Buddhism as Pessimism[*]

DAVID E. COOPER
Durham University, UK (david.cooper001@yahoo.com)

This paper defends the description of Buddhism—by Schopenhauer and many other nineteenth-century figures—as pessimistic. Pessimism, in the relevant sense, is a dark, negative judgment on the psychological, social, and moral condition of humankind and the prospects for its amelioration. After discussing texts in the Pali canon that provide prima facie support for the charge of pessimism, two familiar responses are considered. One emphasizes the positive aspects of the human condition recognized by the Buddha; the other emphasizes the prospect held out by him for the cessation of dukkha. *It is argued that neither response is persuasive—not least because of a failure to appreciate the gulf between ordinary "worldling" existence and that of the* arahant *or enlightened person. A final section discusses the description of the* arahant *as "transcending the world" and the human condition. If correct, this supports the charge of pessimism. This is because pessimism is a claim about the human condition, about our being-in-the-world, and cannot therefore be refuted by the prospect of a mode of being that transcends this condition.*

Key words: Buddhism; pessimism; misanthropy; *dukkha*; enlightenment

1 An Old Debate

In recent years, there has been a flurry of discussions—in books, magazines, and blogs—of the long-standing charge of pessimism against Buddhism. In nearly all these recent discussions, this charge is emphatically rejected. This is in sharp contrast to the nineteenth-century literature on Buddhism where, as one historian puts it, "for the greater part, Buddhism was viewed as a system of pessimism" (Almond 1988: 81).[1] The great Indologist Hermann Oldenberg, for example, declared that the "the Four Noble Truths give expression to Buddhist pessimism" (Oldenberg 1882: 212).[2] His judgment echoed those made earlier in the century by Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as by a host of Christian opponents of Buddhism.

It is no surprise to find the charge of pessimism being rejected nowadays by those western Buddhists whose image of Buddhism is one of a serene form of therapy, a sunny dispensation that offers a smooth path to happiness, mindfulness, and ecological awareness. (This image is nicely reflected in the titles advertised by an Australian publisher of Buddhist books: they include *Always Maintain a Joyful Mind*, *101 Moments of Joy and Insight*, and *5 Minute Mindfulness: Parenting*.) To many western Buddhists, it "might come as a shock" to learn that the Buddha made, "on the first glimpse," any pessimistic remarks at all (Gindin 2018: 3).[3]

Nor, perhaps, is it a surprise that the charge is rejected or ignored by many Asian Buddhists for whom the promotion of a cheerful message is a form of "skilful means" for attracting people to their religion. They are following an earlier generation of monks who had been persuaded by Christian missionaries that, as one Methodist preaching in Ceylon put it, Buddhism might strike people as too pessimistic "to take the world captive" (quoted in Harris 2006: 104).[4]

[*] I am grateful to Ian James Kidd for sending me a draft of his paper, "The Bright-Siding of Buddhist Ethics" and for his comments on my paper, from both of which I have benefited—as I have also done from comments by Simon P. James and two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of World Philosophies*.

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More surprising is the way many serious scholars of Buddhism, very well aware that "on the first glimpse" the Buddha expressed pessimistic views, have followed Walpola Rahula's peremptory dismissal of the charge of pessimism in his influential *What the Buddha Taught* (Rahula 1978: 17).[5] It is odd, for example, to find the immensely erudite Nyanaponika Thera declaring that the Buddha "is anything but a pessimist" immediately after explaining how, for the Buddha, this world is a place of "misery," a "vast ocean of suffering" in which beings "swim around" (Nyanaponika 1994: 232).[6]

Given the recent flurry of discussion, it is timely to revisit the charge of pessimism and examine the bright-siding perception of Buddhism that currently prevails. But why should the issue matter? For one thing, it usefully gathers around it a number of topics and themes in Buddhism that are normally treated quite independently—wisdom and beauty, for example, or nirvana and the householder's life. Second, there is value in the therapeutic shock to many western Buddhists of raising the very possibility of Buddhist pessimism, for intellectual humility requires them at least to "engage with […] uncomfortable modes of thinking" that challenge their own (Wigder 2018: 1).[7]

The most important reason, however, is that Buddhism is left vulnerable unless the charge of pessimism is seriously addressed. This is because the word "pessimism" is popularly understood these days as a pejorative term. A pessimist is someone not to be, someone with a one-sided view of the world that encourages hopelessness and inaction. To hold that Buddhism is pessimistic, therefore, will generally be taken as a criticism of the religion. Hence, followers and sympathizers of Buddhism should feel compelled to respond to the charge. Either they must argue against the charge, rather than airily dismiss it, or, like Schopenhauer (2007: 365ff),[8] deny that it constitutes an objection to Buddhist teaching.

How the discussion and argument goes depends, of course, on the way the issue is understood. And, here, there are two distinct possibilities. One is that the disagreement is about the notion of pessimism; the other is that it is about the interpretation of the Buddha's words. One person may accept and a second reject the charge of pessimism, despite their common understanding of Buddhism, because they understand pessimism differently. Alternatively, they may agree on a definition of pessimism, but differ as to their understanding of the Buddha's dispensation.

I'll begin with rebuttals of the charge that don't rely on questionable interpretations of Buddhist teachings, but rather on characterizations of pessimism that, I suggest, are irrelevant to what is really at stake. I'll then proceed to rebuttals that rest on what, in my judgment, are misunderstandings of the Buddha's discourses. In effect, then, I'll be agreeing with Schopenhauer that Buddhism is, in the most relevant sense, pessimistic. As it happens, I also agree with his view that this is to Buddhism's credit, not its detriment, but this is not something I argue for in the present paper.

2 Pessimism

When pessimism is understood in certain ways, it is obvious that the charge of pessimism is mistaken. Consider, first, the idea that "to be a pessimist is to see the worst in things, or to believe that the worst will happen" (Treanor 2021: 139).[9] This is roughly what the term meant when it was coined, early in the eighteenth century, to name the opposite of Leibniz's doctrine that ours is the best of all possible worlds. Clearly, however, it is not what people generally now understand by the term. A pessimist need not think ours is the worst of all possible worlds: it is enough to think it is very bad indeed. More importantly, there is no reason to think the Buddha regarded the world as the worst possible one.

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Consider, next, the notion of pessimism implicit in Rahula's well-known denial—repeated by countless later authors—of Buddhist pessimism. Buddhism, he writes, "is neither pessimistic nor optimistic […] it is realistic […] it looks at things objectively" (Rahula 1978: 17). The popularity of this claim is strange, for it rests on a definition of pessimism that guarantees its falsity. *However* terrible the world and the human condition, a correct, objective account of it will not be pessimistic, since pessimism is being defined in contrast to truth and objectivity. On this definition one cannot sensibly ask, of a teaching one agrees with, whether it is pessimistic (or optimistic), since to agree with it—to regard it as true or "realistic"—is to thereby exclude its being pessimistic (or optimistic). It is being defined, in effect, as meaning *unduly* pessimistic. No Buddhist therefore could regard the Buddha's teaching as pessimistic, for by accepting the teaching they implicitly rule out its being pessimistic.

