

A Critique of Philosophical Pessimism - Postliterate - Medium

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Philosophical pessimism is the belief that — particularly as a being capable of consciousness — being dead is preferable to being alive. It is thus logical that a crucial trope in the realm of philosophical pessimism is its tirade against human consciousness. To pessimist Peter Wessel Zapffe, a large contributor to this so-called “biological paradox” is the inherent alienation present in human consciousness.

“And yet he [man] could see matter as a stranger, compare himself to all phenomena, see through and locate his vital processes... He [man] comes to nature as an unbidden guest, in vain extending his arms to beg conciliation with his maker: Nature answers no more; it performed a miracle with man, but later did not know him...” [1]

What Zapffe is missing, however, is where this feeling of alienation comes from. It is not inherent in humans; all human consciousness must be developed and continually tended to. The seeds of human consciousness must already exist in humans, but they are merely dormant until fertilized by interaction with the world, particularly other conscious beings; even then, they must still be watered.

This is similar to the central mistake in Descartes' notion of *cogito, ergo sum*. The mind, as the truly existing entity which declares itself to exist, hardly exists on its own. The ability for the mind to declare itself to exist is an advanced level of cognition capable only after years of development through interaction with the world and its conscious beings.

In this sense, the ability for the mind to “see matter as a stranger” is not an innate gift in human consciousness, but a product of interaction between conscious humans in the world. This ability of conscious beings to look outside of themselves must too already exist as potential in every human, but is merely a seed; humans must combine collective forces within the world to create this product — to “see matter as a stranger” — which is larger than the sum of its parts.

What is also important here is the positive aspects of this product which Zapffe does not acknowledge. This feeling of alienation has not been just the contributor to suicides in the world, but also of the human potential to ameliorate suffering in the world. We respond to this alienation by creating the change we wish to see; depending on perspective this can be a uniquely *good* trait about human consciousness.

It must also be discussed the legitimacy of even declaring outright that human consciousness entails only alienation. Zapffe speaks in such potentially negative terms about human consciousness:

“And now he [man] can discern the outline of his biogenico-cosmic terms: He is the universe's helpless captive...”

Through this poetic bramble it is easy to forget that it is this world — which man supposedly sees himself as alien to — which gave him his developed consciousness in the first place. The human Will hardly exists as separate from the world, and thus alien to it; the human Will is so largely a product of the world. Thus, it is not guaranteed that the Will be alienated from the world (and, as mentioned, alienation is not inherently negative), but it instead depends on the relationship of the Will to the world at a particular time. This relationship fluctuates, changes with the weeks and with

the centuries. It may generate the forefront of a revolution and it may generate advocacy for the status quo; what must be emphasized is that it is not one constant negative stream. The world continually gives life to the human Will, it is the gardener who tends to the flourishing plants of human consciousness.

On a separate note, it must be mentioned how disappointing it is that Zapffe and other pessimists fall into the same pitfall that plagues much of the corpus of Western philosophy: that of viewing the mind as separate from the body. The mind, the source of consciousness, cannot always be alienated from the constraints of one's own body because the constraints of one's body form the basis for the functionings of the mind itself. Let us take the case of Nietzsche:

“[T]he ill health and suffering that engulfed Nietzsche’s entire body forced him to be inescapably aware of the corporeal. Through his lived experience, he saw the extent to which mind and body were inseparable, impossible to pick apart. [...] Many of Nietzsche’s greatest philosophical innovations were due to this bodily instinct, and it led Nietzsche to finally recognize that all philosophy, to varying extents and layers of disguise, was indebted to the body.” [2]

A final remark must be made on what I mean when I speak of “the world” — that thing which the mind needs to flourish. “The world” encompasses not just one’s environment and reality, but most importantly, other conscious beings. Because human consciousness is a feature born out of collective interaction which is greater than the sum of its parts, so to speak, it cannot be forgotten that the individual himself — with his consciousness that Zapffe declares a travesty — plays a large role in this collective action. The individual is not a hopeless pawn being forced to develop his consciousness; the individual plays a crucial role in his development and the development of all consciousnesses in the time he is on this earth.

[1] Peter Zapffe, *The Last Messiah*, pg. 2

[2] Jonas Čeika, *How to Philosophize with a Hammer and Sickle*, pg.

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