



EXCREMENTAL HAPPINESS

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EXCREMENTAL HAPPINESS: FROM NEUROTIC HEDONISM TO DIALECTICAL PESSIMISM

BEN WARE

HAPPINESS: THE VERY IDEA

In part one of *Minima Moralia*, composed in 1945, Theodor Adorno remarks scathingly on the pressures of prescribed happiness: “The admonitions to be happy, voiced in concert by the scientifically epicurean sanatorium-director and the highly-strung propaganda chiefs of the entertainment industry, have about them the fury of the father berating his children for not rushing joyously downstairs when he comes home irritable from his office” (2002, 62–63). In our own period, the happiness imperative has been further transformed from a cultural injunction to a moral obligation. No longer does the individual simply have a “right” to the pursuit of happiness (as classical liberalism once promised), now he or she *must* at all times maintain an indefatigable cheerfulness, an “energetic” and “positive” outlook which is conducive to the realization of one’s full “productive potential.” What allows this new happiness commandment to operate all the more effectively, however, is the fact that it does not appear as an irrefutable law, but rather as a “free choice” and a “style of life” that one might rationally, yet casually, adopt for oneself. In the words of a recent popular song by the US performer Pharrell

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Williams, one can simply “Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth [...] Clap along if you know what happiness is to you [...] Clap along if you feel like that’s what you wanna do.” Williams’s track, which appears to grow more prescriptive with each listen, can be seen to function as part of what Alenka Zupančič has recently termed “bio-morality”:

Negativity, lack, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, are perceived more and more as moral faults—worse, as a corruption at the level of our very being or bare life. There is a spectacular rise of what we might call bio-morality (as well as morality of feelings and emotions), which promotes the following fundamental axiom: a person who feels good (and is happy) is a good person; a person who feels bad is a bad person. (Zupančič 2008, 5)

At the same time as the contemporary ideology of happiness has taken root, there has emerged, in theory and philosophy circles, a critique of happiness that is now almost as familiar as the eternally smiling face which it sets itself against. On this view, happiness entails a fundamental giving way in relation to one’s desires:

In a strict Lacanian sense [...] “happiness” relies on the subject’s inability or unreadiness to fully confront the consequences of its desire [...]. In our daily lives, we (pretend to) desire things which we do not really desire, so that, ultimately, the worst thing that can happen is for us to get what we “officially” desire. Happiness is thus inherently hypocritical: it is the happiness of dreaming of things that we do not really want. (Žižek 2002, 59–60)

More intriguing, however, than this simple conflation of happiness and satisfaction is the fact that there would appear to be something perverse at the core of the happiness imperative, which demands, on the one hand, that we relentlessly “enjoy” our lives, and, on the other hand, that we feel guilty and ashamed if we fail to fully succeed in this endeavour (Bruckner 2010, 5). Carl Cederström and Rickard Grassman (drawing on the work of Barbara Ehrenreich) thus speak of the “unbearable weight of happiness,” noting that “it is impossible for the individual to live up to the demand of constant and unbounded happiness. Rather than producing the intended experience of harmony and satisfaction, it becomes a tyrannical imperative,” resulting in new forms of anxiety for the subject (2010, 112).¹

To this charge sheet, we might add three further problems which the idea of happiness runs up against. First, as Sigmund Freud

recognizes in *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, whilst there is no doubt that most individuals “want to become happy and to remain so,” there is a fundamental incompatibility between this goal and the demands of modern “civilized” society. “Civilisation,” Freud writes,

imposes such great sacrifices not only on man’s sexuality, but also on his aggressivity, we [can] understand why it is so hard for him to feel happy in it. Primitive man was actually better off, because his drives were not restricted. Yet this was counterbalanced by the fact that he had little certainty of enjoying this good fortune for long. Civilised man has traded in a portion of his chances of happiness for a certain measure of security. (Freud 2002, 14, 51)

Second, while happiness is often thought of as a subjective concern, it makes no sense for individuals to claim that they “know” that they are happy. The very fact of the unconscious implies that the subject’s self-knowledge is always at best partial; moreover, logically speaking, one can only say “I know” where doubt is possible, but it is in the very nature of “I know that I am happy” that it does not admit of doubt or ignorance. Viewed in this light, subjective talk about happiness begins to look incoherent. Third, there is the uncomfortable truth that some people (more, perhaps, than we would care to acknowledge) simply *enjoy unhappiness*. As Robert Pfaller observes,

unhappiness is not merely the absence of happiness, but instead a passion that the afflicted actively carry out. Accordingly, unhappy people can also hardly free themselves from their unhappiness. Instead, they defend their misery against attempts at comfort or healing, as though it were a precious treasure. There is also happiness in unhappiness, a gain in foregoing pleasure, a satisfaction waiting in the darkest, most passionate asceticism. (Pfaller 2014, 198)

Paraphrasing Samuel Beckett’s character Nell in the play *Endgame*, then, we might say that for certain individuals *nothing is more satisfying than unhappiness*.

Given the problems inherent in the very idea of happiness, should we not therefore conclude that abandoning its pursuit—relegating it to the domain of mere fantasy—is the only viable option? In his *Untimely Meditations*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes that anyone who “desires happiness” is yet to raise his or her “eyes above the horizon of the animal” (1997, 157); and indeed, it would seem that one would have to be, at best, philosophically naïve in order to continue to take happiness as the goal of one’s striving.

