The consequences of pessimism

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Nowadays, one can, without major inconvenience, exterminate mankind. According to calculations that appear reliable, we had, for example, already a few years ago gathered a sufficient nuclear weapons stockpile to eradicate the human race 50,000 times over (Robin Clarke, *Vetenskapen om krig och fred*, Stockholm 1973, p. 46). In addition, there are chemical and biological weapons that are at least as deadly as nuclear weapons (ibid, p. 186).

We do not merely have access to these means of extermination. It is moreover rather likely that we in the near future will use them. History shows us that the percentage of the Earth's population that is killed in war quadruples or increases fivefold every fifty years. If this trend is extrapolated customarily, one can calculate that practically 100 per cent of humanity will be killed in war before the end of the next century (ibid, p. 12).

This calculation could certainly be refuted if a real breakthrough were to happen in the disarmament negotiations, but nothing indicates this. There are, on the contrary, strong reasons to believe that the arms race will continue. And if the wars do not kill us, some form of environmental destruction likely will.

One can, of course, not with absolute certainty know that humanity soon will cease to exist. But it seems considerably more reasonable to assume this than to assume the opposite. Has one then adopted a pessimistic position? In daily speech, we would perhaps say so. But in philosophical contexts, usually, the term 'pessimism' is rather used for the view that human life is something evil and that it therefore would be better if humanity did not exist. It is this kind of pessimism that I shall here take interest in. And if pessimism in this sense is correct, then it seems the view that humanity will soon be eradicated could be regarded as a kind of optimism.

I

Pessimism is thus a valuation rather than a prediction. It is, of course, neither obvious nor uncontroversial, but it is also not obviously implausible. On the contrary, there is a lot that speaks for its correctness. Mankind's life on Earth has certainly both positive and negative parts. To the positive belong things such as love, happiness, and different kinds of experiences of beauty. But it is, upon further reflection, difficult to find that these positive parts could even closely outweigh the horrible amount of cruelties, suffering, insecurity, and injustice that humanity's history also contains. Surely, one must say that human existence, on the whole, contains significantly more evil than good. And that it is thus, as a whole, evil, something that has negative value in itself.

The Swedish pessimist Ingemar Hedenius has gone one step further. Like Schopenhauer and other pessimists, he holds that human life is evil, but he also maintains that this conclusion need not be based on some more or less unreliable value calculation in which one weighs the good against the evil. Every such calculation must be rather uncertain, among other things because we know so little about the past and the future. But already the evil that we do know of is, according to Hedenius, so evil that it cannot be outweighed by any good. This viewpoint he calls 'the norm of the weight of evil'. He writes:

> … is the evil sufficiently horrible, it appears to be able to wipe out the good from the picture and make continued calculation redundant.… The worst in life, the fate of the completely unhappy, the uninterrupted, infernal suffering, the hopeless humiliation, a child who is slowly tormented to

> death – I cannot see that all the beauty in the world or even the most exceptional thoughts can 'counterbalance' such things, nor that other humans' happiness and culture can do it either.… One can call this 'the norm of the weight of evil'.… I cannot accept the thought that the worst in life can be counterbalanced by ever so many symphonies and welfare arrangements etc. or of … the superhumans' coming existence (*Livets mening*, Stockholm 1964, pp. 24–25).

A circumstance that speaks for the norm of the weight of evil is that suffering seems addable in a way that happiness is not. As far as I can see, it makes no great difference whether after us and until the extinction of mankind there would come 10 or 100 completely happy generations, but it makes a substantial difference whether after us there would come 10 or 100 unhappy generations. As long as all humans are happy it is rather insignificant how many they are, but the more who suffer or are unhappy the worse it is. Therefore, it does not help so much if there after us – contrary to expectation – would come many rather than few happy generations. This involves an extra difficulty, which perhaps is insurmountable when it comes to counterbalancing the suffering that mankind's history has so far contained. For it is hard to think that this suffering could be outweighed by <u>one</u> happy generation, even if it would be completely happy.

Pessimism follows from the norm of the weight of evil, and the norm of the weight of evil seems rather plausible. But pessimism need not at all be rejected if the norm of the weight of evil were incorrect. Even if it is possible, in principle, that future happiness could outweigh the evil here in life, it is actually rather unlikely that this possibility is realised. Pessimism seems, in other words, rather plausible.

