harming each other; our liberal freedoms and tolerance seem also to breed contempt and hatred. We are capable of astonishing cruelty and indifference to our own and other species. All these observations, and many more, certainly on the face of it provide reasons for holding a

²⁴ ‘The Holocaust’, p.238.

pessimistic view – both that it is unlikely, given our record, that ‘the good will not prevail’, and that there is something deeply troubling about us that makes it so.

Of course, as optimists are bound to point out, Moral Pessimism might very well depend upon a certain kind of, selective, attention. It might see the good, but only in the shadow of the bad. It sees change where others see progress. Why should we agree that these are the correct ways of viewing the data? Steven Pinker, in fact, has argued that we have seen a reduction in atrocities and violence over time and that our century shows a marked moral improvement.²⁵ Of course we are not rationally forced into pessimism, any more than we are forced into optimism. People of different temperaments will incline to more or less pessimistic views of the human world and both will find evidence in their favour. However, Pessimists could equally respond that optimism is also the result of selective attention, or, more strongly, that optimists are naive, myopic or not taking the horror fully to heart. While it may be true that those who live in Western Europe are now relatively safe from atrocities and live a life more peaceful and free from harm than ever in our history, life for those who live elsewhere more than makes up for this. As Elizabeth Kolbert writes in a review of Pinker’s book, “[n]ame a force, a trend, or a ‘better angel’ that has tended to reduce the threat, and someone else can name a force, a trend, or an ‘inner demon’ pushing back the other way. ... Hate and madness and cruelty haven’t disappeared, and they aren’t going to.”²⁶ Without a religious belief in our potential redemption, or enormous faith in technological advancement, it is reasonable to take a bleak view. This cannot be settled here, but Moral Pessimism is not clearly unreasonable, though like optimism, it might weigh the evidence in a way that is not strictly required of us.

While Moral Pessimism is not unreasonable to hold, we might worry that it is not a morally benign view, and not one that ought to be encouraged. Are we not morally obliged to take the sunnier view of humans if it is available to us, and if the alternative is not strictly required by the evidence? Faced with a choice between thinking humans redeemable and thinking them irredeemable, is there not virtue in choosing the more generous view? Just as we ought to forgive, rather than to hold onto resentment; just as we ought to be hopeful, merciful and charitable towards each other – ought we not to be optimistic rather than pessimistic?²⁷ And

²⁵ Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature*.

²⁶ ‘Peace in Our Time’, p.78.

²⁷ I owe this question to Lucy Allais.

though I might have distinguished pessimism from close relatives like cynicism or nihilism, does it not too easily become them, to our moral detriment?

Again, these questions cannot be satisfactorily dealt with here. It is important, however, to remember Pessimism's recognition of value and its insistence that, despite the possibility of failure, we ought to strive to realize it. When we fail, it cautions us to be merciful rather than harshly condemnatory, but still, it recognises our failures as just that, as missing a mark we do recognize. As a tragic view of the human condition it requires, too, that values be intelligible and realizable for us. This acceptance of value and its insistence that we be judged by its standards distinguishes Pessimism firmly from the more corrosive attitudes of cynicism or bitterness or misanthropy. Given that the bleaker view of ourselves is not condemnatory or hateful, that it is neither nihilist or misanthropic, and that it is not clearly a moral failing, it is not obvious that we *must* – to be reasonable or moral – choose the more optimistic view.

So I will provisionally conclude that Moral Pessimism is reasonable and that it is not obviously morally objectionable. Yet it does give rise to tensions in our view of ourselves, and I explore one of these in the rest of this paper. This is the tension between our view of humans as especially valuable, and the potentially destabilizing view of human nature that Moral Pessimism presents us with.

IV Human Value

It is axiomatic to most of us, and foundational to our moral philosophical tradition, that humans are valuable in a distinctive way. We are 'sacred'; we have 'dignity without price', in Kant's words; we are 'precious', in Raimond Gaita's. Our presence on the earth adds something uniquely valuable that demands a strenuous respect from us; our absence would make earth the poorer in terms of value. In some versions of this tradition, our value and the respect we are owed because of it, is grounded in a particular feature of humanity. In Stephen Darwall's terms, some valuable feature grounds 'recognition respect', a "disposition to weigh appropriately in one's deliberations some feature of the thing in question and to act accordingly".²⁸ Kant, for instance, grounds our dignity in rationality, in our ability to set ends for ourselves through

²⁸ Darwall, 'Two Kinds of Respect', p.38. Compare *appraisal respect*, the objects of which are "persons or features which are held to manifest their excellence as persons or as engaged in some specific pursuit" (p.38).

