

Pessimism and the Tragedy of Strong Attachments

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Abstract

Pessimists hold that human life is fundamentally a condition of suffering which cannot attain transcendent meaning. According to pessimistic nihilism, life's lack of transcendent meaning gives us reason to regret our existence. Life-affirming nihilism insists that we can and should affirm life in the absence of transcendent meaning. Yet both of these strains struggle to articulate what practical reasons might compel us to regret *or* affirm our inability to transcend the immanent conditions of the human predicament in the first place. I suggest that we catch sight of these practical reasons when we shift our attention from the value of transcendent *meaning* to the desire for temporal transcendence expressed by *strong attachments* such as love and devotion. In short, we want the things we love to last forever, and they can't. This makes human life tragic, but it does not settle the question of what sort of meaning it might have or lack.

1. Introduction: From Meaning to Attachment

Can human life be happy? Does life have a meaning sufficient to redeem our sufferings? Is it a good thing for me that I was born? Many people, if they think about these questions at all, are likely to think that the answer to all three is “yes,” perhaps obviously so. Some might even think it downright immoral to think otherwise. Yet for those of us who have a sneaking suspicion that the answer to at least one of these questions might be “no,” philosophical pessimism provides a more sympathetic tradition of interlocutors. That tradition is centrally concerned with the value of existence, and is open to the possibility that existing might be a very bad thing indeed.

Pessimism claims that life is unsatisfactory because it is pervasively marked by *suffering*, or because it is *meaningless* (or possibly both). As Frederick Beiser explains in his study of pessimism in 19th-century Germany,

Life was held to be not worth living either for *eudemonic* reasons, i.e. because it is filled with more suffering than happiness, or for *idealistic* reasons, i.e. because we cannot achieve, or even progress toward, those

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moral, political or aesthetic ideals that give our lives meaning. Clearly, these rationales are distinct: someone might think that, even though life is filled with suffering, it is still worth living because we make progress toward our ideals. Some pessimists ... would combine both rationales; others, however, would carefully distinguish between them, holding one rather than the other.¹

It is not surprising that the question of meaning has been so central within the pessimist tradition, since our sense of what kind of meaning life has or lacks can influence our evaluation of life as a whole. A sufficiently meaningful life might be worth living even if it is fundamentally and pervasively marked by suffering and unhappiness. If we are aware that a great deal of life consists of suffering, and if we are concerned with the question of whether life is worth living, it seems especially important to determine the extent to which our lives can have meaning.

There is considerable disagreement within the pessimist tradition of what sort of meaning life would need to achieve in order to be worthwhile. One tendency, which I will call “pessimistic nihilism,” holds that in addition to being a condition of appalling suffering, human life lacks any form of meaning that would make it worthwhile. It is thus reasonable to regret coming into existence. The second tendency, which I will call “life-affirming nihilism,” acknowledges that while life may certainly be a condition of suffering and unhappiness, our lives can nevertheless achieve meaning through a form of striving which creates new ideals and types of value, discovers new ways of exerting power and increasing our agency, and ultimately allows us to affirm a birth we never asked for.

It is nowadays common to draw a distinction between the concept of a “meaning of life” and the concept of “meaning in life.” Debates about the meaning *of* life focus on the question of whether life as a whole has a point, whether life is significant in “the grand scheme of things,” or whether there is an ultimate purpose that life serves. Debates about meaning *in* life focus on the question of whether and how life can include a distinctive kind of value (“meaningfulness”) which gives us practical reasons to endure suffering, devote ourselves to religious or political causes, undertake projects or relationships, and so on. Even if there is no cosmic purpose that our lives serve, no good reason for us to come into

¹ Beiser (2016), pp. 4-5.

existence, and no point to our lives as a whole, it may be possible to lead more or less “meaningful” lives.

Ultimately, both pessimistic and life-affirming nihilism concur that there is no “meaning of life” (or at least no type of meaning that would redeem or compensate for our sufferings).² More precisely, there are no *transcendent* sources of meaning available to human beings: whatever meaning our lives can have must be realized on the earthly terrestrial plane. However, these forms of nihilism differ on the significance of this fact for human life. Pessimistic nihilism argues that our inability to access transcendent sources of meaning shows 1) that life does not have a kind of meaning sufficient to redeem our sufferings and thus 2) that we should regret the fact that our lives lack transcendent meanings. Life-affirming nihilism insists that a lack of transcendent meaning is nothing to be regretted – in fact, focusing on transcendent meaning separates us from the project of criticizing, re-evaluating, and re-creating the sources of meaning that govern our lives on the terrestrial plane (precisely the activities which might ground a “meaningful life”).