II

But is pessimism interesting? Does it matter whether it is true or false? Does it have any practical consequences? Does anything follow from the pessimistic doctrine about how we should act?

As I pointed out above, we can nowadays exterminate humanity. Does this – in combination with pessimism – imply that we also <u>should</u> exterminate humanity? And we who do not have control over the weapons arsenals and the political decisions – should we refrain from fighting militarism and arms racing? Should we stop worrying about the end of the world, and should we perhaps also stop having children? If all this follows from pessimism, then it is far from uninteresting.

I shall here focus on the first of these practical consequences, and I shall start from Ingemar Hedenius' views on the matter. His standpoint is somewhat vacillating. On the one hand, he holds that pessimism leads to that mankind should be exterminated – at least if the killing itself can happen quickly and in a not too ghastly way (ibid, p. 27). On the other hand, he is not prepared to accept this consequence, and, therefore, he tries to eliminate it – mainly by two different counterarguments – without abandoning pessimism (ibid, pp. 28–31). But his own solution proposals do not really convince him, and he concludes:

> I get the consequence, that humanity should be exterminated when I assume the norm of the weight of evil. And because I neither can nor want to abandon this norm, I must come up with a way to eliminate the insane consequence, and I try to do that with as small interventions as possible in my other conditions. This problem I have created for myself – and none of the alternative solutions I have managed to produce convince me fully (ibid, p. 32).

Which are then his solution proposals? The first involves simply that one assumes that mankind's existence is holy, or, in other words, that there is a special moral norm, according to which it is forbidden to exterminate mankind even if this would mean that more evil than good would disappear from the universe. But this is not a real counterargument. As Hedenius himself points out, it merely involves 'that one cuts the reasoning at the most sensitive point without being able to give any intellectual reasons for this' (ibid, p. 29).

The second solution proposal is based on the thought that humans from different ages can have different views on the value of life when each and everyone (which is reasonable) places special weight on the circumstances that exist in his or her age and nearest future (ibid, pp. 29–30). It is, e.g., possible that future humans will hold that, after all, life is valuable. Hedenius maintains therefore that we 'must be clear about the changeability of all views on this matter, and we have then no right to undertake a measure that would make our particular judgment the definitive one' (ibid, p. 31).

But this second counterargument does not seem especially successful either. For it is not at all a question of 'making our particular judgment the definitive one'. The pessimistic doctrine that Hedenius originally argued for, and joined, was not tied to any specific age. It was an impartial and, if one wants, a timeless pessimism, an overall valuation of the life in which all mankind's conditions have been assessed by the same criteria, and where no particular importance has been attached to the conditions during any specific age (cf. ibid, pp. 25–26). If this pessimistic valuation is correct, then every valuation conflicting it is incorrect regardless of who advances it. And the question is what follows from this pessimism. This has, of course, nothing to do with who advances it, or with the existence of other, more relativistic valuations of the type 'from our generation's point of view, life is overall evil', or with the fact that perhaps for most of us it is impossible to make a purely impartial valuation of mankind's life on Earth.

The two counterarguments that Hedenius brings forward are thus hardly convincing. But perhaps that does not matter much, for his original thesis – that they were meant to undermine – is also very dubious, not to say obviously false. From the view that human life is evil does not follow – neither purely logically nor in any reasonable normative system – that it ought to be eradicated. From that something is evil it possibly follows that we, if we can, should prevent its existence (given that no other values are risked). But we cannot prevent mankind's existence. We can only shorten it. And from that life as a whole is evil it does not follow that we ought to shorten it, for it is possible that the future overall has positive rather than negative value.

III

For clarity, it might here be appropriate to distinguish between a few different types of pessimism. The first type we can call whole-pessimism. It is the one I have so far discussed, and it means thus that the whole that consists of mankind's life on Earth, right through the whole history and into the future (as long as it lasts), contains more evil than good and thus, on the whole, is something evil.

The second type of pessimism, which one perhaps more often is interested in in non-philosophical contexts, concerns only the future, and we can therefore call it future-pessimism. It says that mankind's future life contains more evil than good. A future-pessimistic doctrine is, of course, implicitly tied to a specific point in time or time period, for different points in time correspond to different futures.