reason. Our value might be *conditioned* by some feature of us; nonetheless it is *unconditionally* and categorically possessed – it does not depend on any other feature of us besides the essential feature of human rationality, and it must be respected whatever our inclinations or moral shortcomings. The chosen feature, while essentially characteristic of human beings, could be lacking in a particular human – in babies or the senile or the comatose. The feature that grounds value is, on this Kantian account, a capacity, the exercise of which is essentially characteristic of humans, but is not exercised or even present in every human being or at every time. However, whatever the feature, this strand of the human value tradition will hold that even when it is missing in specific cases, and even if someone possessing the relevant feature behaves in ways utterly inimical to the moral system, some basic unconditional respect is warranted to all humans, in virtue of their belonging to a species whose special value is conferred by the characteristic feature.

This view of our special status is most naturally associated with the deontological tradition. Utilitarians are usually less inclined to talk of preciousness or a special value that is categorical and unique to humans. However, it is open to them to point out our *de facto* difference from other species – our capacity for the higher pleasures, or our having desires and preferences that can be satisfied or thwarted, or our possessing more complex forms of rationality and consciousness – and to say that *these* ground moral status, are worthy of special consideration, and require special kinds of reasons before they can be ignored. These features might make us count humans more heavily in our utility calculations, thus bestowing some special status that nonetheless is only contingently ours, and which does not automatically outweigh any amount of other good. It is also noteworthy that utilitarians do not give less weight in their calculations to the preferences or happiness of those who transgress moral standards. Each person, whatever her moral character, is to count equally, a view that shares a basic commitment to equal moral considerableness with the deontological tradition.

In another, stronger, strand of the deontological human value tradition, our value is not grounded in any feature of us, in anything about us besides our mere humanity (or perhaps the fact of God's love, though I will set this aside). It is impermissible to ask 'in virtue of what' humans are precious in this unconditional sense, when that is a call for evidence, for a special feature which might be present or lacking in individual people, and which might be present in other species. No evidence could confirm or deny our preciousness, because no feature of us is

responsible for our value. To be human is to be precious, inescapably, inalienably, and unconditionally. Whatever happens to us and whatever we do, whatever our abilities or lack of them, however evil our deeds – we remain precious and worthy of love independent of any feature of us except our being, simply, human. For example, Gaita writes:

If we insist that the existence of such facts is a condition of that acknowledgment [of common humanity], then realism will eventually force us to condemn some of them as beyond the reach of our sense of a common humanity.²⁹

...

Beyond all sense and reason, beyond all the discoveries of science, literature and philosophy, that acknowledgment [that all are owed unconditional respect] insists that we keep amongst us evil-doers in whose lives and characters we can find no empirical basis for the assertion that they are fully our fellow human beings.³⁰

Commitment to this thought then structures and underlies our sense of morality and our moral system itself. Moral thought and emotion, our appraisal of each other and our world, even our appraisal of non-humans³¹ – all this is governed by, given content by, and restrained by, our concept of humanity, which essentially includes a commitment to humans having special value. Gaita writes that “what is best in our morality” is “the faith that human beings are precious beyond reason, beyond merit and beyond what most moralisers will tolerate”.³²

So on the one hand, there is a familiar tradition of thinking that humans are especially or uniquely valuable, whether this is grounded in a characteristic feature in principle discoverable in another species, or in a feature unique to us, or simply in humanity itself. We must unconditionally respect all humans, even those who are evil or defective, or unable to make claims for themselves, out of respect for the feature that is distinctive to humans, or in virtue of their humanity alone. On the other hand, Pessimism points to evidence all around us, both locally and globally, that in spite of our special value, we manage to mess up systematically,

²⁹ *A Common Humanity*, p.54.

³⁰ *A Common Humanity*, p.55.

³¹ This view holds that it is not *speciesist* to treat humans as distinctively valuable, as some animal activists and ethicists have argued; rather, it is part of our very concept of the human. See, eg., Cora Diamond, eg. ‘Eating Meat and Eating People’; Gaita, *A Common Humanity*; Stephen Mulhall, ‘Fearful Thoughts’; and from a different perspective, Bernard Williams, ‘The Human Prejudice’.