Yet both parties to this debate stumble over a simple but important question: what reasons do these arguments give *us* to regret or affirm a lack of transcendent meaning in our lives? Pessimistic nihilism regrets the unattainability of a type of transcendent meaning which the vast majority of us simply do not seem to care for. Life-affirming nihilism, on the other hand, too often denies the relevance of transcendent value to human flourishing altogether. Illuminating a middle way in this debate requires us to show that most of us are *already implicitly committed to affirming* the value of a kind of transcendence in our daily lives which, regrettably, we cannot achieve. I argue that there is evidence of this implicit commitment in our *strong attachments*, especially those on display in our concerned, loving, caring, and radically vulnerable attachments to other people.

Section 2 gives a more precise characterization of pessimistic nihilism and life-affirming nihilism and their disagreement over the importance of transcendent meaning. There we will see that the problem of rational authority gives us a reason to seek a middle way between pessimistic nihilism’s longing for certain kinds of transcendence and life-affirming nihilism’s rejection of those

² The qualification is important because Schopenhauer (who I consider a pessimistic nihilist) often remarks that suffering is the *point* of our existence, and that human life resembles the progressive working off of a debt we incur by being born (albeit a debt inherited in a godless, indifferent universe in which there is no cosmic order or intelligence to which we are indebted). Thus there is a sense in which Schopenhauer’s universe realizes a dark “meaning of life,” even if it is one which does not give us much consolation. Thanks to Michael Hauskeller for pointing this out.

types of transcendence. Section 3 introduces the core notion of “strong attachment,” and argues that the unsatisfiability of our strong attachments renders life tragic. Additionally, we distinguish “the tragic” from the closely related notion of “the absurd,” and show that the problems that each poses for life are distinct. Section 4 argues that the centrality of strong attachments in different philosophical traditions suggests that they are a central feature of human psychology and practical agency. Section 5 concludes with a brief speculation: strong attachments are the clearest manifestation of a more general tragic tension between the demands of wisdom and the demands of love.

2. Two Tendencies in Pessimism

Modern pessimism grew out of the decline of Christian monotheism and theodicy, which for centuries in Europe had served as the reigning philosophical framework for grappling with the world’s manifest horrors. Under the influence of Schopenhauer, pessimism emerged as a form of “Protestantism without theism” which affirmed the bleakest descriptions of human suffering in the Christian tradition while excising God, natural teleology, and other transcendent values from its ontology.³ Pessimistic nihilism is “nihilistic” insofar as it denies that the sources that would actually give human life sufficient meaning (can) actually exist, and it is “pessimistic” insofar as it suggests that this fact (among others) should lead us to regret our existence. Pessimistic nihilism can perhaps be best summed-up by a counterfactual lamentation: transcendent values might indeed have given our lives a form of meaning that would make existence worthwhile – what a pity, therefore, that no such values exist.

Pessimistic nihilists differ in their understanding of what sort of transcendent meaning human life lacks. Yet in each case, there is an assertion that any value which *could* conceivably confer a point upon, grant significance to, justify, compensate for, or redeem the struggles of human lives would have to lie beyond human earthly experience and idealized human capacities. Again, the transcendent values of a religious ontology would count as sources of transcendent meaning by this definition.

Yet the class of transcendent meanings can also include more “secular” values which are inaccessible to us due to non-negotiable psychological, logical, or

³ Beiser (2016).

physical constraints on human life. For example, Rivka Weinberg has recently argued that while the value of our everyday activities can be articulated in terms of the valued ends or “points” they have, our lives as a whole cannot have a point which would justify the entire enterprise, insofar as it is impossible for there to be a valued end “external” to the life as a whole. Activities within life can have points (and therefore, justifications for engaging in them) while life as a whole is pointless. This fact should make us “very, very sad.”⁴

Similarly, David Benatar claims that we should regret that our lives lack “cosmic meaning.”⁵ For Benatar, human lives can appear significant, important, and purpose-serving in various ways, from various perspectives. Yet all lives are meaningless from a *cosmic* perspective. Our limitations in space and time and the fact that “we serve no purpose in the cosmos” means that nothing we do can have any significance “from the perspective of the cosmos.” It is as if we never existed at all. While it is certainly good that our lives can realize forms of meaningfulness from more local perspectives, “we are nonetheless warranted in regretting our cosmic insignificance and the pointlessness of the entire human endeavor...”⁶

Life-affirming nihilists concur with pessimistic nihilists that human life cannot realize transcendent meanings. Yet they do not see this as cause for regret, and deny that this fact supports a negative evaluation of human life as a whole. While Friedrich Nietzsche frequently identified himself as a kind of pessimist, Schopenhauer’s pessimism and its paradoxical ethics of resignation and compassion ultimately struck him as a moralistic holdover from Christianity and its ultimate metaphysical roots: the Platonic demarcation of the realms of Being and Becoming, in which The Good, The True, and The Beautiful is consigned to an eternal realm “beyond” the flux of earthly life altogether.