But there is also a third type of pessimism, which does not at all speak – other than indirectly – of the life of mankind. It speaks instead of individual human lives, and the point of it is that these lives always, or as a rule, contain more evil than good. We can call this general pessimism. General pessimism says that all, or nearly all humans, so far and in the future, live lives that are overall not worth living. I think it is most nearly this form of pessimism that, e.g., Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann advocated.

Whole-pessimism and future-pessimism are logically independent of each other. One can very well accept one and reject the other of these doctrines. But both seem to follow from general pessimism. Admittedly, perhaps they do not follow purely logically, but I still do not believe that anyone would want to accept general pessimism and at the same time reject whole-pessimism or (some variant of) future-pessimism. At least as long as there is a future.

I have assumed that the pessimism that Hedenius embraces and discusses is whole-pessimism. His argumentation indicates that. The norm of the weight of evil, if I have understood it correctly, does not say that in each human's or most humans' lives, there is something that is so evil that it cannot be counterbalanced by anything good. It says merely that some humans have it so terribly that nothing can counterbalance this, and that humanity's life on Earth, therefore, is something evil. And Hedenius seems here to not merely refer to suffering and other evil in the future. On the contrary, he rather seems to base his valuation on things that have already happened. His pessimism seems thus to be whole-pessimism.

IV

But those who distinguish among the three types of pessimism that I have described above would, upon further reflection, hardly want to maintain that whole-pessimism has as a consequence that mankind should be eradicated. (What follows is at most that if someone has created humanity, he thereby acted morally wrong.) Because whole-pessimism does not say anything about the value of the future, it cannot motivate any particular way of acting towards this future. The value of the whole can possibly be affected by eliminating the future, but this does not follow from whole-pessimism, and above all, it does not follow that the value of the whole would increase if the future were eliminated.

On the contrary, this is a very plausible consequence of future-pessimism. In any event, this means that it is in itself better that the future – i.e., the future part of mankind – does not exist than that it exists. By 'the future' or 'the future part of mankind' is then meant the part of humanity that has not already ceased to exist.

It is moreover reasonable to assume that humanity's continued existence, on the whole, does not have any (positive) instrumental value, which could counterbalance its negative intrinsic value. This is not because all value ultimately would be tied to humans and human experiences. I thus do not accept the view that, among others, Hedenius advances, that the universe is 'indifferent from the point of view of value, if we disregard the humans and what they experience' (ibid, p. 27). At least also the animals' suffering – which, by the way, in large part is caused by the humans – must be considered to have negative intrinsic value. But largely the effects of mankind's existence that are not tied specifically to the humans' own life are negative rather than positive, and there is no reason to believe that the future would involve any change in this regard.

If future-pessimism is correct one can thus say that overall – from the point of view of the universe – it would be a gain rather than a loss if humanity were eradicated. Does it not hereby follow from future-pessimism that we should eradicate humanity? Also, this question should be of some interest because future-pessimism seems to be about as plausible as whole-pessimism – or perhaps even more plausible. Some of mankind's troubles have disappeared or mildened, but many new ones have arisen, and there are hardly any reasons to believe that we are heading towards good, or even better, times. One can rather assume that the norm of the weight of evil will hold also for the future.

But as far as I can see neither does it follow from future-pessimism that we ought to exterminate humanity. Because it does not follow from future-pessimism that we cannot accomplish a future that overall contains more good than evil, and which thus has positive value for its own sake. And if we can accomplish such a future, then we should do so, rather than annihilate mankind!

V

We can, if we want, distinguish between a fatalistic and a non-fatalistic variant of whole-pessimism as well as future-pessimism. The fatalistic variants contain then the addition that we do not have the power to prevent that mankind's (respectively, future mankind's) existence overall is something evil.

When it comes to the practical consequences of whole-pessimism this distinction plays no larger role, but we can note that the whole-pessimism that Hedenius discusses seems to be fatalistic rather

than non-fatalistic, because it is based on the norm of the weight of evil, and Hedenius seems to mean that at least a part of the evil that cannot be counterbalanced has already occurred. Future-pessimism is, on the contrary – as I have so far understood it – non-fatalistic. The non-fatalistic variant of future-pessimism is, by the way, decidedly more plausible than the fatalistic one.