Consider, finally, a very common use and understanding of the term—the one illustrated by the familiar example of seeing a glass half-empty rather than half-full. In this example, there is no disagreement as to the fact of the matter: half of the wine has been drunk, half remains. The difference between the pessimist and the optimist is one of attitude, mood, or reaction—the former depressed by how much he's drunk, the latter pleased by how little he's drunk.

Nineteenth-century scholars, like Oldenberg, were fond of attributing to Buddhists such enervated feelings and dejected moods as "world-weariness" (Oldenberg 1882: 220). No doubt some followers of Buddhism, like those of other religions, are disposed to such feelings and moods. But there is no evidence that the Buddha himself and his disciples were prone to dejection, torpor, and regret. On the contrary, not only were they people of energy and commitment, but the texts explicitly and frequently condemn torpor, sloth, and the like as serious impediments to enlightenment.

More importantly, the charge of pessimism in the half-empty wine glass sense is irrelevant to the issue at hand—namely the pessimism or otherwise of the Buddha's *teachings*. Schopenhauer was, apparently, a rather gloomy man, but even if he had been as happy as a lark, his philosophy would still be a deeply pessimistic one. Likewise, it is not the Buddha's personal character that concerns us, but his account of the world and the human condition.

Identifying the senses of "pessimism" just discussed helps us to expose the sense that is relevant to the debate about the charge, the sense that makes the debate an important one. Pessimism in the relevant sense is a dark, negative judgment on the human condition, including its moral condition, and on the prospects for amelioration of this condition. Better, perhaps, it is a "philosophical sensibility" that gets expressed in such judgments, for philosophical pessimists differ as to the precise verdict they pass on our condition (Dienstag 2006: xi).[10]

This is the sense in which such nineteenth-century figures as Giacomo Leopardi, Schopenhauer, and Eduard von Hartmann called themselves pessimists, and the sense in which the term was then retrospectively applied to Michel de Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is the sense, too, in which twentieth-century writers like Emil Cioran are universally counted as pessimists, as well as the one that several contemporary philosophers, including David Benatar, intend when describing themselves as pessimists.

Crucially, moreover, it is this philosophical pessimism that negative Victorian verdicts on Buddhism typically registered. What made Buddhism pessimistic were its alleged doctrines—that "existence is a curse," for example, or that "there is no good, but all is evil in human existence" (quoted in Harris 2006: 104–5). For Oldenberg, recall, Buddhist pessimism was contained in the Four Noble Truths. And it is charges of such philosophical pessimism that Rahula, Nyanaponika, and many others claim, rightly or not, to be rebutting.

Our question, then, is whether the verdict of Buddhism on the human condition is pessimistic in the sense indicated. Before addressing it, a couple of points of clarification are needed. First, I have posed the question as one about the human condition. We might, instead,

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speak of the human world, the human form of life, or human culture, but not, I suggest, of human *nature*. To do so would invite speculations that are not germane to the question—ones about human biology, for example, or about human beings in a pre-cultural "state of nature," or about the dispositions of very young children. The pessimist's verdict is on human existence as it has evolved in recorded history, not on what we were like in a pre-cultural "state of nature." It is through observation of and reflection on how human beings live their lives in cultures as we know them, and not through biological, historical, or psychological speculation that assessment of the verdict should be made. It matters not at all to that assessment, for example, whether in a state of nature we were Rousseau's friendly, peaceful savages or Thomas Hobbes's nasty, brutish ones. The Buddha's remarks on human existence concern human beings as he found them, not as they might conceivably once have been or might become.

Second, I have posed the question as one about Buddhism. But Buddhism, of course, is a very broad church in which competing schools of thought—Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, and so on—have emerged. I confine my discussion almost entirely to the Buddha's teachings as recorded in the Pali canon, especially the collections of *sutta*s or discourses. This is not to pretend that there exists an undisputed core of Buddhist doctrine articulated in the canon. Indeed, it is with one important dispute about the Buddha's teaching that we're presently concerned. But that doesn't prevent the attempt to identify in these texts an appraisal of the human condition. Nor does it prevent the rejection, as reliable interpretations of the texts, of seemingly more optimistic appraisals of the human condition proclaimed by some later Mahāyāna schools of Buddhism. People who worry that using the term "Buddhism" at all suggests the existence of a monolithic body of doctrine may, if they prefer, substitute for the term in what follows something like "the Buddha's teachings as they may be reasonably identified in the Pali canon."

3 *Dukkha*

Are the Buddha's teachings, then, pessimistic in the relevant sense? In this section I show how initially compelling is the charge of pessimism. To do this, however, it's important, first, to note and criticize a familiar tendency among those who reject the charge. This is to focus their discussion almost entirely upon brief statements of the Four Noble Truths. In their most abbreviated form, these are the truths, announced in the Buddha's First Discourse, of *dukkha*, the origin of *dukkha,* the cessation of *dukkha*, and the way or path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* (see SN 56.11). Traditionally translated as "suffering," *dukkha* is said by the Buddha to accompany birth, illness, aging, death, unpleasant experience, not getting what one wants, and much else. More generally, it is an aspect of the five aggregates or factors (*khandhas*)—like feeling and perception—that make up the cognitive and affective system we call "mind." *Dukkha*, in effect, is the stamp of human experience of the world. (For the purposes of this paper, I ignore the point that *dukkha* is also said to mark the lives of other beings, such as animals and "hungry ghosts.")