There is no doubt that issues of ethical, philosophical, and political clarity arise where happiness emerges as 1. something which is demanded of the subject; or 2. where it is conceived of as a kind of perpetual pleasure that can be acquired directly; or 3. where it is spoken of as an inalienable, individual “right.” At the same time, however, the history of theory demonstrates that there are radically different ways of approaching the idea of happiness—approaches which aim to secure its place within the framework of an emancipatory politics—which many contemporary critics (including many on the left) fail to register. For example, in the Introduction to his “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” Marx draws a distinction between “illusory” and “real” happiness: “the abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness” (1994, 58). Setting aside Marx’s reference to religion here, it would seem clear that for him “real” happiness is intimately tied to the process of overcoming various forms of self-estrangement through collective political action; and indeed, when asked in a private questionnaire to define his own view of happiness, Marx offered just two words: “to fight” (1865).² In his “Theological-Political Fragment” [“*Theologisch-politisches Fragment*”], Walter Benjamin also argues that “the secular order should be erected on the idea of happiness” (2006, 305); and later, in the section of *Passagen-Werk* entitled “*Theoretical Reflections on Knowledge*” (*Konvolut N*), he writes that “there vibrates in the very idea of happiness [. . .] the idea of salvation” (1999/N 13a, 1). From these two remarks alone, we can thus discern that for Benjamin the idea of happiness operates in a dual sense: first, it “has the function of a guiding idea for the profane-historical order” (Agamben 1999, 144); second, there is an *indissoluble* connection between happiness (*Glück*) and redemption (*Erlösung*) (Benjamin 2003, 389).³ More recently, Alain Badiou (echoing Marx’s earlier distinction) has spoken of the metaphysics of “real” happiness. According to Badiou, real happiness has three dimensions—ethical, ontological, temporal. Real happiness is 1. beyond the order of mere satisfaction; 2. it emerges when we discover the possibility of the impossible, that is, when we realize that as subjects we are capable of something wholly new; and 3. it destroys ordinary conceptions of time:

In philosophy, the twentieth century (with the theory of relativity and Bergson) was a moment when the multiplicity of temporalities was explored. The question of happiness takes its place within this

framework. The time proper to truths, be they mathematical, artistic, political or the truths of love—the time of happy subjectivation—is the time of the consequences of the event, which can't be situated in the course of ordinary time. It is necessarily the time of a split, a rupture, an exceptional time. Accepting the consequences of this temporal exception, means forging a different time. [. . .] This a general characteristic of real happiness. (Badiou 2015)

In what follows, rather than aligning myself explicitly with any of the positions just outlined (although my sympathies with Marx, Benjamin, and Badiou will no doubt become clear), I want, instead, to turn the tables. First, taking a close look at Thomas Mann's short story "The Will to Happiness," I examine what I call *neurotic hedonism*: a more developed variant of the hysteric's old game of deriving satisfaction from unsatisfied desire itself. This mode of pseudo-happiness involves the use of certain "necessary fictions"; and I look at these fictions, and their limits in the case of Mann's protagonist, via the work of Nietzsche, Kant, and Hans Vaihinger. In the second part of the essay, I explore what it might mean, at least in theory, to move beyond neurotic hedonism by embracing a different, and indeed more emancipatory, structure of feeling: *dialectical pessimism*. This pessimistic outlook, grounded in an acknowledgment of the universal reality of human suffering, is allied to the activity of critique. However, it also requires a specific conception of the self. In a passage of his prison notebooks, Antonio Gramsci writes as follows: "Before, [everybody] wanted to be the ploughmen of history, to play the active parts, each one of them to play an active part. Nobody wished to be the 'manure' of history. But is it possible to plough without first manuring the land?" (1971, xciii). What, then, might it mean to re-think the whole question of happiness alongside this process of becoming "the manure of history?" How might we use the tools of literary and philosophical modernism to map the coordinates of an *excremental happiness*?

HAPPINESS AND NECESSARY FICTIONS

Mann's 1896 short story "The Will to Happiness" [*Der Wille zum Glück*] centers on an episode in the life of an artist, Paolo Hofmann, who falls in love with a young and beautiful woman, Baroness Ada von Stein (Mann 2004, 89–119).⁴ The unnamed narrator, an old school friend of Paolo's, recalls how the latter had, from his earliest

days, been afflicted by both physical ill-health (“he was a thin little fellow with a yellowish complexion [. . .] threaded with little blue veins”) and a profound “melancholy” (91, 93, 94). When the pair meet again in Munich after five years apart, the narrator notices that while Paolo still “looked bad, really ill” he “was in high spirits”: “an elated, almost exalted mood” (95). The reason for the transformation of Paolo’s outlook turns out to be not simply his infatuation with the young Baroness, but, more specifically, his belief that with Ada his future will be otherwise: “I believe I will be happy” (102).

The narrator’s initial “feeling of doubt” is, however, proven to be correct: Ada’s parents, Baron Oskar von Stein and his wife, reject Paolo as a suitable marriage candidate for their daughter on account of his persistent ill health—an intervention that results in the latter disappearing from Munich without a word to friends or family. As the narrator then speculates: “He did not want to be disturbed by anyone—he had run away from everything in order to die somewhere in complete solitude. Certainly, to die. [K]nowing what I did I had to accept the sad likelihood that I would never see him again” (Mann 2004, 106). Five years later, however, the two friends are unexpectedly reacquainted in Rome. Paolo has spent the intervening years traveling (“He had rambled in the mountains of the Tyrol, slowly crossed all of Italy, had gone to Africa from Sicily, and spoke of Algiers, Tunisia, Egypt” [108]) and pursuing his life as an artist (“You’ll find me tomorrow morning at the Galleria Doria. I’m copying Saraceni; I’ve fallen in love with the musical angel” [111]). As the pair resume their conversations, Paolo, for the first time, explains the specific nature of his illness and the devastating effect which it has had upon his life:

Every day I am almost at the end of my rope. At night I lie in the dark—on my right side, by the way! My heart pounds into my throat, my head reels, and I break out in a cold sweat, and then I suddenly feel as if death were touching me. For a moment I feel as if everything inside me were standing still: my heart stops beating, my breath fails, I jump up, turn on the light, breathe deeply, walk around, and devour everything with my eyes. Then I take a sip of water and lie down again—always on my right side! Slowly I fall asleep. (Mann 2004, 113)

While Paolo claims to have “seen death a thousand times face to face” during these traumatic nights, one thing, he says, has enabled

him to keep his final demise at bay, a single sentence uttered by the Baroness Ada before his departure, which he repeats to himself inexorably: "I will never accept another man's hand in marriage" (106).

