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Joshua Foa Dienstag: Pessimism

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Chapter One

THE ANATOMY OF PESSIMISM

The idea that a pessimistic philosophy is necessarily
one of discouragement is a puerile idea, but
one that needs too long a refutation.

—ALBERT CAMUS

CAN IT really be the case that an entire tradition of thought has gone missing from our standard histories of political theory? A claim like this sounds extravagant on first hearing. In some sense, perhaps, it is extravagant—but not in the way that immediately comes to mind. In attempting to reframe the history of political thought so that pessimism becomes one of its major strands, I will not be arguing for paying attention to a series of writers who have hitherto been wholly unknown. While there certainly are authors, important to identify, who have been unjustly neglected on account of their pessimism, that is not the only, or even the main, story. Instead, I argue that while many of the pessimists are well-known, the nature of their common project (indeed, the very idea that they have a common project) has been obscured. Since pessimism is perceived more as a disposition than as a theory, pessimists are seen primarily as dissenters from whatever the prevailing consensus of their time happens to be, rather than as constituting a continuous alternative. The result is that each seems disconnected from the mainstream of the history of political thought. They appear as voices in the wilderness, to put it politely—or to put it less politely, as cranks. While they are often admired for their style, or respected for the critiques they offer, their apparent lack of a “positive project” is made to appear as a badge of second-rank philosophical status. They interest us; but, it is believed, they cannot possibly orient us.

With greater or lesser degrees of respect, then, pessimists have in many cases been dismissed from the upper reaches of the canon of political thought. Or when they are admitted, as in the case of a figure like Nietzsche, they are taken to be radically isolated from other elements in that canon. Nietzsche’s philosophy *is* highly distinctive, of course, but this should not blind us to the ways in which he, like many of the other figures to be discussed here, remains part of a tradition that has itself been rendered invisible. Even as, in recent decades, the traditional list of great works has been strenuously attacked, stretched, revised, and reconsid-

ered, the idea of a pessimistic political theory has not been seriously entertained. There are several reasons for this—but none of them are really barriers to a reconsideration of pessimism. First, as I mentioned above, pessimism is often taken to be a state of mind, rather than a philosophy or philosophical orientation. This is perfectly understandable; there are, of course, happy and unhappy people and they do tend to have different attitudes about the world. But just as theories of progress are not the same thing as a cheerful attitude toward life, neither should pessimism be equated with a foul disposition. Nor is it even true that these attitudes and philosophies are regularly correlated in individuals. John Stuart Mill, for example, was famously optimistic in his belief about the long-term growth of mankind through the continuous application of reason, and he was just as famously depressive and dyspeptic. Schopenhauer, it is often claimed, was pessimistic in both the psychological and philosophical senses. But even were this claim true, Schopenhauer is not the whole of pessimism (though he is often mistaken for it) and, were one to proceed in this way, one could find just as many happy pessimists as sad ones. But I will not be examining the relative cheerfulness of the philosophical pessimists in any detail; nor would I suggest that anyone should do so on behalf of the orists of progress. It will, I hope, be enough to point out here that philosophy and disposition should simply not be confused with one another. The real question is whether I can demonstrate that a pessimistic *philosophy*, as such, exists. If I do, I hope that its distinctness from depressive attitudes will be granted as a matter of course.

A second reason that pessimistic theory has not been recognized as such is that it is often lumped together with nihilism, cynicism, skepticism, and other like philosophies. Few writers, of course, adopt the label of “nihilist” or “cynic” for themselves (though there are many self-proclaimed skeptics). But these schools of thought are nonetheless named and studied by their critics, usually for their deleterious effects on the species.¹ Without getting into these debates in any detail, I think it is fair to say that, in discussions such as these, the word “pessimistic” is one of a list of adjectives used very loosely to describe any “negative” philosophy, that is, any philosophy opposed to traditional attempts at system-building or the defense of some concrete political order. While pessimism is a negative philosophy, in this sense, with the goal only of fortifying us in a limited existence, it is otherwise not directly related to skepticism or nihilism,

¹ Tallis is fairly typical here: “[T]he contemporary attack on Enlightenment values carries great dangers. . . . [I]t is part of a process by which contemporary humanity is talking itself into a terminal state of despair, self-disgust and impotence.” (Tallis 1999, xiv). Likewise Herman: “the sowing of despair and self-doubt has become so pervasive that we accept it as normal intellectual stance.” “Modern pessimism . . . has managed to wreck our faith in the idea of civilization itself” (Herman 1997, 10, 450).

which are generally the true objects of attack by those suspicious of negative philosophy. That is to say, insofar as pessimism has been considered at all, it has been rendered an adjunct to skepticism or nihilism. If, therefore, my description of pessimism shows it to be something genuinely distinct from these, then it will have to be considered anew, even by those still inclined to be critical of it.

Finally, the dismissal of pessimism reflects the continuing grip that ideas of progress retain on contemporary consciousness. Though supposedly slain many times (Lewis Mumford called it the “deadest of dead ideas” in 1932), this beast continues to rise from the ashes for the simple reasons that, first, it helps us to make sense of the linear time of our calendar and, second, there is no easy substitute for it.² However much it may be denied in principle, in practice the idea of progress is difficult to displace. And from this perspective, pessimism is especially bewildering. Precisely because it asks us to rethink our sense of time, pessimism is an idea that challenges our notions of order and meaning in dramatic ways. Though it may not seem, on the surface, to be an especially political doctrine (it often appears, and is assumed to be, antipolitical), pessimism attacks the roots of modern political orders by denying their sense of time. Pessimism *is* a substitute for progress, but it is not a painless one. In suggesting that we look at time and history differently, it asks us to alter radically our opinion both of ourselves and of what we can expect from politics. It does not simply tell us to expect less. It tells us, in fact, to expect nothing. This posture, I argue below, while difficult, is not impossible and not suicidal either. It is neither skeptical (knowing nothing) nor nihilistic (wanting nothing). It is a distinct account of the human condition that has developed in the shadow of progress—alongside it, as it were—with its own political stance.

Pessimism, I have been saying, has been hiding in plain sight. Its exemplars could be said to include, among others: Rousseau, Leopardi, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Weber, Unamuno, Ortega y Gasset, Freud, Camus, Adorno, Foucault, and Cioran—to name just a few in what could become a very long list. It could be said to have precursors in figures like Mon-

² Christopher Lasch helpfully distinguishes the belief in progress from the less common, though also modern, utopianism: “not the promise of a secular utopia that would bring history to a happy ending but the promise of steady improvement with no foreseeable ending at all.” (1991, 47). His book surveys the irrepressibility of the idea of progress in Anglo-American thought in the last two centuries. For a longer view, focused more on Europe, see Kumar 1978. The classic account is J. B. Bury’s *The Idea of Progress* (1923). Even such apparently radical contemporary theorists as Derrida proclaim themselves “progressists”: “So we have to change the law, improve the law, and there is an infinite progress to be performed, to be achieved in that respect. . . . [P]eople would like to oppose . . . deconstruction to the Enlightenment. No, I am for the Enlightenment, I’m for progress, I’m a ‘progressist’” (Derrida 2001, § 31).

taigne, Lichtenburg, Pascal, and La Rochefoucauld. And it could be said to have close associates in writers like Sartre, Arendt, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, and Weil. The list would grow considerably longer, of course, if one included poets and fiction writers (e.g., Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, et al.) but here (with one notable exception) we will confine ourselves to works drawn from the philosophical tradition. For whatever reason, the idea of a pessimistic novelist has never been as illegitimate as the idea of a pessimistic philosopher. (It would be an interesting project to determine just why this is so, but one I cannot pursue here.) The former has been as prominent as the latter has been invisible; and so it is only the latter whose existence I am concerned to vindicate.³

Nonetheless, I should be clear about the nature of the endeavor undertaken here. In saying that these various philosophers—all modern and

³ Though the term is used in a casual way with great frequency, there was almost no sustained attention, in the last century, to pessimism as a tradition in intellectual history or political philosophy. Apart from occasional essays usually focused on a single figure or books about Schopenhauer, the best (virtually the only) twentieth-century work, is Henry Vyverberg's *Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment* (1958). As its title indicates, it is restricted in scope, but it does have the virtue of arguing that "progress was neither the exclusive focus nor the one logical consummation of Enlightened French philosophy, . . . historical pessimism too had its roots deep in the 'philosophical' movement" (1). While the book contains much useful information, and I refer to it below, it covers such a variety of figures that none are really given sustained attention and it is more concerned with episodes of hesitation and doubt among optimists than with establishing a true countertradition. Historians of the idea of progress, such as Bury, do acknowledge the presence of pessimists such as Rousseau, but they are characterized as outliers or vestigials, rather than as part of an alternate modern line of reasoning (Bury 1923, ch. 9). Bury is updated, in the American context, by Chambers 1958, which also reviews those who seconded Bury's thesis (197).

In the nineteenth century, on the other hand, Schopenhauer's prominence and the short-lived existence of a recognized school of pessimism inspired a number of critical works, especially in German but also in English (see, e.g., Sully 1891 and Saltus 1885, the former of which contains an extensive bibliography of contemporary works on the subject, as does Hübscher 1989, 496–97). For the most part, these analyses are fairly simplistic and often conceive pessimism as merely positing an excess of pain over pleasure in life, a misconception I deal with below. However, some of these works do note the existence of a pessimistic tradition and place more emphasis on, for example, figures like Leopardi who are utterly ignored in the twentieth century.

Inspired by the work of Raymond Williams, two recent works of political sociology, Joe Bailey's *Pessimism* (1988) and Oliver Bennett's *Cultural Pessimism* (2001) seek to explore pessimism as a "structure of feeling." But both are exclusively concerned with public discourse of the post–World War II period, largely in the United Kingdom. Williams's framework blurs the distinction between pessimism as emotion and as theory in a way that I believe is counterproductive for understanding the philosophical lineage I explore here.

The antipessimistic tracts I mentioned in the preface are for the most part journalistic polemics and I do not consider them further. Even the best of them (Tallis 1999 and Herman 1997) are haphazard briefs for the prosecution. They implicate pessimism or decline willy-nilly in every political ideology to which they object, however tenuous the connection. In what follows, I hope to provide a more balanced assessment.

European but nonetheless drawn from several centuries and countries—should be collectively understood as pessimists, I shall not attempt to demonstrate that they share a single idea (e.g., that “life is suffering”). That, in any case, is not really a good test for the existence of a school of thought. One would be hard-pressed, I think, to name the *single* thought shared by, say, all liberal political philosophers or all republicans. Even where a school is said to derive from a single figure (as, say, with Platonists), there is no reason for there to be a single proposition on which all members agree. We are better off, I believe, if we utilize here Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblance”—his term for a situation in which there is no one element in common but rather “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein 1958, 32). The various members of a family may all be visibly related to one another without there being a single feature they all share. But, Wittgenstein argues, that does not mean we are mistaken to call them by a single name. In fact, we do this all the time; it is only when we reflect on the practice that we mistakenly demand that each name correspond to a single feature rather than a network of overlapping similarities. Furthermore, he argues, one cannot say exactly where one family ends and another begins. Instead, Wittgenstein suggests the idea of a strand composed of many overlapping filaments: “the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through the whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres” (Wittgenstein 1958, 32). Likewise, I shall be arguing that pessimism is a strand that has been woven through the history of modern political thought, where many overlapping elements comprise a single trajectory. But this is not meant to set pessimism off from other sorts of political philosophy—modern political thought (to continue the metaphor) is, on this view, just a fabric of many such similarly constituted fibers. In the second half of this chapter, I will elaborate a series of propositions that, I claim, are characteristic of pessimism. Perhaps no pessimist subscribes to all of them, but in order to be a pessimist one must subscribe to several of them. If there is, throughout, an implicit attempt to harmonize these various propositions into a whole, this should be understood as my own effort at a sort of fusion of various horizons. It is not proposed as an interpretation of any of the pessimists in particular, but rather as an attempt to say what the thread of pessimism, built up from a variety of fibers, amounts to.