It is right, of course, to draw attention to the Noble Truths, whether or not one rejects the charge of pessimism. And right to point out, as those who reject the charge generally do, that "suffering" is an inadequate translation of "*dukkha*." Not getting what one wants, for example, does not always cause suffering in any literal sense of the term. Nor could it be literally true to regard the whole of our experience—the whole operation of our cognitive and affective system—as one of suffering. Having rejected the translation of "*dukkha*" as "suffering," these commentators then go on to propose other terms that supposedly capture its meaning. Candidates include "dis-ease," proneness to anxiety and insecurity, the ever-present *possibility* of suffering, and—perhaps the most popular—"unsatisfactoriness." One commentator even proposes that, when the Buddha calls our lives *dukkha*, he simply means that they are "less than the ideal" or "not fully satisfactory" (Gowans 2003: 32, 121).[11]

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If it is in such terms that *dukkha* should be understood, then it is a short step to rejecting the charge of pessimism. That we are often liable to anxiety, that suffering is a possible outcome of things we do, that life is never fully satisfactory—these may be unfortunate aspects of our lot as human beings, but they surely do not warrant a bleak, negative verdict on our condition, physical, mental, or moral. They are aspects that may be subsumed under the heading of *dukkha*, but if this were all that *dukkha* amounts to, it would seem hysterical to judge, as many philosophical pessimists have, that it would be better for us never to have been (see Benatar 2009).[12]

The response, however, to this way of rejecting the charge of pessimism is that the proffered translations of "*dukkha*" are too anodyne: they fail to convey how negative the Buddha's verdict on the human condition is. "Suffering" may not be the right word, in all contexts, for what *dukkha* is, but at least it has the merit of indicating that there is something seriously bad about our condition. To appreciate the harshness of the Buddha's verdict, it is necessary to consider a much wider range of texts than those canonical statements of the Noble Truths around which the debate about pessimism usually revolves. The first two Truths—those of *dukkha* and its origin—can then be regarded as condensing the rich, complex observations on the human condition made in these texts. When proper attention is paid to them, it becomes understandable why the Buddha sympathized with one of his chief disciples for "abhorring" the world and being "disgusted" by it (Sn 4.16).

(1) To begin with, there are the many powerful similes or metaphors that the Buddha employs to graphically convey the magnitude of *dukkha*. The most famous is found in the Fire Sermon. Our senses, our minds, our emotions are all burning "with the fire of lust […] hatred […] delusion […] birth, aging and death […] with sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair" (SN 35: 28). Elsewhere, it is not fire but flood water in which we are hopelessly immersed. Or our lives are compared to that of a leper who desperately scratches at his sores, thereby getting momentary relief but also making the wounds worse (MN 75: 17). Or to that of a dog who, chained up, frenziedly tries to escape but succeeds only in revolving around the same pillar (SN 22: 99).

There are two things to note about these similes. First, their purpose is to prompt a recognition of the human condition as something far more desperate than merely "unsatisfactory" or "less than ideal." Second, their aim is not simply to convey the extent and depth of *dukkha*, but to indicate that the prime responsibility for this lies with us—with our lust, hatred, and other vices and failings. The comparison of lust and hatred with fire or flood is further intended, of course, to emphasize the immense power these exert over us.

(2) A second body of texts are those that expose and catalogue the immense range of these vices and failings. The Pali canon contains perhaps the most elaborate and perceptive taxonomy of these that has ever been attempted. English names of the groups into which our vices and failings are collected vary, but among the most frequently encountered are "cankers," "taints," "hindrances," "afflictions," "perversions," "fetters," and "unwholesome roots." Among the moral and other failings that belong in one or more of these groups are lust, craving, greed, envy, niggardliness, cowardice, laziness, hard-heartedness, willful ignorance, self-delusion, readiness to accept self-serving beliefs, and indulgence in biased perceptions and conceptions.

Attempts are occasionally made to lend more system to the list. Bhikkhu Bodhi, for example, divides these "defilements of the mind" into those that respectively bring about bad behavior, impede meditation, and "maintain bondage to the cycle of rebirths" (Bodhi 2012: 41–4).[13] What matters to us, however, is not their classification, but recognition of the prominence and centrality of these defilements in the Buddha's account of the human condition. This recognition is especially important because of the neglect or marginalization of the taints, cankers, and so on in most contemporary, especially western, presentations of Buddhism. The indexes of two recent books on Buddhism on my shelves do not contain a single reference to them. By contrast, the index of, say, *The Numerical Discourses* contains far more references to greed, lust, and

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deluded views than they do to such staples of contemporary attention as compassion, generosity, and non-harming.

"One who sees dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) sees the Dhamma" (MN 28: 28). The process of dependent origination is a complex of interacting and often mutually reinforcing factors that constitute our lives and bind us to the cycle of rebirths. The relevant point, in the present context, is the crucial role played by vices and failings in fueling this process. The chain of causes includes ignorance and delusion, craving and clinging, along with feelings, motives, and cognitive tendencies that include all those defilements I listed earlier, such as envy and intellectual prejudice. When the Buddha presents the process backwards, as it were—by explaining what must be abandoned or overcome if the cycle of rebirths is to end—all of these vices and failings are included. If we are no longer to "burn," the fires of lust, greed, hatred, delusion, and the rest must be put out. The term "nirvana," recall, derives from one meaning to snuff out or extinguish. The defilements, then, cannot be ignored or marginalized in an account of the Buddha's teachings: they are essential to it.

(3) It is important to recognize how, for the Buddha, mental defilements are interwoven with the social, economic, and cultural contexts that they both help to shape and are in turn reinforced and modified by. So, a third set of texts to attend to are those that describe the interplay between vices or failings and socio-economic processes.

Relevant here are the reference to the "eight worldly conditions" (*lokadhamma*) that "keep the [human] world turning around," and around which this world turns (AN 8:6). These conditions include gain and loss, fame and disrepute, and praise and blame. The claim is that social intercourse is dominated by obsessions with making gains and massaging egos. Other texts chart the ways in which such failings as envy and niggardliness give rise to a culture of hate and conflict, in which further self-centered desires and prejudices are then encouraged (DN 21). We learn how sensual desire leads people to strive to own property, the result of which is "a mass of suffering visible in this present life." If a person fails to acquire property, he is distraught, while if he succeeds, he lives in fear of losing it. These same sensual desires, moreover, give rise to disputes, violence, and crime (MN 13: 8ff).

While these effects on society are sometimes presented in a linear fashion, we should recognize that the process here is a dynamic, circular one. Our personal defilements help to produce social and cultural conditions that cause "a mass of suffering" and also serve to reinforce those failings. The envy and need for fame that motivate someone to acquire wealth help to inspire further envy of those who are even wealthier and more famous. The conflicts this gives rise to then whip up further cravings, for revenge, say, that in turn lead to further suffering—and so on.

The texts that expose the defilements of the mind and of culture and society indicate that the Buddha was, in an important sense, deeply misanthropic. The sense in question is not the popular one of hating or disliking one's fellow human beings. It is the sense, rather, that Kant identifies: a negative moral appraisal of humankind, of the "falsehood, ingratitude, injustice [and] puerility," among much else, that give rise to "all imaginable evils" (Kant 1952: 129).[14]

It is important to emphasize the misanthropic character of the Buddha's account of our condition, since it strengthens the charge of pessimism. For the misanthrope, the grimness of our situation—*dukkha*—is largely down to us. It is not fate or bad luck that is responsible for this "mass of suffering," but our own desires, delusions, and unwholesome form of life. As such, little can be expected of humankind by way of extracting itself, in the foreseeable future, from its present condition.

