

## *Introduction*

One pursuit that has typically occupied the interests of moral philosophers is the attempt to identify the nature of the good life: Which things make a life go well? Candidates commonly include pleasure, knowledge, virtue, meaningfulness, autonomy, achievement, friendship, and others. It is often taken for granted, however, that whatever constitutes the good life, these things are widely achievable. This may be thought, as it was by many humanists of the Enlightenment, to be enabled by continued scientific and philosophical progress. It may also be thought, as it was by many Scholastics and early moderns, to be made possible by the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving deity who ensures that the world is conducive to our flourishing and that things will inevitably work out for the best. On each version of this view, the values taken to determine our quality of life are understood to be realisable, and so life is generally very much worth living, and the world that exists is on balance something to be celebrated. One of the major controversies that shaped the philosophical terrain of nineteenth-century German thought centred upon a movement to establish that this confidence in the value of life was hopelessly misguided. A careful and honest analysis of the human condition, with all its futile striving and abundance of seemingly pointless suffering, would reveal the pitiful reality of our situation. As Arthur Schopenhauer – the primary initiator of the controversy – contrastingly claimed: “we should be sorry rather than glad about the existence of the world; . . . its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; . . . it is something that fundamentally should not be” (*WWR2*: 591–592).

‘Philosophical pessimism’ drew the critical attention of the major thinkers of the time, though many of them are barely spoken of today. This included defenders of pessimism – most notably Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906), his first wife Agnes Taubert (1844–1877), Julius Frauenstädt (1813–1879), Philipp Mainländer (1841–1876), Olga Plümacher (1839–1895), and Julius Bahnsen (1830–1881) – as well as its

many diverse yet staunch opponents, notably, the positivist Eugen Dühring (1833–1926); the neo-Kantians Rudolph Haym (1821–1901), Hans Vaihinger (1852–1933), Jürgen Bona Meyer (1829–1897), and Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915); the English psychologist James Sully (1842–1923); and the theologian and pastor Georg Peter Weygoldt (1844–1907). The debates between thinkers such as these, generally lasting from Schopenhauer's death in 1860 until the turn of the century, generated thousands of pages dedicated to answering the question of whether life was worth living, and became known as the Pessimismusstreit, or 'pessimism dispute'.

One attentive commentator on this dispute, and a cautious participant, was Friedrich Nietzsche. Many of Nietzsche's best-known ideas – for example, eternal recurrence, aesthetic justification, nihilism and the death of God, will to power, his critique of Christianity, and his critique of hedonism – emerge against the backdrop, and sometimes as a direct result, of the Pessimismusstreit. The primary motivation for this book is to consider Nietzsche's complex relation to the pessimism dispute. More specifically, it aims to elucidate and disentangle Nietzsche's evolving resistance to philosophical pessimism, noting how the details of his epistemic, metaphysical, and axiological commitments both were shaped by engagement with the less known figures within the dispute and formed the basis of his objections to pessimism throughout different points in his career.

Like Schopenhauer before him, Nietzsche was not interested in contributing to merely academic debates largely confined to the halls of university lecture theatres. Though a classically trained philologist, he was by temperament a natural and incisive *Kulturkritiker*, occupied with the historical evolution of cultural institutions, practices, and values, and how this orientated – for better or worse – the lives and existential attitudes of different individuals within the societies who lived under their sway. More precisely, Nietzsche was above all concerned with the perceived *decline* of European culture in crucial respects, and how it might be rejuvenated with a reconfiguration of its artistic, scientific, religious, and ethical programmes. For Nietzsche, philosophy could articulate these issues, but at its best, philosophy could play a crucial role engaging this project. As he puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil*: “the philosopher demands of himself a judgement, a Yes or No, not in regard to the sciences but in regard to life and the value of life” (*BGE*, §205). The Pessimismusstreit, or 'pessimism dispute', was a controversy that attracted Nietzsche's attention precisely because it was a comprehensive cultural phenomenon. The