But pessimism *is* set off from other modern schools of philosophy (though not all of them) by something else. As I granted above, pessimists generally do not set out a scheme of ideal government structure or principles of justice. Theirs is (for the most part) a philosophy of personal conduct, rather than public order. Since such schemes or principles are, to some, the very essence of a political philosophy, this fact, by itself, has

been enough to disqualify the pessimists from serious consideration in some quarters. Recently however, there have been a variety of attempts to rehabilitate such non-system-building philosophy (for it has a long history) under a variety of rubrics. In the first place, there has been renewed interest in those later Hellenistic philosophers grouped under such names as Stoics, Cynics, Epicureans, and Sceptics. These philosophers, it is generally agreed, practiced a sort of philosophy that focused much more on the individual's approach to life than on the structure of the state within which she lived. The very titles of recent works such as Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* and Martha Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire* betray a renewed interest in this style of reasoning while insisting that it is no less a part of the philosophical tradition. Although both Nussbaum and Hadot have been critical of Foucault's attempts, in his late works, to use these same writers in the service of redefining philosophy as a "technique of the self," all parties to these disputes would have to agree that our understanding of political philosophy is wrongly narrowed if we limit it to that which systematizes.⁴ In a related development, recent interpretations of Nietzsche have focused on the idea that what is suggested to us in his books is an "art of living" in which we are directed, not to act in a particular way, but to view our actions in the light of criteria both historical and, for lack of a better word, aesthetic.⁵ This, in turn, has given rise to varieties of feminism and postmodernism that show a renewed concern with personal conduct, as opposed to government structure.⁶ Now, with the exception of Nietzsche himself, very little of this writing is, to my mind, pessimistic. So, if pessimism is indeed, by the very nature of its concerns, set off from such traditional schools of philosophy as liberalism, Marxism, republicanism, and so forth, it is certainly not *alone* in being so distinguished. Indeed, it is in part the renewed attention being paid to this style of philosophy that makes it easier for us now to recognize the pessimistic tradition in philosophy.

As an antisystematic philosophy, pessimism still needs to be distinguished from other such philosophies, especially such premodern ones as Stoicism and Epicureanism. As will become clear as we proceed, it undoubtedly shares certain elements with these perspectives and is in some sense a descendant of them. Nonetheless, there is a reasonably sharp divide between such earlier philosophies of the self and pessimism, marked out by their different attitudes toward time. Like the idea of progress, and the various philosophies to which it gave rise, pessimism is a modern phe-

⁴ See Hadot 1995, 206–13; Nussbaum 1994, 5–6; Foucault 1986, 37–68.

⁵ Some exemplary texts in this tradition are Strong 1988, Nehamas 1985, Rorty 1989, Theile 1990, and Honig 1993.

⁶ See Orlie 1997 and Butler 1990, 1997.

nomenon. The word “pessimism” itself (from the Latin *pessimus*—the worst) came into widespread use only in the nineteenth century.⁷ Although the philosophical tradition I will be examining is considerably older than that, it does have an identifiable beginning. Like optimism, pessimism relies on an underlying linear concept of time, a concept that only became a force in Western thinking in the early modern period.

My argument here relies on the fairly common idea (still contested in some quarters) that a transformation in the time-consciousness of Europe sharply distinguishes the modern era from previous ones. While it is surely an oversimplification to say that ancient notions of time were simply “cyclical” while modern ones are purely “linear,” it is nonetheless true that there was a change in Western ideas of time that had a profound effect on nearly every element of society, philosophy included. Though there were a variety of ancient views on time (as on any subject), the cyclical view, in different forms, was by far the dominant one. Pythagoras, for example, taught that “events recur in cycles, and that nothing is ever absolutely new” (Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 238). Stoic cosmology held that “time is passing just as we say the year passes, on a larger circuit,” and the world was perpetually destroyed and recreated such that “after the conflagration of the cosmos everything will again come to be in numerical order, until every specific quality too will return to its original state, just as it was before and came to be in that cosmos” (Sambursky 1959, 107; 1956, 201–2). Even Aristotle’s more measured discussion of time links it fundamentally to motion, and since the revolution of the heavens is the fundamental motion of the universe, “all other things are discriminated by time, and end and begin as though conforming to a cycle” (*Physics* 223b27–28).⁸ Ancient political theory relied on these

⁷ Leibniz first used the term “optimum,” as a correlate to “maximum” and “minimum” in his *Théodicée* of 1710. French writers then began to refer to his doctrine as one of *optimisme*. The international popularity of Voltaire’s *Candide ou l’Optimisme* of 1759 apparently propelled the term into English, but also provoked Voltaire’s Jesuit critics in the *Revue de Trévoux* to accuse him of “*pessimisme*” (I thank M. Aurelian Demars for this information). Lichtenberg uses the term “*pessimismus*” in 1766; in 1789 a satirical French play entitled *Le pessimiste ou l’homme méconte de tout* appeared; and the first known printed appearance of “pessimism” in English follows shortly thereafter, although the context seems to indicate that the term was already in use. The French Academy admitted the word “*optimisme*” in 1762 but “*pessimisme*” only in 1878 (See Hübscher 1989, 259–60)!

⁸ Plato’s views on time are more obscure, appearing only in the highly rhetorical *Timaeus*. Nevertheless, he too appears there to subscribe to the idea, common in the ancient world, that the cycle of time is marked out by a Great Year, that is, the period of time in which the solar and lunar cycles (and, in the case of Plato, the cycles of the other major heavenly bodies) perfectly coincide: “the perfect number of time brings to completion the perfect year at that moment when the relative speeds of all eight periods have been completed together and, measured by the circle of the Same that moves uniformly, have achieved their consummation” (39d; the solar-lunar year is approximately thirty-three standard years, but the Great

views in its descriptions of historical patterns—and of the place of human beings within those patterns. As a result, progress, decline, or even an endless but linear accumulation of experience, played little part in ancient philosophy.⁹ Modernity, by contrast (as discussed in greater detail below) has been marked out from the start by a belief in linear time and non-cyclical historical narrative.

Although this commonplace of modern historiography has had its critics, most attempts to refute this idea have only addressed it in an extreme form, as if by employing the notion of cyclical time one contends that ancient cultures all believed in some kind of reincarnation or the eternal return of the same. Some members of the Old Stoa, like Chrysippus, may have tended toward this view, but this is clearly not the case in general.¹⁰ When ancient writers like Polybius or Aristotle spoke of a cycle of regime-types, for example, they meant only that the same sort of governments could be expected to reappear on a regular basis, as one expects the springtime every year, without thinking that this spring will be identical to the last one. What is significant about such an idea is not that it predicts a recurrence of events, but that it limits the potential for innovation within the system. When Aristotle gave an inventory of the various possible political regimes, he did not expect that new ones might appear in the future, as someone who lists the four seasons does not expect to learn of a fifth.

It is also true, however, that no society has ever possessed a time-consciousness that is purely linear or purely cyclical. Even today, when we meticulously count the seconds and years in a linear fashion, great portions of our lives are governed by daily, weekly, and yearly cycles that would change very little if we gave up the progressive numbering of our annual calendar. We continue to use expressions like the “cycle of life” or “to every thing there is a season” in a perfectly comfortable way. Similarly, even when other cultures have a view of history that is nonlinear, or even have a language without a future tense, this has hardly prevented

Year that Plato describes would be many times the length of a human life and, hence, unobservable to a given individual. See Turetzky 1998; Borst 1993; Samuel 1972). In general, ancient philosophers connected time to movement and thus to spatial measures—which, given their cosmology, led inevitably to circular patterns. Modern physicists, by contrast, posit the existence of an “absolute” time that is unrelated to the movements of heavenly bodies or anything else. See n. 15, below.

⁹ A partial exception should be made here for some later Roman historians, such as Tacitus, who were concerned with decline. However, this concern was more civic than historical and could easily be accommodated within a larger cyclical narrative. I do not want to deny, however, that there is a certain incipient modernism in some of the later Romans that might well have developed into something recognizable as a modern historical consciousness if not for the collapse of the Western Empire.

¹⁰ See Turetzky 1998, chap. 3, and Voytko 1994.

them from making plans for tomorrow, or next week, much as we do. Yet even in Arnaldo Momigliano's heroic attempts to work these plain facts up into a refutation of the thesis of a change in time-consciousness, he makes an exception for philosophers who, he acknowledges, did indeed have a circular conception of time in ancient Greece, which later philosophy abandoned.¹¹

While many intellectual historians have agreed that a change in time-consciousness marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern period, there is less agreement as to the exact nature of the shift, its timing and causes. Reinhart Koselleck, in his influential book *Futures Past*, focuses largely on the emergence of ideas of progress in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and attributes these ideas to the appearance of new technologies that made material progress visible in the course of a single lifetime, something that had not happened before (Koselleck 1985, 267–88). In a similar vein, Hans Blumenberg emphasizes developments in astronomy in the sixteenth century, where comparisons between ancient and modern data gave rise to the thought of cosmic changes over long periods of time (Blumenberg 1974, 18ff.). By contrast, J.G.A. Pocock contends that it was the historical ideas of the Italian Renaissance that were crucial since “the Christian world-view . . . was based on the exclusion from consideration of temporal and secular history, and [] the emergence of historical modes of explanation had much to do with the supersession of that world-view by one more temporal and secular” (Pocock 1975, 8).

Despite Pocock's claims, it must nonetheless be recognized that the decline of European paganism and its replacement with the biblical faiths had something to do with the changes in western time-consciousness. A long tradition of classical scholarship has insisted that it is the history of the Old Testament, stretching from Creation to the Prophets (and only spread to the West, but not essentially modified, by Christianity) that forms the basis for the modern view of time.¹² Other scholars have ar-

¹¹ Momigliano 1966, 7. Momigliano's real target, in this essay, is the idea that cycles are “Greek” while linearity is “Hebrew,” especially insofar as the distinction grounded a kind of lingering antisemitism in postwar classical studies. About this conclusion, I have no qualms, but it seems to me that Momigliano, in seeking to erase this distinction, tends too strongly in the direction of asserting that no significant differences in time-consciousness have ever existed.

¹² Momigliano (1966, 1–8) discusses the prevalence of this view, while criticizing it. Blumenberg (1983) also criticizes it as an element of the “secularization” thesis of Löwith (1949); Löwith had written that modern historical consciousness “is as Christian by derivation as it is non-Christian by consequence” (197). That is, the modern sense of history should be understood as a “secularization” of biblical eschatology—so the structure of history remains parallel to the biblical while the “meaning” of that structure is transformed from something sacred to something mundane. Blumenberg's arguments parallel those of

gued that it is Christianity proper that provokes the change. G. J. Whitrow, for example, focuses on the uniqueness of Christ's Incarnation and argues that "the non-repeatability of events was the very essence of Christianity" (Whitrow 1972, 17). In any case, it is clear enough that Augustine, writing in the fourth century CE, produced an account of time that is notably linear—focusing as it does on the relation between past, present, and future—and that did not subordinate time to motion (Augustine 1960, 285ff).

For my purposes, the timing and nature of the change, and its diffusion into the world of politics, are ultimately more important than the exact causes that brought it about. While it seems clear that we can only speak, at best, of a growing emphasis on linearity in time-consciousness (rather than, say, a radical paradigm-shift), there are good reasons to think that such a change did occur in that period of several centuries that we now consider either late medieval or early modern. The most prominent markers of this change were the sudden ubiquity of mechanical clocks in the fourteenth century and the less sudden, but broadly coincident and ultimately very widespread agreement on, and use of, a common calendar that marked the years in an unbroken, ascending fashion.

In his acclaimed *History of the Hour*, Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum describes the appearance of the mechanical clock and its radical effect on almost every element of European culture.¹³ It is difficult for us now to register just how differently daily life was navigated in the absence of reliable time-telling devices. Before the mechanical clock was invented (the exact date and location of the invention are unknown, but it almost certainly occurred in northern Italy around 1300), the hours were generally not of fixed length but waxed and waned with the seasons so that there were twelve hours from dusk to dawn and twelve from dawn to dusk. Insofar as time was kept at all, it was done with sundials (useless in cloudy weather) and waterclocks (very unreliable, labor-intensive, and useless when temperatures were below freezing), and the hours marked were those of the monastery (Prime, Tierce, Nones, Compline, et cetera).¹⁴

Koselleck in placing the emphasis instead on intellectual developments of the late medieval period, though he stresses those that are internal to scholasticism as well as outside it. For an alternative view on the evolution of modern temporality, see George Poulet's *Studies in Human Time* (1956, chap. 1); Poulet's account is marvelously suggestive but, to my judgment, ultimately contrived and unreliable.

¹³ Most of the material in this paragraph and the next is drawn from this remarkable book (Dohrn-van Rossum 1996), along with Borst 1993, Poole 1998, and Toulmin and Goodfield 1965. In condensing so much material, I have had to simplify somewhat the very complex, and still-debated, story of the emergence of modern time-telling devices. But I hope to have done no real violence to its main features.

¹⁴ Monasteries had the greatest need for accurate time-keeping since the rules that governed the monks' lives (starting with the original Benedictine rule) prescribed particular ac-

Minutes and seconds were something measured only by astronomers; the degrees of precision we take for granted in ordinary conversation (“Meet me in half an hour . . .” “I’ll be back in five minutes . . .”) were far from routine. Short periods of time were often measured by repetitions of the Lord’s Prayer.