(4) A final ingredient in the *sutta*s we should attend to belongs, like the similes considered earlier, to the rhetoric of Buddhism—namely, the many references to liberation, deliverance, release, escape, and refuge. A typical text is that in which an *arahant*—an enlightened person (generally a monk) who will not be reborn—is said to be liberated through having lived a spiritual life and destroyed the taints and fetters (MN 73: 6). Another is one in which the Buddha insists

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that there is such a thing as "escape from the world" with which we are rightly "disenchanted" (AN 3: 102).

For our purposes, the important matter to note about these texts is how very badly chosen their rhetoric would be unless the full gravity of *dukkha* is recognized. We don't, in everyday conversation, use metaphors of liberation or release from situations that are merely unsatisfactory or less than ideal. Unless *dukkha* is a good deal more terrible than those anodyne glosses on it suggest, the Buddha's rhetoric would come across as hysterical.

This point is appreciated by Nyanaponika, who, despite his rejection of the pessimism charge, is fully aware of what is presupposed by talk of taking refuge in the Buddha, the dhamma, and the community of Buddhist monks. "The need for taking refuge," he writes, presupposes recognition that "this world of ours really [is] a place of danger and misery," in which "the vicissitudes of life give no chance of maintaining even the lowest degree of happiness [or] moral worth" (Nyanaponika 1994: 232).

The rhetoric of liberation and refuge point, then, to a much darker vision of the human condition than bright-siding interpretations of Buddhism allow. To bring out that vision is, more generally, the purpose of focusing on the texts I have discussed in this section. The effect is to make the charge of pessimism look significantly more compelling than is admitted by those who cursorily dismiss it. The question is whether there are, nevertheless, good grounds for rejecting the charge.

But, before turning to that, two brief comments on the texts. First, it is very difficult to reconcile the accounts of *dukkha* that I've cited with the proposal that the Noble Truths are really just therapeutic instructions or injunctions designed to enable us to live better, or to properly confront our anxieties—that they are, in effect, not "truths" at all.[15] It seems to me to be clear that, whatever the Buddha's therapeutic objective, the accounts of *dukkha* are what they look to be—descriptions of the human condition. And if they are not understood in that way, it is then unclear what the need for therapy would be.

Second, there are a number of texts I might have cited that refer to the "cycles" or "aeons" (*kappas*) through which the universe passes (AN 7: 156). These cycles include immensely long periods of "world-dissolution" during which the lifespan of human beings shrinks dramatically, and "moral conduct will completely disappear," while promiscuity and violence increase (DN 26: 19–21). We are, it's said, either in such a period of dissolution or soon will be. For many writers, the doctrine of temporal cycles belongs to the "hocus pocus" of the religion. Be that as it may, it is not a doctrine that nowadays resonates, even with many Buddhists. That is one reason for not making the charge of pessimism rely on it. Another reason is that those who have brought this charge, including Buddhism's nineteenth-century Christian critics, didn't base their case on this cosmological belief. The texts I have discussed in this section are sufficient to establish the plausibility of the charge of pessimism. The further, cosmological texts are not required additionally, although they will strengthen the charge in the minds of those Buddhists who do accept what these texts affirm.

4 Responding to the Charge (1): Accentuating the Positive

In this and the following section, I consider two of the most frequently made replies to the charge of pessimism. I argue that they are unconvincing and that this is partly because they ignore a theme in the Buddha's teachings to which I turn in a later section (section 6).

The first familiar reply is that the charge of pessimism ignores the positive features that the Buddha finds in the everyday human experience. The emphasis here may be on positive aspects of the world, such as friendship and beauty. "To awaken our mind" to beauty, according to a Sri Lankan teacher of meditation, is "why we are getting up in the morning" and meditating

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(Samararatne 2011: 61).[16] Or the emphasis may be upon positive mental states, such as happiness and pleasure. The Buddha encourages joy, writes one Buddhist monk, and "joy is hardly pessimistic" (Dhammananda 1973: 126).[17] In what follows I'll talk, simply, of positive human experience: friendship and beauty may not exactly be experiences, but it is our experience of them that allegedly enhances life and so militates against the charge of pessimism.

If replies of this type are to have any force, it must not be directed against a straw-man version of pessimism. It is easy, for instance, to dismiss the charge if pessimism is defined as the insistence that there is "nothing but suffering and pain" (Shi 2016: 28).[18] But no philosophical pessimist, not even von Hartmann or Leopardi, has denied that people sometimes experience friendship and beauty, happiness and pleasure. What the pessimist does insist, however, is that the negative aspects of our world and experience are profound, thoroughly entrenched, and ubiquitous. It is on this, according to the charge, that the Buddha also insists.

It might seem that the obvious strategy to secure the charge is to establish that it is hate, ugliness, pain, and viciousness that preponderate, and not love, beauty, pleasure, and virtue—to establish, that is, that *dukkha* outweighs positive experience. Now the Buddha certainly did think that we seriously underestimate the scale and depth of those negative aspects. This is why, for example, he encourages meditation on the foulness of the human body. Meditating on the body serves to reduce our erotic craving, not only because its contents—pus, phlegm, and so on—repel us, but because mindfulness of them reveals the impermanence and fragility of the objects of our desires (MN 10: 10). (This is a meditation, predictably, that is rarely mentioned by Buddhist bright-siders.) It is tempting, as well, to construe the story about the young Gotama's first encounters with the world outside his father's palace as an allegory for our blindness to harsh features of our condition (AN 3: 39). The three "messengers" that the young man encounters beyond the palace walls—disease, old age, death—are ones that most of us are all too ready to put out of mind until they are already upon us. A striking tendency, parenthetically, of western bright-siders is to regard as pathological or depressive prolonged attention to bleak truths that, for the Buddha, are essential to right understanding and enlightenment (see Obeyesekere 2018: ch. 5).[19]

The Buddha, however, does not produce a Bentham-like "hedonic calculus," measuring pleasures against pains, friendship against hate, or beauty against ugliness, and then calculate that *dukkha* tips the scales. Instead, he raises two more interesting considerations in relation to the seemingly positive features of everyday experience. The first is that these features are inextricably implicated in the processes—mental, social, cultural—that are productive of *dukkha* and bind beings to the cycle of rebirths.

That the Buddha devotes several discourses to advising ordinary people—"householders," "uninstructed worldlings"—on how to improve their lot, demonstrates his belief that some people can achieve greater mundane happiness and welfare than they currently enjoy (see, e.g., AN 8: 54 and DN 31). In other discourses, where the purpose is not prudent advice on improvement, it is made clear that even seemingly honorable or innocent affections and enjoyments are caught up in the mesh of *dukkha*. For example, the Buddha gets a village headman to recognize that it is precisely his affection for his son and wife, and his friendship with fellow villagers, that renders him so liable to "sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair." The message is that suffering inevitably arises out of mundane desires and emotions, whatever these may be (SN 42: 11).

