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Optimism?

In this essay I suggest that human self-understanding has become blinded by optimism. Indeed, as a species we have become addicted to optimism. Without optimism no one can hope to succeed in a public office. Leaders feel obliged to be optimistic. Innovators need to be optimistic, lest they fail to find funding. Journalists are obliged to hold out hope to their audiences. Engineers, scientists and technologists are optimistic. Arguably, all professionals are trained to be optimistic; institutional life is governed by optimism. Collectively and individually experts advise us to remain optimistic at all times. Positive thought is very powerful.

But what exactly is optimism? Like love, optimism is universally applauded but rarely defined. In this essay optimism is defined as a positive attitude of mind, inextricably linked to hope. Optimism is therefore also an emotional process and open to self-censoring of undesirable outcomes, feelings, and emotions.

Optimism is fundamental to human psychology – without optimism and hope life is generally held to be very bleak. Conventionally, optimism is held to be a functional prerequisite for healthy living. Its absence is generally understood to be non-functional; psychologists pathologise this as morbidity, hopelessness, despair, and depression. On the contrary, I will suggest in this essay that optimism, and its opposite pessimism, are best understood as defining a continuum ideally mediated by realism, rather than by the fantasies of advertising, the delusions of politicians, and the metaphysics of religion.

Optimism is a key feature in popular culture and daily life. Optimism leads to hope and aspiration. Every politician trades on this simple axiom. Indeed, because all modern ideologies tend to be future oriented, progressive and technologically driven, optimism is logically required as the driving force of such cultural trajectories: winners are grinners; and we should learn from our failures. *Always look on the sunny side of life.*

Optimism adds buoyancy to daily life. In the west we eat, sleep and consume optimistically. Obesity thrives on optimism. Healthy living requires optimism. Drivers are optimistic. Internet users are optimistic. Statistical facts about mortality, morbidity and risk are no deterrent; indeed, they probably encourage optimism since nobody can afford to spiral into total lock down.

Perhaps there are other socio-political and cultural factors involved in the development of modern popular culture that is so optimistic – such as a global growth imperative, and a global presence of religion. Whatever, optimism is a fundamental imperative at work in most, if not all, of these 'other factors'. Unfortunately, closer scrutiny of the automatic assumption that optimism is fundamental has now become a human survival issue. It would be wonderful if all our hopes for a better tomorrow could be realised, but it is becoming painfully apparent that they won't.

Too much optimism has led us down the proverbial garden path. In recent times the abject failure of the species to deal with the existential threat of climate change is *prima facie* evidence for the loss of vision caused by excessive optimism. And there are other current examples of the dangers of blind optimism. The Corona virus pandemic, for instance, shows how political optimism can resulted in narrowly focussed individualism. The recent firestorm that engulfed large swathes of Australia also shows how excessive optimism can be catastrophic – the rains came too late.

Because there are so many examples of apparently wilful optimistic ignorance attending global disasters – including the outcomes of wars - we have to wonder whether human self-appreciation, in general, is quite misguided. Rather, it seems that human life can be paradoxical, and often a dark comedy

of errors. As I go on to discuss, this is not an appeal for pessimism, as such. Rather, the problem is with the dichotomising of optimism and pessimism, and other idealistic assumptions. We need not be either optimistic or pessimistic. We need to be realistic and find a balanced emotional response to situations that may become increasingly difficult. Optimism, or pessimism, is an emotional indulgence.

Such an idea is at odds with conventional wisdom of the kind to be found in most journalism and popular literature. At best, in all populist traditions optimism is the motivational force that can transform anger into positive action. As Christiana Figueres put it (in the context of climate change), 'we have to be able to face that reality without denying it, whatsoever, understand it, and in a martial arts way turn the energy that comes out of that pain and that grief, into a firm commitment, a resolute, gritty determination, to do what it takes to protect nature and to protect human life, because if we do not approach this with a firm resolve, we will lose it' (quoted in Julia Baird, 'Globally, we need to consider optimism', ***Sydney Morning Herald***, March 14-15, p.35).

This sounds like excellent advice – and certainly, politicians and other leaders would do well to follow such advice. But there are details about optimism and pessimism that need fleshing out.

Optimism and pessimism form a continuum

In the first instance, optimism and pessimism are best not considered as a binary system – the default position in most popular culture, such as evident in the tedious positioning of most politicians. Optimism and pessimism actually form a continuum of more complexly motivated possibilities. We know that the realities of social life everywhere will always mediate and undercut the lofty ideals of government consultants like Christiana Figueres. Corruption, criminality and complacency will always emerge at some point or another. It is not enough to be optimistic. We also have to be realistic.

For example, in the context of western liberal democracies we know that the prioritisation of choice and freedom makes crisis management more difficult for democratic governments than for those in authoritarian societies, such as China. One suspects that at times of national crisis (such as at times of a pandemic, for instance) individuals motivated by freedom and choice are less likely than their counterparts in authoritarian societies to tolerate harsh measures from governments. In the west fights occur in supermarkets over toilet paper. The Chinese state would not tolerate that, any loss of human rights not withstanding. Statistics about the impacts of Corona virus comparing countries such as China and India, or even China and the USA, will be interesting.

