

Joshua Isaac Fox

Department of Philosophy • The University of Chicago • jifox@uchicago.edu
917-607-9966

Academic Employment

University of Chicago: Humanities Teaching Fellow

Fall 2021 – Present

Education

University of Chicago

PhD: Philosophy

August 2021

BA: Philosophy and Fundamentals

June 2013

Universität Bonn

Visiting PhD student

Fall 2018 – Spring 2019

Specialization

AOS: 19th-Century German Philosophy, Ethics, History of Ethics

AOC: Aesthetics, Philosophy of Emotion, Ancient Philosophy

Dissertation

Existential Pessimism and Aesthetic Experience: Mill, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche on Life's Value

Committee: Brian Leiter (co-chair), Martha Nussbaum (co-chair), Agnes Callard

Abstract: I examine how three major 19th-century philosophers – Mill, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche – confronted the problem of pessimism: the worry that life might not be worth living. I demonstrate how all three took this problem to stem from concerns about the structure of human desires and interests, concerns Mill and Nietzsche both took specifically aesthetic value to play an essential role in answering. Taken together, these thinkers' engagement with pessimism highlights two different aspects of aesthetic value's importance to human well-being: human beings need to value things in an aesthetic manner, and they also need to view themselves as possessing a particularly aesthetic kind of dignity. In the absence of aesthetic valuing, human beings are unable to maintain non-aversive desires: that is, desires directed *towards the good* rather than merely away from the bad. In the absence of aesthetic dignity, the same aesthetic valuing needed to get our desires in shape would subject us to debilitating forms of self-contempt and self-disgust.

Peer-Reviewed Publications

"Complex Wisdom in the *Euthydemus*" (2020). *Apeiron* 53, 3: 187-211.

"Gratitude to Beautiful Objects: On Nietzsche's Claim That 'the Beautiful Promises Happiness'" (2020). *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 51, 2: 169-187.

"Two Pessimisms in Mill" (2021). *Utilitas* 33, 4: 442-457.

"The Freedom-Based Critique of Well-Being's Exclusive Moral Claim" (2021). *The Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 22, 4: 647-662.

"Schopenhauer on Boredom" (2022). *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30, 3: 477-495.

"Does Schopenhauer Accept Any Positive Pleasures?" (Forthcoming). *European Journal of Philosophy*.

Other Publications

“The Costs of an Aesthetically Oriented Life.” (2022). In *Das Hauptwerk*, edited by Dieter Birnbacher and Matthias Koßler. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumen, 215-224.

Works in Progress or Under Contract

“Transfiguring Tempo: Anti-Pessimistic Art in BGE 28.” Invited contribution for *Nietzsche: Style and Thought*, edited by James Conant and Sebastian Sunday Grève.

“Boredom, Motivation, and the Value of Life.” Invited contribution for *Boredom in the History of Philosophy*, edited by Andreas Elpidorou and Josefa Ros Velasco. Routledge.

Commentaries

“The Costs of an Aesthetically Oriented Life.”

Response to Sandra Shapshay at *Das Hauptwerk: 200 Jahre Arthur Schopenhauers “Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung”*, Conference of the Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft. October 25, 2019.

Teaching Experience

As Instructor of Record:

2023: *Compassion: For and Against* (prospective)

The Ethics of John Stuart Mill (prospective)

2022: *Nietzsche’s Gay Science*

Philosophical Perspectives I

Pessimism

Reading and Research: Unamuno’s Del sentimiento trágico de la vida

Philosophical Perspectives III

Philosophical Perspectives II

2021: *Philosophical Perspectives I*

2020: *Pessimism and Compassion: Schopenhauer on Value*

As Teaching Assistant:

2020: *History of Philosophy III: Kant and the 19th Century* (Matthias Haase)

Introduction to Ethics (Ben Callard)

Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil (Brian Leiter)

2018: *Human Rights: Philosophical Foundations* (Ben Laurence)

2017: *History of Philosophy I: Ancient Philosophy* (Agnes Callard)

Intensive History of Philosophy I: Plato (Agnes Callard)

Awards

2018: Bonn-Chicago Exchange Fellowship

2013: Lee Family Prize for Highest Grade Point Average in Philosophy

2012: Phi Beta Kappa

2011: Dante Society of America Dante Prize for Best Undergraduate Essay on Dante

Academic Service

2022: Referee for *The Journal of Ethics*

Referee for *The Philosophical Forum*

Languages

German: Advanced Reading, Intermediate Speaking

High Pass on the Reading German for Research Purposes Exam

High Pass on the University of Chicago German Academic Reading Comprehension Assessment