Consider, too, the enjoyment of beauty. There are texts addressed to laypeople in which beauty sounds like a legitimate object of desire. Queen Mallikā, for example, is told that she will be reborn beautiful if she lives without anger and resentment (AN 2: 197). Elsewhere, however, stern warnings are issued against a preoccupation with sensual beauty. "The sign of the beautiful," especially of a woman, "is the nutriment for sensual desire" (SN 46: 2), and thereby of "greed, hate and delusion" (see Ñāṇamoli 1991: 752 n.14).[20] Even the beauties of the natural world must be regarded with circumspection, for they can distract from what is really going on. This was the point

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made by a Thai monk who, when a colleague of mine admired the beauty of the monastery garden, replied, "No, No! Here, too, everything is suffering."

Quite generally, our desires, affections, and attachments—even ones usually regarded as benign—provide fuel for *dukkha* and bondage. The Buddha puts the point in terms of gratification and danger. Mundane pleasures and joys provide gratification in the world, but this is precisely where the danger lies—one that can be averted only by "escape from the world" (AN 3: 10). One model for the rhythm of mundane life is that of the leper, mentioned earlier, who itches, scratches, itches, scratches… We desire things and experience gratification when we get them, but this relief from unsatisfied desires—like that from scratching a sore—only serves to augment our desires.

We cannot, then, separate out mundane positive experiences from *dukkha* and then calculate which outweighs the other. This is because, for all the momentary happiness they furnish, positive experiences are inextricably enmeshed in the webs of desire, attachment, satisfaction, frustration, self-deception, fear, and disappointment that define the human condition.

There's a second consideration that serves to counter the "positive features" response to the charge of pessimism. In the preceding paragraphs I have qualified references to human lives and experiences by inserting "mundane," "worldly," "everyday," or "ordinary." This is in order to honor the distinction made between us ordinary "uninstructed worldlings" or "householders" and people (nearly always monks) who are either enlightened or well on the path to being so. These are often referred to as "instructed" or "noble disciples" (e.g., SN 36: 6). When this distinction is made, the householder's life is compared unfavorably with that of the disciple. An early text puts it bluntly: "if one renounces household life […] and leads a pure and celibate life, this is the worthiest jewel," for the householder "can never resemble the monk" in mindfulness and virtue (Sn: v 274). The disciple is on a "noble (*ariya*) quest," the householder on a "common (*anariya*, "unnoble") quest."

The point is not simply that the disciple's life is superior, but that, through its conformity to dhamma, it is of a different order. The implication is that the apparently positive aspects of the householder's existence—friendship, beauty, happiness, and so on—are barely commensurable with the higher forms that these take in the case of the noble disciple. So great is the gap that seen from the elevated heights of the disciple—who is compared to a swan soaring above the earth (Sn: v 221)—the positive aspects of householder life appear hardly positive at all. Indeed, "what is called happiness is called suffering" by the noble disciple (Sn: v 761). Let's consider the three aspects just mentioned in turn.

While the Buddha advises householders to have friends, not enemies, this is primarily for pragmatic, contractual reasons. If I look after my friend's property when he is away, he will do the same for me (DN 31). Contrast this with his claim that "good friendship" among monks is "the entire spiritual life." Whatever that means exactly, it is clear that this friendship consists in mutual cultivation of the path to enlightenment. Without reliance on others equally intent on enlightenment—on developing dispassion, right mindfulness, and so on—a monk would be unable to reach the end of the noble eightfold path (SN 45: 2). In comparison with such true friendship, the friendship between householders looks pale and pedestrian, useful rather than sublime.

Comparable remarks are made about beauty. The beauty enjoyed by the worldling is liable to arouse craving and is woven into a network of desires. By contrast, the Buddha's answer to the question "What is beauty for a monk?" refers to his "perfection in behavior" and unerring perception of faults in himself or others (DN 26: 28). In the verses of the female elders, one nun, Subhā, is described as going "forth full of faith, beautiful by reason of the true doctrine" (Thi: v 363). The "beautiful factors" listed in the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* (chapter 2) include the mindfulness, tranquility, faith, and rectitude achieved by the disciple. The beauty possessed by and appreciated by disciples is, then, of a different order from that which figures in householder life—a beauty free from involvement with desires that "infect the mind" (MN 5: 6). It's not quite right,

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however, to say that the only true beauty, for the Buddha, is an "inner" or "moral beauty." This would be to ignore the importance attached to outward manifestations, available to the senses, of inner or moral states (see Cooper 2017 and Samuels 2010).[21] True or higher beauty, like Subhā's or indeed the Buddha's, is what shines forth in the grace, tranquil comportment and mindful demeanor of a person released from the mundane.

Consider, finally, some typical passages about happiness, pleasure, and other apparently positive mental states. "Blissful is dispassion for the world and the overcoming of sensual desires," declares one text, "but the subduing of the conceit 'I am' is truly the supreme bliss" (Ud 2.2). Here is a blunt indication of a higher happiness available only to the disciple who has overcome not only ordinary desires but any tendency to view things from a self-centered perspective. Other texts go into considerable detail when contrasting the happiness of the layperson with that of someone on the path to enlightenment. It is the difference between "sensual happiness" and that of "renunciation," between "worldly happiness" and "spiritual happiness," between "tainted" and "untainted" happiness, and between "pleasurable happiness" and that of equanimity. In each case, it is the latter happiness that is "foremost" (AN 2: 7).

The point, once again, is that the difference between householder and disciple is one of kind, not degree, and that from the disciple's perspective, the happiness of the householder is barely positive at all. Better, no doubt, than misery, but no less entangled in the process of *dukkha*. The *arahant's* happiness, moreover, is not something the householder can even approach, for an important aspect of the former is precisely the knowledge of having been liberated from lust, hatred, and delusion (SN 36: 31).

Calling attention, then, to the allegedly positive aspects of mundane life does not succeed in repelling the charge of Buddhist pessimism. These aspects are not innocent, for they belong to and fuel the very psychological and social processes that make this condition one of *dukkha*. Moreover, in comparison with the genuinely positive aspects of the noble disciple's life, they cannot be recognized without qualification as positive at all. After all, the friendship, beauty, and happiness of the disciple's life are defined by way of contrast with those that figure in the worldling's life. No disciple mentioned in the texts ever looks back on the household life he or she once led with a nostalgic sense of loss.