In short, however, the continuum of optimism and pessimism should be mediated by realism – evidence based, scientifically informed, expert driven, realism. This requires a break with binary linguistic habits that remain unqualified – something now in the interests of species survival.

Humans are animals

Further, the utopian ideals about human nature that drive most inspirational writing and thinking, are just wrong. Humans are self-interested animals; we are not naturally 'good' (or 'evil'). Social ideals (such as 'good', empathy, compassion, sharing, mutual aid, and so on) are essential correctives in the interests of quality survival, but they are only constructs – it must be repeated, **constructs**. The rule of law, a professionalised division of labour, and generally speaking, social institutions that valorise freedom and choice, are the social forces that produce order and progress in modern civilised societies. These are all produced and reproduced in social processes without the help of god, gods and metaphysical processes. There are no naturally 'good' or 'evil' agents lurking in heaven, hell or at the margins of social machinery.

And even if millions do believe in fairy stories, we in the west have a cultural system that preserves the right to believe in anything at all: secular, liberal democracy.

It is hard not to be enthusiastic about this great cultural achievement of contemporary western societies, excessive optimism notwithstanding.

The universe is not moral

Yet it should be hard to be optimistic at a time when measured pessimism is required. Indeed, the global disasters we face – such as climate change, over-population, warfare, pandemics, political corruption, and endless institutional dysfunction - are all a product of a long history of barely qualified optimism about human character, religious destiny, technological progress, economic growth and institutional benevolence. Really, all this human centred madness has resulted in a possibly terminal situation for the human species.

Of course, a certain level of pragmatic optimism – including 'I can survive this' and 'we can solve this problem', is required to avoid a total quagmire, but there is a hard philosophical discussion to be had about the pursuit of realism in the face of disaster. Such a discussion may help disperse some of the personal angst associated with 'measured pessimism', the awkward nature of disasters, and brutal truths about human nature. It is now necessary to entertain pessimistic thoughts. Things could well go downhill from here. Our children deserve to hear the truth; they will not thank parents who refused to confront reality.

It does help the great cause of realism if we can accept the fact that the universe is not moral. There is no guarantee of a happy outcome to any of the problems life throws up. We just do our best, with the help of others, with the help of good analysis, and with the help of good coping strategies in the context of positively functional societies. Normally this is enough. Humans are smart, creative and good survivors. And certainly we can hope for the best; but we need also prepare for the worst. That fall back position seems to elude politicians, the merchants of spin, and all those who make a living out of excessive optimism.

Also, as stated above, given that human beings are in reality an animal species, it should be relatively obvious that we learn morality and ethics during socialisation. Individually we learn morality and ethics as a generation-to-generation process.

One of the great oversights in the contemporary teaching of ethics and morality is the basic fact that humans are part of a local and global ecology. We share a finite planet with many other species; all of us struggle to survive as individuals and as a species. There is nothing miraculous or particularly remarkable about any of that. As a species humans are just so relatively intelligent that we have become dominant and capable of reshaping our environments. That realisation should change everything; perhaps we are so species centric that, like all other species, we just need to take up as much space as possible. Jobs and growth will certainly keep us on track in that department.

Complexity

Human society is complex enough, but in the context of the natural systems comprising a global ecology, the relationship any one individual has with other humans and a non-human environment is extremely complex and because of that, often apparently perverse, ironic and humorous. In life things rarely go to plan, and sometimes fail in spectacular ways. There are so many ways 'the best laid plans can go awry'. Social order is actually an incredible achievement. We really do need to keep a good historical perspective

on the recency of modern civilization, on it's fragility, and on the ease with which any society can fall into hard times. Social order is not inevitable; it is hard won.

This is not to let politicians, economists, doctors, lawyers, engineers, technologists, managers, and 'leaders' off the hook of trying to make things go to plan, but rather to emphasise the great difficulty in making living systems conform to human abstractions. Think of political assertions about bushfires, pandemics and war. No matter how accurate experts may or may not be in their predictions, nobody can really be confident about the future any more. We have reached too many tipping points.

Of course, human society is only possible because life can be to some extent 'routinised' - but, in an era of increasing 'crisis management' habits of thought and action are increasingly provisional. We all have to live with the possibility of some kind of radical upheaval, and need to adjust mentally and emotionally to the hard fact of unpredictability. That is not simply a pessimistic view; it's a realistic one. Optimism may be a significant motivator of individual action, but it can be embarrassing in the cold light of day.

Dialectics

It has been said that every situation contains its opposite as a latent potential; everything is becoming something else in a radically different way. Historically there have been two major philosophical systems to make this claim: dialectical materialism (Marxism) most recently, and ancient Taoism. Both systems could be called 'dialectical' because they emphasise the role of contradictory or opposing forces in the development of change, and 'progress'. However, Marxism (I would say) is too formulaic and unrealistic about the fallibility of living systems, and ancient Taoism too far removed from the realities of modern life. Most people are just not open to the joys of mystical contemplation, or indeed to the 'inevitability' of social and cultural revolution.

