

THE SAD TRUTH: OPTIMISM, PESSIMISM, AND PRAGMATISM

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Abstract

Pragmatists (such as William James) recommend optimism as a successful strategy, and recent psychological research has confirmed its value. But optimism comes at a price: optimists are less accurate in their assessments and expectations than are pessimists. Thus optimism ‘proves itself to be good in the way of belief’, and by pragmatic standards should count as true; but that makes the accuracy costs of optimism invisible (the problem is only exacerbated by Rorty’s recommendation that pragmatists stop speaking of truth altogether). The problem prevents pragmatists from offering a Darwinian explanation of why pessimism survives, and also blocks any pragmatist account of the well-documented and highly successful exploratory behavior of many animal species.¹

Optimism is psychologically adaptive but notoriously cockeyed. Its benefits are known by common experience and confirmed by psychological research, and pragmatists such as William James have eloquently described the advantages of sturdy optimism:

Whether you [like me] or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation . . . The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth’s existence; and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts. Who gains promotions, boons, appointments, but the man in whose life they are seen to play the part of live hypotheses, who discounts them, sacrifices other things for their sake before they have come, and takes risks for them in advance (James 1897, pp. 23–24)?

As Hilary Putnam notes with approval, William James ‘. . . believed that people cannot live and function in the world on a diet of mere pessimism; a world-view that can be a guide to action

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need not be full of rosy optimism, but it must not tell us that we are all the pawns of either blind chance or iron necessity' (Putnam 1990, p. 218). When we think we will succeed, we are more likely to do so; when we are optimistic concerning our recovery, recovery is hastened; and the little engine who thinks he can has a better chance of climbing the mountain than does the little engine who thinks he can't.

Optimism works. It's not a magic talisman, of course. Incurably optimistic golfers may hook their drives and push their putts, optimistic patients may recover slowly or not at all, and optimistic little engines sometimes fail. But all else being equal, optimists are more likely to be successful than are pessimists. And this is not just an article of untested faith among philosophers and coaches and the authors of inspirational children's books; it is a well-confirmed conclusion based on solid empirical research (Seligman 1990, pp. 167–184; Scheier and Carver 1993; Gillham 2000).

Optimism is a more successful strategy for living and flourishing. So approach the world with optimism, look at the world through rose-coloured glasses, and have confidence that success will crown your efforts. You will live more successfully, and furthermore – from the pragmatic perspective – your beliefs will be *true*. As William James insists: 'The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons' (James 1907, p. 42). Optimism has proved its worth as a framework for belief, and for definite reasons: the definite reasons that the optimist strives harder, lives better, and accomplishes more.

Or perhaps rather than equating truth with usefulness, it is better for pragmatists to eschew speaking of truth altogether. Richard Rorty prefers 'justified' beliefs that function well within various systems. Notions of 'true representation of reality' are metaphysically profligate and counterproductive. From Rorty's perspective we have no need or use for hypotheses concerning 'truth': optimism is simply a successful and well-justified strategy within a system that works effectively for us.

Indeed, so successful is optimism as a belief strategy that it raises the question of why pessimism survives at all. Shouldn't natural selection make short work of such a comparatively inept policy? This is an important issue for pragmatists, since pragmatism has its roots in Darwinism. It is Darwinism, according to Rorty, that undercuts representation (and truth-as-accurate-representation):

Since the pragmatists, unlike the idealists, took Darwin and biology seriously, they had an additional reason for distrusting the idea that true beliefs are accurate representations. For representation, as opposed to increasingly complex adaptive behavior, is hard to integrate into an evolutionary story. Within such a story, it is easy to think of beliefs, with Bain and Peirce, as habits of action, patterns of complex behavior. But it is hard to imagine that, at a certain point in the evolutionary process, somewhere between the squids and the apes, these patterns began to be determined by inner representations, having previously been determined by mere neurological configurations. Even if one chooses to treat sufficiently complex neurological configurations as representations, the question of their accuracy seems to collapse immediately into that of their utility. So, once again, we seem to have a difference that makes no practical difference (Rorty 1995, p. 20).

Thus pragmatists recognize the importance of finding a good account of why optimism is successful: an account that is compatible with Darwinism and turns on utility (and does not employ notions of 'accurate representation'). The flip side of that commitment requires taking seriously the question of why less successful pessimism has not become extinct.

But when we try to give a plausible Darwinian explanation for why pessimism survives, the idea of accurate representation proves more useful than Rorty supposes; and contrary to James, it defies definition in terms of utility. Why do pessimists survive, when optimists work faster, harder, and better? Because pessimists have one thing going for them: they judge more accurately. Seeing the world through rose-coloured glasses encourages the optimist to achieve greater success, but also leads the optimist to overestimate the chances of success and underestimate the obstacles. The pessimist makes a more realistic assessment of the task ahead, with all its pitfalls and perils. When the optimist and the pessimist attempt the same task, the optimist is more likely to succeed, but is also more likely to overestimate her chances of success; the pessimist is less likely to succeed, but more likely to make an accurate assessment of her prospects. Optimistic Ophelia and Pessimistic Polly undertake the same task. Ophelia optimistically estimates that it will take her eight hours to complete the task, and actually finishes in nine. Polly estimates that the task will take her ten hours, and she in fact finishes in ten. Ophelia worked

better and harder, but Polly judged the task and her own capacities more accurately.