General pessimism can also occur in a fatalistic and a non-fatalistic variant. I believe, however, that it is here most appropriate to concentrate on the fatalistic variant. Firstly, it is rather obvious that the non-fatalistic general pessimism does not have as a consequence that mankind should be eradicated. The reason for this is the same as the reason why non-fatalistic future-pessimism does not have this consequence. Secondly, I believe most adherents of general pessimism have been adherents of its fatalistic variant. There is hardly any reason to believe that every human's life contains more evil than good if one does not also believe that this has its basis in some unchangeable conditions in the human situation – conditions that we cannot do anything about. If we really could change these conditions decisively, then, on the contrary, general pessimism would appear exceedingly unlikely. Because here our own interests would be involved; it would not 'merely' be a question of improving life for others.

When I hereafter speak about 'general pessimism' I refer to its fatalistic variant. If it is correct, then surely so is fatalistic future-pessimism. But I also believe the reverse holds. There are hardly any good reasons for fatalistic future-pessimism that do not also give support to general pessimism. They also seem to have precisely the same practical consequences. At least it seems to be the case that the fatalistic future-pessimism has as a consequence that humanity should be exterminated if and only if this is a consequence of general pessimism. I limit myself therefore to discussing the latter.

VI

From general pessimism it really seems to follow that humanity should be exterminated. It admittedly does not follow purely logically from general pessimism alone, but it seems to follow from general pessimism in combination with certain extra assumptions that appear plausible. These extra assumptions are the following. Firstly: the general normative principle that one should always act so that the consequences of one's act become as good as possible – at least as good as the consequences of every alternative act. Secondly: the assumption that mankind's continued existence overall does not have positive instrumental value. Thirdly: the assumption that it is not in our power to do something that would result in mankind's continued existence having a positive instrumental value sufficiently great to counterbalance the negative intrinsic value that humanity's continued existence has according to general pessimism. Given these three assumptions, it seems to follow from general pessimism that humanity should be exterminated.

But before we really accept this result, we should perhaps consider some possible counterarguments.

VII

The counterargument closest at hand is seemingly the one that focuses on that humans generally do not want to die. Even if general pessimism is correct, it is completely possible – and actually rather likely – that most want to continue living. If we conducted a worldwide survey in democratic order, then we would surely find that a great majority would oppose the suggestion to exterminate humanity. Should we then not as good democrats seize on this? If a person wants to continue to live despite that his life is more evil than good, then he should be allowed to do that? One might think that it is his business, and that he can blame himself if he loses on it.

This counterargument might appear strong, but I do not believe that it is. The thought that people should get what they want is obviously appealing, but I do not think it is applicable in this case. As far as I can see, it does not have any value in itself that we get what we want. It can, on the other hand,

often have instrumental value since one normally feels satisfaction when one gets what one wants and disappointment or unease when one does not get what one wants. As a rule, it is, in that case, wise to comply with their wishes.

But if general pessimism is correct, then the possible satisfaction that we experience when our wish to live on is granted is merely an element in a life that nevertheless contains more evil than good. And if, on the other hand, mankind is annihilated, then there is no human left who can be disappointed about this. Moreover, the maxim that people should get what they want can only hold when this does not lead to others being harmed. But in our case, there would be others who would be harmed if we complied with our wish to survive – namely the future generations that we thereby would condemn to a life that is not worth living. I, therefore, do not believe that this counterargument is sufficient to refute our earlier conclusion about that humanity should be annihilated if general pessimism is correct.

VIII

Another counterargument could perhaps start from the assumption that death is something evil, and that it moreover – at least for most of us – is a greater evil than a continued life would be, regardless of whether general pessimism is correct. By killing a human one inflicts on her a greater evil than if one lets her live on. From this it might be thought to follow that humanity should not be annihilated.

But if one accepts the assumption that death is something evil, then one should also note that we actually, by annihilating humanity, would be able to prevent a lot of humans from dying – namely those that have not yet been born. By exterminating humanity we would save future generations from not only a life that is not worth living, but also from the evil that death involves. This speaks in that case strongly for that humanity should be exterminated.