The first reliable mechanical clocks began to appear in the belltowers of northern Italian towns in the early fourteenth century. Inaccurate by our standards, they nonetheless functioned regardless of weather and provided the first common, public measures of time. Although these clocks only marked a cycle of hours, they altered time-consciousness in such a way as to clearly foreshadow modern, linear understandings. First, of course, clocks had the effect of divorcing the measure of time from nature, and made it into a matter of mechanical regularity. The day no longer began or ended according to the sun, but according to the clock.¹⁵ Second, by making the hours (and, eventually, minutes and seconds) into units of fixed length, rather than something that varied with the seasons, they reinforced the idea that time was a succession of identical units.¹⁶ Augustine’s linear time, by contrast, had been highly subjective (he emphasized how our individual perceptions of time could differ and contrasted these with the more substantial timeless eternity where God dwelled), and thus offered astronomers and historians no fixed temporal structure by which to measure events.

The effects of these changes on science were obviously profound; but the cultural changes were likewise radical. In becoming measurable and calculable, time became less like the seasons and more like a commodity. A minor, but telling, detail mentioned by Dohrn-van Rossum gives us some sense of what this meant: after the emergence of the clock, hour-glasses began to appear regularly in Renaissance paintings and in personal

tivities at particular hours. They often maintained elaborate water-clocks for this purpose, with mixed results. Our word “noon” derives from the Latin “nonas,” originally, the ninth hour after dawn, which ought to be around 2 PM (but may have been moved up to accommodate hungry monks, who were forbidden to eat before that hour).

¹⁵ Hence the expression “o’clock” meaning “of the clock” rather than by the sun. Depending on the time of year, ten o’clock could be a somewhat different point than “ten” measured in the variable hours of the old system. While it would take several centuries for clock-time to fully replace sun-time, especially outside of cities, it is also clear that the very *idea* of clock time had a profoundly transformative effect on daily life, even before everyone wore a wristwatch. See Stephens 2002.

¹⁶ This divorce is encapsulated by Newton’s statement of 1686: “Absolute, true and mathematical time flows into itself, and by its own nature, equably, without reference to anything external; . . . Relative, visible and ordinary time is a perceptible and external measurement of duration by means of motion, be it exact or inequable, which one ordinarily makes use of in place of true time (n.b.), for example the hour, the month, the year” (Cited in Poole 1998, 20).

inventories, apparently because they came into more common use. As a technology, of course, hourglasses did not depend on the existence of clocks—but it was only at this point, after the appearance of mechanical clocks, that people began to find it necessary to frequently measure exact periods of time. And the concept of time as the flowing of an endless stream of identical grains is obviously congruent with a more linear view of it. In these paintings, the hourglass is also a symbol of mortality and the fleetingness of existence. As Lichtenberg put it in 1772, “Hour-glasses remind us, not only of how time flies, but at the same time of the dust into which we shall one day decay” (Lichtenberg 1990, 42). It is surely no coincidence, then, that the very time and place where Pocock sees modern concepts of history emerging (north-central Italy of the fourteenth century) is the same time and place where the mechanical clock first appeared. As time became less a matter of heavenly revolutions and more a matter of secular sequences, the idea of a long-term direction or trend to human history became increasingly conceivable.

Compounding this process were the effects of the Gregorian calendar reform of 1582, which confirmed and universalized the system of year-numbering with which we are now familiar, with its constant upward march. Remembered today largely for skipping eleven days to correct for the errors that had crept into the Julian calendar over fifteen centuries, this reform signaled something else as well—a common measure of historical time in Europe. In the pre-Christian era, most cities kept their own calendars, tied to local religious or political rituals. These were sometimes cyclical, but often unnumbered, with years simply being denoted by the names of the most prominent officeholders. Roman rule unified the calendar, but years were still commonly denoted by the name of the consuls or the emperor.¹⁷ With the collapse of the empire, control over the calendar reverted to local authorities. The Roman legacy meant that there was a certain commonality to these calendars, but over the centuries they began to diverge. New Year’s was celebrated in some places on January 1, but in others on the day after Christmas, and in still others on March 1 or 25. The numbering system we use today was only proposed in the sixth century by a Scythian monk, then spread slowly within the Church,

¹⁷ That is, by “year of the consulship of X” or “third year of the reign of X”. In the later empire, of course, the Romans also possessed a calendar that measured the years in a linear fashion from the founding of Rome (*ab urbe condita* = AUC). But this calendar (originated by Varro in the first century BC) was apparently not in wide use. The consular or regnal year was the normal designation—but it was also a common habit to note the years with reference to iterations of a fifteen-year tax cycle (the “indiction” cycle), much as the Greeks had earlier used the cycle of the Olympiad to track historical time. That this latter system survived the empire and remained in use in certain parts of Europe for nearly 1500 years is strong evidence that it, rather than the AUC numbering, was the more common one.

and was not common, outside of church documents, before the eleventh century. Local authorities generally had little use for this numbering scheme and regnal reckonings (e.g., “the tenth year of the reign of X”) were simpler to use for many purposes (Poole 1918).¹⁸ Though the Gregorian reform was largely motivated by a desire to celebrate Easter at the right time (and to reenforce the church’s control of that celebration), the effect of the reform, eventually adopted by both Catholic and Protestant countries (England held out until 1752, Sweden until 1753) was to unify the count of years across Europe and to ensure the authority of astronomers and mathematicians in any future reforms. The calendar, then, seemed less like a local convenience and more like a universal, natural measure of time—a measure that was linear and open-ended.

It is this cluster of changes from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century that, in my judgment, undermines the view that Christianity (with or without Judaism) is the crucial factor in creating the modern linear notion of time. Although Augustine, for example, may well have contributed to the intellectual climate that was ultimately amenable to linearity, his reflections on time were attributed greater importance in the modern period (e.g., by Jansenism) than by his contemporaries. Augustine’s main preoccupation in his writing on time is to distinguish the human experience of temporality from eternity, wherein God abides. The result is that all human temporality, in his analysis, takes on an air of unreality—the linearity he describes is ultimately understood as an artifact of the (flawed, human) mind (Augustine 1960, 290, 301). Thus, despite Augustine’s great contemporary influence, it is several centuries before the church (almost accidentally) composes a linear calendar, and centuries more before that calendar has notable influence, even within the church itself.¹⁹ More importantly, perhaps, Augustine’s analysis produces no great interest (either in himself or in his successors in the church) in questions of historical theodicy—this too is something that appears only in modern times. From this perspective, Pocock’s judgment that the church’s denigration of the secular and temporal was a hindrance to modern concepts of time and history seems strongly supported. If it were otherwise, then one would ex-

¹⁸ “If we suppose a traveler to set out from Venice on March 1, 1245, the first day of the Venetian year, he would find himself in 1244 when he reached Florence; and if after a short stay he went on to Pisa, the year 1246 would have already begun there. Continuing his journey westward, he would find himself again in 1245 when he entered Provence, and on arriving in France before Easter he would be once more in 1244. This seems a bewildering tangle of dates. But, in fact, our traveler would not think of the year; he would note his movements by the month and day” (Poole 1918, 47).

¹⁹ More important within the church in the early medieval period were the liturgical and monastic times that emphasized daily and yearly cycles as well as the ecstatic “already/not yet” suspension of time that saw human beings as awaiting an endtime that had, in some sense, already begun. I thank Alison Dickie for a very helpful conversation on this point.

pect the gap from an Augustine to a Newton to be something less than the ten centuries it, in fact, was.

The modern changes in time-consciousness did not, of course, force philosophers and historians to alter their views. But they did provide an underlying mental structure that *allowed* new ideas about human history and the human experience of time to be built atop it, and which made those new ideas feel more plausible once proposed. It has been said many times that the idea of progress is something modern. To this truth, two points should be added. First, the widespread acceptance of this idea would not have come about without the foundation laid by the overall change in time-consciousness that occurred in the late medieval/early modern period. Second, and more importantly from our perspective, this change in time-consciousness did not *only* authorize the idea of progress. Pessimism too is one of its progeny, the hidden twin (or perhaps the *doppelgänger*) of progress in modern political thought. What is surprising in standard intellectual histories is how rapidly the idea of linearity is assimilated to the idea of progress, as if progress and stasis were the only two choices available to human thought and the first is straightforwardly the result of linear time while the latter is the direct issue of cyclicity. Montaigne complained of a similar conclusion when he wrote, “The philosophers . . . always have this dilemma in their mouths to console us for our mortal condition: ‘The soul is either mortal or immortal. If mortal, it will be without pain; if immortal, it will go on improving.’ They never touch the other branch: ‘What if it goes on getting worse?’” (Montaigne 1958, 413).

My proposal is that we should think of pessimism as equally descended from the modern notion of linear time, and hence, as equally a conceptual child of modernity. “Not a freak, a sport, but an authentically organic growth” (Vyverberg 1958, 6). If it were simply a matter of thinking through the meaning of linear time, one might imagine pessimism as equally plausible as progress. But if pessimism is indeed a child of modernity, it would have to be considered a prodigal—one rarely seen and, when seen, often ill-recognized, and often diagnosed as an ailment rather than a philosophy. While professional historians may, in principle, dismiss the idea of progress, to be a pessimist is still to be, at best, an oddball and, at worst, someone with an unpleasant character; “pessimist” is still a term of abuse. But as the idea of progress becomes more questionable to us, we have greater reason to turn to the unappreciated history of pessimism. If we find it impossible to return to a circular or cyclical view of the past, and if narratives of progress seem equally mythical, then we ought to reflect more on the nonprogressive, linear accounts of time that remain—and this means pessimism. As the alternatives decline in plausibility, the value of pessimism must be reconsidered.

As a first step in this reconsideration, we must learn to avoid thinking of pessimism as a psychological disposition somehow linked to depression or contrariness. However late the term itself appeared in our language, it clearly names a persistent thought, or set of thoughts, that have recurred often in social and political theory since the Enlightenment. Treating pessimism as a disposition robs it of its seriousness and transforms it into a mere complaint, one with which some people are mysteriously and unfortunately stricken. Yet while it would be recognized as absurd to treat the optimistic conclusions of Mill and Marx in terms of their authors' sunny dispositions (especially since they did not have them), such analyses of the pessimists that exist routinely take a biographical tack and, for example, attribute Schopenhauer's pessimism to some condition of genetic unhappiness or childhood trauma.²⁰ We must divorce the concept of pessimism from that of unhappiness as thoroughly as we separate theories of progress from happiness. Happiness and unhappiness, it ought to go without saying, have existed forever. But pessimism, like progress, is a modern idea.

What is it, then, to be a philosophical pessimist? Many people will say, after all, that they are optimistic about some things and pessimistic about others. Even if we specify that, since we are dealing with political philosophy, the things in question must be important social and political processes or institutions or values, the terms "optimist" and "pessimist" will still strike some as too imprecise to be of real use. John Dewey, for example, once said that he was "very skeptical about things in particular but [had] an enormous faith in things in general."²¹ And while it is perfectly possible to understand what he meant, it is nonetheless my contention that most modern political theory, in response to the linearization and historicization of Western time-consciousness, has some fundamental answer to the question of whether the human condition is meliorable or not. There are many different ways, of course, in which one could imagine the human condition improved—moral, political, material, technological, et cetera. Yet most political theorists will have a position on which of these categories is most important, and it is along this line, whatever it may be, that one is justified in calling them "optimistic" or "pessimistic." Although Dewey may have been pessimistic about American political prospects, he had no doubt that the functioning of human intelligence, over time, was bound to bring about a freer, morally and materially ad-

²⁰ See, for example, R. J. Hollingdale's extensive introduction to the Penguin edition of Schopenhauer's essays, Schopenhauer (1970, 9–38). But pick up almost *any* account of Schopenhauer and one is likely to be greeted by preliminary ruminations (usually wildly speculative and ungrounded) about his character, temperament, and moods.