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question of the value of existence and the weight of suffering upon the human condition permeated through every level of German society for the entirety of Nietzsche's adult life. It included not only academic philosophers, but also artistic and political figures. Pessimism was a popular topic of discussion in the literary salons among high bourgeois and aristocrats,<sup>1</sup> but also among members of the middle and working classes, as well as students in various stages of education.<sup>2</sup> So deeply embedded was the topic of pessimism in the social consciousness of the age that in his *Der Geschichte der Philosophie*, Windelband claimed that it gave rise to "an unlimited flood of tirades of a popular philosophical sort, and for a time . . . completely controlled general literature".<sup>3</sup>

The pessimism dispute took place in a context of especial socioeconomic and political upheaval in Germany. This included, inter alia, fatal cholera epidemics, the Austro-Prussian war or *Deutscher Bruderkrieg* of 1866, and the economic 'Founder's Crash' (*Gründerkrach*) of 1873. But more generally, this period saw widespread social stratification and inequality following rapid industrialisation, in turn raising the persistent 'social question' (*die soziale Frage*) or 'worker's question' (*die Arbeiterfrage*). This question largely concerned how, if it all, the mass immiseration of the working classes could be alleviated without incurring social and economic regression; immiseration that contributed to the discontent that drove the 1848 revolutions. For a view so many found to be highly counter-intuitive, it is unsurprising that a popular response to pessimism, as we shall see, was to take these historical events to be largely causally responsible for the rise in popularity of pessimistic thinking, as if it were solely a product of a mood – or at worst, a pathology – shaped by socioeconomic misfortune.<sup>4</sup> However, to avoid blatantly begging the question against pessimism, one must consider the *intellectual* climate the dispute took place under in order to fully appreciate the precise nature of pessimism as a *problem* warranting serious thought.

It was not until the end of the 1860s that the term 'pessimism' took on a relatively fixed meaning as the claim that life is not worth living, that non-existence is preferable to existence. The most widely discussed justification for this thesis was grounded in the distribution, kind, and copious amounts of gratuitous suffering that there is, and always will be, in the world. Of course, suffering was nothing new in the nineteenth century – all were aware of the various miseries endured in past centuries, be they

<sup>1</sup> See Heymons (1882: 21).    <sup>2</sup> See Trautz (1876: 6–7).    <sup>3</sup> Windelband (1926: §46, 673).

<sup>4</sup> On this general idea of pessimism as *Zeitgeist*, see Weygoldt (1875: 15).

natural disasters and diseases or human practices: war, oppression, and subjugation. One of the things that was new to this social context, however, was the observable decline of theism as an intellectually tenable position, as well as the beginning of the erosion of traditional religion as a necessary social institution. Previously, there had been consolation that despite all of the suffering, misery, and evil in the world, such things are part of a divine plan in which good would eventually triumph over evil, and one's struggles would be redeemed and compensated for in an afterlife. But from the mid to late eighteenth century onwards, suspicions about theistic and religious assumptions provoked open challenges to them, challenges both serious and numerous. These included:

- (1) David Hume and Immanuel Kant's powerful critiques of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, and their respective demonstrations of the poverty of unrestricted metaphysical speculation more broadly.<sup>5</sup>
- (2) The explosion of progress in the empirical sciences, giving new vindication to earlier materialist reductions or eliminations of phenomena such as the immortal soul, the afterlife, free will, God, and morality. This growing explanatory power was seen to be a promising alternative to the relatively stagnant quarrels among theologians over tired medieval arguments.
- (3) Naturalistic accounts of scriptures in the rapidly advancing field of philology, exposing them as (often contradictory) products of interwoven human cultures.
- (4) The emergence of the field of anthropology, revealing to Europeans a far greater diversity of religious beliefs and values in the world than they presupposed. Among other things, this triggered a loss of confidence in the idea that the Judeo-Christian tradition could itself withstand the same sociopsychological debunking strategies often used to denounce other, 'heathen' religions.
- (5) In the 1860s, the widespread acceptance of Darwinian theories of evolution by natural selection, which mattered for at least two major reasons: (i) it offered a wholly naturalistic mechanism to explain in greater detail the origins and development of complex life-forms, and (ii) it concurrently revealed the systematic and pervasive nature of

<sup>5</sup> The latter point centres upon Hume and Kant's respective criticisms of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. For close attention to this criticism and Hume's influence upon Kant in this respect, see Anderson (2020). See Section 1.2 for Schopenhauer's own contraction of the PSR and its role in his pessimism.