One might expect that the pessimist would underestimate her abilities and exaggerate the difficulties, thus erring in the opposite direction from the optimist. That is a reasonable expectation, but it is not supported by psychological research. Pessimists do not work as efficiently, but they gauge their capacities more accurately and without an underestimation of abilities that corresponds to optimistic exaggeration. Of course one could stipulate that by definition a pessimist *must* underestimate her abilities; but that would block, rather than facilitate, empirical inquiry. Psychologists have devised measures of optimism and pessimism that are independent of productive capacities and judgments of those capacities. Those measures are based on extensive question sets, including respondents' level of agreement or disagreement with such statements as 'I hardly ever expect things to go my way' and 'In uncertain times, I usually expect the best' (Scheier and Carver 1985; see also Seligman 1990, pp. 32–51). With optimism and pessimism examined in that manner, it is then possible to make independent studies of their effects on both work efficiency and on the accuracy of gauging such efficiency. Those studies reveal that optimists work more effectively, but judge less accurately.

Optimists work better, are less likely to suffer depression, and their sense that they have significant and effective control over the events in their lives contributes to their success and well-being. But optimism comes at a cost: a cost in accuracy, as demonstrated by an elegant and revealing experiment (Alloy and Abramson 1979). Subjects were given a button to press to turn on a light; one group had total control of the light, while a second group had no control at all. Both groups were then asked to assess their degree of control over the light. Pessimists were quite accurate in gauging when they did and did not exercise effective control, while optimists consistently judged that they had substantial control over the light, even when they had no control at all. (Similar results were found in Lewinsohn, Mischel, Chaplin, and Barton 1980.)

The pessimist's accurate representation does not 'collapse into utility'; to the contrary, the two are entered on opposite sides of the ledger. The price exacted for pessimistic accuracy is in lost optimistic utility, and the cost of beneficial optimism is paid in loss of accurate representation. Thus groups that contain a few pessimists may have a better assessment of the risks and obstacles.

When the optimists apply their fortitude and ingenuity to those obstacles, the group's prospects for success are enhanced. This may not be the most satisfactory Darwinian explanation of why pessimists survive: it raises questions of group selection, and those are a vexed Darwinian issue (as discussed in Alexander 1987). But without a distinction between accuracy and utility, this explanation cannot even be considered. By collapsing that distinction, the pragmatism of James and Rorty eliminates from consideration a range of explanatory hypotheses that appear to be worthy of consideration. A pragmatism that aborts such explanatory hypotheses can hardly claim the Kuhnian fecundity that pragmatists value. (This critique is aimed at the prominent pragmatic views of James and Rorty. Obviously there are philosophers who also claim allegiance to pragmatism but offer significantly different accounts of truth: Putnam (1999) is a clear example.)

To appreciate the benefits of pessimism we require a concept of nonutilitarian accuracy. That same concept is essential in another context that – like optimism – initially appears to support the pragmatic approach. In a standard learning experiment, James Lee Kavanau trained feral white-footed mice to swiftly and accurately negotiate a maze to reach food. But he noted that even after the captive mice had mastered the correct path, they still occasionally made wrong turns. Kavanau found this perplexing, but on reflection realized that he was viewing the situation too narrowly:

Investigators sometimes are puzzled by the fact that once an animal has learned a discrimination well, it nonetheless still makes some 'incorrect' responses. Actually, these responses are incorrect only from the point of view of the investigator's rigidly prescribed program, not from that of the animal. The basis for these responses is that the animal has a certain degree of variability built into many of its behavior patterns. This variability is adaptive to conditions in the wild, where there are many relationships that are not strictly prescribed (Kavanau 1967, p. 1628).

This appears to be grist for the pragmatist's mill. The best strategy for the white-footed mouse is to vary its routes, try new paths, keep its options open; thus it discovers new food sources, and is less likely to become a food source for predators. The notion of a straight and narrow single true path is less useful than a larger perspective that considers behaviour in terms of its overall

usefulness. But there is another moral to the story. Without the concept of an 'accurate' or 'correct' path, it would have been impossible for Kavanau to recognize and appreciate the rich complexity of the feral white-footed mouse's exploratory behaviour.

No doubt Kavanau's white-footed mice can deviate from the 'correct path' without requiring a conceptual scheme that distinguishes true from useful; likewise for commuters trying alternative routes to the office. But to understand this phenomenon in a Darwinian context, we require a distinction between true or accurate on the one hand, and justified and useful on the other. Only by employing that distinction can we frame an adequate Darwinian account of the apparently erratic behavior of white-footed mice. The message of the white-footed mice is plain: the most useful path is not always the true path; but without the concept of a true path (not the straight and narrow path to transcendent ultimate truth, but only a mundane path that reliably leads to the present goal) we lack the conceptual resources for understanding this phenomenon.