³² *A Common Humanity*, p.27.

with lasting and pernicious effects. This tension is at least *prima facie* disorienting. Our moral system and ways of conceiving and relating to each other is grounded on a value that cannot be forfeited, that while often obscured in evil-doing, is not taken away by evil, and which is the bedrock of our moral sensibility. At the same time, the pessimistic gaze shows up a world that is not reflective of that value, does not seem to express it, and the failure of which is not only that of evil-doers. Even the best and nicest of us mess up consistently in very ordinary ways and with the purest of intentions, but often with lasting effect; a recognition just as disturbing as evil-doing. Furthermore, the systems we create take on a life of their own, embedding us in practices, norms and expectations which we admit are often harmful, and yet from which are unable to extricate ourselves. Should value not generate value, or at least not be inimical to it? Should beings infinitely and unconditionally precious not, after all, have a less damaging presence? Is it impermissible to take our effect on the world to say something negative about our value? Does it show a ‘corrupt mind’ to even think of these questions?³³ If we are taken by the bad state of the world, is it corrupt to ask about the value of those responsible for it?

I now want to risk moral corruption, and explore this tension further. If Moral Pessimism is plausible, and the human value thesis foundational for morality, what happens when the two views are brought into conversation? I shall focus on the deontological tradition in what follows, for, unlike utilitarianism, it takes our value to be unique and categorical, placing (almost) non-negotiable limits on how humans can be considered and treated.³⁴ The following sections are, firstly, exploratory, attempting more to understand what exactly the issue is – and whether there is an issue – than to reach decisive conclusions. Secondly, to be clear: We need *some* notion of human value that places limits on our conduct; an outlook that leads us to reject this completely would be impermissible. My aim is to see if there is a notion that can survive and be compatible with pessimistic reflection. I will tentatively suggest that there is one, and it will be familiar to us. I do not offer a new account of what our value consists in. However, there is interest in arriving at a familiar place from an unfamiliar direction. If Moral Pessimism is reasonable and

³³ Utilitarians have been similarly accused of displaying a corrupt mind in being prepared to sacrifice categorical demands for overall utility. See Hampshire, ‘Morality and Pessimism’, and G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’.

³⁴ I say ‘almost’ non-negotiable, because some deontologists might allow that in extreme emergencies, the value of a person might legitimately be sacrificed or ignored.

morally acceptable we need to take its questioning seriously, and then explore whether there is a notion of human value that can nonetheless survive it.

V Human Value and Moral Pessimism

The tradition I outlined above of course never denies that humans do bad things; part of its power is that despite these bad things, we remain valuable in a special way that ought to regulate our conduct and attitudes. I want to put pressure on this ‘despite’. If we say we are valuable ‘despite’ our systematic and serious failings, what exactly are we saying? If our failings are systematic and serious, what is the nature of that tenacious value? Does the reasonableness of pessimism count for nothing at all in our self-evaluation? If it does count, how do we then understand the respect due to each one of us in the light of these destabilizing questions?

The view that humans have special value and status is a view of the relation between humans and value. It says that we possess a value that is essentially independent of any value or disvalue we bring into the world. If we had a God’s-eye view of our presence on the earth over the centuries, we could infer nothing about our value as a species from looking at the value or disvalue we realize. Neither the damage we do nor the value we realize provide evidence for our value as a species, and for the value of each member of the species. Our value is in the strictest sense intrinsic and unconditional; it does not depend upon any factor extrinsic to us, any feature contingently present in us, or upon any other conditions being met – for instance that we realize more value than disvalue. We are valuable even though we routinely destroy or ignore value elsewhere. Furthermore, on many accounts, our value is also unique and irreplaceable: Take humans out of the world and a distinctive kind of value would necessarily vanish too. And finally it is a value that places *moral* demands on our treatment of each other: it entitles us to respectful treatment and acts as some kind of – perhaps in principle defeasible – limit on how each one of us may be treated.

Moral Pessimism is also at base a view of the relation between humans and value. It says that while we can realize value, we place obstacles in the path of our doing so, and that because of our presence on earth, the good is unlikely to prevail over the bad. That view must be read as a criticism of us, even if it is a criticism tempered with compassion. However, at the same time, Pessimism says nothing about whether *we* are valuable or not – the claims (i)-(v) say only that

value is unlikely to be realized significantly through us. Furthermore, Pessimism must assume that we are valuable enough to be cared about, for our transgressions to matter to us, and for our perversity to be a tragic, rather than indifferent, fact about us. The attitudinal dimension I explored – its response to the claims that define its cognitive dimension – is normative. In its sombre assessment of our value record, Moral Pessimism does not dispense with the view that humans are still valuable in some way, and in this way it again parts company with cynicism and misanthropy.³⁵ If we accept that humans are marked out in our experience as having unique properties³⁶ – moral agency, speech, creativity, self-reflective rationality – is that not enough to ground special value? And is that not enough to put a stop to any Pessimism-generated worries?