Spanish: Advanced Reading, Intermediate Speaking
Ancient Greek: Beginner Reading

Graduate-Level Coursework

* indicates audit

Ethics and Political Philosophy

Utilitarian Ethics (Martha Nussbaum)

*Freedom and Responsibility: Contemporary and Historical (Michael Forster and Brian Leiter)

Ethics of Anscombe (Anselm Müller)

Feminist Philosophy (Martha Nussbaum)

Amartya Sen (Martha Nussbaum)

Libertarianism (Ben Laurence)

Emotion, Reason, and Law (Martha Nussbaum)

Final Ends (Anselm Müller and Candace Vogler)

*John Stuart Mill (Martha Nussbaum)

19th Century Philosophy

*Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Heinrich Meier)

Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* (Jonathan Lear)

*G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Michael Forster and Rainer Schäfer)

* Deutsche Romantik (Michael Forster)

**Beyond Good and Evil* Reading Group (Brian Leiter)

**Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Reading Group (Brian Leiter)

**On The Genealogy of Morality* Reading Group (Brian Leiter)

*Nietzsche's Meta-Ethics Reading Group (Brian Leiter)

Ancient Philosophy

Socratic Intellectualism (Agnes Callard)

Plato's *Philebus* (Gabriel Lear)

Aristotle and the Origin of the Ethical (Agnes Callard)

Other Philosophy

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (Irad Kimhi)

Philosophy of History: Narrative and Explanation (Robert Richards)

Language

Intensive Introductory Ancient Greek 1-2 (Sarah Nooter, Chris Faraone, and James Redfield)

Intermediate Ancient Greek 1 (James Redfield)

Elementary German 2-3 (Frederic Kopp)

Deutsche Märchen (Anna Pajak)

German for Research Purposes (James McCormick)

References

Brian Leiter

Karl N. Llewellyn Professor of Jurisprudence

The University of Chicago

bleiter@uchicago.edu

Agnes Callard

Associate Professor of Philosophy

The University of Chicago

agcallard@uchicago.edu

Martha Nussbaum

Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor

The University of Chicago

martha_nussbaum@law.uchicago.edu

Long Dissertation Abstract

Existential Pessimism and Aesthetic Experience: Mill, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche on Life's Value

In current use, pessimism is a temporal thesis. The pessimist denies the possibility of *improvement*. Things are, the pessimist suggests, as good as they're going to get. Perhaps they will stay the same. Perhaps they will get worse. What is certain is that they will never get better.

In the latter half of the 19th century, pessimism meant something different, something that allowed Nietzsche to define it as "the problem of the *value of existence*"(GS 357). Nietzsche and his contemporaries were not worried about the *relative* value of tomorrow and today. Their fear was more absolute. They worried not that life is already as good as it is going to get, but simply that it would never be good enough. Pessimism, in its 19th century use, was a worry about *life's value to the one who lives it*. In its weakest form, it was the fear that human happiness is an impossibility. In its strongest form, it was the thesis that human life is not worth living.

Worries about pessimism in this sense of the term gripped thinkers throughout the 19th century. In my dissertation, I discuss three thinkers who took this problem particularly seriously: John Stuart Mill, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Each of these thinkers takes their own approach to the problem of pessimism. I do my best to bring out the grounds of their individual worries about life's value. I also argue that there is a particular advantage to putting these thinkers' worries in contact. When taken together, their separate confrontations with pessimism point toward something of lasting philosophical significance: namely, a compelling account of the roles aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic dignity play in making life worth living.

I begin in chapter 1 by considering a pair of pessimistic charges Mill confronts in *Utilitarianism*. Interestingly, these charges are exactly inverted: the first suggests that the best possible human life will be satisfying but ignoble, the second that it will be noble but unsatisfying. The first account leads to what I call the pessimism of aesthetic disrespect: unable to view themselves as potential bearers of aesthetic value, those who view the world through the lens of such values are condemned to self-contempt or disgust. The second leads to what I call the pessimism of disengagement: insufficient opportunity for the satisfaction of desire turns us away from an existence that either failed to reward our interest or never excited any interest in the first place.