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competitive striving and suffering in the animal world, making a benevolent creator much more difficult to take seriously as a hypothesis.<sup>6</sup>

These events contributed to a seismic shift in the reputation of theism and traditional religion in German thought. Appearing to many on the brink of collapse, their old narratives about the reasons for human suffering quickly lost persuasiveness. In this respect, the question of the 'value of life' is one that Schopenhauer, to his credit, re-introduced and re-configured in a way that made it relevant to the concerns of his contemporary secular audience. Why should we, as vulnerable as we are to the hostilities of life, and – following the Kantian destruction of metaphysics – for no purpose we could in principle know, continue to prefer existence to non-existence?

This is not merely a theoretical question reserved only for the academy, but a deeply *human* puzzle. Schopenhauer referred to this question as “the puzzle of existence” (*das Rätsel des Daseins*), the identification of which Nietzsche admiringly attributes to Schopenhauer’s “unconditional and honest atheism” (*GS*, §357), or what he saw as a form of courage in being the first to think through the real *practical* consequences of abandoning belief in the God of classical theism. It is to this intellectual contribution that we can trace much of Schopenhauer’s tremendous influence, not just in philosophy, but perhaps especially in the arts.<sup>7</sup> This is Nietzsche’s starting point, as much as it was for many others in the pessimism dispute. Operating in the context of the Pessimismstreit, Nietzsche sought to do two things:

- (1) *The Normative Aim*: To map out the evaluative and practical-existential implications of the death of God, to uncover pessimism’s relation(s) to other cultural-philosophical phenomena (e.g., nihilism, degeneration), and to determine whether and how pessimism can be resisted, and, more positively, life affirmed.
- (2) *The Meta-Analysis*: To determine whether those taking part in the Pessimismstreit – both those who claim to be followers of Schopenhauer in their pessimism and those seeking to refute

<sup>6</sup> For an ‘evolutionary case for pessimism’ that appeals to the abundance of past suffering in the animal kingdom, see Kahane (2022).

<sup>7</sup> It is no secret that Schopenhauer had a profound impact on the likes of Wagner, Tolstoy, Proust, Mann, Beckett, and others.

it – have genuinely understood Schopenhauer's key diagnosis about life and its practical-existential implications.

Each of these aims is to be investigated in this book as part of an attempt to explore Nietzsche's broader response to the pessimist's challenge: Is life something worthy of praise and affirmation, or condemnation and renunciation? The extent of Nietzsche's interest in responding to this challenge is an unsettled matter in the secondary literature. On one end of the spectrum, some suggest that Nietzsche quickly moves beyond the question of pessimism completely after distancing himself from Schopenhauer and Wagner in the mid to late 1870s. Frederick Beiser, for example, claims that the problem of pessimism "ceased to be a central concern to Nietzsche after 1878".<sup>8</sup> There is some justification for this view: as early as 1873, just a year after publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche privately disparages the pessimism dispute as a "priestly squabble" (*Pfaffenstreit*) (*eKGWB/NF*, [1873]: 29 [230]). More explicitly in *Human, All Too Human* in 1878, Nietzsche writes: "Away with these tedious, worn-out words 'optimism' and 'pessimism'. Everyday there is less and less cause to use them; only babblers still cannot do without them" (*HH*, §28). His seeming frustration with philosophical pessimism only grows into outright hostility in the 1880s.