²¹ Letter to Scudder Klyce, April 16, 1915. Quoted in Rockefeller (1991, 328). I thank Alan Ryan for calling my attention to this passage.

vanced society. On the other hand, a pessimist such as Rousseau, for example, may grant that the material conditions of society have greatly improved over the centuries and are likely to continue improving. But this does not weaken his contention (indeed, as we shall see, it strengthens it) that at the same time the species has been degenerating morally. And since this moral degeneration is, for him, the crucial issue, it is appropriate to characterize his philosophy as pessimistic²² just as it is appropriate to call Dewey an optimist. “Optimism,” as I shall use this term, thus encompasses a broader variety of modern political thought than pessimism, which names a relatively discrete group of theorists. The optimistic account of the human condition is both linear and progressive. Liberalism, socialism, and pragmatism may all be termed optimistic in the sense that they are all premised on the idea that the application of reason to human social and political conditions will ultimately result in the melioration of these conditions. Pessimism, while retaining a linear account of time and history, denies this premise, or (more cautiously) finds no evidence for it and asks us to philosophize in its absence.²³

One point that deserves emphasis here is the non-equation of pessimism with theories of decline. While pessimists *may* posit a decline, it is the denial of progress, not an insistence on some eventual doom, that marks out modern pessimism. Pessimism, to put it precisely, is the negation, and not the opposite, of theories of progress. This may immediately strike some readers as a fudge, but consider: most of those thinkers whom we could agree without argument to call pessimists, like Schopenhauer, did not profess a belief in any permanent downward historical trend. Schopenhauer posits no long-term historical trends at all, merely a constantly regrettable human condition burdened (as I discuss below) by linear time. In fact, belief in a permanent decline of the human condition is relatively rare in political theory (Horkheimer and Adorno’s wartime *Dialectic of Enlightenment* comes to mind, and Rousseau’s first two *Discourses*, but little else). But it is not by accident that writers such as Schopenhauer are known as pessimists—for the nonprogressive yet linear view of human existence is indeed profoundly discomfiting. Unlike a cyclical account, where the pattern of history is essentially pre-given, pessimism is historical in the modern sense: change occurs, human nature and society may be profoundly altered over time, just not permanently for the better. Although pessimism does not *issue* from black moods, it could indeed inspire them. But

²² Especially in the case of such a contradictory figure as Rousseau, this is a characterization to be made with great hesitancy. In chapter 2, I will discuss the reasons for this judgment in more detail.

²³ This dichotomy, of course, does not capture every element of modern political thought perfectly. One might argue, for example, that Hobbes’s theory, in its purely spatial, geometric approach seeks to avoid the question of temporality entirely. But I cannot deal with such exceptional cases here.

even this, as we shall see, is not the regular conclusion of pessimistic philosophies.

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What does a pessimist believe and on what basis? In the rest of this chapter, I shall try to answer these questions. I remind the reader again that, in setting out a series of propositions as the central claims of pessimism, I do not insist that everyone I describe as a pessimist subscribes to all of them. I should add as well that, even when they do reach similar conclusions, the means they employ to arrive at them can be very different. What they share is something more than a sensibility, but less than a doctrine. It might be best to say that they share a problematic—their thoughts all emerge from the question posed to them by the modern problems of time and history—that issues in a certain approach to traditional questions of political theory.²⁴ While I could provide a series of portraits of each thinker, it will be more effective, and more likely to demonstrate their common endeavor, to proceed through a series of propositions that pessimists subscribe to in greater or less degrees. These propositions, which to some extent build on one another, are, in their bluntest form, as follows: that time is a burden; that the course of history is in some sense ironic; that freedom and happiness are incompatible; and that human existence is absurd. Finally, there is a divide between those pessimists, like Schopenhauer, who suggest that the only reasonable response to these propositions is a kind of resignation, and those, like Nietzsche, who reject resignation in favor of a more life-affirming ethic of individualism and spontaneity.²⁵

The Burden of Time

What does it mean to think of time as a burden? One way to get at this question is to look at what the pessimists have to say about the difference

²⁴ Two important recent books which attempt to reexamine the history of political thought from the perspective of its central problems, and which share many of the thematic concerns of this volume, are Susan Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (2002) and J. Peter Euben's *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (1990). While not fully in agreement with either, I admire both for their willingness to insist that political philosophy is first and foremost a study of human limitations, provoked not by our utopian dreams but by our tragic experiences. Because of this, they are far more helpful than any of the critical literature on pessimism.

²⁵ The concept of "resignation" has itself been recently complicated, in a useful way, by Thomas Dumm (1998). Although Dumm finds affirmative possibilities in resignation that deserve consideration, I use "resignation" here, as I have throughout, in what I take to be the commonplace sense of a paralyzing despair or purposeful withdrawal from all activity.

between human beings and animals. The distinction between humans and animals is one repeatedly drawn in the pessimistic tradition and one that centers on the consciousness of time. At the beginning of his essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche famously compares human beings, with their keen sense of history, to animals (specifically, in this case, cows) who are “contained in the present” (*UM* 61). Animals, to Nietzsche, live “unhistorically” in the sense that they can form no concept of past or future. They respond to stimuli in the present in a routine and automatic way, as their natures dictate, but are unable, on the one hand, to form plans or hopes about the future, and on the other, to have regrets or satisfactions about the past. The animal, as Schopenhauer puts it, “is the present incarnate” (*EA* 45). To be human, on the other hand, is to have, for better or worse, a linear sense of time. Human existence, in Nietzsche’s words, is “an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one.”

However unobjectionable this distinction may seem (at least as rough description), it is not one that has always been made. Thomas Aquinas, for example, explicitly maintained that higher animals have the capacity for hope and, therefore, a sense of past and future, even if more limited than that in humans.²⁶ By itself, this disagreement would mean very little if it were not connected to certain vital issues. To Aquinas, the animals’ capacity for hope is one of a series of traits that connects them to humans in a common createdness. To the pessimists, however, the human condition is existentially unique—its uniqueness consisting precisely in the capacity for time-consciousness. In Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality (Second Discourse)*, the difference is put between earlier, animalistic humans and the conscious beings we have become. The savage’s soul “yields itself wholly to the sentiment of its present existence, with no idea of the future, however near it may be, and his projects, as narrow as his views, hardly extend to the close of the day” (*SD* 151). More importantly, perhaps, “an animal will never know what it is to die, and the knowledge of death and of its terrors was one of man’s first acquisitions on moving away from the animal condition” (*SD* 150).²⁷

There are several points here worth emphasizing. The first is the close identification that pessimism makes between time-consciousness and consciousness per se. If self-consciousness means a sense of self as a continu-

²⁶ See Aquinas 1981, II-I, 40, 3, 1; 760ff.). I thank Jennie Donnellon for her conversations and papers on the question of Aquinas’s belief about the sense of time in animals.

²⁷ Rousseau is not responding directly to Aquinas, of course, but has in mind such figures as Shaftesbury and some of the *philosophes* who, in positing a natural sociability in humans, emphasized the continuity between human and animal constitutions (see Hulliung 1994, chap. 2). I thank Annie Stilz for her conversations and papers on Shaftesbury and the question of natural sociability.

ous being over time, then obviously the animals cannot be in possession of it if they have no sense of time at all. In this sense, *self-consciousness is time-consciousness* to the pessimist in the sense that consciousness of time is the fundamental, indispensable attribute of self-consciousness. Human beings are separated from the animals, and even from their earlier animal selves, by their conscious existence within time. I use the phrase “conscious existence within time” here to cover a variety of views on whether the human recognition of time is itself valid. To Schopenhauer, for example, linear time (as I explain in more detail in chapter 3) is in some sense an illusion, or more properly, a delusion from which death will release us. To Rousseau, in contrast, our emergence into time-consciousness is a genuine intellectual advance, even if it dooms us to unhappiness. But whatever disagreement there may be on this question, it is the common currency of pessimism that humans are marked out from the animals by their sense of time. The timelessness of animal existence, whether seen as an Eden or as an infancy, is something we have left behind and can never recover, except perhaps in occasional moments of reverie or transcendence.²⁸

To say that human existence is defined by time-consciousness is also, for the pessimist, to say that it is burdened. Pessimists depict this burden in a variety of ways, none more important than the one mentioned above in the passage by Rousseau: consciousness of time means consciousness of death. Human beings are unique among the animals in having foreknowledge of their own death and this conditions the life they lead. Rousseau simply calls this knowledge one of the many “terrors” of consciousness. Perhaps it is enough to say here that many will find the prospect of their eventual nonexistence to be terrifying. Even apart from the suffering that often precedes death, the prospect of the end of life is not one on which human beings are apt to dwell. But the threat of death is also linked to a whole series of other conditions that, to the pessimists, threaten to drain even the days we have left of meaning and purpose. The first of these is colorfully illustrated in the “Dialogue of Fashion and Death” by Giacomo Leopardi. In it, the goddess Fashion catches up with Death, “the mortal foe of memory,” to remind her that they are both

²⁸ Insofar as possible, I attempt to remain agnostic here about the question of time’s true nature, a fascinating topic that a book like this cannot hope to resolve. As a result, I must also leave to one side here the depiction of time in modern physics. However, it may be useful for readers to realize that the Newtonian postulate of a natural absolute linear time, after dominating for three centuries, is now open to question from within the field of physics itself. Einstein’s theory first made time less than absolute, but did not question its linear character. However, in the wake of quantum theory, some physicists are now willing to speak of the fundamental unreality of time in a language that sounds positively Schopenhauerian (see Greene 2004).

“daughters of Decay.” Though Death at first denies the relationship, Fashion points out how much they have in common: “I know that both of us equally aim continually to destroy and change all things here below, although you achieve this by one road and I by another” (OM 51). As a daughter of Decay, Death not only represents the final end of life, but also defines the *path* of life. Every moment of our lives, we are on our way to death, whether we recognize this or not. Governed indirectly by Death or directly by Fashion, “the greater part of life is a wilting away” (OM 173). Other pessimists put the point more plainly. Freud just says, “the aim of all life is death,” while Don Quixote declares that he was “born to live dying” (BPP 46; DQ 2:59).

This sentiment—of the constant presence of death in our lives—is one both central to the pessimistic tradition and also central to misunderstandings of it. Critics have often used this sort of material to accuse the pessimists of teaching resignation or nihilism. But this is usually (though not always) a mistake. It is not the pessimists, but their opponents, who draw the conclusion that the acknowledgment of death must lead to inactivity or helplessness. This is hardly ever the conclusion of the pessimists themselves. To say that our lives are always on the way to death is not at all to say that they are pointless, but simply to set out the parameters of possibility for our existence. Pessimism may warn us to acknowledge our limitations—but it does not urge us to collapse in the face of them. Death is merely the ultimate reminder that we do not control the conditions of our existence and are not ever likely to. And from her kinship with Fashion, we know that these conditions include relentless, unpredictable change.

This constant change is something else that the pessimist takes to be a burden of temporal existence. To live within the flow of time means that whatever exists now is always rushing into the nonexistence of the past. Schopenhauer puts this point in its most extreme form when he laments “*Time* and that *perishability* of all things existing in time that time itself brings about. . . . Time is that by virtue of which everything becomes nothingness in our hands and loses all real value” (EA 51). He refers to this phenomenon as the “vanity of existence”—meaning thereby the older sense of “vanity” as a nothing or nullity. The change of fashions that Leopardi describes is thus emblematic to the pessimist of the ordinary nature of temporal, nonprogressive existence: constant change to no particular effect.

For pessimism, the fleetingness of existence has a series of related implications. First is the sense of unreality that it brings to human life. Since every moment disappears into the past as it occurs, it can be hard to take anything too seriously. Nothing is so solid that it will not melt into air, if not in this moment, then in one soon to come. For someone like Schopen-

hauer, the implication of this is that all human striving is in some sense futile. Whatever one sets as one's goal in life, even if one can achieve it, will disappear the moment it arrives. Nothing is permanent, and we suffer most from the lack of permanence in the people and things that we most care about it. Indeed, the more we care, the more we suffer. Even if one rejects his conclusion that withdrawal from existence is the best course, Schopenhauer's reasoning on the intensification of suffering by time-consciousness remains powerful:

Yet how much stronger are the emotions aroused in [man] than those aroused in the animal! How incomparably more profound and vehement are his passions! . . . This arises first and foremost because with him everything is powerfully intensified by thinking about absent and future things, and this is in fact the origin of care, fear and hope, which once they have been aroused, make a far stronger impression on men than do actual present pleasures or sufferings, to which the animal is limited. For, since it lacks the faculty of reflection, joys and sorrows cannot accumulate in the animal as they do in man through memory and anticipation. With the animal, present suffering, even if repeated countless times, remains what it was the first time: it cannot sum itself up. (EA 44)

Animals, like humans, lose whatever it is they possess every moment. But only humans feel the pain of that loss, since only human consciousness retains a sense of these things as past. Nor is our capacity for hope, or anticipation of the future, a compensation for this condition. Indeed, it compounds our situation, since most of our hopes are bound to be disappointed, and those that are fulfilled are disfulfilled in the next moment as the objects of our hopes slip into the past. All in all, time-consciousness is a bad deal from the perspective of human happiness.