In addition, it is doubtful whether death really can be said to be evil. One could even think that it would rather be something good if general pessimism is correct. Because in that case death liberates us from something evil – namely life. This reasoning is, however, not convincing, because it does not follow from general pessimism that the part of life that one has left if one does not die at a certain point in time contains more evil than good. This valuation holds only for life as a whole.

But if death really is something evil, then this can at most be an argument for that the present generation should not be killed. The consequence of general pessimism would then perhaps more precisely become that humanity should be annihilated in the special way that we all stop having children. However, we would perhaps hereby become even unhappier – but this is in any case better than that every generation in a long row of unhappy generations reduces its own unhappiness (but without eliminating it) by reproducing and thereby creating a new unhappy generation.

If it follows from general pessimism that we should not have children then it seems, however, to also follow that the one who can kill the present generation in a fairly quick and painless way also should do it. Because it seems unrealistic to believe that we really would stop having children, or that one by some form of legislation could force us to this. In such a situation it seems a killing of the present generation is the only means one can use to prevent the origin of new unhappy generations. Our generation is, by the way, probably the first one for which this means is available.

The discussion of this counterargument seems to show at least two things that can be of some interest in this context. Firstly: mankind can be ‘eradicated’ in several ways, completely different ways – and there can be important moral differences between these. Thus one should at least distinguish between that our generation simply does not have any children and that someone using violence kills our generation. Secondly: if it shall follow from general pessimism that one should exterminate humanity in the last-mentioned of these ways, then apparently some other assumption is required beyond the three mentioned in section VI above.

IX

It might be tempting to assume that humanity should be exterminated if a pessimistic view of life is correct. This thought has also been put forward. It might appear frightening – partly because pessimism is rather plausible, not to say unavoidable, and partly because exterminating mankind would be drastic to say the least. (Perhaps one thinks here of nuclear war and the like.)

However, I have tried to show that this reasoning is far from obvious. Among other things, one can distinguish several pessimistic doctrines. Some of these – and more specifically the most plausible ones – do not have as a consequence that mankind should be exterminated. This seems, however, to really follow from general pessimism in its fatalistic variant. But even if this pessimism by no means is completely implausible, it is still significantly less believable than, e.g., the fatalistic whole-pessimism and the non-fatalistic future-pessimism. In addition, specific extra assumptions are needed if one shall be able to conclude that humanity should be exterminated. It is also partly unclear how humanity should be exterminated if general pessimism is correct. The most likely method is seemingly a big nuclear war, but it is not certain that it is the best method – or even an acceptable method.

About the original text and the translation

The translation ends here. Simon added this section.

The original Swedish text by Lars Bergström has the title "Pessimismens konsekvenser". It was published in 1978 on pages 24–34 in the book *En filosofibok tillägnad Anders Wedberg*, and the book was edited by Lars Bergström, Harald Ofstad, and Dag Prawitz.[1] The location was Stockholm and the publisher Bonniers. The Swedish original is available online at https://www.simonknutsson.com/files/Lars-Bergstrom-Pessimismens-konsekvenser.pdf (published online with Bergström's permission), and the translation is available at https://www.simonknutsson.com/the-consequences-of-pessimism/ and at https://www.simonknutsson.com/files/Bergstrom-Lars-The-consequences-of-pessimism.pdf.

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The publishing house Albert Bonniers Förlag wrote to Simon that the rights are not with them anymore and that it is the author or the author's heirs who must approve a translation. Bergström gave Simon permission to translate the text and publish the translation. This translation might be updated if, for example, typos are discovered.

Finally, the following are comments on choices made during the translation: In section I, it says "Pessimism is thus a valuation rather than a prediction". The Swedish word is *värdering*, which is here translated as 'valuation', but other options are 'value', 'evaluation', and 'appraisal'. The translation says 'outweigh' and 'counterbalance' several times. In all those instances, the Swedish word is *uppväga*, which is here sometimes translated as 'outweigh' and sometimes as 'counterbalance'. 'Outweigh' and 'counterbalance' seem about equally appropriate, and they are treated as synonymous in this translation. Other translations of *uppväga* are 'offset' and 'make up for'.

[1] These were the editors, according to Bergström (e-mail on July 7, 2022). These are also the three persons listed at the end of the preface.