As the story reaches its conclusion, Paolo receives a letter from Baron von Stein informing him that Ada has refused an alternative suitor, and that now, feeling powerless to affect her wishes, he and his wife will consent to the desired marriage: "I hereby declare that we, her parents, no longer wish to stand in the way of our child's happiness" (Mann 2004, 116). As Paolo embarks upon his return to Ada, his friend wishes him "all the happiness in the world" (119). Ironically, however, Paolo's journey back to "happiness" is, quite literally, a journey toward death. For, as the narrator recounts, "he died the morning after the wedding night—almost during the wedding night" (119).

According to the narrator, Paolo's death is simply "the way it had to be." "Was it not," he reflects, the "will, the will to happiness, that had enabled him to keep death at bay for such a long time? He had to die, die without a fight, without resistance, once his will to happiness was satisfied. He no longer had a pretext to live" (Mann 2004, 119). This conclusion, which reads death as the apotheosis of fulfilled happiness, is, however, much too simplistic, for it entirely overlooks what is most intriguing about the role played by happiness in Paolo's troubled life. First, it should be noted that when Paolo receives the letter from Baron von Stein, informing him that he now has permission to marry his daughter, this certainly does not make Paolo happy; indeed, "there lay [on his face] an expression such as only death could bring" (115). When his friend asks him if he will be returning to Munich, Paolo responds only with a sense of resignation: "My things will be packed tomorrow morning" (117). While the narrator believes he sees "solemnity" and "triumph" on Paolo's face as he makes his final departure, the artists' actual words suggest something otherwise—anxiety and disorientation: "I am feeling nervous and awkward" (118). In this respect, the tale invites us to consider two issues simultaneously: not only the (well known) danger of getting too close to the apparent object of one's desire, but also and importantly the dialectical relation between one's ostensible desire—in Paolo's case, a "happy" marital union with Ada—and one's actual desire—Paolo's wish to pursue a life of artistic activity and emotional detachment (the life of the aesthetic individual, in Kierkegaard's sense). Elaborating upon this dialectical relation,

we might say that Paolo's not getting what he (apparently) desires (marriage with Ada) allows him to enjoy something else (his art), which is precisely what he (really) desired all along. However, Paolo's going on with his art is itself dependent on the fiction of a future happiness with Ada: it is this fiction which sustains him, keeps him together by holding in place the lack. Contra the narrator then, who provides a standard picture of Paolo striving after (marital) happiness but encountering multiple obstacles, Paolo is, we should say, *already* happy (in one sense); but what guarantees his happiness is, crucially, the maintenance of a certain level of *dissatisfaction*. By telling himself that there is some part of his life that is "missing," that his ultimate desire has been "thwarted," Paolo can continue with the picture of himself as the "tragic artist," heroically holding out for his "true love," the Baroness. In this respect, when confronted with the letter from Baron von Stein granting him permission to marry his daughter, Paolo's *honest* reply might well have been as follows: "Please, Sir, I ask you not to agree to my demands, for this is not what I *really* want. What I actually wish for, if I can speak truthfully, is to maintain the fiction of a happiness to come—a future in which my dreams of love are fully realized with your daughter. Without this fiction, everything is lost for me; indeed, I may actually die. I therefore implore you to do me the honor of not making my dreams come true."

Looked at from this point of view, there are two fictions which hold Paolo in place—1. the fiction of a happy ending with the Baroness and 2. the fiction of himself as the tragic-heroic artist. These fictions are logically incompatible (if his happy ending was to be realized his situation would no longer be tragic), but self-supporting (his situation is tragic because his "real" happiness is, he can maintain, beyond his reach, denied to him by the law of the young woman's father). Paolo thus finds a way of keeping both satisfaction and dissatisfaction simultaneously in play; or stated more paradoxically, he finds a form of happiness in failing to achieve what he does not really want, but failing is precisely what allows him to go on as if he really wanted it. The artist therefore needs the other (Baroness Ada) in order to organize his desires, but it is not the other that he desires. The fact that he doesn't put up a fight for Ada after the failure of the original marriage proposal, nor barely mentions her name during his final reunion with the narrator (he is, however, "enchanted" by the artist Bernini), indicates that, for Paolo, what is ultimately desired

is unsatisfied desire itself; or more accurately, *the fiction* of an unsatisfied desire.⁵

Based on Paolo's case, we might therefore advance a number of provisional statements about happiness. First, happiness is not something that can be willed directly; rather, to the extent that it is possible at all, it is something that can only be experienced indirectly, as the by-product of some other goal. Second, essential to any experience of happiness is the perception (or the reality) of a certain barrier to happiness: without the "block" to happiness, we might say, there is *no happiness*. Third, at the same time as requiring the block, what is needed is also the idea of the block being removed, the fantasy of overcoming a certain set of constraints; even though this isn't what one *actually wants*, as it is the block itself which guarantees happiness (in the form of unsatisfied-satisfaction). In this respect, happiness always involves an imaginary element, a relation with the world that is necessarily fictional. This point is fully grasped by Relling, the doctor in Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, who, in conversation with the moral zealot Gregers, remarks as follows:

GREGERS: I see. So Hjalmar Ekdal is sick too?