Part of the exploration here is to discover what is still destabilizing about Moral Pessimism given what it does accept, or is compatible with. It is at least worthy of comment that valuable creatures cause so much damage, that valuable creatures are still *perverse*, and that we cannot expect much overall improvement from them. Again, if we have accepted that Moral Pessimism is reasonable, it is at least *prima facie* odd for this to count for nothing in our self-assessment. Its view of our value record therefore does raise questions about the nature of our value and the reasonableness of insisting that we are special in a way that merits the weighty discourse of dignity, preciousness, respect or love whatever we do. If our axiological record were true of some other species, after all, we could be forgiven for concluding that at the least, its destructiveness or ineptness is a serious charge against it having some such special moral value. We might certainly conclude that it plays an essential role in the ecosystem, for instance, and thus has some instrumental or systemic value. The special value of humans, however, is supposed to be moral, non-instrumental and unconditional. We are supposed to be *precious*, after all, warranting the strenuous moral attitudes of respect or love, and that is to say far more than that we, like so many other things on the earth, have some value that renders us useful or interesting or integral to the health of the biosystem.

Some proponents of the human value tradition, especially in the non-evidentialist strand, would consider it misguided to even begin this line of thought. Human value is such that no amount or quality of disvalue in the world, whether through their creation or not, could weigh negatively against it. Any disvalue we produce is from the start discounted because our inherent

³⁵ I thank Lawrence Blum for this point.

³⁶ Or, to accommodate the utilitarian, properties contingently present only in us.

value trumps all other considerations. There is no amount of human-caused damage or suffering that could give us reason for thinking we are not uniquely valuable,³⁷ and in a way that somehow ‘prevails’ over the harm our presence causes. However, if we have allowed that Pessimism is reasonable, it is begging the question to bring its questions to a halt in this way. If Pessimism is reasonable, it is permissible to explore its consequences – unless one insists from the start that the mere fact of such worries provides a *reductio* of Pessimism. And yet this does not seem reasonable when we do not yet know where the Pessimist-inspired line of thought will lead us.

One way of stopping this line of thought before it starts is to ground our value on God’s creation and love of us. Whatever other problems God raises for moral philosophy, He would provide an answer to the question of why our value is unique and unconditional. Again, and reluctantly, I set this religious view aside in an attempt to explore a neutral, secular version of Pessimism.³⁸ Another way is to argue that it is *impermissible* for moral reasons, because it undermines deep and necessary commitments. Even thinking that the value of humans might not be unconditional and inalienable is the first push down a slippery slope to exactly the kind of moral horrors about which Pessimism is so clear-sighted. Any normative theory that countenances this thought faces a *reductio*.³⁹ A third way is to argue that it is *incoherent* to begin this line of thought, because it requires us to step outside of the forms of human life to evaluate those forms themselves. This is impossible to do, because we are necessarily immersed in it. Gaita, for instance, insists that “our thought is inescapably *in medias res*, in the thick of things”.⁴⁰ To take the perspective of an observer is either to attempt the impossible – to leave behind our human-ness – or to smuggle in assumptions from within the ‘thick of things’ and not admit it. Too much of our moral thought and perspective – which is, after all, the human perspective – is bound up with an acceptance of human preciousness, for us to be able to disentangle that one idea and be left with a recognisable phenomenon to evaluate.

We are not, however, compelled to accept either of these options. Firstly, Moral Pessimism does not deny value to human beings and it is itself a morally substantive position,

³⁷ I am following George Harris’s formulation closely here, though he has in mind the more familiar problem in normative ethics of balancing human suffering against happiness or dignity. See ‘Pessimism’, p.277.

³⁸ Perhaps religion is reasonable precisely because it allows us to do this, and thus to bring the Pessimistic line of thought to an end before it progresses too far. If we take the special value of humans to be foundational and non-negotiable, it is reasonable to adopt a view that allows just that.

³⁹ See Mulhall, ‘Fearful Thoughts’.

⁴⁰ *A Common Humanity*, p.13. Compare Mulhall, ‘Fearful Thoughts’, and Williams, ‘The Human Prejudice’.

incorporating virtuous attitudes of compassion and acceptance. It cannot be dismissed at the start as morally pernicious. Secondly, we have seen shifts in ethical theory towards non-anthropocentrism, towards the evaluation of humans alongside other species. This is not obviously attempting the impossible nor muddling up our concepts in morally obnoxious ways – at their best, such theories offer a generous extension of moral concern, not an incoherent muddle. They make sense, even if you think they are wrong. Thirdly, Pessimism need not require us to evaluate ourselves from an impossible Archimedean perspective; to reflect on our value from a perspective entirely outside, and uninfluenced by, human forms of life. The questions posed by pessimism are embedded in our views of ourselves and our world. We are looking at ourselves and what we have done and experienced of ourselves, in the light of value commitments we might fail at meeting, but nonetheless accept and at least try to meet. Unless all impartial self-evaluation is impossible, this must in principle be a coherent exercise. There are therefore no obviously compelling secular reasons to prevent us thinking about the value of humans in the light of Moral Pessimism. So we can return to our question: What kind of suspicion does Pessimism cast on our having special value?