5 Responding to the Charge (2): "The Cessation of Suffering"

Whereas the first response to the charge of pessimism focused upon the first two Noble Truths, an equally familiar one focuses on the last two—"the cessation of *dukkha*" and "the path" leading to this. Perhaps, the response goes, the human condition, for the Buddha, is as bad as the charge alleges, but since he also holds out the possibility of the cessation of *dukkha*, he cannot be accused of pessimism. Pessimism, as we characterized it, comprises not only a negative judgment on the human condition, but on the prospects for any significant, foreseeable improvement in it. According to the response now under examination, the Buddha's teaching does not contain that second clause.

Almost every author who rejects the charge of pessimism makes this response. Pessimistic portraits of Buddhism "forget" that the Buddha "teaches the way to end suffering" (Dhammananda 1973: 125). Since the Buddha affirms that there is refuge from *dukkha*, he is "anything but a pessimist" (Nyanaponika 1994: 233). Remarks like these are often accompanied by the claim that human beings possess a capacity for self-mastery or self-determination that, properly exercised, leads to the cessation of *dukkha*. A nineteenth-century enthusiast refers to "the superb optimism of the Buddhist, who believes that man can be his own saviour" (quoted in Almond 1988: 82). One reason Rahula rejects the charge is because, he alleges, the Buddha attributed the achievement of enlightenment solely to "human endeavour and intelligence." "Every

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man," he continues, "has within himself the potentiality of becoming a Buddha" (Rahula 1978: 1). This linking of self-determination with the cessation of *dukkha* is not surprising. In the absence of belief in a powerful god, a cosmic process, or a stroke of luck that could change our condition for the better, it's hard to see how the optimist could rely on anything except human endeavor. This link is important: it means that to exaggerate our power of self-determination is also to exaggerate the potential of human beings for enlightenment, for escape from bondage.

To show why the rebuttal of the charge of pessimism based on the second pair of Noble Truths is uncompelling, I draw attention to four themes in the texts and then show how these militate against the rebuttal.

(1) Earlier we encountered the battery of similes and analogies that the Buddha uses to emphasize the seriousness of the human condition. Our lives are burning, like a house or grass on fire; it's as if we are caught in a whirlpool or are being swept away on a flood tide. The point of recalling these similes is to note the damage they do to a conception of ourselves as self-determining, self-mastering beings. An important element in the Buddha's attack on the "conceit 'I am'" is rejection of the inflated image most of us have of being masters of our lives (SN 22: 89). Certainly all mastery is lost if one is reborn as a non-human being: for it is then only "by chance" that one might "regain the human state" (SN 56: 47–8).

(2) That last quotation comes from a sutta that exemplifies a second theme—the great length of time and "exertion" required for liberation from *dukkha*. The chance of reaching this goal is as bad as that of a blind sea turtle, who surfaces every hundred years, inserting its head into small yoke afloat on the ocean. "For such a long time, monks," the Buddha explains, "you have experienced suffering, anguish and disaster," for the cycle of rebirths is "without discoverable beginning" (SN 15: 1). Even the "stream-enterer," on the path to liberation after eliminating various "fetters," may need another seven lives before the cycle ends. Many Buddhists, of course, do not nowadays endorse the doctrine of rebirth, but without rebirth, there is only a tiny chance for an ordinary person to become an *arahant*, the fully enlightened person in whom all the fetters have been destroyed. At any given time, there are very few *arahant*s, so my opportunity to become one is drastically reduced if my present life is my only one. The path to liberation is anyway up a steep and "extremely frightful precipice" down which all of us whose motives and desires are imperfect constantly tumble (SN 56: 42).

(3) An important reason why the possibility of achieving enlightenment in a single lifetime or a foreseeable number of lifetimes is small is that a complex of favorable conditions needs to be in place. This, too, militates against the optimistic view that *dukkha* will cease in the surveyable future. We've already noted the need for progress towards enlightenment of finding true friends who are themselves on the path. Elsewhere, the Buddha mentions the necessity—and good fortune—of living at a time when "the dhamma and discipline […] shines in the world" (SN 56: 48). A classic summary of "the happy conjunction" of factors necessary for ending *dukkha* is given by Śāntideva: they include being born as a human being, possessing perfect bodily senses, having true friends, belonging in a society of good people, receiving the right teaching, and acquaintance with a Buddha (Ss: Ch 1 §). We know from the "cosmological" texts alluded to earlier that this "happy conjunction" is a long way off. Maitreya—the next Buddha—won't appear for several hundred million years.

(4) Noble disciples are people who, in addition to their own "exertions," are fortunate to have experienced the "happy conjunction" of factors just referred to. And this leads to a fourth theme. Earlier, I described some essential differences between these noble ones and us ordinary worldlings. There, the aim was to emphasize the gap between mundane positive aspects of life and the higher ones of the disciple's life. The present point is to stress the gulf between mundane exertions and attainments and those of the person who has achieved, or is close to achieving, enlightenment. And it is only in this person, recall, that there occurs "cessation of the whole mass of *dukkha*."

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The noble disciple is not only a moral virtuoso in whom all vices and "unwholesome" motives have been eliminated, but the possessor of wisdom and insight. The *arahant*'s knowledge of "the three characteristics"—impermanence, suffering, and not-self—is not of the merely abstract, propositional type that a student sympathetic to the Buddha's doctrines might acquire. Rather, the knowledge is fully internalized, intuitive, and "direct," no longer infected by the "false views" that proliferate in the minds of the rest of us (DN 1). More generally, by the noble disciple "all formations have been well seen as they really are with correct wisdom" (AN 10: 90).

Equally striking is the noble disciples' remarkable control of their emotions and feelings. The only pain they experience is "a bodily one, and not a mental one," for they do not "sorrow" or "lament" (SN 36: 6). The *arahant* has not merely overcome all cravings and unwholesome desires, but has "given up likes and dislikes" (AN 8: 6). All emotional attachments have also been severed, as with the monk, Saṅgāmaji, who takes no pleasure in the arrival of his ex-wife and son and feels no grief when they leave: for he is "freed from ties" (Ud 1: 8).The noble disciple is, in brief, one who has achieved equanimity (*upekkhā*), not even reacting when spat at or urinated on (MN 12: 51). As it is succinctly put in the *Visuddhimagga* (Vsm XXI: 63), the equanimous person's "heart no longer goes out" to beings or things. Equanimity is a state of peace, happiness, and understanding that is entirely free from *dukkha*, and far removed indeed from the normal human condition.

I return to these extraordinary aspects of the noble disciple in the following section: the more immediate task is to draw from the four themes just discussed their implication for the second response to the charge of pessimism. These themes were our subjection to the processes of *dukkha*, the extreme "exertion" and length of time required for liberation, the need for a happy but rare conjunction of conditions to be in place, and the gulf between the attainments of ordinary householders and noble disciples respectively.