RELLING: Well, who isn't?

GREGERS: And what medicine are you giving him?

RELLING: My usual one. I feed the life-lie in him.

GREGERS: Life-lie did you say?

RELLING: Yes, that's right. The universal stimulant. [. . .] Deprive the average human being of his life-lie, and you rob him of his happiness. (Ibsen 1994, 202–3)

ON THE USES AND ABUSES OF FICTIONS

I have been arguing that Paolo's happiness depends upon certain "necessary fictions"; and here it will be useful to pause over this concept and to assess what light its philosophical application might, in a roundabout way, help to cast upon Paolo's predicament.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche argues (much like Ibsen's Relling) that there are certain fictions without which we cannot live; and indeed, that illusions (of a certain kind) are both necessary and useful:

The falseness of a judgement is not necessarily an objection to a judgement: it is here that our new language perhaps sounds strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-advancing, life-preserving,

species-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding; and our fundamental tendency is to assert that the falsest judgements [...] are the most indispensable to us, that without granting as true the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a continual falsification of the world by means of numbers, mankind could not live—that to renounce false judgements would be to renounce life, would be to deny life. (Nietzsche 1990, 35–36)

Nietzsche's point (although somewhat provocatively stated in his own text) is an important one: imaginary ideas and fictitious concepts are both a condition of everyday life and an indispensable part of philosophical and theoretical discourse. We can illustrate the case, in relation to the topic of happiness, by turning briefly to Kant. According to Kant, happiness is not an unqualified good; rather, the only thing that can be considered good without limitation is a "good will" (Kant 1997, 7/ AK 4: 393).⁶ For Kant, "if *eudaemonism* (the principle of happiness) is set up as the basic principle [of action] [...] the result is the *euthanasia* (easy death) of all morals" (AK 6: 378). "[The] end is not the subject's happiness" (which is on the side of mere *pathological pleasure*) "but his morality" (AK 6: 388); and morality, in Kant's view, consists in good willing (i.e., acting *from* duty) carried out in conformity with the moral law—a law that is both universal and one that the subject freely submits to as one's own ("the law of your own free will"). Kant thus concludes that a free will and a will acting under moral laws are one and the same: freedom (autonomy) *just means* morality.

This conclusion, however, raises an important question: what grounds do we have for regarding ourselves as free? In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant begins an answer by saying that all rational beings act "under *the idea of freedom*" (AK 4: 448). "Reason," he continues, "must regard itself as the author of its principles independently of alien influences; consequently, as practical reason or as the will of a rational being it must be regarded of itself as free, that is, the will of such a being cannot be a will of his own except under *the idea of freedom*, and such a will must in a practical respect thus be attributed to every rational being" (AK 4: 448). Kant is here, however, only *presupposing* freedom as a necessary property of the will of rational beings. While he does think that we have strong metaphysical grounds for regarding ourselves as free, in the last analysis freedom is not a concept of experience (only an idea of reason) and therefore its objective reality cannot be proven theoretically

(AK 4: 455): “reason would overstep all its bounds if it took it upon itself [. . .] to explain how freedom is possible [. . .] Where determination by laws of nature ceases, there all explanation ceases as well” (AK 4: 458, 459). In the end, then, freedom—or more specifically *the idea of freedom*—functions for Kant as a necessary fiction: one without which his entire system of ethics could not operate.

Kant thus takes us back, rather neatly, to Paolo. Both the philosopher and the artist, albeit in radically different ways, acknowledge the value of *fictionalism*. Both recognize that fictions are essentially what structure our reality.⁷ We cannot, therefore, renounce fiction and illusion without losing reality itself. Whether they take the form of Kant’s transcendental ideas or Paolo’s ideas of the self, it is fictions which make life coherent and meaningful. In the words of Hans Vaihinger: “Without the imaginary factor neither science nor life in their highest form are possible” (2015, 33).⁸

While Kant and Paolo each traffic in their respective fictions, Kant’s idea of happiness (underpinned by his transcendental “idea” of freedom) can also cast light upon the limits of Paolo’s position. While Kant denies that the “doctrine of happiness” can function as the basis for ethics, he nevertheless believes that happiness itself plays a vital role within ethical life. In the second *Critique*, he speaks of “the concept of the highest good [. . .] in which the greatest happiness is represented as connected in the most exact proportion with the greatest degree of moral perfection” (AK 5: 129/130). In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he also suggests that “the greatest happiness” will naturally follow from “*the greatest possible human freedom*”: freedom is a “necessary idea” that leads to happiness (2003, 312B, 373). Moreover, because the “freedom of each” is inseparable from the freedom “of all others,” so it is that “when it comes to promoting happiness as an end that is also a duty, this [happiness] must [. . .] be the happiness of other human beings, whose (permitted) end I thus make my own end as well” (AK 6: 388). In this respect, Kant can be said to employ his fictions for the benefit of *all* (the idea of a universal freedom leads one, logically, to promote happiness as a universal end); and this points to a clear contrast with Paolo. For the artist, happiness is an exclusively subjective affair: he is little troubled with the happiness of others, including that of the Baroness (his supposed “love”), merely with maintaining the homeostasis of his own happiness in unhappiness. In relation to Kant’s declaration that ethics is concerned not with “how we *make* ourselves happy” but how we “become *worthy* of happiness” (AK

5: 130), Paolo therefore falls short: his “will to happiness” (as the narrator terms it) is entirely divorced from Kant’s “good will.” But this is not simply to criticize Paolo on (Kantian) “moral” grounds; rather, it is to point up the tensions within his position. For his position is very clearly split: on the one hand, his identity as an artist and his recurring neurotic symptoms (“My heart pounds into my throat, my head reels, and I break out in a cold sweat, and then I suddenly feel as if death were touching me” [Mann 2004, 113]), can be read as an indirect protest against the prevailing form of life, as a refusal to adapt to the social necessities (paid work, family life) of a manifestly unfree society. At the same time, however, his art illustrates a clear passion for impotence, failing to move beyond the sphere of *imitation* (“I am copying Saraceni”), while his own cynically derived (un)happiness—and the fictions which support it—demonstrates an inability to arrive at a *real* critical relation with the “unhappy” society itself. Paolo thus occupies the position of the *neurotic hedonist*: his own happiness is taken as the highest possible good, although this happiness is nothing other than the blunted pleasure extracted from unhappiness itself.