In chapter 2, I argue that Mill's concern about *both* of these pessimisms is no accident. Mill takes the threat posed by aesthetic disrespect so seriously precisely because he sees aesthetic valuing as essential to engagement. I bring these two pessimisms' relationship out through a novel account of the crisis Mill describes in his *Autobiography*. I argue that the crisis centered on doubts about the *sustainability* of the interest we take in our ends. Mill worried that interest in our ends would always be undermined by those ends' realization: the objects of our interest are engaging to *pursue*, but not engaging to have. Mill feared that this left us caught between a life of struggle and despair or a life of boredom and disaffection. Mill found a solution to this crisis in *aesthetic interest*, which he praised for its unique sustainability. Relying on aesthetic interest to solve the crisis comes with a cost, however: it saves us from the pessimism of disengagement, but our dependence on it leaves us vulnerable to the pessimism of aesthetic disrespect. Cultivating aesthetic interests requires developing sensitivity to and concern about the aesthetic significance of the world around us. This makes doubts about our own aesthetic significance relevant in a way they otherwise would not be.

Ultimately, however, I suggest that Mill is not fully successful in his effort to ground these claims about the importance of aesthetic interest and dignity. This becomes clear when we consider Schopenhauer's treatment of a quite similar set of issues. Like Mill during the crisis, Schopenhauer thinks human interests are fundamentally unsustainable. Again like Mill, he thinks that this means an excessively complete realization of our ends would lead to an unshakeable boredom that might turn us away from life. Unlike Mill, however, he does not think that such unshakeable boredom is likely to transpire with any frequency, offering an account of the way that different unsustainable interests might be combined in order to maintain an enduring interest in life. The plausibility of this account undercuts Mill's worry that disengagement would be the general result of reliance on exclusively unsustainable interests. For this reason, I pivot in chapters 3 and 4 to discussion of the pessimisms dealt with by Schopenhauer and

Nietzsche. Schopenhauer, despite denying Mill's particular worry about the situation described above, raises his own concerns about it. In responding to these concerns, Nietzsche offers a new, perhaps more successful, justification of Mill's claims about the importance of particularly aesthetic valuing and dignity.

In chapter 3, I argue that a uniquely decisive role in Schopenhauer's pessimism is played by the claim that human desire is essentially aversive in nature – driving us to flee states experienced as bad rather than pursue states experienced as good. Although other claims are needed to give Schopenhauer's pessimism its distinctive severity, this claim alone is responsible for the fact that his account is a pessimistic one at all. The aversive structure of desire is sufficient to explain why life never benefits, even if more must be said to reach Schopenhauer's stronger claim that life is always harmful.

In chapter 4, I argue that Nietzsche's claims about the importance of aesthetic experience respond to precisely this worry about aversion. As Nietzsche sees it, desires will be aversive in Schopenhauer's sense if we disvalue them: if we are distressed by our desires, we will value their objects merely negatively, as means of relieving that distress. With this in mind, I offer a novel account of Nietzsche's claim that "the existence of the world is only *justified* as an aesthetic phenomenon"(BT "Attempt" 5), suggesting that Nietzsche takes aesthetic experience to play an essential role in enabling us to value our desires. Aesthetic experience is thus the key to keeping the pessimism of aversion at bay. This explains why Nietzsche too worries about the pessimism of aesthetic disrespect. Like Mill, Nietzsche thinks that valuing our lives depends on taking aesthetic values seriously. This once again gives new weight to questions about our own ability to live up to those aesthetic values.

In chapter 4, I defended Nietzsche's thoughts about aesthetic experience's importance only on the assumption that he was basically correct about its nature. In chapter 5, I conclude by considering some of the arguments Nietzsche makes in favor of his aesthetic view. Nietzsche holds that aesthetic experience is a fundamentally interested state, famously endorsing Stendhal's claim that "the beautiful promises happiness"(GM III.6). Nietzsche defends this position via three explanatory arguments. Two arguments of his own creation focus on the motives and practices of representational artists: such artists, Nietzsche claims, are often moved to create by *gratitude* to beautiful objects, and they tend to represent those objects in a way that highlights the appeal of living with them. Another argument, borrowed from Stendhal, focuses on differences in aesthetic taste, putting particular emphasis on the way that positive experience with an object can change our sense of its aesthetic worth. The success of Nietzsche's view at explaining these phenomena gives us reason to take his aesthetic theory seriously, and thus to also take seriously his claims about aesthetic experience's role in warding off the pessimism of aversion.