The response aims to reject the charge on the ground that the Buddha teaches the cessation of *dukkha*. The four themes show that this response is unconvincing. One way to recognize this focuses on the claim, made by Rahula and others, that each of us has the *potential* to become enlightened and liberated. Certainly, the Buddha allows that, in a sense, it is possible for all beings to achieve liberation. It is not ruled out by the laws of logic or of nature, and no malicious god, not even Māra, is preventing it. But, in this weak sense, it is also possible for each of us to play the violin like Heifetz or sprint as fast as Usain Bolt. Very few of us, however, have the potential to do so. I, for one, don't have the talent, dedication, dexterity, and musicality to aspire sanely to play like Heifetz. It is appropriate to talk of a potential for something only when a person manifests qualities that, if suitably developed, make attainment of it a realistic prospect. It is possible, certainly, to acquire a potential one previously lacked. Conceivably, like TV's "bionic man," I'll one day undergo an operation that gives me the potential to run as fast as Bolt. But I don't have it now.

All this applies to enlightenment and liberation, not just to musical or athletic achievement. It doesn't follow that I have the potential to be an *arahant*, in this or a foreseeable lifetime, just because this is not totally impossible. That I may acquire this potential in a distantly future lifetime, moreover, doesn't mean that I've got it now. If there is no such thing as rebirth, of course, then I don't have the potential *tout court*. I don't have it in my present life, and that's the only one I'll get. Reference to potential for becoming an *arahant* or a buddha is appropriate only in the case of people—ones close to stream entry, perhaps—who manifest the understanding, virtues, and faith that, given fortunate circumstances, might one day be sufficiently developed to achieve the cessation of all suffering.

Another way of recognizing the inadequacy of the second response focuses not on the notion of potential, but on that of pessimism itself. Those who deny that the Buddha is a pessimist because he teaches the cessation of *dukkha* are setting the bar for the truth of pessimism excessively high. For, to be a pessimist, on their view, is to insist that cessation is utterly impossible.

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To see how eccentric this view is, consider a recent author's appeal to the familiar analogy between the Noble Truths and a medical report on a person's illness. In both cases, a condition is identified and diagnosed, and this is followed by a prognosis and instructions for the way to recovery. The Buddha, we are told, is not a pessimist since he focuses on "*solving* the problem [i.e., *dukkha*]" and is "optimistic about the prognosis," for he regards the problem as solvable. This is why he gives examples of people who have "solved the problem," like himself and earlier buddhas. Unlike the pessimistic doctor who tells the patient that "there's no chance of being cured," the Buddha is therefore an optimist (Bommarito 2020: 17).[22]

The criterion of pessimism implicit here is excessively strict. Any doctor, it seems, except the one who rules out any chance of a cure, is an optimist. On this criterion, my doctor is being optimistic when he tells me that, while there's a *chance* of recovery, I'll need to be very lucky, make enormous effort and great sacrifices—relinquishing my former pleasures, cutting my ties with family and friends—and that the recovery will take a very long time. I suggest that almost no patient would be cheered up or rendered content by this prognosis. In comparison with the "no hope" prognosis, it might be described as optimistic. But why compare it only to this? Why not as well to the news that my condition isn't serious and can be cured easily? In comparison with this news, I must find my doctor's prognosis alarmingly pessimistic.

Once we take notice of the themes discussed in this section, it emerges that responding to the charge of pessimism by invoking the cessation of *dukkha* is uncompelling. The last two Truths do not entail that more than a tiny number of us have the potential to achieve liberation from *dukkha*, nor do they indicate that the Buddha's prognosis of the human condition is, by any normal criterion, other than pessimistic.

In the following section, I consider a notion that has been close to the surface during my discussion—one that, when given prominence, provides a further reason for accepting that the Buddha's verdict on the human condition amounts to pessimism.

6 Human Life, Transcendence, and Pessimism

We read, in one sutta, that the wise person, who has "dispelled attraction and repulsion" and overcome "sorrow," has "transcended [worldly] existence" (AN 8: 5). That the life of a noble disciple is "world-transcending" or "supramundane" is an idea that has been implicit at several points in this paper. We noted, for example, the rhetoric of "escape from the world," and the gulf between worldly happiness and that of the *arahant*. We've seen, too, how the extraordinary attainments of *arahant*s—equanimity, for example—set them apart from the normal human condition.

It is important to understand the relevance of this for the charge of pessimism. Pessimism, in the relevant sense, is a harsh, negative verdict on the human condition, combined with a denial that this condition can be significantly ameliorated. It is, therefore, no reply to the charge of pessimism to point to the existence of a transmundane, world-transcending condition superior to the human condition and to which some people might realistically aspire. It does not, to take an analogy, contradict my pessimism about the parlous state of my tennis club that there is another, better club to which some members might transfer. Indeed, as Nietzsche saw, the prospect of a world allegedly higher than the one we're actually in is liable to intensify the pessimistic verdict on our world (Nietzsche 1968: Bk 1 Ch 1).[23]

The prospect of the possibility of escape from our world may cheer some people up, but that is irrelevant. Pessimism, in our sense, is not an affective state—despondency or whatever—but a judgment. It helps here to contrast the Buddha's position with that of a genuine optimist like Karl Marx. Marx was a "meliorist," for whom humankind's present miseries were due to particular economic circumstances that would be eliminated through a communist revolution. After the

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revolution, men and women—far from escaping the human condition—will be returned to their authentic "species-being" from which, under capitalism, they have been "alienated" (Marx 1979: 138ff).[24] The Buddha, by contrast, holds out no prospect of a significant amelioration of the human condition by "changing [our world] from within" it (Gowans 2003: 27).

Someone will object that the supramundane, world-transcending references in the texts are merely figurative. An *arahant* or a buddha is, after all, an identifiable, embodied person, who was born and will die, and who, in between, eats, sleeps, and talks as do ordinary human beings. His transcendence of the world is not entry into another, disjoined, and "supernatural" realm, but, as I'll elaborate shortly, emancipation from or overcoming of the human world, the ordinary human condition. The *arahant* is an exemplar of this overcoming, not a celestial god. Nevertheless, we may sensibly ask if this person is participating in a recognizably human form of life and still belongs to the human world.