FROM NEUROTIC HEDONISM TO DIALECTICAL PESSIMISM

The problem with Paolo’s position, then, is not that it lacks “authenticity” (there is, we might say, no “true” self which operates *beyond* the realm of fictions), but rather that it fails to break out of the order of mere (dis)satisfaction and thus refuses to countenance the possibility of new possibilities for either the self or others. To put the point another way: Paolo, as the “outsider” artist, fails to recognize himself as fully “inside” a system of rules, practices and relations that constitute him as a certain kind of subject: one who finds “freedom” only in splendid isolation; one for whom “love” involves treating the other (Ida, in this case) as a mere means rather than an end in herself; and one whose neurotic hedonism entails a deep investment in his own (un)happiness while at the same time allowing him to avoid himself *as* a question. In many respects, then, Paolo is the late capitalist subject *par excellence*: he fails to see the collectivity that is always already enclosed within the (socially produced) individual. For him, there is little beyond the horizon of the self and its narcissistic desires.⁹

Is there, then, a way out of this impasse—one which allows us to move beyond the limits of Paolo’s position while simultaneously

enabling us to rethink the question of happiness? Here I want to propose that the (potential) overcoming of neurotic hedonism consists in adopting a new structure of feeling: *dialectical pessimism*. For the surrealist author Pierre Naville, pessimism (he uses the phrase “revolutionary pessimism,” rather than dialectical pessimism), which he finds at the root of both Hegel’s philosophy and Marx’s revolutionary method, provides a “method” or “more accurately [a] tendency [that] will keep us from stagnating, from dying, [and by which] we shall maintain our permanent right to existence in this world” (quoted in Nadeau 1973, 153). Naville’s pessimism is, as Michael Löwy notes, “active, revolutionary, alive: it [is] a ‘sail raised in all winds and all storms’ ” (2009, 50). In his 1929 essay on Surrealism, Benjamin speaks of Naville’s essay as one which “makes the ‘organisation of pessimism’ the call of the hour.” Benjamin goes on, in the same essay, to advocate “pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals.” This resolute pessimism stands in opposition to the “unprincipled, dilettantish optimism” which circulates among certain sections of the left; and it does so in a specific way: by countering its “stock images”—that is to say, its *fictions* (2005, 216).¹⁰

It has been argued that pessimism represents a “failure of philosophical thinking,” or that it is merely the symptom of a “bad attitude” toward life (Thacker 2015, 3). According to Bertrand Russell, pessimism is “a matter of temperament not reason” (1961, 727); while for Nietzsche pessimism indicates that one simply suffers from “the *impoverishment of life*” (1974, 328). Moreover, pessimism has been widely dismissed as a viable political position: the only truly “radical” stance, it is argued, is a commitment to hope;¹¹ a recognition that, as Rebecca Solnit puts it, “hope is a gift you don’t have to surrender, a power that you don’t have to throw away” (2016, xi). In opposition—and building upon the ideas of Naville and Benjamin—I want to suggest the following: first, pessimism can be thought of a coherent and actively acquired philosophical position, rather than simply a deflated “mood” or “tendency”; and second, pessimism is essential to what we might call an emancipatory orientation, not only because it attacks the ideas of “progress” which ground conventional political discourse, but also because, unlike neurotic hedonism, it opens up the possibility of a new mode of being-for-others. Against the

demand for “positive thinking,” pessimism (of the kind I am suggesting) responds with the power of the negative—*critique*; and in this respect, it is *active* (in Naville’s sense) and, at the same time, clearly distinct from nihilism, cynicism, and scepticism.¹² Additionally, by refusing the banalities of optimism, pessimism underscores the fact that the dominant tale of history to date has been one of absolute suffering (“wreckage [piled] upon wreckage,” as Benjamin puts it [2003, 392]); however, by faithfully articulating the reality of human suffering, pessimism occupies the space between what *is* and what *might be* and, to this extent, it points negatively towards the possibility of happiness in a new key. We can illustrate the case using two examples, one philosophical the other literary: Schopenhauer and Brecht.