One destabilizing feature of this line of questioning is the removal of the unconditional character of our value. If it is legitimate to ask whether our value record casts any doubt on our having special value, we are asking whether our value record provides a condition for our being especially valuable, whether our value is, in fact, dependent upon another feature of us – our overall value record. If so, that leaves open the possibility that our woeful record detracts from our having special value. And once this possibility is raised, the categorical nature of special value and the respect owed to us might also come under pressure. Why should our value place such strong limits if it is, in fact, conditioned by our record? If our record is disappointing, should we forfeit some respect for ourselves?

When it comes to individuals' moral records, this is a familiar and pressing issue for any normative theory that insists that each individual person is due respect whatever her transgressions. As I noted, both utilitarianism and Kantianism, as much as non-evidentialist strands, insist on this in their different ways. Gaita's non-evidentialism is precisely meant to prevent us asking why *this* person, whose value record is heinous, should be warranted any

respect at all. It is therefore not a problem raised uniquely for our moral system by Pessimism.⁴¹ However, we should note the starting-point and dialectic of this discussion, which does place pressure on the solution to the issue given by those evidentialist strands of the tradition. Moral Pessimism as described was admittedly not precise in the target of its pessimism – whether it was describing the value presence and nature of the *human species*, or of each person *qua human being*. It is, however, probably most naturally taken as targeting the former. However, if that is the case, then the route open to, say, Kantians, to rescue moral transgressors, and by implication, to rescue *anyone*, for warranted respect is undercut. They say that each person, despite her deeds and abilities, is worthy of categorical respect in virtue of her membership in the group with the essential and characteristic value-bestowing property. Once the special value of that group – despite the relevant property – is questioned, the inviolability of individuals is similarly questioned. The special feature might be present, but it seems no longer sufficient to ground special value to anyone. In both these cases, we might ask whether questioning our status as creatures with a special kind of value leads to our losing respect for ourselves as human beings, or about each person who transgresses value, or whether the questioning leads us to re-configure that traditional and categorical respect into something new. If it is true, as Nozick writes, that there is “a general injunction to treat everything as having the value it has”,⁴² we might need to reconsider the appropriate attitudes towards our species and each one of us.

These remarks begin to distinguish between the value of individuals of a group *qua* members of the group, and the value of the group itself, and we can continue with the distinction. Let us concentrate for now on individuals. On the one hand, from within the human value tradition, we are committed to each person having a value that places categorical limits on our treatment of her, whatever her deeds and abilities. On the other hand, and equally from within our moral system, our judgments of particular people are certainly affected by their relation to value. Those who are destructive of value, we censure or shun or pity, or try to reform. If they transgress often and seriously enough, without remorse, we place them outside of the moral community or are reluctant to accept them as moral agents at all. However, even here, most of us will not write off such people; we think they deserve the respectful and humane treatment the human value tradition calls for, despite their crimes. Need we therefore say that such people –

⁴¹ Thanks to Richard Flockemann for pointing this out.

⁴² *Philosophical Explanations*, p.518.

or, indeed, any of us – have special value or preciousness, where that is entirely independent of their value record and worthy of the paeans of the humanists? As Gaita admits, talking of the ‘preciousness’ of an Adolf Eichmann, for instance, “sounds a bit sickly”.⁴³

It is probably impossible to settle this foundational issue in moral philosophy. However, there is room within our moral tradition to retain what a viable moral system requires, without recourse to a notion of value that is utterly independent of anyone’s, or the species’, *de facto* value record. We can demand respectful treatment for even the worst of us, not because we consider them all equally precious, equally deserving of a place in Heaven, we might say, but because doing so demonstrates our communal commitment to an ideal of human life, and, importantly for our purposes, pays our guilty respect to that value-realizing potential that Pessimism acknowledges in us. Our system of rights, respect and dignity can be separated from a belief that we in fact possess some special unconditional value or preciousness, and so we can separate moral considerableness from preciousness.⁴⁴ We can hold to respectful treatment as the sign of our commitment to treat each other decently even in the face of the threat to it that our perversity constantly presents.