Of course, happiness is not the only metric that can be applied to human existence. Time-consciousness does offer other compensations to human beings. The primary benefit is simply that of consciousness itself—the intellectual capacity for higher thought that accompanies the emergence from animal status. Enlightenment figures such as Locke termed this the capacity for “reflection”—a word which, for Rousseau, perfectly captures the connection that pessimism draws between time-consciousness and what we call reason. For Rousseau, the essence of reasoning is the ability to make comparisons between different conditions. The animal can never compare his present condition to that of his past (or potential future) because it lacks the requisite sense of continuity over time. One can think of this as an incapacity to recognize one's own reflection in a mirror. A mirror always displays an image of a self that is removed from the conscious mind by an infinitesimally small moment. The ability to see this image as an image of *oneself* is thus the simplest marker of a sense of continuity

over time. To reflect is thus the core of higher thought in the sense that it is our capacity to reflect ourselves to ourselves that marks us out as thinking beings.

But Rousseau had little patience with the idea that this capacity was simply of benefit to us: “the state of reflection is a state against Nature, and the man who meditates a depraved animal” (*SD* 145). The natural condition, as the multitude of animals demonstrates, is to be timeless and happy. Whether we abandoned this condition by choice or an unfortunate series of accidents or an act of Providence is beside the point. Once abandoned it can never be returned to; reflection produces knowledge and knowledge, secured by our newly founded memory, accumulates. In the state of nature, “there was neither education nor progress, generations multiplied uselessly; and as each one of them always started at the same point, centuries went by in all the crudeness of the first ages, the species had already grown old, and man remained ever a child” (*SD* 166). Emerging from this state, we gain knowledge, but only at considerable cost. In language that anticipates the passage from Schopenhauer quoted above, Rousseau writes: “Reflection . . . causes him to regret past benefits and keeps him from enjoying the present: it shows him a happy future, so that his imagination might seduce and his desires torment him, and it shows him an unhappy future so that he might experience it ahead of time” (*FD* 107). Unamuno made the same point rather more pungently: “Consciousness,” he wrote, “is a disease” (*TSL* 22).

To this point, I have not been clear about whether it is the thought of time or the thought of death that is primary in pessimistic thinking. Rousseau’s way of putting things, however, makes clear that it is the former that precedes the latter. We do not, after all, acquire an image of death by experiencing it, either in ourselves or through others. An animal can witness the death of fellow-members of its species and still have no anticipation of its own death. How is it, then, that the pessimists conclude that we come to anticipate and fear death? Rousseau’s sense of self-consciousness as reflection answers this question. If coming to consciousness means having a sense of oneself as continuous over time, then it is only on this basis that we can come to imagine an end to such a continuity. That is, it is only when we understand ourselves as continuous with our past that we can imagine ourselves projected into the future *and also not projected into the future*. So if knowledge of death was “one of man’s first acquisitions on moving away from the animal condition,” it was not the very first. The idea that, at some point in the future, we might not exist (just as the idea that, at some point in the past, we *did* not exist) is only available once we have a sense of our existence over time. Birth and death are not meaningful concepts to the timeless. Knowledge of death may be terrible—but it is *knowledge*, something acquired through the conscious

reflection made possible by time-consciousness. All our experience of death as animals never endowed us with a consciousness of it.

Like Schopenhauer, then, Rousseau argues that time-consciousness, by itself, leads to human suffering. Or to be more precise, time-consciousness magnifies the trifling sufferings of animal existence into something much greater. This point is central to the entire pessimistic tradition and appears, I believe, in every author discussed in this book in one form or another. But Rousseau's account points to something else that is less developed in some later writers. In leaving the state of Nature, human beings become, not just temporal, but *historical* creatures as well. The implications of this historicity form the second major heading under which I have grouped the conclusions of pessimism.

The Irony of History

The pessimist finds that man has emerged from a timeless animality or infancy into an adulthood of linear time. Some of the effects of this emergence, those outlined above, are felt nearly instantaneously. But others only emerge later. That we are aware of the temporal dimension of existence means, for the first time, that our experiences can accumulate and multiply and interact. This is what it means for humans to be historical animals. While most pessimists do not doubt that time, as such, has always proceeded in a linear fashion, it is only when humans become conscious of this fact, even in a primitive way, that history begins to have an effect on us as individuals. Of course an historical optimist, no less than a pessimist, believes in this process. The difference between the two lies in how they interpret the effects of the accumulation of experience and the resulting development of reason. While much philosophy has taken it for granted that these effects are (or in the long run will always be) positive, pessimism has found little ground for this confidence and much evidence for the reverse conclusion.

Pessimists do not deny the existence of "progress" in certain areas—they do not deny that technologies have improved or that the powers of science have increased. Instead, they ask whether these improvements are inseparably related to a greater set of costs that often go unperceived. Or they ask whether these changes have really resulted in a fundamental melioration of the human condition. This often results, as my title for this section suggests, in a conception of history as following an ironic path, one that appears, on the surface, to be getting better when in fact it is getting worse (or, on the whole, no better). Again, the reasoning that supports this view varies among the pessimists, but not so greatly as to obscure the common sentiment.

It was the contention of Plato, and many philosophers following him, that true knowledge and true happiness must be coterminous. In the myth that concludes the *Gorgias*, for example, it is the philosopher himself who is judged, not just the most virtuous, but also the happiest of men, both in this world and the next (526c, 527c). To the pessimists, this is a fundamental mistake on the part of the philosophical tradition, one it is largely too late to set right. Reason has its benefits but, from a pessimistic perspective, happiness is simply not among them. Indeed, in its destruction of illusions, reason is actually productive of unhappiness.

It is this destructiveness that makes reason cumulatively (as opposed to instantaneously) harmful to human felicity. When humans became self-conscious, they had taken a great leap from the animal condition, but they were still relatively ignorant creatures. Now, however, they would not remain so. Little by little, illusions and mistakes are overcome by reason. Leopardi narrates this process in the bleakly comic “History of the Human Race”: Jove creates human beings and continually strives to make them happy. But humans remain perpetually dissatisfied with mortal existence despite the god’s efforts to make it pleasant. Finally, Jove becomes exasperated with their demands and resolves “to set all mercy aside and to punish the human species for ever, condemning it for all future ages to a wretchedness far worse than that of the past. For this purpose [Jove] decided not only to send Truth down among them for a while, as they asked, but to give her eternal abode among them; and removing those lovely phantoms which he had placed here below, to make her alone the perpetual moderator and mistress of the human race.”

At this point, the other gods protest, since this act will surely make the humans too god-like. But Jove reassures the other gods that the reign of Truth will only increase the distance between mortal and immortal:

Jove disabused them of this opinion by pointing out that . . . whereas [Truth] was wont to show the immortals their beatitude, to men she would entirely reveal and continually hold before their eyes their own wretchedness. . . . Nothing will seem truer to them than the falsity of all mortal things; and nothing solid, but the emptiness of all but their own griefs. For these reasons they will be deprived even of hope; with which, from the very beginning until the present day, more than any other pleasure or comfort, they have sustained their lives. And hoping for nothing, nor seeing any worthwhile end to all their toils and endeavors, they will fall into such neglect and abomination of all industrious, not to say magnanimous works, that the usual habits of the living will scarcely differ from those of the dead and buried. But in this loss and despair they will not be able to prevent that craving for immense happiness, innate in their spirits, from stinging and cruciating them as much worse than before as it will be the less impeded and distracted by the variety of their concerns and the impetus of action. (OM 41–42)

This convinces the other gods who now find Jove's punishment to be, if anything, too cruel. For creatures condemned to an earthly existence, the acquisition of knowledge about their fate does not, as Plato thought, arrive as a gift, but as a terrible penalty.

Leopardi's parable shows the burden of time compounding itself over the course of history: if humans were happier as animals than as conscious beings, then as primitive, ignorant conscious beings they remain happier than as more developed and civilized ones. Since the reality of temporal existence is transience, decay, and death, happiness is found in illusion. The piercing of illusion may be counted as a philosophical, and even a moral, advance. But if we knew of the consequences beforehand and cared about our happiness, such insight would not be pursued. The growth of reason, however, once initiated cannot be frozen at any point. Knowledge cannot draw a limit to itself since the knowing mind finds it nearly impossible to value ignorance.

A parallel kind of reasoning (in a very different vocabulary, of course) appears in Freud's account of the displacement of hallucination with ratiocination in the course of human history. Dreams, Freud says, are a piece of childhood preserved in the adult, but "behind this childhood of the individual we are promised a picture of a phylogenetic childhood" so that "the analysis of dreams will lead us to a knowledge of man's archaic heritage" (*ID* 587–88). Initially, Freud says, our entire mental life was like that of our dreams today. What Leopardi calls our capacity to fulfill our longings through "imagination," Freud calls hallucination and he posits that "there was a primitive state . . . in which wishing ended in hallucinating" (*ID* 605). That is, when our thoughts were unimpeded by any notion of fidelity to a true understanding of the world, our every desire could be fulfilled by means of self-created illusions. What Leopardi calls the descent of Truth from Heaven, Freud calls, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "the bitter experience of life" and later, the supplanting of the pleasure principle with the reality principle. As we come to be more knowledgeable, reason destroys not just particular illusions, but our capacity for self-delusion, and thus self-satisfaction, more generally. Our infantile dreaming is replaced by adult thinking: "Thought is after all nothing but a substitute for a hallucinatory wish" (*ID* 606). As in Leopardi, coming to know the world better reduces our capacity to be happy within it. While Freud, valuing knowledge over happiness, does not regret this transformation in the same manner as Leopardi, his account of the costs involved is no different. The illusions dismantled by knowledge were a source of childhood delight for which the development of science and philosophy make a poor substitute, no matter how many creature comforts they provide.

Both of these accounts have a fundamentally ironic structure: what appears from one perspective to be an advance is, from another, in equal

measure, a diminishment. Every step away from our animal condition is a step closer to misery; the path toward enlightenment and the path to hell are one and the same. Nor is this trajectory reversible. Reason, once engaged, has its own logic, and we can no more ignore its conclusions than we can consciously decide to become unconscious. Leopardi does not hesitate to draw the conclusion that the optimistic faith that philosophy has placed in itself is unfounded:

Therefore they greatly deceive themselves, who declare and preach that the perfection of man consists in knowledge of the truth, and that all his woes proceed from false opinions and ignorance, and that the human race will at last be happy, when all or most people come to know the truth, and solely on the grounds of that, arrange and govern their lives. And these things are said by not far short of all philosophers both ancient and modern. . . . I am not unaware that the ultimate conclusion to be drawn from true and perfect philosophy is that we need not philosophize. From which we infer that, in the first place, philosophy is useless, for in order to refrain from philosophizing, there is no need to be a philosopher; in the second place it is exceedingly harmful, for the ultimate conclusion is not learned except at one's own costs, and once learned, cannot be put into effect; as it is not in the power of man to forget the truths they know, and it is easier to rid oneself of any habit before that of philosophizing. Philosophy in short, hoping and promising at the beginning to cure our ills, is in the end reduced to a long-ing in vain to heal itself. (*OM* 186–187)

In this indictment of philosophy, Leopardi is developing a line of reasoning largely initiated by Rousseau. As is well-known, Rousseau became famous for arguing that the development of reason in general, and the Enlightenment in particular, was responsible for a pernicious decline in the moral character of the species. In the *Discourses*, he traces several paths by which progress is transmuted or refracted into its opposite. These stories combine to create a nearly mathematical certainty that “our souls have become corrupted in proportion as our Sciences and our Arts have advanced toward perfection” (*FD* 7).²⁹ The decline of morals, rather than resulting from weakness, evil character, or a philosophical error that further learning could alleviate, is instead seen to derive directly from mental growth: “It is reason that engenders vanity, and reflection that reinforces it; It is what turns man back upon himself; . . . It is Philosophy that isolates him” (*SD* 162). Again, the sense of human thought as “reflection” is important: for humans to “reflect” means that they dwell more upon

²⁹ In the *First Discourse*, the primary story concerns the spread of luxury; in the *Second Discourse*, the focus is on property and inequality. These will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

themselves. They become more individuated and thus more interesting to themselves: “his first look at himself aroused the first movement of pride in him” (*SD* 172). Concomitantly, their identification with others declines and with it their sense of moral obligation. Thus while human reason is “perfected,” the species is “deteriorating” (*SD* 168). Each intellectual accomplishment, though individually admirable, only fuels Rousseau’s pessimism about humanity as a whole. No philosophy, however moral or ascetic, could cure the disease of Philosophy itself. This, then, is the result for Rousseau of everything that modern society has called “progress.” Intellectual development and moral sturdiness are locked in a zero-sum struggle, which the latter is bound to lose, for the former accumulates steadily as time passes while the forces of the latter are fixed in, and by, timeless, unchanging nature.