Perhaps we should reassess both systems in the light of modern science, the fallibility of human nature, and the naivete of sociological solutions. That goes well beyond the scope of a short essay, but the 'comedy of errors' that characterises all efforts of social planning, management, and 'leadership' warrants closer scrutiny - if humanity is to become more rational, and perhaps even survive with some quality of life for the masses.

Modern science and mathematics do offer some correctives to the traditional simplicities of Marxism and Taoism: specifically the ideas of complexity, non-linearity and the great difficulty of reconciling the microscopic with the macroscopic (ie. quantum mechanics versus Newtonian and Einsteinian mechanics). The world system is not a simple calculation, it does not move in straight lines, and things may not be what they appear to be.

The metaphoric possibilities of these outcomes alone should shake the complacency of modern sociology and social policy. And we should note, optimism is not relevant in the interplay of dialectical processes.

Paradox?

Could there be other unaccounted fatal flaws in human thinking about human nature? At a time of national emergency it is certainly useful to think about the ways in which human action does go wrong: how in the middle of a global pandemic the passengers of an infected cruise liner can casually walk ashore; how during bushfire season heroic landowners attempt back burning; how scientific advice about climate change can be ignored; and so on.

It would seem that there are always unanticipated consequences to social action. And it may be that we have a perverse fascination with the way things can go wrong. There would seem to be, indeed, an endless audience appetite for scandals, criminality and outrage. The media trade on this aspect of human nature. Perhaps there is even an institutional demand for this kind of narrative. 'Fake news' indeed.

Unfortunately, words like 'unanticipated', 'contradiction' and 'fake' do not quite capture the nuance of difficult situations that are unpredictable, absurd, darkly comedic, perverse or even paradoxical. Disasters of any kind usually go beyond the meanings of logical categories and established vocabularies. Disaster management may be forever confounded by a kind of dark passion: wanting to experience the unexperienced; wanting to know the unknowable.

Ultimately, the point is not to be constrained by the limitations of language. Understanding new and complex dilemmas might require new categories of thought, or at least a more nuanced approach to optimism.

And so on to modern times

One obvious consequence for social planning is that complex problems do not necessarily have unique and simple solutions. Approximation, management, and leadership require realism, even when optimism evaporates in the face of unpredictable crises. The loss of houses, partners, children, animals and working ecologies to bushfires, for example, demonstrate the limitations of optimism. In Australia survivors were buoyed up by the kindness of strangers and the resilience of their societies, but they were not always comforted by politicians, or supported by 'helping' institutions. And they were preyed upon by the unscrupulous.

A certain level of optimism is required for personal survival, but a world that is unpredictable requires personal courage and stoicism. These human attributes go beyond optimism or pessimism. They require a kind of 'warrior' mentality.

Conclusions

Crisis management of the kind we can now easily anticipate requires far more than simple optimism. If we are to survive and survive well, we will have to change the world. That may not be possible.

Perhaps this is the time to benefit from a little 'post structural' wisdom; optimism and pessimism are not binary opposites. Rather, they define a continuum of human conditions that should be mediated by realism. This last conclusion is perennial philosophical wisdom - tried and tested over many centuries. It would be tragic to forget such a simple idea.

Tom Jagtenberg
30 March, 2020

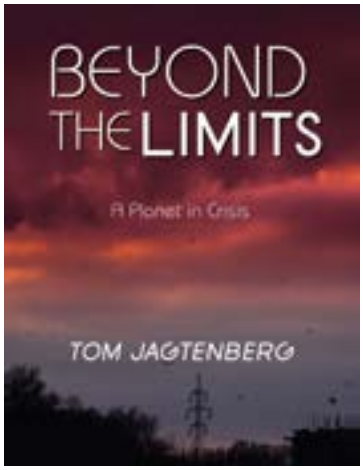
About Tom Jagtenberg

Tom has a longtime interest in the natural world and concern about its decline. His interests, whilst being inter-disciplinary, have always had a focus on nature and the environment.

He worked as a sociologist for thirty years at Wollongong University (where he was a Senior Lecturer) and Southern Cross University (where he was an adjunct research fellow). He is a published author of books and articles about the environment and related cultural fields. Tom has qualifications in science, engineering and sociology – a BE (Chemical and Fuel Engineering, Hons 1, UNSW), an MSc (Liberal Studies in Science, Manchester University) and a PhD (Sociology, University of Wollongong).

Since Tom's student days he has been concerned with the representation of nature in disciplinary fields as diverse as science, sociology, cultural studies and communication studies, natural medicine and political life. He has been a strong critic of the exclusion of non-human interests from academic fields and political parties. As his latest book suggests even Green political parties are limited in the extent to which they can be advocates for other species, their habitats, and even human environments.

Tom retired from academic life to live in Northern New South Wales with his partner. They chose the Northern Rivers region because of its strong ecologically focused community and beautiful environment.



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ISBN-13-978-0992560287
Cilento Publishing

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