Interpreting respect as an ongoing commitment is one tentative conclusion we can arrive at after Pessimist reflection. However, some might be dissatisfied with respect floating free in such a manner. Should our commitment not be grounded by *something* about us? In response, we can recall that, unlike cynicism, nihilism or misanthropy, we are not obliged by Pessimism to consider ourselves worthless, or unfit for any respect whatsoever. We can realize value and sometimes we do, and this is as significant in our self-assessment as our failures. The tragedy of human nature, which Pessimism recognizes, is that while many of us are decent and well-meaning, we still go wrong. The problem, in other words, lies in our *perversity*. We can therefore ask what it is about us that remains worthy of respect through the process of Pessimistic reflection, and that can co-exist with our perversity. And the answer must be ‘our ability to recognize and realise value, to orient ourselves to the good’. This is what should be cultivated by each individual; a failure to do so in spite of our recognition of value is, precisely, our perversity. Grounding whatever is valuable about us in an essential but not always exercised

⁴³ The Preface to *A Common Humanity*, p.xxiii. Gaita is reporting the reaction of Lloyd Reinhardt in a review of the book.

⁴⁴ Gaita denies all of this. See *A Common Humanity*, p.26.

ability of humanity – our ability to orient ourselves to value – is not a new thought, of course, and it commits us to a version of human value evidentialism. However, it is significant as a feature that survives Pessimistic reflection, that arises out of the process of inquiring into our value in the light of our value record. If there is value, then the ability to orient ourselves to it and be guided to it must itself be valuable. Each one of us is, in Nozick's terms, a 'value-seeking self'.⁴⁵ The fact that we will consistently fall short of this ability does not take away from its value. Our ability to orient ourselves to value is internal to Moral Pessimism; it is compatible with a pessimistic outlook while retaining what is attractive about the human value tradition – the commitment to there being something about us that limits our wills. So a second tentative conclusion is that our ability to orient ourselves to value is after all something about us that is valuable and worthy of respect.

The discussion so far has explored how our view of individuals is affected by their relation to value. I have accepted the necessity of there being limits to what can be done to human beings; I have suggested that this can be separated from the tricky notion of special value or preciousness; and I have suggested in its place a value that might ground moral considerableness and survive Pessimistic reflection. We can take this exploration further by recalling the attitudinal features of Pessimism. Earlier we noted that Moral Pessimism is not judgemental; it is not surprised when we fail but does not anticipate failure; it responds with disappointment rather than condemnation to our failures. Built into this attitude, it appears, is a virtue close to that of *forgiveness*. Lucy Allais has written that forgiveness consists in no longer seeing a person in the way her wrongdoing supports; the person is no longer defined by her "worst actions".⁴⁶ We could, perhaps, say that Pessimism allows us to consider each other in a way that does not reflect what is worst about us. We see each other as better than our species record (and often our individual record) warrants us to be seen.

Attractive as this is, it raises its own problem, however: The Pessimist who forgives those around her has the potential to be insufferably self-righteous.⁴⁷ While it might not be a mark against the correctness of a view that it clashes with the social virtues, it is worth considering, given that Moral Pessimism takes itself to be on a morally higher ground than other

⁴⁵ See *Philosophical Explanations*, pp.457ff.

⁴⁶ 'Wiping the Slate Clean', p.62.

⁴⁷ I owe this point to Frans Svensson.

bleak views. Importantly, furthermore, the target of Pessimism, and the perspective from which it is operating, becomes relevant at this point. An impersonal, reflective Pessimism towards humanity might be appropriate, but it is still possible that a Pessimism that operates in our relations with those around us, might not be. I can only begin to address this very complex issue here.

Pessimism does not say that value-realization is impossible, and it does not expect the bad. Its commitment to the value-seeking capacity of humans carries with it a demand that each one of us tries to realize value; we can be held to account because failure is not determined. Because value matters to us, and because it matters that we are value-seeking creatures, our transgressions must rightfully matter to us as well. The forgiveness of Pessimism cannot be a default position towards each other *qua* individual agent, a position that expects failures and then magnanimously forgives them even in advance of actual transgressions. If its commitment to value is to operate, Pessimism cannot offer a blanket forgiveness that ignores the particularity of each failure and each agent. This then suggests that in our everyday, embedded and caring relations with each other, when moral life is impeded only by the understandable failures of the decent people we know, Pessimism is difficult to keep 'active'. Rather, it typically gets a grip when viewing strangers, or from the distanced reflective perspective we all occupy at some point, and which the Pessimist occupies rather more often than others do. The implication is that, appropriately, Pessimism does not usually have great practical weight for us in our embedded lives with others. It is not in the foreground of how we think about and respond to the people we are in some significant contact with. Instead, it comes to the foreground when we consider strangers, or when we take a step back and reflect upon humanity in general. In other words, we have a third tentative conclusion: That there is a limit to how active our Pessimistic commitments and attitudes can be in our engaged, embedded lives with others who matter to us. Pessimism applies most forcefully for us when we take a reflective step outside our lives with others and think about the human world from an impersonal, impartial and objective point of view. From this perspective, Pessimism would allow us to consider ourselves *qua* human beings

as better than our species record warrants, while still demanding that each person realize value and holding us to account – with mercy rather than condemnation – when we fail.⁴⁸