There are several reasons to suggest that the answer to these questions is negative. The noble disciple experiences only bodily pains, not mental afflictions, and has no likes or dislikes. It is not surprising that the texts speak of such a person as having "come to the end of the world," as "no longer included in the world" (AN 9: 38). The noble disciple is, moreover, without social and familial attachments, having, like Saṅgāmaji, "abandoned all the heart holds dear" (SN 1: 28). *Arahant*s, moreover, no longer perceive things from particular, and prejudiced, perspectives. Instead they see things directly as they really are. With enlightenment comes "the cessation of perception" as a human faculty (AN 9: 38), since the *arahant*'s seeing of things is, unlike ours, untainted by affective responses. More generally, the *arahant*'s cognitive and affective life is no longer subject to the operation of the *khandhas* (volition, feeling, and so on) in the manner that the lives of the rest of us are. Since the *khandhas* are described as "a world-phenomenon," it follows that the enlightened person who has "broken through" this phenomenon has "overcome the world [and] dwells unsullied by the world" (SN 22.94).

Talk of the enlightened person transcending or leaving the world is not like the casual metaphor we use when describing an absent-minded colleague as being "in another world" or a fantasist as "not living in the real world." The Buddha's references to world-transcendence will only seem figurative to people who assume that the only literal application of "world" is to the physical world, described in the natural sciences. But this is to ignore the equally central and common use of the word to refer to experiential environments with which people engage—the worlds of fashion, music, or sport, say, that people participate in and move in and out of. More generally, we speak—without a hint of metaphor—of the human world: the world as it figures for us in experience and with which we engage. This is a world that we are *in,* not because it is a physical container that we are inside, but because it is a theater of meanings and opportunities, conventions and constraints that provide the context within which we perceive, understand, and act (See Heidegger 1980: I.3.14ff).[25]

It is the human, not the physical, world—the world of experience and engagement—that dominates in the Buddha's discourses. "That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called the world in the Noble One's discipline" (SN 35.116). This is why, when the processes of the *khandhas* and *dukkha* that define the human condition are overcome, so is the world, and why, when sensual desires and pleasures are "surmounted" by someone, he or she is no longer "included in the world" (AN 9.38). Earlier commentators have rightly recognized that "the world with which the Buddha's teachings is principally concerned is 'the world of experience'" or that, for a human being, his "experience *is* for him the world" (Bodhi 2000: 394 n.182; Hamilton 2000: 98).[26]

At the end of the day, it may not matter too much how we choose to speak: whether to speak of noble disciples transcending the world and the human condition, or speak of them, instead, as belonging in the human world but in a manner radically different from, even incommensurable with, that of ordinary people. Either way, it is incumbent to emphasize just how

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different is the enlightened person's form of existence and to concede that this form resists our powers of description and conceptual understanding. The enlightened person's knowledge, for example, is not just different from ours but something we cannot understand "without experiencing it because it involves the reorientation of all our conceptual categories" (Hamilton 2000: 77). Or consider the four "divine abodes" (*brahmavihāra*) attained through noble discipline. These include compassion and equanimity, but it would be wrong to assimilate these to the compassion one feels for a wounded animal, or the equanimity we might manifest in the face of danger. The disciple "pervades the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled" with compassion, equanimity, and the other "abodes" (DN 13: 76ff). These are meditative achievements, "perfect and unshakeable," that presuppose direct knowledge of karma and "not-self" (*anattā*) (see Nyanaponika 1994: 245–65). These "sublime states" are not ones that we ordinary persons can imagine ourselves being in.

Confidence or faith (*saddhā*) in the Buddha requires that, while we cannot know what it is to be like a buddha or *arahant*, we are sure that there is indeed something that it *is* like—a "possibility of being" to which we are attracted even though it surpasses our powers of imagination and description (see McGhee 2000: 162ff).[27] This "possibility" might be what Schopenhauer meant when referring to nirvana as being "merely a relative, not an absolute, nothing" (Schopenhauer 1969: I.412).[28] Nirvana, at least in the case of a still living enlightened person, is not a total blank, but a state incommensurable with and opaque to us uninstructed worldlings.

Whichever way we speak—of world-transcendence or of an incommensurable way of being in the world—the charge of pessimism about the human condition sticks. Either this condition has to be transcended for the cessation of *dukkha*, or it has to be so radically transformed as to be incommensurable with the human condition as we know it. Since the charge is directed against the human condition as we *do* know it, then it is no defense to point to a different, ineffable condition—even if we choose to call it a human one—that exceeds our understanding.

References to Buddhist texts are to the following:

Abh.S *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* (Comprehensive Manual of *Abhidhamma*)
AN *Anguttara Nikāya* (Numerical Discourses)
Dhp *Dhammapada* (Path of the Dhamma)
DN *Dīgha Nikāya* (Long Discourses)
MN *Majjhima Nikāya* (Middle-length Discourses)
SN *Samyutta Nikāya* (Connected Discourses)
Sn *Sutta Nipata* (Section of the Suttas)
Ss *Śikṣa Samuccaya* (Training Anthology)
Thīg *Therīgāthā* (Verses of the Female Elders)
Ud *Udāna* (Inspired Utterances)
Vsm *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification)

David E. Cooper is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Durham University, UK. He has been a visiting professor in several countries, including the USA, Malta, and Sri Lanka. His many books include *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction*, *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility and Mystery*, and *Animals and Misanthropy*.

1 Philip C. Almond, Philip C., *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 81. Interestingly, early critics of Buddhism—Confucians, for instance—did not

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complain that Buddhism was pessimistic, perhaps because they were themselves pessimists. The charge of pessimism takes off in the more optimistic climate of the Enlightenment Deism and Victorian Christianity.

2 Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrines, His Order* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1882).

3 Matthew Gindin, "Buddhism according to pessimism." 2018, https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/buddhism-pessimism

4 Elizabeth J. Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter* (London: Routledge, 2006).

5 Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1978).

6 Nyanaponika Thera, *The Vision of Dhamma* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994).

7 Chaim Wigder, "Buddhism: Pessimism Before It was Cool," 2018, https://thefailedbuddhist.wordpress.com/2018/12/2/buddhism-pessimism-before-it-was-cool

8 Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Fourfold Root of Sufficient Reason* (New York: Cosimo, 2007).

9 Brian Treanor, *Melancholic Joy: On Life Worth Living* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

10 Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

11 Christopher W. Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha* (London: Routledge, 2003).

12 David Benatar, *Better Never To Have Been* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

13 ed. and trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (Somerville MA: Wisdom, 2012).

14 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 129. See also, David E. Cooper, *Animals and Misanthropy* (London: Routledge, 2018); Ian James Kidd, "Misanthropy and the Hatred of Humanity," in *The Moral Psychology of Hatred*, ed. N. Birondo (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

15 See, for example, Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 7, and Ñāṇavīra Thera, *Notes on Dhamma (1960–1965)* (Netherlands: Path Press, 2009), Preface.

16 Godwin Samaratne, *A Beautiful Way of Living* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2011).

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