SCHOPENHAUER AS POLITICAL EDUCATOR

“There is only one inborn error,” writes Schopenhauer in the first book of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* [*The World as Will and Representation*], “and that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy. So long as we persist in this inborn error [. . .] the world seems to us full of contradictions” (2012, 634). “If you want a safe compass to guide you through life,” he continues in a set of later remarks, “and to banish all doubt as to the right way of looking at it, you cannot do better than accustom yourself to regard this world as a penitentiary, a sort of penal colony”:

If you accustom yourself to this view of life you will regulate your expectations accordingly, and cease to look upon all its disagreeable incidents, great and small, its sufferings, its worries, its misery, as anything unusual or irregular; nay, you will find that everything is as it should be, in a world where each of us pays the penalty of existence in his own peculiar way. (Schopenhauer 2015, 12–13)

For the high priest of pessimism, the idea that suffering, not happiness, is the general rule, is intimately tied to “a new system of philosophy.” In the Preface to the first edition of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Schopenhauer writes that “what is to be imparted by [the book] is a single thought” (1969, xii); namely, that it is necessary to consider the world under two aspects, representation and will. The world as representation corresponds to the world of phenomena and presupposes a perceiving subject: “no truth is more certain, more independent of all others, and less in need of proof than [. . .] that everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this

world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word, representation" (3). Will, on the other hand, is the *ground* of representation as such: the *thing-in-itself* which constitutes the fundamental reality of the world. As Schopenhauer writes, will "is the innermost essence, the kernel, of every particular thing and also of the whole. It appears in every blindly acting force of nature, and also in the deliberate conduct of man" (110). As the thing-in-itself, will lies outside the province of reason: if a person were "asked why he wills generally, or why in general he wills to exist, he would have no answer; indeed, the question would seem to him absurd. This would really be the expression of the consciousness that he himself is *nothing but will*" (163). In addition to being the "the ultimate and onward moving spring of all things," the will is without "aim" or "limits": it is nothing but an "endless striving" or ceaseless desire which cannot be fulfilled or satisfied (164).

Here, then, we arrive at the crux of Schopenhauer's radical pessimism, his view that "human life must be some kind of mistake." To live is to will, but to will is to suffer, because will is striving, and although we hope that the fulfilment of our desires will bring a final satisfaction, an end to striving as such, this is not the case: "our existence [. . .] is essentially unceasing *motion*, without any possibility of that repose which we continually strive after. It resembles the course of a man running down a mountain who would fall over if he tried to stop and can stay on his feet only by running on" (Schopenhauer 1970, 52). Happiness therefore cannot dwell in a world where "everything is involved in restless change"; a world, that is, where "nothing occurs except continual becoming and never being" (52). But the problem is not simply that we are caught up in an eternal loop of striving and dissatisfaction; the situation, we might say, is even worse than this. For on those rare occasions when we do in fact achieve (temporary) satisfaction, what we encounter is only *boredom*; and boredom, as Schopenhauer puts it, is direct proof that all of our striving is essentially worthless: "boredom is nothing other than the sensation of the emptiness of existence. For if life [. . .] possessed in itself a positive value and real content, there would be no such thing as boredom: mere existence would fulfil and satisfy us" (53–54).

Here we should make two initial points. First, while we cannot entirely escape suffering and boredom, there are, according to Schopenhauer, two ways in which we can limit our unhappiness—I. pure self-denial (radical asceticism) and 2. aesthetic contemplation. Second, to the extent that Schopenhauer's pessimism centers on

the relation between will (desire) and suffering (dissatisfaction), he anticipates a central strand of modern psychoanalysis:

All *willing* springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering. Fulfilment brings this to an end; yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied. Further, desiring lasts a long time, demands and requests go on to infinity; fulfilment is short and meted out sparingly. But even the final satisfaction itself is only apparent; the wish fulfilled at once makes way for a new one [...]. No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines; but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow. (Schopenhauer 1969, 196)

There is, however, an important distinction between Schopenhauer and contemporary psychoanalysis (specifically Lacan), which points us in the direction of both the weakness and the strength of the former's position. For Lacan, desire is not, like Schopenhauer's will, an irrational cosmic force, but rather a *social product*: 1. an effect of language (the signifier) and 2. a "desire of the Other" (1998, 235–36), which means both a desire for recognition from the Other and a desire for the thing which we take the Other to desire. Very simply put, then, desire, for Lacan, is always structured in relation to the Other; and nowhere is this more apparent than in the analytic relationship itself where "the analyst attempts to get the analysand's desire into motion [by becoming the very] *cause* of the analysand's desire [*objet a*]"—a move intended to open up a space in which, as Lacan puts it, a "limitless love [might] emerge" (Fink 1997, 52–53; Lacan 1998, 276). In stark contrast, Schopenhauer's notion of the will is entirely abstracted from intersubjective relations and concrete social links—it floats free from both language and history. What we thus encounter is, as Terry Eagleton puts it, "nothing more than the uncouth rapacity of the average bourgeois, elevated to cosmic status and transformed to the prime metaphysical mover of the entire universe" (1990, 160). This is an echo of the argument put forward by Georg Lukács in his chapter on Schopenhauer in *The Destruction of Reason*. For Lukács, Schopenhauer is an exponent of a specific kind of bourgeois irrationalism which results in an "*indirect apologetics*" for capitalism: in his writings, with the will placed center stage, reified human relations are hypostatized as a natural condition, while the human suffering *produced by the system* is projected into eternity. Any attempt at changing society is thus not only doomed to fail, it signifies an absurdity—a demonstration

of nothing more than the vanity of human striving (Lukács 2016, 192–243).

While Lukács is certainly correct to highlight the problems of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, his reading is, at the same time, troublingly *undialectical*. Schopenhauer is, to be sure, misguided in his attempt to subsume everything that exists under a single timeless category, the will; additionally, his aesthetics and asceticism, proposed as ways of countering egotism, reveal themselves, paradoxically, to be nothing more than a celebration of "the individual's pure self-sufficiency" (Lukács 2016, 208). Equally problematic is Schopenhauer's ethics of *Mitleid* (compassion); an ethics which, as Adorno points out, "tacitly maintains and gives its sanction to the negative condition of powerlessness [. . .]. The idea of compassion contains nothing about changing the circumstances that give rise to the need for it" (2001, 173). However, despite failing to provide an adequate account of the subject in its connection with the social whole, Schopenhauer's work nevertheless "babbles out the truth" (Horkheimer 2012, 66); and this is precisely what Lukács fails to grasp. As Max Horkheimer puts it in an essay of 1961:

In the century since Schopenhauer's death, history has had to admit that he saw straight into its heart. [. . .] Since his death, history has entered a new phase, progressing from a balance of power to ruthless competition among nations. Stiffer competition spurred technology, and the armaments race began. Rulers and ministers of state were in uniform. The anarchy of nations and the arms race inevitably led to the age of world wars, which in turn eventually resulted in the frantic urge for power in all nations of the world. This was Schopenhauer's prognosis. [. . .] Anyone who would have dared, in Schopenhauer's day or even at the turn of the century, to predict the course of history up to the present moment would certainly have been decried as a blind pessimist. Schopenhauer was a clairvoyant pessimist. (Horkheimer 2012, 66–69)

According to Horkheimer, Schopenhauer is "*the* teacher for modern times" (81) exactly because "his work makes no promises. Neither in heaven nor on earth, neither for [so-called] developed or [so-called] underdeveloped peoples does it hold out that to which leaders of every political or racial hue claim to be guiding their faithful." In this respect, "it is hardly fit to gain friends among the molders of public opinion, except perhaps by the element of denial, for it seems to attribute harshness to existence by showing that existence is necessarily harsh" (65). Schopenhauer's refusal "to clothe

the negative in a semblance of meaning” (65)—there is “no linguistic gesture that feigns at depth in order to render meaninglessness and death meaningful [. . .], no theology of Nothingness, no replacement of the philosophy of history through a historicization of Being” (Horkheimer 2004, 91)—is a refusal of all forms of false compensation. However, it is precisely this refusal which connects “the soul of Schopenhauerian philosophy” to “resistance” (95). As Horkheimer neatly formulates it: “In utter contrast to positivism, [Schopenhauer] enunciates the negative and preserves it in thought, thus exposing the motive for solidarity shared by [. . .] all [people]: their abandonment” (2012, 82).

TOWARDS AN EXCREMENTAL HAPPINESS

Via Horkheimer, then, we get a clear sense of what it might mean to understand Schopenhauer as a political educator, as a philosopher who does not *merely* provide an “apologetics” for the present state of things, but one whose writing is in dialectical conflict with the reality it describes. It is in this zone of conflict, we might say, that Schopenhauer’s emancipatory potential resides. It will be necessary, however, to pose two further, and final, questions: 1. what specifically does it mean to utilize Schopenhauer and the pessimistic outlook today; and 2. how might this lead to a transformation in our understanding of happiness? The first and most obvious thing to say is that it will be necessary to preserve Schopenhauer’s insistence on confronting our situation without false compensations (transcendental or otherwise)—which does not of course mean without fictions. However, where Schopenhauer insists on the unalterability of human suffering and the permanence of world history, we need instead to emphasize a different temporal perspective. By abstaining from the “positive,” by opening ourselves up to the force of despair (“resignation without hope,” as Benjamin puts it [1999, 26]), we arrive not at stasis, but at a new type of truth: the problems we confront cannot be resolved within the existing, despairing framework, and so it is the framework itself which must be transformed. We thus despair so that at some future point we can have done with the despairing mode of life altogether. Despair is the corridor out of despair; and this marks the difference between a *purely metaphysical* and a *dialectical pessimism*. Second, in place of Schopenhauer’s *lyrical pessimism*—his elegant prose functioning as a protest against an unhappy world in which protest is essentially meaningless—we need

a *materialist pessimism*. This pessimism, as I argue earlier, takes the form of *critique*; but it also requires a specific conception of the self. In a passage of his prison notebooks, Antonio Gramsci writes as follows: “Before, [everybody] wanted to be the ploughmen of history, to play the active parts, each one of them to play an active part. Nobody wished to be the ‘manure’ of history. But is it possible to plough without first manuring the land?” (1971, xciii)

The task of the true pessimist today is to adapt oneself to being “the manure of history.” Philosophically speaking, one must know how to become shit;¹³ one must know how, even in defeat (or worse still, when defeat *appears* to be at an end, and everyone wants to act like ploughmen), to fertilize the terrain for future struggles. This is an ongoing intellectual task, as Gramsci himself notes: “It is like the problem of the proverbial dying man. But there is a great difference, because at the point of death what is involved is a decisive action, of an instant’s duration. Whereas in the case of the manure, the problem is a long-term one, and poses itself afresh at every moment” (1971, xciii). It is precisely here, however, in the melancholy work of preparing the ground, that one discovers (potentially, at least) a new kind of *excremental happiness*. This happiness has two poles: first, negatively, it consists in being liberated from the unhappiness which optimism necessarily generates and sustains; second, positively, it emerges at the point of encounter between a tragic attitude toward the present and a joyful anticipation of the possible future. Infinite resignation is thus twinned with a commitment to eventual transformation—a total exposure to suffering as suffering’s only solution.

A literary correlate of this position can be found in Bertolt Brecht’s first play *Baal* (1920). The eponymous anti-hero sings a song about Orge (who may well just be Baal himself): “Orge thought the best place known to man / In this world was the lavatory pan”; and it is here, “with stars above and excrement below,” that Orge/Baal finds not only “a place of refuge” but also “a place of truth [. . .] a place of wisdom” (1998, 14). While Baal initially appears to offer nothing beyond a libertine anti-morality (he is a dissolute poet who ends up killing his friend in a drunken brawl), Brecht invites us to see him otherwise: here is someone “standing out against the demands and discouragements of a world whose form of production is designed for exploitation rather than usefulness. [. . .] [Baal] is an anti-social man, but in an anti-social society” (369–70). By embracing his own excremental negativity—by placing himself among the contents of

the lavatory pan—Baal unleashes a living critique of the society in which he finds himself. As the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal puts it in a 1926 prologue to the play, Baal succeeds in “laying the weary concept of the European individual in the grave” (117). As a destructive force, Baal’s achievement is not simply that he operates as a dialectical figure, creating the space in which new possibilities can emerge; it is that precisely by doing so, he simultaneously gestures towards the truth forever lurking on the other side of his own unrelieved pessimism: “*humanity’s urge for happiness can never be destroyed*” (Brecht 1998, 370).

