

Call for Papers

The Good Life beyond Optimism and Pessimism: Philosophy — Ideology — Affective Materialities

International Conference
University of Augsburg, 9-11 October 2025

Confirmed keynote speakers:

Joshua Foa Dienstag (University of Wisconsin-Madison)
Katrin Röder (TU Dortmund)

Pandemics, wars, climate change, austerity, the rise of right-wing totalitarianism across the world – the present offers plenty to be pessimistic about. This sentiment seems to be confirmed by recent surveys of the outlook of today’s youth, who is often labelled as the most pessimistic generation in decades.¹ Moreover, the seemingly widespread pessimist affect is also reflected in the continuing popularity of apocalyptic and dystopian narratives in popular culture such as the TV shows *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017–), *The Purge* (2018-2019), *Black Mirror* (2011–) etc. This pessimist affect can be, in turn, connected to a distinct pessimist tradition in philosophical thought – a “nightside of thought”², which emerged as a branch of modern Western post-Enlightenment philosophy. Within the British context, in fact, the very word ‘optimism’ originated in 1759, stemming directly from Gottfried-Wilhelm Leibniz,³ in particular, his famous dictum that we are living in “the best of all possible worlds” (*Essais de Theodicee*, 1710). This relatively passive view of optimism, relying on the notion of a preestablished harmonical order, was accompanied by a more active conception as for instance Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s writings, Thomas Jefferson’s famous (active) “pursuit of happiness” and, not least, British hedonistic moral philosophy of the time (e.g., Jeremy Bentham, Anthony Earl of Shaftesbury, David Hume etc.) reveal.⁴ Throughout its ongoing evolution towards the 21st century, “optimism” along with its underlying notions of “happiness” reappeared in countless manifestations in society, culture and literature. Despite their heterogenous conceptions, though, optimism and happiness largely coincide in their temporal-teleological structure;⁵ that is, a positive outlook towards a future (optimistically perceived to be) “more likely than not to materialize”.⁶ Pessimism, on the other hand, is in many ways a response to

¹ See “Deloitte Global Millennial and Gen Z Survey 2021”

<<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/deloitte-millennial-survey-2021.html>> and the survey “Jugend in Deutschland” (“Youth in Germany”) <<https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/gesellschaft/studie-jugend-100.html>>.

² Eugene Thacker: *Cosmic Pessimism* (Univocal, 2015), p. 3.

³ Cf. <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100252316#:~:text=Optimistic%20philosophies%20include%20Platonism%2C%20with,evil%20of%20pain%20as%20well>>.

⁴ Cf. Darrin M. McMahon: “The Pursuit of Happiness in History” in Susan A. David et al.: *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness* (Oxford UP, 2014), pp. 258–260; Dieter Thomä et al.: *Glück: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (Metzler, 2011), pp. 163–171, 173–176, 179–181.

⁵ Cf. Ignacio L. Götz: *Conceptions of Happiness* (University Press of America, 1995), p. 3; Sara Ahmed: “Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness.” *New Formations* 63 (2007), p. 24; Lauren Berlant: *Cruel Optimism* (Duke UP, 2010), p. 93.

⁶ Oliver Bennett: “Cultures of Optimism.” *Cultural Sociology* 5 (2011), p. 303.

the Enlightenment inasmuch as it constitutes a “doppelganger” of progress⁷ that radically questions such teleological narratives of modernity.

In recent years, both optimism/happiness as well as pessimism have become flourishing fields of study. To the same extent that we can speak of a “happiness turn” in the humanities from the 2000s on,⁸ pessimist philosophy has likewise diversified into “micro-pessimisms”⁹, including afropessimism, queer pessimism, ecological pessimism and antinatalism.¹⁰ What unites these new pessimisms is not only their particular focus on specific identities and how these constitute a being-in-the-world that can be grasped with pessimism as an epistemological perspective, but also their grappling with questions of “the good life.”