On the other end of the spectrum, some claim that the question of the value of life sustained Nietzsche's interest as an animating feature of his philosophy. For example, Brian Leiter writes: "There are relatively few claims about Nietzsche that are uncontroversial, but I hope this one is: Nietzsche was always interested in responding to that Schopenhauerian challenge [i.e., why prefer life to non-existence?], from his earliest work to his last. And the animating idea of his response also remains steady from beginning to end."<sup>9</sup> Paul Katsafanas similarly writes that it is "uncontroversial that Nietzsche is gripped by the Pessimism debates".<sup>10</sup> This, too, has a weight of evidence behind it.

Taken in isolation, passages that express Nietzsche's frustrations toward pessimism can appear as an *abandonment* of interest in the issue. But this would obscure two major distinctions. The first is Nietzsche's attitude towards the *pessimism dispute*, on the one hand, and *pessimism-proper* (i.e., Schopenhauer's diagnosis of life's meaning), as he conceives of it, on the other. The likes of Hartmann, Mainländer, and Bahnsen – as well as their opponents such as Dühring – are frequently the subject of scorn and/or

<sup>8</sup> Beiser (2023: 80).

<sup>9</sup> Leiter (2018a: 155).

<sup>10</sup> Katsafanas (2022).

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ridicule by Nietzsche in the 1880s. This is partly because he sometimes appears to take the entire Pessimismstreit to be premised upon a shallow distortion of Schopenhauer's insight, as if the value of life was determined by a mere utilitarian-style balance sheet tallying pleasures and pains. While Nietzsche rejects that, for reasons we shall come to see, he maintains a significant respect for both Schopenhauer and *his* pessimism, despite aiming to resist its conclusions and practical consequences. A second crucial distinction overlooked by taking passages such as *HH*, §28 in isolation is between the types of pessimism he rejects, and Nietzsche's own endorsement of a *kind* of pessimism that he calls a "pessimism of strength" (*Pessimismus der Stärke*) or "Dionysian pessimism" (*dionysischer Pessimismus*). Nietzsche is adamant that this form of pessimism, partly characterised by a revaluation of suffering as something to be welcomed, is intended as the *antithesis* and *counter-ideal* to the form of it defended hitherto (see *GS*, §370; *BGE*, §44, §225; *eKGWB/NF* [1887]: 10 [21]). Thus, as it shall be argued here, the more well-supported interpretation is that Nietzsche does not *abandon* interest in the problem of pessimism but instead refines its focus.

There is additional, biographical evidence in favour of the view that Nietzsche sustains his interest in philosophical pessimism throughout his writings. Despite his outward disdain for the pessimism dispute and its primary combatants, Nietzsche nonetheless continued to acquire and read major texts dedicated to the issue well into the 1880s. For instance, in 1883 Nietzsche intensively read Hartmann's *Phänomenologie des sittlichen Bewusstseins* (1879). He owned Bahnsen's *Widerspruch im Wissen und Wesen der Welt* (1880–1882). He also acquired the French translation of Sully's *Pessimism: A History and a Criticism* (1882), and Plümacher's *Der Pessimismus in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (1884), both of which were significantly annotated by Nietzsche.<sup>11</sup> This stands in tension with the view that Nietzsche loses interest in the problem of pessimism in his mature works. Nietzsche's continual immersion in the texts of the major philosophical controversy of his day also speaks against a common perception of him as not widely read in philosophy. One commentator, for example, writes that "[a]lthough Nietzsche thought of himself as a philosopher from the early 1870s on, he rarely read any of the technical literature of philosophy. His knowledge of philosophical classics – apart from Plato – came mainly from compendia on the history of philosophy."<sup>12</sup> While it is true that Nietzsche did not read some texts often considered part of the

<sup>11</sup> See Brobjer (2008: 99).      <sup>12</sup> Sommer (2019: 43).