Rousseau’s argument here has become known as the “auto-critique of the Enlightenment,”³⁰ but this term, though apt in some respects, is misleading if it is taken to imply that human development before the Enlightenment is not equally placed under suspicion. Although recent times, for Rousseau, may be especially dubious in their celebration of reason, it is the entire path of human history, from the dawn of reflection onward, that is the subject of his concern. This point is amplified in philosophical descendants like Heidegger who are explicit about the dangers of reason from the moment of its first arrival on the scene. Heidegger’s essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” for example, can be usefully read as a complement to Rousseau’s *First Discourse*. In it, Heidegger depicts us as increasingly unfree, enslaved to a technology that we only think we control. His concern that we see nature only as the object of our desires parallels Rousseau’s depiction of philosophical humans as increasingly vain and self-interested. Just as humans, in Rousseau, lose their natural sympathy toward others and instinctive attachment to the world, so for Heidegger do we come to view the world as “standing-reserve,” a collection of resources that exists for our potential benefit. Heidegger, like Rousseau, does not contest the technological improvements of the last few centuries; rather he argues, again like Rousseau, that these accomplishments have been dehumanizing and denaturalizing—literally, depraving. Although the technological tendency has, for Heidegger, become ever more dominant since the Enlightenment, he, like Leopardi, traces its roots back to Athenian philosophy, contrasting this with the earlier approach of the pre-Socratics. But Rousseau’s theme of the “tyranny of reason” and its historical development has also resonated with writers on the other end of the political spectrum from Heidegger, for example in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. What all these diverse authors

³⁰ See Hulliung 1994, chap. 2.

(and others discussed in later chapters) share is an apprehension about the accumulating effects of reason, and the ironic development whereby what appears to be mankind's greatest tool and achievement becomes, in Heidegger's words, "the supreme danger" (Heidegger 1977, 26).

Finally, there is another historical concern expressed, not by all pessimists, but nearly exclusively by pessimists: boredom. An emotion we often view with contempt (as the privilege of the adolescent or idle rich), boredom, to the pessimists, is a particularly modern contagion, one of the long-term effects of linear time.³¹ It is easy to see why this is so. The situation is encapsulated in modern dramas like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Sartre's *No Exit*. If history neither repeats itself nor goes on improving, what else is left? While some pessimists, like Rousseau, envision decline, most simply see a kind of earthly purgatory where nothing changes but nonetheless that same nothing lasts forever. Human beings often manage to distract themselves from this underlying reality, but when they do not, or their distractions fail, boredom is the inevitable result. According to the pessimists, then, we are not juvenile or lazy if we feel bored; we are instead simply cognizant of a fundamental element of the human condition.

It is perhaps Schopenhauer who is best known for this view, but in fact he was preceded in this theme by Leopardi. Boredom is one of the main concerns of the *Moral Essays* and the effects of boredom are there depicted in the most dramatic terms. Boredom, like laughter, is one of those characteristics that separates humans from animals. But again, it is not so much that we have a special capacity for tedium, but rather that we are able to feel our continuous existence in time; boredom is simply one of the consequences of this. Since boredom springs from this fundamental attribute of self-consciousness, it is effectively the baseline mental condition from which we can only be distracted, either by pain or by relentless activity. This latter does not bring happiness, exactly, but at least it is neither pain nor tedium, the two most common conditions. So, for example, Leopardi puts into the mouth of Columbus, a figure he greatly admires, the following speech:

if at this moment you and I, and all our companions, were not aboard these ships, in the midst of the sea, in this unknown solitude, in a condition as un-

³¹ Patricia Meyer Spacks (1995) argues that the concept of boredom did not really exist, as such, before the eighteenth century. Although the French word *ennui* is very old, the English verb "to bore" did not exist until the second half of the eighteenth century and noun "boredom" not until the nineteenth. Spacks is more interested in describing the evolution of the concept than in explaining its emergence but speculates that it has to do with the collapse of the Christian worldview, with its sense of responsibility, thus allowing the sin of *acedia* (sloth) to become the condition of boredom (11).

certain and risky as you please; what other situation in life would we find ourselves in? What would we be doing? How would we be spending these days? Do you think, more happily? Or would we not rather be in some greater trouble or anxiety, or else full of boredom? What does one mean by a condition free of uncertainty and danger? If content and happy, that is to be preferred to any other; if tedious and wretched, I cannot see what other state is not to be preferred to it. . . . Even if we gain no other benefit from this voyage, it seems to me that it is most profitable to us, in that for a while it keeps us free of boredom, renders life dear to us, and makes us value many things that we would not otherwise take into account. (*OM* 161)

But the condition of happiness, which Columbus apparently believes in, is withdrawn as a possibility by Leopardi's larger philosophy. Nor is boredom a neutral state, halfway between happiness and unhappiness. Rather, boredom is our normal condition of unfulfillment, lacking only an active pain. This unfulfillment is caused simply by the length of our conscious existence coupled with our loss of the animal ability to be satisfied in the moment. So human beings, for the most part, alternate between pain and boredom, with only the exceptional figure, like Columbus, able to banish both temporarily through vigorous action: "I truly believe that by tedium we should understand none other than the pure longing for happiness; not assuaged by pleasure, and not overtly afflicted by distress. But this craving, as we agreed not long ago, is never gratified; and real pleasure is never to be found. So that human life, so to speak, is composed and interwoven, partly of pain and partly tedium; and is never at rest from one of these passions without falling into the other" (*OM* 96).

Schopenhauer, like Leopardi, connects the prevalence of boredom to the absence of true pleasure in life. We are, he argues, compelled by needs that are hard to satisfy. But even when we do satisfy them, "their satisfaction achieves nothing but a painless condition in which [man] is only given over to boredom . . . and that boredom is direct proof that existence is in itself valueless, for 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 fulfill and satisfy us. As things are, we take no pleasure in existence except when we are striving after something (*EA* 53–54)." Boredom, then, is not so much a problem in itself as it is a marker for time-boundedness. Our condition is one of linear extension and yet that extension has no pattern (progress), goal (*telos*), or end (*eschaton*). It is the bare condition of temporality, with nothing given to distract us from its endlessness and meaninglessness. Unless we can divert ourselves with self-imposed tasks, as Columbus did in Leopardi's fable, boredom is the best we can hope for. A disenchanting universe offers us nothing else.

Insofar as we value this knowledge, we can consider boredom, as Leopardi sometimes did, as “in some ways the most sublime of human feelings” (P 48), the key to an understanding of our predicament. But it is perhaps more likely that we will take the perspective that E. M. Cioran encapsulates in a simple exchange: “‘What do you do from morning to night?’ ‘I endure myself.’” (TBB 36).

Whether viewed as a source of disillusion or boredom, then, the historicity of human experience is something that pessimism views as a lamentable consequence of time-consciousness. We cannot, the pessimists argue, separate the material and intellectual achievements that the accumulation of experience makes possible from the costs such an accumulation imposes. What optimistic philosophies depict simply as a growth of ability and power is, to all the pessimists, the cause of much human suffering and, to some of them, the source of a certain moral decrepitude as well. While we should again recognize how simplistic it would be to evaluate the conditions of our life merely in terms of pain and pleasure, part of the pessimists point here is to reveal how just such a hedonism underlies the position of their opponents: it is the optimists who claim that the increase in human mental and technological abilities will inevitably produce a society of happier, freer individuals. (Indeed, stripped of this claim, it would be hard to know what their philosophy amounted to.) To the pessimists, whether this assertion is made in a Platonic form with regard to philosophy itself, or in an Enlightenment form where philosophy is said to be allied with science, it is a false promise, one without foundation in experience or theory. Without denying the increase in cerebral agility that we have attained, a full account of both historicity and the human beings who endure it cannot, the pessimists claim, be made in a mood of celebration. Indeed, insofar as we have mistaken the instruments of suffering for those of self-betterment, only an ironic tone can capture the situation accurately. While we need not conclude, with Leopardi, that the *only* solution for the philosopher is not to philosophize, it is the more general conclusion of pessimism that any philosopher who truly wishes her work to be of some aid to her species must, at the least, recognize the limitations of her instrument and the burdens that historicity imposes alongside its better-known benefits. While these are indeed serious restrictions, it should again be noted that it is only the critics of pessimism, and not the pessimists themselves, who find them paralyzing.

The Absurdity of Existence

Thus far, I have described pessimism as an investigation into the effects of temporality on the human condition. This it certainly is, but it is also a

judgment of these effects and a recommendation for how to respond to them. This section will deal with the first of these topics, the next with the second. The simplest way to characterize the pessimistic reaction to the human condition is with words like “absurd” or “contradictory.” Absurdity of existence is illustrated by the persistent mismatch between human purposes and the means available to achieve them: or again, between our desire for happiness and our capacity to encounter or sustain it. Different generations put the point in different ways, of course, but the enduring thought is not a complicated one. To my mind, it is contained in the view that freedom and happiness, both difficult to obtain, are furthermore incompatible with one another.

The germ of this idea is found in Rousseau’s contention, cited above, that our condition of consciousness is one “against Nature.” Even after Nature ceases to function as a regulative ideal for later pessimists, the sense that a thinking being must be in permanent tension with his or her environment is a continuing one. “Human life,” Schopenhauer writes, “must be some kind of mistake” (*EA* 53). The mistake consists in the poor fit between the aims that human beings share and the world in which they are settled to pursue those aims. Since we are nonetheless taught, by the false optimism that predominates in modern society, to believe that our goals are achievable, “life presents itself as a continual deception, in small matters as well as great” (*WWR* 2:573). We are thus constantly subject to what Schopenhauer calls (in English) “disappointment,” the sensation of finding that the world has once again let us down (*EA* 47). Freud puts a similar point in a more scientific-sounding language: “the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle . . . and yet its programme is at loggerheads with the whole world . . . all the regulations of the universe run counter to it” (*CD* 24–25). Camus, in introducing the concept of “the absurd” to philosophical discourse, speaks of the “divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting” as “properly the feeling of absurdity” (*MS* 6).

While pessimism is a philosophy rather than a disposition, it is, of course, concerned with dispositions in the limited sense that most pessimists view human beings as largely unhappy and largely fated to remain so. Pessimism, as a theory, is interested in the prevalence of human unhappiness. In some cases, as for example with Freud, a pessimist may even offer an account of this condition that is itself primarily rooted in psychology. But this is of course very different from the theory itself having its origin in a particular disposition within its authors. Indeed, fundamentally, the pessimistic account of the origin of unhappiness (even, I would maintain, in Freud) has little to do with psychology itself but with a claim of ontological misalignment between human beings and the world they inhabit. Furthermore it is not so much the prevalence of unhappiness

that pessimism condemns (though it certainly does deplore it) as the uselessness and aimlessness of such suffering—along with the deception constantly being perpetrated on us that our suffering is unnecessary, temporary or the result of individual misfortune. Thus Leopardi has Nature identify the mistake of one who complains of our perpetual distress: “Did you perhaps imagine that the world was made for your benefit?” (*OM* 102).

A crucial element of this deception is the contention made by optimistic philosophy that our capacity to reason is something that gives us power over the world and thus a means of alleviating our suffering. In order for this to be true, the world would in some sense have to be aligned with or amenable to the force of reason when, to the pessimists, it simply is not. Thus, to Nietzsche, the “optimism” of Socrates is contained in “his faith that the nature of things can be fathomed, [he] ascribes to knowledge and insight the power of a panacea” (*BT* 97). But to Nietzsche, as to Leopardi, the world was made neither for our benefit nor our understanding. This is not to deny that reason exists or that it has certain powers; but in order to know *in advance* that our powers of reason could ensure our happiness (that is, in advance of the day, yet to arrive, when it actually did so), we would also have to make assumptions about the nature of the world in which reason finds itself. This, Nietzsche contends, was the leap that Socrates made, without foundation, and that through Plato was transmitted to the rest of the philosophical tradition in the West. But beginning at least with Rousseau, the pessimists have been concerned that the opposite might be the case: that in abandoning the condition of animals for one of reason, we only distance ourselves from the world and make it less likely that we will be at home in it. Thus Camus cries: “This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation” (*MS* 51).

