Please join us for our discussion on Optimism (or anything else for that matter). We will meet in Gamble, room 213 on Friday, November 12th at 3:00 pm.

Optimism

By Chris Dunn

When I think of modern philosophy and modern culture in general, a few key words come to mind: bleak, despair, isolation, anxiety, and meaningless. Certainly there are aspects of our modern world to which it would be unfair to attribute these words, but those that they describe seem to overshadow any positive visions of existence. Existentialism is particularly joyless, and is perhaps at the heart of the matter. It declares that man is isolated and trapped in a world devoid of meaning. There is no bearing for truth, right and wrong, good or bad. All of our actions are in vain and we should live in a state of constant anxiety as we are “condemned to be free” and are thus totally responsible for our actions. This pessimism is in opposition to what should be expected. The western world is quite prosperous in terms of material wealth. Should we not then be ecstatic about our existence? In other words, why if everything is improving is modern philosophy’s outlook on life so depressing? Is a pessimistic viewpoint something new to philosophy or is it something intrinsic in its nature? To further understand the problem at hand, perhaps it would be useful to explore some key philosopher’s views. Socrates began philosophy on a relatively optimistic note. In the famous cave allegory, he suggests that there is an infinite beacon of knowledge which can be sought and known by all who are awakened to its existence. Although all but the rare philosopher are forced to see only shadows of reality, which is a bit pessimistic, there exists at least the potential to be freed from the chains of deception. His view of death is worth quoting at length for its great optimism.

Now as you see there has come upon me that which may be thought, and is generally believed to be, the last and worst evil. But the oracle made no sign of opposition . . . I regard this as a proof that what has happened to me is a good, and that those of us who think that death is an evil are in error . . . . Let us reflect in another way, and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is a good, for one of two things: either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by the sight of dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. . . . Now if death is like this, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is a journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead are, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this? . . . What would not a man give if he might converse with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer? Nay, if this be true, let me die again and again. . . . Above all, I shall be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in that; I shall find out who is wise, and who
pretends to be wise, and who is not. . . . The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways--I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows. (Plato’s Apology, 40a-42a)

How was Socrates able to hold such an optimistic viewpoint of knowledge, death, and life in general while being sentenced to death by his peers? Perhaps Socrates’ optimism is very much a result of and more than likely inseparably interconnected to his contentment. As he puts it: “contentment is natural wealth, luxury is artificial poverty.” Whatever life (or death) gives him, he will accept in stride, all the while maintaining a relatively good attitude. Simultaneously, he was very discontented with the stubbornness of those around him. Ever since Socrates assumed the role of gadfly, stirring up Athens, forcing them to question their fundamental assumptions and virtues, philosophy has been necessarily bound to a certain level of discontentment. Socrates’ seemingly paradoxical position can be best understood if we realize that his role of the discontented gadfly was only to guide people towards a contentment similar to his own, to lead them from the shadows towards the logos. Thus his discontentment was actually a product of his optimism.

The optimist of optimists was Gottfried Leibniz. He stated that an all perfect God created this world, and since God is unable to make a world less than perfect, this must be the best of all possible worlds. Thus, the amount of evil which exists is in perfect balance with the amount of good. Leibniz also believed that the world is a rational, understandable place in which truth can be known. In Candide, Voltaire asks, if this is the best of all possible worlds then why is there so much suffering and evil. Surely, God in all his goodness could have created a world with no misery. Leibniz views suffering as but shadows in an otherwise beautiful picture of life, while Voltaire points out that the shadows are horrible blotches that all but destroy what goodness there is. Once again we return to the concept of contentment. Leibniz is content with his existence while Voltaire is not. Socrates recognized the suffering and blindness present in the world, but was also able to spot the perfection present in logos. Is modern philosophy’s pessimism then only a symptom of its discontent? Is it possible for one to be joyous about existence, while simultaneously realizing that life involves a certain amount of suffering? Perhaps this would be possible if we were to always aim for truth and not settle for beliefs or ethics that simply work or get us through life. This very well may not be attainable, thus one who aims for this may live their whole life in discontent. However, one should be content with what one is given. So, one should be content with life but at the same time always be striving to perfection, thus be discontent.

In other words, one should be content and say, "well, this is what I have been given, so I will appreciate it and make the best of it", but also know that it always falls short of perfection, so it shouldn't necessarily be affirmed. I am therefore proposing a life of Socratic pessimistic optimism.

If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, please contact either Chris Dunn or Dr. Nordenhaug. Anyone interested in writing a brief article for The Philosopher’s Stone, please contact either of us (it doesn’t have to be good, however it does have to be thoughtful).

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Philosophical Comedy: Scientists come to God and claim they can do everything God can do. "Like what?" asks God. "Like creating human beings," say the scientists. "Show me," says God. The scientists say, "Well, we start with some dust and then-" God interrupts, "Wait a second. Get your own dust."