While it might seem counterintuitive to consider pessimism as a starting point for eudaemonia, pessimism indeed provides new perspectives on optimism as well as on happiness. It questions teleological narratives of collective cultural and social progress as much as narratives of individual happiness. In other words, it challenges the ideological functions of the “cultures of optimism”, which, however, appear to be crucial for the stability of the state, community and the subject.¹¹ Pessimism can thus be a tool to interrogate what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism” – the demand for toxic positivity and individual responsibility for one’s personal success that is at the heart of current late-capitalist ideologies. We, indeed, witness the rise of multiple forms of self-optimization¹² embedded in a literal “happiness industry”¹³ in recent times. Thus, pessimism might certainly prove liberating for individuals tired of the demand for positive “self-actualization” – and it is an affect that results as a negative image from the “positive culture of emotions” that the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz has identified as central to the affective life of late modernity.¹⁴ At the same time, as philosophers like David Benatar and Mara van der Lugt have demonstrated, pessimism can account more accurately for the inevitable facets of human life often neglected in cultures of positivity and optimism: in facing suffering, pessimist philosophy offers modes of empathy and compassion (Mit-Leiden)¹⁵ and debunks the “promise of happiness” by articulating the position of the “affect aliens” – those left behind by narratives of the good life.¹⁶ Pessimism and optimism, then, are not necessarily entirely separable, but constitute complementary epistemological approaches to existential question of eudaemonia.

This conference seeks to explore the relationship between optimism and pessimism (including their implicit notions of un/happiness) by focusing on their underlying philosophical histories from Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought (from Voltaire to Schopenhauer and Adorno/Horkheimer and beyond) to the “new” pessimisms of the present (Eugene Thacker, Joshua Foa Dienstag, Sara Ahmed, Frank B. Wilderson III and others). The conference wants

⁷ Joshua Foa Dienstag: *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton UP, 2006), p. 16.

⁸ See e.g. Christopher Kullenberg and Gustaf Nelhans: “The happiness turn? Mapping the emergence of ‘happiness studies’ using cited references.” *Scientometrics* 103 (2015), who trace the emergence of a “happiness turn” in numerous academic disciplines around the 2000s.

⁹ Joseph Packer & Ethan Stoneman: *A Feeling of Wrongness: Pessimistic Rhetoric on the Fringes of Popular Culture* (Penn State UP, 2018), p. 18.

¹⁰ For an overview of these new pessimisms, see Mark Schmitt: *Spectres of Pessimism: A Cultural Logic of the Worst* (Palgrave, 2023).

¹¹ Cf. Oliver Bennett: “Cultures of Optimism.” *Cultural Sociology* 5 (2011), pp. 308–314 for the functions such “cultures of optimism” perform.

¹² See for example Oliver Bennett: “Cultures of Optimism.” *Cultural Sociology* 5 (2011), p. 305 and Jeffrey R. Di Leo: *Happiness* (Routledge, 2022), p. 22.

¹³ Di Leo 2022, p. 1.

¹⁴ Andreas Reckwitz: *The End of Illusions: Politics, Economy and Culture in Late Modernity* (Polity, 2021), pp. 110-112.

¹⁵ See David Benatar: *Better Never to Have Been. The Harming of Coming Into Existence* (Oxford UP, 2006); *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life’s Biggest Questions* (Oxford UP, 2017); Mara van der Lugt: *Dark Matters: Pessimism and the Problem of Suffering* (Princeton UP, 2021).

¹⁶ Sara Ahmed: *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke UP, 2010), p. 157.

to scrutinize optimism and pessimism along with their potentials for cultural, literary and media studies, sociology and related subdisciplines (such as futures studies) in theory and practice.

We invite papers of 20 minutes that examine philosophical issues of optimism and pessimism as well as the cultural and aesthetic representations of these philosophies, materialities and affects. Papers can address the following aspects:

- The pessimism of optimism and the optimism of pessimism
- (Beyond) optimism and/or pessimism in (meta-)theory and practice
- Optimism/Pessimism: diachronic and synchronic perspectives
- Textual and cultural practices of optimism/pessimism (literary and cultural case studies)
- Genres of optimism and pessimism (e.g. utopia/dystopia)
- The aesthetics of optimism and pessimism
- Optimism/Pessimism and affect
- Optimism/Pessimism and materiality
- (un)happy objects
- Melancholia and optimism/pessimism
- Ideologies of optimism/pessimism
- The ethics of optimism and pessimism
- Pessimism as deconstructive force
- Optimistic and pessimistic temporalities
- Futures Studies
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Abstracts (max. 300 words) for papers proposed should be accompanied by a short biographical note, plus full address and institutional affiliation.

Please send your proposals to both organisers: Mark Schmitt (mark.schmitt@hu-berlin.de) and David Kerler (david.kerler@uni-a.de)

Deadline: 20 December 2024