VI Conclusion

So far I have been exploring the Pessimist attitude towards each other as individuals and as members of the human species. I will briefly conclude with some questions about our attitudes towards our group membership. We might accept that we need a commitment to human value as a limit to our conduct, and still think that our woeful record puts some doubt on whether that is the end of the story about the value of the group to which we inescapably belong. The worries raised above about the appropriateness of Pessimistic regard for each other do not seem to apply to our regard for the species. Can it be true that *whatever* we do as a species, that species remains valuable in a stringent way? What should our attitude towards our species membership be?

One way of isolating the issue is to return to the example of the Holocaust, and to consider, as Nozick does, whether it would be a “*special* tragedy if humankind ended”.⁴⁹ He concludes that after the Holocaust, it would not “have constituted an *additional* tragedy, one beyond that to the individual people involved, if human history and the human species had ended”,⁵⁰ because “the species, the one that has committed *that*, has lost its worthy status”.⁵¹ Pessimists might agree with the conclusion, while thinking we had reason to believe it even before that particular “massive and continuing distortion of the human space”.⁵² Perhaps the

⁴⁸ Is this to accede to Gaita’s Wittgenstinian position that our ethical reflections and concepts are embedded in forms of life that give them content and structure? Am I admitting his point here and reverting to his notion of non-evidential special value? While the status of Gaita’s claims remain unclear to me, much of what he writes suggests that if we undertake the kind of skeptical reflection that this paper attempts, or if we try to disentangle moral considerableness and respect from the notion of preciousness, we are committing ourselves to conceptual and ethical confusion at some (quickly arrived at) point. It is, however, not clear to me that this is the case here. We might disagree with my tentative Pessimist conclusions, but whether they are incoherent or impossible to hold in some ethical sense is not obvious. Further, as Christopher Hamilton notes, Gaita’s talk of preciousness does not allow that it is “only one way of seeing other human beings and therefore that there are other, equally (morally) appealing ways of seeing human beings. He writes as if seeing human beings in any other way is to fail to see what they really are.” (‘Raimond Gaita on Saints, Love and Human Preciousness’, p.190.) If Pessimism is reasonable and morally acceptable, it provides another way of viewing human beings, which Gaita would have to rule as an incoherent attempt from the start. Again, where the incoherence or impossibility resides is not clear to me.

⁴⁹ ‘The Holocaust’, p.238.

⁵⁰ ‘The Holocaust’, p.238.

⁵¹ ‘The Holocaust’, p.239.

⁵² ‘The Holocaust’, p.242.

Holocaust, as Nozick thinks, was sufficient for us to reach the conclusion. In any case, the Holocaust is enough to make us take seriously the thought of just how valuable we can be and yet still do *that*. And if this is a coherent thought, we have an entry-point into questioning the idea that humanity has special unconditional value, and warrant moral attitudes: Should we retain some form of pride in our species membership, or feel loyalty towards it?⁵³ Or rather, ought one to feel shame, regret or guilt about one's species membership? Insofar as you think these notions are coherent in virtue of group membership, and group membership that is inescapable, we can perhaps ask them, in principle, about our attitudes towards being human.⁵⁴

Pessimistic reflection would certainly, at the least, seem to support a sense of humility, a de-centring of human concerns, in the way many environmentalists have called for and which would have far-reaching practical implications for our conduct towards the non-human world. It should also cause reflection on what we are prepared to do, as a species, to maintain our existence, longevity or health. Is it reasonable, for instance, to use non-human animals to test medicines or procedures to prolong our lives? Pessimism leads us to the view that there are limits to what we should be willing to consider doing in the name of our own survival. A fourth tentative conclusion, the one I end with, is therefore that a de-centring of human concerns and a more deflationary attitude towards our own importance is warranted from a Pessimist perspective, and this places it on the side of non-anthropocentrism in value theory. This need not lead to the misanthropy sometimes found in radical environmental movements, but the humility Pessimism does call for would, given our record and sense of self-importance, be radical and destabilizing enough.

⁵³ On species loyalty, see Bernard Williams, 'The Human Prejudice'.