‘philosophical canon’, the technical literature of philosophy that defined his era was something Nietzsche paid careful attention to. Further grounds for a rejection of this interpretive trend can be acquired once one acknowledges that many of the arguments in the pessimism dispute were informed by, or overlapped with, those in the emerging literature in the adjacent major philosophical controversy of the day: materialism. This view – the view that all facts are reducible to physical processes, that all that exists is matter in motion – found its most prominent defenders in the likes of Ludwig Büchner, Karl Vogt, Eugen Dühring, and Ludwig Feuerbach, amongst others. Nietzsche read works by all of these materialist thinkers, as well as many of their most prominent opponents, the neo-Kantians.<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, their influence on Nietzsche’s thinking about pessimism is apparent in a number of places.

Despite Nietzsche’s persistent and evolving remarks about pessimism through his career as a writer, remarkably little has been written about his place in the Pessimismstreit. A number of articles have been written about aspects of Nietzsche’s critique of pessimism, but they near-uniformly maintain an exclusive focus on his relation to Schopenhauer.<sup>14</sup> There are understandable reasons for this. First, Nietzsche was first exposed to pessimistic thought via Schopenhauer, and he retained respect for his ‘great teacher’ in a way entirely at odds with his dismissive view of subsequent pessimists like Hartmann and Bahnsen (two thinkers who, nevertheless, happened to be among Nietzsche’s earliest published commentators).<sup>15</sup> Second, a significant portion of Nietzsche’s engagement with the thought of the post-Schopenhauerian pessimists takes place in his notebooks and correspondence, and so is easy to miss if one tries to

<sup>13</sup> Neo-Kantians such as Friedrich Lange, Otto Liebmann, and Jürgen Bona Meyer complained that materialism could not survive the Kantian critical arguments, nor the emerging empirical research on perception, which they suggested held that objects must conform to our cognition in various ways. The main proponent of an *empirical case* for an epistemic form of idealism was Hermann von Helmholtz (1853). The early Schopenhauerian Julius Frauenstädt accepted this research in addition to the Kantian/Schopenhauerian a priori arguments in his (1856) *Der Materialismus. Seine Wahrheit und sein Irrthum: Eine Erwiderung auf Dr. Louis Büchner’s Kraft und Stoff*. The neo-Kantians’ aim was to show that a Kantian epistemology could preserve the integrity of notions such as freedom and morality by opening conceptual space for their possibility beyond experience. For a detailed investigation of Neo-Kantianism and disagreements within the tradition, see Beiser (2014).

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Came (2005); Reginster (2006); Katsafanas (2015); Leiter (2018a); Elgat (2022).

<sup>15</sup> See Eduard von Hartmann (1891), “Nietzsche’s ‘neue Moral’”, *Preussischer Jahrbücher*, 67(5): 504–521. Hartmann’s primary complaint is that Nietzsche’s ethics is not ‘new’ at all, but rather an (inferior) reproduction of Max Stirner’s materialism. For attention to Hartmann’s understanding of Nietzsche, see Weyembergh (1977) and von Rahden (1984). Bahnsen’s engagement with Nietzsche remains implicit, but is hostile to his naturalistic debunking of morality in *HH* as well as his account of the function of tragedy in *BT*. See Section 7.5 for discussion.



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trace Nietzsche's views on pessimism with sole attention to the published texts. While this does not licence free use of isolated *Nachlass* passages, it does mean that they can be useful in giving additional context to what Nietzsche chooses to publish about pessimism and when. Third, Nietzsche rarely reveals which writings have influenced him, when he is borrowing an argument from someone else, or when it is purely his own. This is especially the case when he is intellectually indebted to those with whom he fundamentally disagrees and to whom he shows hostility. Any comprehensive interpretation of Nietzsche's claims about pessimism must take account of these difficulties.

These three reasons explain why the secondary literature on Nietzsche's analysis of pessimism has tended to exclusively focus exclusively on his understanding of Schopenhauer. In this book I attempt to show that this approach is too narrow, and conceals the nuances of Nietzsche's philosophical development over the course of his writing. While Nietzsche often writes disparagingly of other participants in the pessimism dispute, he was often deeply influenced by their ideas, and continued to develop and refine his views in dialogue with them.

