**Buddhism, pessimism, and *Weltschmerz***

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1. **Preliminaries.**

I welcome the recent scholarly attention to **philosophical pessimism**, as exemplified by the books of Beiser, Dienstag, and van der Lugt.

This trio shares several aims:

1. to rehabilitate PP as a serious philosophical doctrine
2. to bring to attention forgotten figures in that tradition (Bahnsen, von Hartmann, Mainlӓnder).
3. to reconfigure historiography of PP – less ‘Schopenhauer-centric’, more aligned with wider developments (eg vdL’s connecting early modern problems of evil to emergence of PP).

Different evaluations of PP: some reaffirm pessimism – ‘endorse’ and ‘reanimate’ PP by presenting its ‘appeal’ to late moderns (Dienstag) – while van der Lugt sees pessimism as a ‘moral source’.

OK – so what’s the problem?

1. **The particularity thesis.**

Proposal: B, D and vdL’s accounts – for all their differences – present PP as a phenomenon that is historically and culturally particular – to *circa* C17 Europe. Call this the **particularity thesis**:

1. **Beiser, *Weltschmerz***: ‘pessimism was the rediscovery of the problem of evil after the collapse of theism. It came from the realization that there is going to be no redemption from all the evil and suffering of life, and from the conviction that, for this reason, life cannot be worth living’ (7)
2. **Dienstag, *Pessimism*:** ‘pessimism relies on an underlying linear concept of time, a concept that only became a force in Western thinking in the early modern period’ – ‘a conceptual child of modernity’ – a negative answer to the question of whether ‘the application of reason to human social and political conditions will ultimately result in the melioration of these conditions’ (9, 16, 18)
3. **van der Lugt, *Dark Matters***: ‘optimism cannot be understood without pessimism, just as pessimism cannot be understood without optimism … neither can be understood without also understanding the questions posed by the problem of evil’ (398)

I suggest the **particularity thesis** contains this implicit argument:

1. PP arises when kinds of **trust** in human life are disrupted or destroyed (Neiman: evil ‘shatters’ our ‘basic trust in the world’ - ditto Améry).
2. such loss of trust creates new existential anxieties.
3. anxieties provide content, motivation, and direction for self-conscious philosophical reflection, which can express itself in *doctrines*.

Existential trust expressed doctrinally as (a) redemption in the face of suffering (Beiser), (b) amelioration of the human condition (Dienstag) and (c) the possibility of a meaningful life in the face of evil (vdL).

Corollary – the **contingency thesis**:

1. the events, anxieties, reflections that made pessimism possible were contingent products of a certain way history went. If history had gone other ways, PP would not have become intelligible or salient.

Objection: the particularity thesis is **false**: subscribing to it obscures the understanding of PP as a **perennial** perspective on the human condition.

Specific forms of PP are inflected by the contingencies of socio-historical context – eg ‘collapse of theism’ – but PP itself is ubiquitous, perennial.

Ironically, Dienstag anticipates this: pessimism as a ‘sensibility’, ‘a problematic and not a doctrine’ (19, 83).

So, how can one show that the particularity thesis is false?

1. **The neglect of Buddhism.**

Claim: the Buddha’s appraisal of the human condition, as expressed in the *suttas* of the Pali Canon, is systematic philosophical pessimism (cf. Cooper).

Some aspects of BPP:

* *dukkha* as ineradicable dimension of human existence
* the dialectics of attachment, desire, craving, and frustration
* *nibbana* as soteriological aspiration to escape *saṃsāric* existence
* the arduousness of the path to, and rarity of, *nibbana*

*Dukkha* a ‘mark of existence’, experienced by all beings, and not a feature of only certain forms of life, even if life is worse during periods of ‘world-dissolution’ (eg DN 26: 19-21).

The ‘medical model’ of Bsm urged to support optimism backfires: what good is a cure’ that demands many lifetimes, vast effort, sacrifice, and final ‘extinction’?

If this is right, why is it so disconsonant with modern images of Buddhism, as a positive, genial, upbeat, activistic, socially-engaged dispensation?

Context: C19 scholars correctly perceived Bsm as pessimistic (Almond, Tweed), but this was displaced, into C20, by combination of factors:

1. Late C19/early C20 Asian Buddhists (eg Dharmapala) worried by the success of Christian missionaries (with upbeat message, ‘Jesus loves you’, ‘Jesus will save you’, commitment to social reform) felt pressure to forge a more up-beat Buddhism (in Ceylon, Siam).
2. Bsm scholars urging us to ‘dispense’ with ‘pessimism’ (Conze) or insisting the B’s philosophy is ‘neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but realistic’ (Rahula).
3. relentless ‘bright-siding’ of Buddhism, by scholars and admirers, twisting the B’s teachings to fit the moral and cultural predilections of its W admirers (cf. Kidd).