⁵⁴ It could, finally, be objected that I am illicitly moving from 'recognition respect' and value to 'appraisal respect' and value, in Darwall's terms. I am certainly questioning the clear distinction between these kinds of evaluation. Recognition respect for the value of humans is the recognition of a feature that grounds moral status and obligations. If we judge humans to be seriously lacking morally in the way Pessimism suggests, this special moral status and its accompanying obligations, is questioned. So if our characters are judged to not merit *appraisal* respect, in a way that points to a systematic flaw, we are therefore at least inclined to ask whether we merit recognition respect.

References

- Allais, Lucy. 'Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36 (1), 2008, 33-68.
- Anderson-Gold, Sharon, and Muchnik, Pablo (eds.). *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Anscombe, G.E.M. 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33(124), 1958, 1-19.
- Benatar, David. *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.
- Darwall, Stephen L. 'Two Kinds of Respect', *Ethics* 88 (1), 1977, 36-49.
- Diamond, Cora. 'Eating Meat and Eating People', in *The Realistic Spirit*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991.
- Dienstag, Joshua Foa. *Pessimism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Dienstag, Joshua Foa. 'The Pessimistic Spirit', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25 (1), 1999, 71-95.
- Frierson, Patrick. 'Kantian Moral Pessimism', in Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik (eds.), *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Gaita, Raimond, *A Common Humanity*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Hamilton, Christopher. 'Raimond Gaita on Saints, Love and Human Preciousness', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11 (2), 2008, 181-95.
- Hampshire, Stuart. 'Morality and Pessimism', in Stuart Hampshire (ed.), *Public and Private Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- Harris, George W. 'Pessimism', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 5 (3), 2002, 271-86.
- Jamieson, Dale. 'Morality's Progress', in *Morality's Progress: Essays on Humans, Other Animals, and the Rest of Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* [1793], tr. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson. New York: Harper and Row, 1960.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. 'Peace in Our Time: Steven Pinker's history of violence', *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2011, 75-8.
- Morgan, Seiriol. 'The Missing Formal Proof of Humanity's Radical Evil in Kant's "Religion"', *The Philosophical Review* 114 (1), 2005, 63-114.

- Mulhall, Stephen. 'Fearful Thoughts' (Review of Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing*), *London Review of Books* 24 (16), 2002, 16-18.
- Mulhall, Stephen. *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Nozick, Robert. 'The Holocaust', in *The Examined Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006.
- Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical Explanations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 'Equity and Mercy', in *Sex and Social Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Oakeshott, Michael, *Rationalism in Politics*. London: Methuen, 1962.
- Prescott, Paul. 'What Pessimism Is', *Journal of Philosophical Research* 37, 2012, 337-56.
- Schopenhauer, Alfred. *Studies in Pessimism*, ed. Bailey Saunders. London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891.
- Scruton, Roger. 'Timely Death', *Philosophical Papers* 41 (3), 2012, 421-34.
- Scruton, Roger. *The Uses of Pessimism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Sutherland, Stewart R. 'Optimism and Pessimism', *Religious Studies* 17 (4), 1981, 537-48.
- Vice, Samantha. 'Cynicism and Morality', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 14, 2011, 169-84.
- Vice, Samantha. 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41 (3), 2010, 323-342.
- Wasserman, David, Asch, Adrienne, Blustein, Jeffrey and Putnam, Daniel, 'Cognitive Disability and Moral Status', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/cognitive-disability/>. Last accessed 21/04/2013.
- Williams, Bernard. 'The Human Prejudice', in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.

p.190, Hamilton on Gaita:

“For when Gaita talks of the preciousness of human beings he does nothing to bring out the ways in which such a notion is only one way of seeing other human beings and therefore that there are other, equally (morally) appealing ways of seeing human beings. He writes as if seeing human beings in any other way is to fail to see what they really are. And my reason for saying this is that he clearly thinks that, if we are to see human beings as they really are - if we are to be in touch with moral reality here - then we must attend to them with the kind of love Gaita takes the nun to have manifested, and thus see them as precious (CH: 22). This, he thinks, is the true way to see them (CH: 21-22). He never says that there are ways of seeing human beings as they really are that would not involve thinking of them as precious in his sense, and he repeatedly says that seeing the full humanity of a human being requires viewing him or her as precious (e.g., GE: xv; xix), which clearly implies that one cannot see his or her full humanity otherwise. So, in fact, I am arguing that one might be impressed by the nun and yet also think that there are ways other than hers (as interpreted by Gaita) of seeing human beings as they really are. Yet Gaita does not acknowledge this point in his writings, which means that he does in fact write in such a way as to suggest that to be impressed by the nun (again, as he understands her) is to think that her kind of way of seeing human beings has exclusive claim on one - assuming, of course, as it is reasonable for him to do, that he, and his readers, have an interest in being responsive to, in touch with, moral reality.”