Put another way, we can say that there is a kind of pragmatism buried so deeply in Western philosophy that it is almost impossible to root out. This is the notion that there *must be* an answer to our fundamental questions, even if we have not found it yet, and that this answer will deliver us from suffering. That is, there must be a way for human beings to live free and happy. Socrates’ constant attempts to discern the superior modes of human life are pragmatic in the sense that they assume that such questions are *problems* that can be rationally solved, that there is some plane on which philosophy intersects with life, or rather that philosophy itself is something capable of providing answers. Such a question-answer vision is still clearly visible, for example, in Hegel’s reading of history—where Oriental civilization is seen as posing a riddle the Greeks first solve, with the solution then being improved upon by subsequent civilizations. Human life, in this allegory, is a riddle awaiting an Oedipus with a rational answer. But the pessimistic critique helps to make visible how widely

such a pragmatism is shared. Even modern liberalism, which offers no grand narrative like Hegel's, assumes that justice is the achievable object of political philosophy and that the patient application of reason to human society will result in political structures that increasingly approach such a condition. This is even true of a theorist as seemingly atemporal as Hobbes, who is often (and quite wrongly) described as a pessimist because of his bleak description of natural man. For whatever the perils of the state of nature, Hobbes has no doubt that the political and social difficulties he describes can be cured by the proper set of institutions. There are obstacles to doing so, but none of them are immovable. Once properly delineated, he maintained, the problem he describes is readily grasped by the mind and defeated. And for no other liberal is the problem even as formidable as it is for Hobbes.

It is this widely shared model of a universe predisposed to being subdued by the proper dialectic that pessimism objects to via the language of the "absurd." Pessimism differs from other modern philosophies, then, not because of a recommendation of lassitude but because of a diagnosis of the human condition that finds no basis for the faith in progressive reason that these varieties of optimism share. Seemingly opposed, Anglo-American and Continental optimism are in fact equally based in the Socratic rationalism, transplanted into and multiplied by modern time-consciousness, that pessimism identifies as the taproot of so much disappointment in modern politics.

To the pessimists, human existence is not a riddle waiting to be solved by philosophy; human existence merely is. Freedom and happiness do not exist as the solution to a problem. Rather, starting with Rousseau's contention that reasoning is against Nature, pessimists have asserted, contra the optimistic Socrates and his descendants, that freedom and happiness are in a fundamental tension with one another as a result of the ontological "divorce" between the time-conscious being full of desires, goals, and memories and the time-bound universe that constantly destroys the objects of its inhabitants' desires. The concept of freedom that the pessimists have in mind here is not one distinct to them, but rather one widely shared in modern philosophy, namely, that freedom is something that can only be obtained by a conscious being. The capacity of reflective, reasoning beings to be self-directed—that is, to choose their own goals and to direct their efforts over time toward such goals—is the property we honor with the name of freedom. But since, for the pessimists, the more we strive to develop our (time-)conscious capacities, the more we will increase our discomfort in the world, the struggle for freedom must always have an ironic consequence for the goal of happiness. Socrates has it exactly backwards; it is only release from the burdens of consciousness, which ultimately means time-consciousness, that could purchase our happiness. But we are

no longer in a position to strike such a bargain, even if reason could be convinced to, in effect, commit suicide.

The absurdity of existence to the pessimist is thus contained in the idea that freedom and happiness oppose one another. Political philosophy therefore cannot be framed as a search for the terms upon which both can be obtained. Rather, it should start from the predicament of their mutual contradictoriness. There is no question that reflection on this predicament can lead pessimism to the edge of the darkest thoughts. Leopardi puts the following words in the mouth of the fictional Filippo Ottonieri: “Asked for what purpose men are born, he replied in jest: to learn how much more expedient it is, not to be born” (*OM* 145). And what Leopardi writes as a sort-of joke, is taken up in deadly earnest by later pessimists. Schopenhauer writes, “There is only one inborn error, and that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy . . . everything in life is certainly calculated to bring us back from that original error, and to convince us that the purpose of our existence is not to be happy” (*WWR* 2:634–35). This we may regard as the final irony to the pessimist’s history—that what life teaches us is not to want it. But this is only one element of the pessimist’s response to the absurdity of existence and not the last word.

Resignation or Its Opposite

Camus famously begins his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” with the proclamation that “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (*MS* 3). This sentiment, I would claim, marks out a particular feature of pessimistic philosophy, namely, its willingness to contend with the possibility that ordinary human life is so full of misery that it is perfectly sensible—rational even—to consider giving it up. In a philosophy that focuses on death as the inevitable limit of life and that considers us fundamentally out of place in the cosmos, this is not surprising. It is more surprising, perhaps, that so few nonpessimists have taken on Camus’ challenge to justify human life, as it were, from the ground up.³² Is it because the challenge is too

³² One prior exception to this generalization is William James’s early essay *Is Life Worth Living?* Its contents might give pause even to the most convinced optimists. While James shows a subtle appreciation for pessimistic literature (including a generous assessment of Leopardi), he appeals ultimately to a sphere of the unknown, which, he claims, we ought to affirm as the ground of meaningfulness, while acknowledging our ignorance of it. It is his analogy for this situation that is disturbing and that gives a sense of how far optimists have been willing to go at times to preserve the grounds for their optimism: he likens ordinary human life to that of a dog undergoing vivisection for the purpose of medical instruc-

great? If so, that, in a way, admits pessimism's insight. But even if there are other, better reasons for the evasion of this question by so much modern philosophy, there is perhaps some comfort to be taken in the fact that even the pessimists, in acknowledging the force of the question, do not simply give way to it. No pessimist recommends suicide (though Leopardi comes close on various occasions). Several do recommend something similar: a withdrawal from life into a hermitage of inactivity and (depending on the writer) pure thought or pure sensation. But others, Camus prominent among them, have found that their pessimism issues in an embrace of a vigorous and active life, one committed to political participation. While it will be left for later chapters to describe the reasons behind these choices in more detail, here I will try to indicate the texture of the various responses.³³

One way to conceive the divide is as follows: given that pessimists agree that our existence is to be principally one of suffering, one can then ask, should we or should we not desire to escape this suffering? There is no question of masochism here—all things being equal, suffering is something all pessimists regret. The question is, are the human properties that are concomitant with suffering such that we should endure what is necessary on their behalf? Or are these properties, valuable as they may be, simply an insufficient compensation? Notice here that there is also no question of hedonism—no pessimist simply adds up the pains and pleasures of life in deciding whether to go on with it.³⁴ All of them weigh pain and suffering against various other life-qualities. But while writers like Camus, Nietzsche, Unamuno, and Leopardi end up affirming life, others, like Rousseau and Schopenhauer, advocate a kind of retreat, if not into

tion. If, he argues, the dog could understand that its suffering served a higher educative purpose, "all that is heroic in him would religiously acquiesce" [!] (James 1896, 54). It is hard to know what to make of the idea that comparing our life-experience to an uncomprehended vivisection gives us grounds for affirming it. Indeed, James reconsidered his answer and when he returned to the topic in a later essay, *What Makes a Life Significant?* (1912), in which he gives much more ground to the pessimists than he did at first. (See also the fine, if brief, reflection on the question in Harries 1991.)

³³ It might be objected here that only those who embrace resignation are truly deserving of the label "pessimist." But this objection is, again, akin to insisting that every optimist is a Dr. Pangloss. There are varieties of pessimism as there are varieties of hopefulness. One would in any case still have to deal with the presence of a tradition that rejects progress while remaining focused on the effects of linear time, whether one called it pessimism or something else.

³⁴ To this generalization, alas, I must make one exception: Nietzsche abuses the pessimist Eduard von Hartmann precisely because he *does* make this pleasure/pain calculation against life. Hartmann, greatly influenced by Schopenhauer, was well-known in the late nineteenth century for his *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1869) and other works on pessimism, but is today largely forgotten. Nietzsche's criticisms of Hartmann will be discussed further in chapter 5.

death then into a highly detached simulacrum of it where suffering is minimized by means of self-isolation.

The tenor of the first response can be seen in Leopardi's "Dialogue of Nature and a Soul" in which the former says simply to the latter: "Live, and be great and unhappy." When the Soul inquires whether these two qualities are bound together, Nature replies that "the two things are more or less the same: for the excellence of souls brings greater urgency to [men's] lives; which in turn brings a greater feeling of their own unhappiness; which is as much as to say greater unhappiness" (*OM* 66). Nature does not shape things this way out of malice; indeed, she has nothing but benevolence towards the soul. The joke of the dialogue is that the Soul is not enamored of this benevolence and is far from eager to embrace life on these conditions—Nature must try to talk her into it. But it is clearly Leopardi's view that we *should* allow ourselves to be talked into it, though there is no overpowering reason that *must* convince us. Full of pain though human life may be, it has possibilities for achievement that are not available to any other form of life. To retreat from it is to allow oneself to be governed simply by pain and pleasure, like an animal. To choose a life "great and unhappy," moreover, is not to make a calculation that somehow one's quantity of greatness outweighs one's quantity of unhappiness (these quantities, in any case, could not be known in advance). It is rather to judge that the qualities unique to human existence, achieved in whatever degree, are worth striving for—they do not simply outweigh pain, they outrank it. Unchosen though human life may be initially, in our rejection of suicide or its surrogates we embrace human existence for its unique possibilities—in effect, for its unknown future—and leave behind all "economic" calculations, which ever show us the losers. Unamuno's similar analysis ends with the bare assertion: "I will not resign from life; I must be dismissed" (*TSL* 144).

Unamuno's defiance can also be read as a direct reply to Schopenhauer, who wrote: "Resignation . . . is like the inherited estate; it frees its owner from all care and anxiety for ever" (*WWR* 1:390). Schopenhauer's defense of resignation is doubtless the most famous of the second sort of response to pessimism. The suffering of this life, he contends, has no aim or purpose beyond that of teaching us not to want life. Consciousness is no compensation for suffering because all the projects of consciousness are themselves swept away by the continuous passage of time. While suicide solves nothing (it too is another futile attempt to seize happiness by positive action), we can minimize our suffering if we imitate the detachment from existence taught by various Eastern religions, above all Buddhism. The central attribute of Buddhism, for Schopenhauer, is its focus on self-denial, or more specifically, on denial of the will. Just as Leopardi argued that suffering is magnified by striving, so Schopenhauer believes that we

minimize suffering by stifling our own will. And as the stories of the Christian saints tell us, this is not something we can achieve once and for all, but something to be continuously labored at: “We therefore find in the lives of saintly persons that peace and bliss we have described, only as the blossom resulting from the constant overcoming of the will . . . for on earth no one can have lasting peace” (*WWR* 1:391). We already have something that approaches this practice, Schopenhauer believes, in the act of contemplating art, which removes us from the stream of life and puts us in touch with the timeless. Art recreates us as “will-less subject . . . i.e., a pure intelligence without aims or intentions” (*EA* 155). The feelings of pleasure that are associated with experiences of beauty are thus nothing positive in themselves, but simply a release from the suffering created by our willfulness.

From another perspective, one can view the divide within pessimism in terms of the question, is the suffering that comes with time-consciousness in any sense *justified*? This is what separates Schopenhauer from Nietzsche. For Schopenhauer, the pains of time-consciousness are a just punishment for our evil natures. Though he disdains religion, the story of the Fall does, to him, contain an eternal truth. Human misery is a fitting reward for our greedy, selfish constitution. That this reward is imposed automatically by an unconscious universe rather than by a knowing, vengeful God is of little concern to him. Indeed, it is better this way. In a passage that likely inspired Kafka’s parable *The Penal Colony*, for example, he wrote:

As a reliable compass for orienting yourself in life nothing is more useful than to accustom yourself to regarding this world as a place of atonement, a sort of penal colony. When you have done this you will order your expectations of life according to the nature of things and no longer regard the calamities, sufferings, torments and miseries of life as something irregular and not to be expected but will find them entirely in order, well knowing that each of us is here being punished for his existence and each in his own particular way. (*EA* 49)

In contrast, Nietzsche, who saw the world no less than did Schopenhauer as a place of continuous suffering, took the opposite tack: “You ought to learn the art of this-worldly comfort first; you ought to learn to laugh, my young friends, if you are hell-bent on remaining pessimists. Then perhaps, as laughers, you may someday dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil—metaphysics in front” (*BT* 26).

In Nietzsche’s approach, we come to value existence neither because it constitutes progress nor because it constitutes an appropriate punishment for our failings. Indeed, the very idea of a metaphysical “justification” for existence—Nietzsche calls it a “comfort”—is rejected. But just on ac-

count of the constant transformation, the continual reappearance of novelty, that is the consequence, along with constant decay and death, of a temporal existence—just on this basis we can find a way to embrace life. Hannah Arendt used the term “natality” (the property of being born, as opposed to “mortality”) to mark out this special attribute of the human condition. If human beings, among all the animals, are the only ones capable of appreciating the significance of death, above all their own death, it is equally true that they are the only animals capable of appreciating the significance of birth, above all their own birth. Each human being represents a new beginning, a new set of possibilities. As mortality marks our whole lives and not just the moment of our death, so too does natality continue to inspire us apart from the moment of birth. While nothing that humans do will endure forever, the very fact of their newness is, in Arendt’s term, a “miracle” that can be appreciated by itself, apart from any consequences it may bring. It is just such an appreciation that Nietzsche had in mind, I believe, as a “this-worldly comfort” that could be learned. We may even be moved by it, as Nietzsche suggests, to the point of laughter. But laughing at our existence is not an overcoming of pessimism. It is in fact the embrace of it.