The only detailed study of the pessimism controversy in the Anglophone world – Frederick Beiser's landmark 2016 work *Welschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy, 1860–1900* – omits Nietzsche completely, instead focusing on the relatively less known figures in the dispute, primarily Hartmann, Bahnsen, Mainländer, Taubert, Frauenstädt, and Plümacher. This omission is quite deliberate. As Beiser notes:

It remains an outstanding desideratum of Nietzsche scholarship that it should *individuate* Nietzsche, that it determine what is unique and new about him in contrast to his contemporaries, that it be able to identify his precise contribution to controversies and discussions that have been long forgotten. Nietzsche needs to be approached from a new perspective, one that places him in his historical context and one that reconstructs his views in dialogue with his contemporaries and predecessors. Until that it is done it is fair to say that Nietzsche, despite the vast literature about him, will remain largely unknown.<sup>16</sup>

In general, I agree with Beiser's diagnosis of the state of contemporary Nietzsche scholarship, at least in relation to questions concerning the value

<sup>16</sup> Beiser (2016: 12). This sentiment is echoed by Joshua Foa Dienstag (2006: 3) in his study of the pessimistic tradition (though it must be said, Dienstag's understanding of pessimism is broader than the specific pessimism dispute of the mid to late 1870s that Beiser, as well as myself, focus upon). As he writes: "Nietzsche is highly distinctive, of course, but this should not blind us to the ways he . . . remains part of a tradition that has itself been rendered invisible."

and meaning of suffering. The project of this book is to attempt to take up the task that Beiser calls for, and to place Nietzsche's philosophical engagement with pessimism in its proper historical context. What this will reveal is that Nietzsche is a less original thinker in some areas than he is typically thought to be. But this conclusion is far from intended to disparage Nietzsche's philosophical legacy. On the contrary, it aims to situate his philosophical contributions in their appropriate context, without knowledge of which his claims can look absurd and ostentatious. The attempt to attribute hyper-originality to Nietzsche has the unfortunate effect of making him appear to make outrageous and implausible proclamations – for example, about 'eternal recurrence', 'intoxication' with art, 'craving suffering', and 'life affirmation' – seemingly plucked from thin air. This way of reading him is particularly common in Anglophone commentary because much of it divorces him from the ongoing debates he was engaged in. It is thus unsurprising that, even to this day, in Anglophone circles Nietzsche still often remains as somewhat of a philosophical 'bogeyman', useful only to represent an extreme and implausible position; this is particularly true in discussions of Nietzschean ethics. Such a view is rarely expressed by those with an understanding of his real intellectual context, and the existing philosophical problems he was concerned to respond to. As I shall argue, Nietzsche *is* a highly original thinker, but this lies not in ideas such as eternal recurrence, nihilistic resignation, or aestheticism per se, but in his particular spin on them, and his peculiar combination of positions within the pessimism dispute.

To my knowledge, there is currently only one book-length treatment of Nietzsche's engagement with the pessimistic tradition in the English-speaking world: Tobias Dahlkvist's 2007 doctoral dissertation "Nietzsche and the Philosophy of Pessimism: A Study of Nietzsche's Relation to the Pessimistic Tradition: Schopenhauer, Hartmann, Leopardi". This rigorous inquiry does much to illuminate the influences upon Nietzsche's thought. But as will become clear, my own interpretation of the evolution of Nietzsche's engagement with pessimism differs in key respects. Perhaps, most notably, Dahlkvist's study omits sustained critical attention to Nietzsche's middle period of the late 1870s, a period that, I argue, contains some of the most important philosophical developments in Nietzsche's thinking that lead to his mature critique of pessimism in the 1880s.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> On this point I am in agreement with Scott Jenkins (2019a). Jenkins is one of the exceptions to the general trend of thinking about Nietzsche's analysis of pessimism exclusively in relation to Schopenhauer. His articles on Nietzsche and the pessimism dispute (2019a; 2019b; 2020) have