However, this context *explains*, but does not *excuse*, the following problem:

The new pessimism scholarship either **marginalises** Buddhism (Beiser, Dienstag) or **ignores** it (van der Lugt).

Specific problems with Beiser’s and Dienstag’s accounts:

1. no systematic statement of Buddhist PP
2. focus on highly specific issue of permissibility of suicide
3. no engagement with Buddhist *suttas*
4. no engagement with Buddhism scholarship

Irony: Schopenhauer judged Buddhism ‘wise’ for its PP.

Dienstag’s downbeat take on S and Bsm: (i) the ‘basic structure’ of S’s philosophy was established prior to his interest in Bsm and (ii) S judged the ‘core insights’ of Bsm were ‘also found in Christianity’ (citing Magee).

But:

* point (i) consistent with the perennialism of pessimism – S’s original inspiration were Upaniṣads – ‘the most profitable and sublime reading of my life’ (PP II 397) – and other Vedic/Vedantic literature, which have close affinities with Buddhist PP – confirming the perennial and ubiquitous nature of PP (cf. Cooper 2015).

* point (ii) dubious: obvious, substantive differences between Buddhist and Christian conceptions of human life/soteriology, obscured by S:

Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism ‘all teach a heavy guilt of the human race through its existence itself’, salvation as a ‘complete transformation of our nature and disposition’ (WWR § 604).

Magee, despite admiring S, also rejects his PP (as Dienstag 85n5 notes), so not a neutral voice.

Anyway, S’s remarks on Christianity and Bsm rely on dubious thesis of Indian origin of Christianity (PP, ‘The Christian System’, 75-77).

Consequence: the sophistication of Buddhist PP and its centrality to Bsm is occluded, as are the B’s systematic arguments for a pessimistic appraisal of the human condition, and his many discussions of the proper responses to that appraisal.

1. **Greece, Christianity, and the Nahuas.**

Further complaint: Beiser et al overlook earlier varieties of PP in the West and wider ‘non-Western’ varieties, occluding perennial and ubiquitous character of P – and characterising it as a response to particular contingent events rather than fixed features of the human condition:

1. **Greece**: ‘wisdom of Silenus’, *Oedipus at Colonos*, ‘never to have been born is best’ (briefly referred to in Beiser 45, Dienstag 176)
2. **Christian**: Desert Fathers, St Benedict, St Augustine – themes of sinfulness/pain/misery caused by desire, hubris, ‘concupiscence’.

Dienstag on Pascal as a ‘precursor’, but understates his account of the ‘wretchedness’ of our condition

pessimism of Luther, Calvin, Kierkegaard, Niebuhr.

1. **Nahuas**/Aztecs: human life is ‘slippery’ (*tlaalahui*) and transitory, unable to sustain genuine happiness and virtue is vastly difficult.

* a wise person ‘weeps and sorrows’, will ‘take refuge’, all people ‘wish for happiness’ but at best achieve *neltiliztli*, a ‘rooted’ life.
* Nezahualcoyotl’s C15 poem:

It is not certain that we live

and have come to earth to be happy.

We are all sorely lacking

Is there any who does not suffer here (cf. Purcell 2017)

* ‘slipperiness’ a cosmological feature of reality, which we cannot remove, ameliorate, or avoid (cf. Maffie 152, 166, 525).

Genuine engagement with traditions earlier than, and culturally distant from, early to late modern Europe undermines both the particularity thesis and the contingency thesis—and underscores the ubiquity and perennialism of philosophical pessimism as a serious stance on the human condition.

1. **Summary.**

We should welcome the renewal of interest in PP but reject the particularity and contingency theses currently built into discussions of it.

The occlusion of Buddhist PP helps to sustain the particularity thesis by concealing maybe the most sophisticated kinds of PP available in the history of world philosophies. Ditto Nahuas et al.

If Beiser et al want to *challenge* that claim, they must *engage* with it.

van der Lugt rightly says European pessimists (Bayle, Schopenhauer) were doing two things:

1. challenging specific ‘optimisms’ of their times – like theodicies
2. exploring ‘the intrinsic tornness and fragility of the human condition’ (390).

I agree, but want to emphasise that Bsm – and others, like the Nahua – were also engaged in these specific and general philosophical projects, and their reflections are powerful.

Exploring these earlier and culturally wider traditions helps restore our sense of PP as a perennial stance on the human condition.

We misconceive and underestimate PP if we see it as a contingent phenomenon that, as it happened, became compelling in a particular period of European cultural history.

IJK

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