A pessimist might initially seem like someone who bears the burden of expectations too thoroughly. But in reality the opposite is the case. *The pessimist expects nothing*—thus he or she is more truly open to every possibility as it presents itself. A pessimist can recognize and delight in the fact that we live in a world of surprises—surprises that can only strike the optimist as accidents and mishaps, disturbing as they do a preordered image of the world’s continuous improvement. This openness to the music of chance lends to the pessimist an equanimity that might strike an outsider as callous. The optimist, on the other hand, must suffer through a life of disappointment, where a chaotic world constantly disturbs the upward path he feels entitled to tread.

These, then, are the two poles of response available to a pessimistic diagnosis: resignation, on the one hand, and what I will call spontaneity, or futurity, on the other. The latter, I should be clear, is *not* a last-minute rejection of pessimism—not a back-door optimism that a dishonest theory leaves open for itself. Rather, it is a form of self-conduct that values the life we are given in spite of the pessimistic diagnosis of its condition. It is also, for that reason, the final proof that pessimism is not by itself to be equated with resignation or depression or cynicism or nihilism. In the face of great suffering, this kind of pessimist—what Nietzsche called a “Dionysian pessimist”—does not retreat, but rather advances willingly into hostile territory, not to die gloriously but instead to “live dangerously” and to die necessarily. Or, as Leopardi put it (with perhaps a bit too much self-importance), “I have the courage . . . to gaze intrepidly on

the desert of life . . . and to accept all the consequences of a philosophy that is grievous, but true" (*OM* 219).

This pessimistic spirit is a restless one, unlikely to be enamored of the status quo. Still, there remains the question of whether, or how far, the activity that such a pessimism stimulates can be properly called political. Does pessimism, in teaching limitations, so reduce the possibility for acting in concert with others or engaging in public projects that it effectively forecloses the political space? Here, I think, the answer is that it need not—but that this certainly has been a temptation that all of the pessimists have faced and to which some have given in. It will be the burden of chapter 4, and especially its pages on Camus, to combat the idea that pessimism must lead to political quietism. As I argue there, Camus was keen to point out the ways in which pessimism motivates and energizes political participation.³⁵

Just as importantly, pessimism helps us to rethink concepts of central concern to any political theory, most significantly freedom and individuality. Over the course of the book, and especially in the later chapters, I hope to articulate a concept of freedom (and an idea of the sort of individual who can experience that freedom) that, while rooted in the widely shared elements noted above, is unique to pessimism. It is a freedom that is not easily described by the vocabularies that currently dominate either political or philosophical discourses. Pessimistic freedom is not tied to historical outcomes—neither to national projects nor to personal life-plans. Nor can it be tied to institutional arrangements of noninterference or non-domination. Rather, pessimism envisions a democracy of moments for an individual who can neither escape time but is not imprisoned by it either. Freedom for the pessimists is not merely a status but an experience that a time-bound person can aspire to through a certain approach to life. As I will elaborate later, the pessimists have tended to see this approach exemplified in questing figures like Columbus or Don Quixote.

Optimism is to time what metaphysics is to space. It projects perfection elsewhere or, more properly, elsewhere. It teaches one to despise the here and now, which ultimately means to despise oneself. Most philosophy today, on the Left and the Right, considers itself to be postmetaphysical—that is, it abstains from condemning what exists from the standpoint of a transcendental realm of perfection. But if Nietzsche's diagnosis of the ori-

³⁵ Camus is not alone in taking this position. Besides the figures discussed in this book, Arendt, Foucault and Adorno, I believe, also hold it. But the issue itself can be adequately addressed through a discussion of Camus. Though undertaken from a very different perspective, Dana Villa's *Socratic Citizenship* (2001) is likewise concerned with revealing the political dimension to a life-practice often taken to be antipolitical; I am indebted to his example.

gin of metaphysics in *ressentiment* is correct, optimism must be understood as one more refuge for the tendency to revenge and self-hatred that authorized metaphysics. “The future,” Camus wrote, “is the only transcendental value for men without God” (*R* 166). Finally it is optimism, rather than pessimism, which is best understood as a negative emotion or disposition (resentment of the present or of time itself). The realm of perfection metaphysical philosophies projected onto a transcendent plane is projected by optimistic philosophies onto an ever-receding future. If we understand the move to postmetaphysical philosophy as a reflection of our growing humanism, we cannot consider this humanism complete until our thinking is postoptimistic as well—beyond the “idolatry of tomorrow,” as Cioran called it (*FT* 47). This is the path the pessimistic tradition has quietly explored for the last 250 years.

Three Kinds of Pessimism

The rest of this book will offer the reader a *tour d’horizon* of the pessimistic tradition. As I said above, although there are several propositions around which pessimists tend to converge, they arrive at these conclusions from a variety of perspectives. As a rough typology I divide pessimism into three basic sorts, which I call *cultural*, *metaphysical*, and *existential* pessimism, respectively. Although all these pessimisms ultimately derive from the problematic of linear time, we should not blind ourselves to the different avenues by which this problematic can be articulated. What is at issue here is not so much disagreements between different pessimists (although these, of course, occur) as the different *levels of explanation* they characteristically employ. In the succeeding chapters, I explore each type of pessimism in turn. For each chapter, I have chosen to focus on two or three figures. I do this both to show that the types I propose do not merely generalize from a single case as well as to explore the different responses, especially on the question of resignation, available to a pessimistic diagnosis.

As exemplars of cultural pessimism, I have chosen Rousseau and Leopardi. Their pessimism is cultural in the sense that, for them, the burdens of time appear particularly in the realms of mores and behaviors. Human society, in their conception, has necessarily developed along a negative historical dynamic that can be described and understood but not altered—because the tools we use to describe and understand it are the very engines of social decay itself. These authors do not, as is sometimes thought, simply assess the flaws of human nature nor, on the other hand, do they lament timeless facts about the universe. The misfortune of our species derives from something that occurs within historical time and that can only

be understood through historical consciousness. But the “history” with which they concern themselves is, I think, best described as cultural (or, perhaps, social). It has to do neither with particular events nor with individuals nor nations, but rather with the development of human mores and forms of consciousness.

In the chapter on metaphysical pessimism, I focus on Schopenhauer and Freud. Here the problem of time is closer to the surface. Both philosophers identified time as a fundamental structure of human experience and described it as a problem. History, by contrast, understood as the development of the species within time, although not entirely absent, is relatively unimportant. It is the relationship of the individual to the universal-metaphysical that is crucial. The burdens of a temporal existence fall nearly as heavily on the first humans as on the most recent, though, to be sure, our species was not really human until it became amenable to these burdens. 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 (which, to them, it does not).

The existential pessimists I discuss—Camus, Cioran, and Unamuno—occupy a position that is, in some ways, intermediate between these earlier two types—or rather, they combine elements from the preceding pessimisms into a distinct position. On the one hand, they reject the kind of metaphysical determinism to be found in the second group. They are concerned with the accumulation of experience within human history, yet their explanations aspire to a kind of universality that is more general than those proposed by the cultural pessimists. They see that our experience of time is something that itself has a history—but a history that we do not escape simply by taking notice of it. Thus to the question of whether the difficulties that pessimism points out are universal or modern, they answer “yes” in both cases. And this is just one of the many ironies or “contradictions” (understood here in a manner quite different from Marxism) with which, they suggest, it is necessary to make our peace.

Although these chapters will give some evidence for the recognition, by the later pessimists, of their kinship with the earlier ones, I will not lay a great deal of stress on this point. While it is important to know that Leopardi, for example, was consciously indebted to Rousseau and that Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in turn were similarly indebted to Leopardi, it is not my aim here to trace out such a history of influence. That would require a very different sort of book. In speaking of pessimism as a “tradition” I mean to indicate a series of authors who wrote on similar topics in a similar vein. Establishing the precise degree of influence they had on one another is a different question (a less important one, I think) than

establishing the conceptual content of what we can (retrospectively) see as their common project. When this common project is acknowledged, others can then explore the question of to what degree the pessimistic tradition was a self-conscious one.³⁶

It will not have escaped the reader's notice, at this point, that there is also a rough periodization that could be placed atop the typology I have proposed, where the three pessimisms succeed each other chronologically. To some extent, I think such a periodization is valid—there is, after all, a sense in which different forms of reason (or, if you like, styles of argument) have come in and out of fashion in philosophy generally. Thus, although a very gross generalization, it is not inaccurate to say that for pessimists and nonpessimists alike, the dominant style of philosophy in the eighteenth century was cultural, in the nineteenth century metaphysical, and in the twentieth century postmetaphysical. However, not only does this generalization misdescribe many important figures, in the case of the pessimists it is also to some extent an artifact of the figures I have chosen to focus on. If one expanded the list of pessimists, the chronology could be broken down rather quickly—but I believe the typology remains useful. For example, twentieth-century figures like Foucault and Heidegger (all their protestations aside) would probably best be characterized as cultural and metaphysical pessimists, respectively.

In any case, the typology is only proposed as a tool of organization and understanding. Personally, I find the similarities among the pessimists to be more important than the differences. But I should not hide, in all of this, that I do find some versions of pessimism more edifying than others, and that I find Nietzsche's the most edifying of all. For this reason, although I would group Nietzsche with the existentials, I have chosen to let his own name for his pessimism, "Dionysian pessimism" stand—and to discuss it in a separate chapter. Because Nietzsche was, to such a high degree, in dialogue with Schopenhauer, this chapter will also serve to describe some of the ways in which existential pessimism arose out of its predecessors. Following the Nietzsche chapter is one on Cervantes, which suggests that in *Don Quixote* we have an example of the sort of pessimistic world and pessimistic exemplar Nietzsche had in mind.

Finally, there are two further chapters: one on aphoristic writing in the

³⁶ This would be a very complicated and interesting question where one would have to weigh carefully the authors' own declarations against their patterns of admitting to influence and evidence of their education, reading habits, et cetera. Schopenhauer, for example, was happy to acknowledge that his pessimism continued that of earlier authors, although he claimed to be the first to perfect it philosophically. Nietzsche, on the other hand, was wont to disparage his indebtedness to previous figures in proportion to their standing. He thus emphasized his differences with Schopenhauer and maligned Rousseau while praising Leopardi, who was lesser-known and then primarily as a poet.

history of pessimism and another on pessimistic freedom that attempts to synthesize and focus some of what the preceding pages have set out. I will simply note here again that it can be no accident that so many pessimists have chosen to employ an aphoristic form of writing. As a preliminary matter, we can say that this style of composition is well-suited to harmonize with the antisystematic approach that pessimists largely adopt—but there is more than this to be learned from the form of aphorism, which is distinct from the maxim and epigram, on the one hand, and from the fragment and short essay on the other. Aphorisms are a literary form that aims to capture a particular human experience that I will describe at more length below. My effort to revive the pessimistic spirit and to give voice to its particular idea of freedom would have felt incomplete without attention to this subject. While it would have overtaxed my talents as a prosaist to have composed this entire book in aphoristic form—as I once considered doing—I hope that these pages will indicate why I do not view the study of pessimism as a mere historical expedition but as an encounter with a tradition as vital, more vital really, as any written about today.³⁷

Camus was doubtless correct in both the idea that it is wrong to link pessimism to discouragement—and that any refutation of this linkage would take too long. I hope not to have exceeded the reader's patience with this extended introduction. But the barriers (historical, philosophical, and psychological) to taking pessimism seriously are so many and so varied in nature that I thought it necessary to proceed as I have. Even so, I feel it is necessary to point out to my readers that, in what has come and what follows, I discuss many periods, thinkers, and texts in a relatively brief book, and will therefore undoubtedly fail to do justice to the subtleties of each and to the secondary literatures that have grown up around them. I can only beg the forbearance of specialists here and repeat that the task I have set myself is primarily inductive and synthetic, rather than deductive or analytic. Having failed to internalize the virtues of brevity exemplified by the aphorists and pessimists I discuss, I can only hope to have faithfully translated a portion of their wisdom.

³⁷ I believe this to be true even in the American context. Although, as I mentioned in the preface, pessimism is often particularly derided in the United States, I think it could easily be shown that there is a long tradition of American pessimism (including such figures as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Henry Adams, George Santayana, Lewis Mumford, and W.E.B. Du Bois, to name a few) that has as much claim on the cultural history of the nation as any other. I regret that I have not been able to pursue this thread of American intellectual history here and hope to do so at a later time.