Rorty, who believes that the notion of truth has little utility – nothing that cannot be better handled by 'justified belief' – suggests that 'truth-seekers' get it wrong for the following reasons:

Such philosophers share a picture of human beings as machines constructed (by God or evolution) to, among other things, get things right. Pragmatists want our culture to get rid of that self-image and replace it with a picture of machines that continually adjust to each other's behavior, and to their environment, by developing novel kinds of behavior. These machines have no fixed program or function; they continually reprogram themselves to serve hitherto undreamt-of functions (Rorty 1995, p. 32).

Rorty is correct. Evolution does not construct us to 'get things right', but instead to function well in the environments in which we evolve. This is a point illustrated by the successful inaccurate estimates of optimists and the beneficial wrong turns of the white-footed mouse. But we still have important uses for the 'get things right' notion of truth. Groups containing some pessimistic members who focus on 'getting things right' are more likely to flourish. And as the psychologist Marvin Zuckerman notes, there are advantages for groups that contain both alterna-

tive-pursuing adventurers along with steady reliable followers of proven paths:

The survival of species that live and move in groups is enhanced by having some members who are adventurous and others who are more cautious and orderly. The biological value of a Columbus to the species is incalculable, but for every Columbus there must be more cautious types who stay at home and keep the books, make the star charts, codify the laws, and plant the crops (Zuckerman 1983, p. 38).

Pragmatists offer an important insight: the old model of truth as an accurate internal map or mirror of reality is cumbersome and unproductive. Rorty wisely counsels us to discard the old notions of humans as mirrors of nature, perfectly designed to develop accurate internal copies of the external world. Why not just respond to the original? What good does an internal copy do: unless we are so radically apart from the world that we can only access it through our special mental powers. Critiquing that account of truth is worthwhile philosophical work; but it does not follow that we must abandon truth as accuracy. When we reject truth as mental copy, we still require a notion of truth as correct representation.

This nonpragmatic truth account does not claim a 'view from nowhere' absolute sense of truth nor a simplistic 'copy' theory of truth. James may be correct that 'the trail of the human serpent is thus over everything' (James 1907, p. 37). All truths must be organized and conceptualized: they are not 'out there' in pristine purity, ripe for the picking. But it does not follow that what guides us best automatically qualifies as true. We must find room for pessimistic accuracy, even though it is not the optimum approach to life.

A recalcitrant pragmatist might answer that both the pessimist's superior accuracy and the 'true path' from which the white-footed mouse deviates are really just useful: useful for specific narrow functions, but useful nonetheless, and so both can be entered in the pragmatic ledger. But that will expand the notion of utility into something so all-inclusive that it no longer does productive work. It obscures the difference that the optimistic-pessimistic views bring out: the difference between an outlook that *works well* long-term (and optimism *is* a long-term successful strategy, not a short-term fluke); and an outlook that does not work as well but is more *accurate*. The problem with optimism is not that it fails to

lead us well; rather, the price optimism pays for its success is that it is not as accurate as the more darkly realistic pessimistic perspective. The substantive claim made by pragmatists is that an account of truth that equates truthfulness with usefulness (or that drops 'truth' altogether) works better. That pragmatist hypothesis might have been right; empirical psychological research indicates that it is wrong.

Pessimism, for all its problems, is a better path to the truth. The pessimist is less likely to win the race, complete the task, achieve the goal; but he takes home the consolation prize: his judgment was sound, his assessment was true. We need some pessimists to tell us when our illusions of control are mistaken, so that optimists can take steps to secure genuine control. A robust, optimistic sense of control – I can make things happen, I am not a pawn of fate or chance or powerful others – works better than pessimism. It promotes sustained efforts, offers protection against depression, and encourages creative problem-solving. But advantageous as such an optimistic outlook is, it is a mistake to suggest (as James does) that optimism is therefore true; and it is a mistake to subsume accuracy under utility (as Rorty prefers). Those are mistakes because they render invisible the costs of optimism: costs in accurate assessment.

Optimism works well, its tendency to exaggerate notwithstanding. That's the price you pay for optimism. And exploratory behaviour is a valuable tendency, even at the price of error. But if we adopt the truth accounts of James or Rorty, those costs cannot be entered in the books. To make that entry, we need the distinction between 'truth' and 'utility'. It sounds like a dictum from old-time religion: just because it's expedient, that doesn't make it true. That is an important distinction, even if we have high regard for the expedient; in fact, it may be especially important if we *do* have high regard for the expedient. In any case, it is a *useful* distinction that James and Rorty render impossible. So long as there remains a pessimistic perspective that is less effective as an approach to life but more accurate in its assessment of the world, we shall need a term for that benefit which brings cold comfort to pessimists. I suggest we call it 'truth'.

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