NOTES

¹ Striking a more directly political note, Jean Baudrillard observes that the discourse of happiness, whilst promising a kind of secular, consumerist “salvation,” serves only to conceal the fundamental “absence of democracy and the non-existence of equality” in contemporary society. The “Revolution of Well-Being,” Baudrillard writes, “removed from any collective ‘feast’” and based only on “individualistic principles,” functions as a mere stand-in for actual social and political transformation (1998, 50, 49). The idea of changing the world is thus replaced by the idea of changing one’s “perception” of the world; what matters now are not collective projects aimed at calling into question the given form of life, but rather the cultivation of individual “inner health” and subjective “wellness.”

² In the same questionnaire, Marx also says that his idea of misery is “to submit” (1856).

³ It is worth citing the passage from Benjamin in full: “‘It is one of the most remarkable characteristics of the human heart,’ writes Lotze, ‘that so much selfishness in individuals, coexists with the general lack of envy which every present day feels towards its future.’ This observation indicates that the image of happiness we cherish is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us. There is happiness—such as could arouse envy in us—only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption” (2003, 389).

Here we should also highlight a crucial further link in Benjamin’s work between redemption and class struggle: “true universal history, based on the universal remembrance of all victims without exception [. . .] will be possible only in the future classless society” (Löwy 2016, 67).

⁴ Critical commentary on Mann’s short story is relatively rare; however, see Nicholls (1953). It is, however, this kind of undialectical, Nietzschean interpretation that my own reading sets itself against. Mann himself was

certainly a Nietzschean, but this need not—and indeed should not—provide the only framework for approaching his work.

- ⁵ According to Lacan, the hysteric's stance is characterized by the desire for an "unsatisfied desire" (2006, 518). Here Lacan follows Freud (1954, 134–62). For two excellent discussions of the hysteric's desire, see Soler (1996) and Schuster (2016). Note here, however, I speak, specifically, of Paolo desiring the fiction of an unsatisfied desire. This is a subtle point of difference, but a very significant one nevertheless.
- ⁶ Hereafter all references to Kant's works will appear in the body of the essay using the standard method of citing passages from Kant's work (except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*). AK 4: 393 says that the passage quoted is on page 393 of Volume 4 of the Standard German Academy edition (AK) of Kant's writings.
- ⁷ There is, of course, a question as to whether Kant thought of "freedom" as a fiction. In the context of this essay, however, I will follow Vaihinger who puts the point as follows: "Kant was well on his way to regarding liberty as an 'idea,' i.e., as a fiction. Indeed his conception of intelligible freedom was at first probably thought of as a fiction, but his reactionary tendency [...] induced him in the end to make a hypothesis out of fiction; and this was naturally transformed by his followers into a dogma, and as such enthusiastically disseminated. This conception is actually only of value if treated as an expedient fiction" (2015, 35).
- ⁸ A similar view to Vaihinger's is expressed, almost a century earlier, by Jeremy Bentham: "fictitious entities are [...] the utterance of which is necessary to the purpose of discourse"; however, Bentham goes an important step further, placing special emphasis on the linguistic dimension of such fictions: "To language, then—to language alone—it is that fictitious entities owe their existence; their impossible, yet indispensable existence" (Ogden 2001, xlii & xxxii). It is this view which is of interest to Lacan in his *Seminar VII* when he writes that Bentham's use of the term "fictitious" is meant "in the sense that every truth has the structure of fiction. [...] The fictitious is not, in effect, in its essence that which deceives, but is precisely what I call the symbolic" (2008, 15).
- ⁹ On the emergence of contemporary narcissism, see Christopher Lasch (1979).
- ¹⁰ As Benjamin puts it: "The [social-democratic 'socialist'] sees that 'finer future of our children and grandchildren' in a society in which all act 'as if they were angels' and everyone has as much 'as if he were rich' and everyone lives 'as if he were free.' Of angels, wealth, freedom, not a trace—these are mere images" (2005, 216). In this respect, then, pessimism becomes a kind of necessary counter-fiction: an unflinching realism pressed into the service of revolution.
- ¹¹ This is argued, for example, in Ernst Bloch (1995). A recent article by Junot Díaz in *The New Yorker* was entitled "Under President Trump,

Radical Hope is our Best Weapon” (November, 2016); and one should note here the political passivity which often accompanies the so-called “politics of hope.” (One is, in this case, “under” Trump; while “hope,” rather than active political organization, is offered as a solution.) My implicit recommendation in this essay is for a politico-therapeutic procedure which begins by eliminating “hope” from our theoretical discourse. This does not, however, mean turning hopelessness into a new kind of fetish; rather, as I make clear in the final section of the essay, I am arguing for a dialectical pessimism which connects transformation to the activity of critique.

- ¹² The notion of critique I am advocating here relates to what Marx describes in a letter to Arnold Ruge as “ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.” As Marx goes on: “constructing the future and settling everything for all times are not our affair [. . .] we do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one.” Letters from the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher, Marx to Ruge, Kreuznach, September 1843, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm (date accessed: 22/07/ 2017).
- ¹³ For an irreverent discussion of the history of human waste, and its centrality to our identities as modern subjects, see Dominique Laporte (2002).

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