Nietzsche’s life-affirming nihilism rejects the idea that true value can only come from permanent, changeless, and transcendent sources. In place of the withdrawing ascetic who pines after the “other world,” Nietzsche champions the “high-spirited world-affirming human being” who is strong enough to will their life exactly as it is over and over again:

Whoever has endeavored with some enigmatic longing... to think pessimism through to its depths and to liberate it from the half-Christian,

⁴ Weinberg (2021).

⁵ Benatar (2017).

⁶ Benatar (2017), pp. 62-63.

half-German narrowness and simplicity in which it is finally presented itself to our century, namely, in the form of Schopenhauer's philosophy ... may just thereby, without meaning to do so, have opened his eyes to the opposite ideal: the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have what was and is repeated into all eternity..."⁷

Certainly, Nietzsche's life-affirming perspective emphasizes *self*-transcendence, or a creative striving against the contingent limits self-imposed and imposed upon us by "morality," "religion," "nature," or "social custom." Perhaps that self can be strong enough to be the source of its own value, and out of its strength would not wish anything to be different than what it is, forever.

Pessimistic nihilism and life-affirming nihilism thus agree on the absence of transcendent meaning, but recommend very different attitudes toward that fact. What attitude should *we* have, if we are convinced that human life has no transcendent meaning? Here pessimism encounters a more general problem in normative theory, the problem of *rational authority*. This is the problem of explaining how a normative theory gives agents practical reasons to think, feel, and act in the ways that theory recommends. For example, act utilitarianism instructs me to perform those actions that maximize aggregate utility, on the grounds that aggregate utility is the most important good. Yet if I am not already inclined to treat aggregate utility as the most important good, it may be unclear to me just why I should act like an act utilitarian. It is then incumbent upon the act utilitarian to supply me with practical reasons to maximize aggregate utility. Similarly, a pessimistic (/life-affirming) nihilist might tell me that my life has or does not have meaning in a certain respect, and that I should regret (/affirm) that fact. But if I don't already recognize the rational authority of that form of pessimism, it must provide me with practical reasons to follow its prescriptions.

Part of the difficulty of the problem of rational authority is that one temperament might see practical reasons for regret or affirmation where another does not. Pessimistic nihilism might seem to set the bar for meaning "too high" because it requires life to have "more" meaning or a loftier kind of meaning than that interpreter cares to have. To others, it might seem that life-affirming nihilism

⁷ Nietzsche (1886), section 56.

sets the bar “too low” because it suggests that we have no reason to regret that our lives fail to have transcendent meaning.

One way of addressing the problem of rational authority is to demonstrate that we are *already practically committed* to acting in the way a theory recommends. Why should I care about aggregate happiness? A utilitarian might try to demonstrate that we already are practically committed to producing aggregate happiness on the basis that each of us is practically committed to her own happiness, and that securing our own happiness requires caring about the happiness of others as well. Why should I care whether or not life has transcendent meaning? Well, perhaps we are already somehow practically committed to achieving transcendent meanings, and so it would be rational to regret that life lacks them.

But *are* most of us committed to achieving transcendent meanings? Certainly, the fact that our lives lack certain *types* of transcendent meaning might be a matter of indifference to many of us. Personally, it is hard for me to regret that my life literally does not have a “point” in Weinberg’s technical sense, or to share Benatar’s disappointment that life will never realize “cosmic meaning.” Perhaps others are just as sure that they *do* crave these things, or some other form of transcendent meaning.

Yet ultimately, even if we could show that life lacks a kind of transcendent meaning that all human beings desperately crave, this might not settle the question of whether that lack of meaning is a *problem for life*. This is ultimately the point Nietzsche is driving at when he accuses Schopenhauer’s pessimism of a kind of performative contradiction. Despite describing the suffering and pointlessness of the world in some of the strongest and darkest terms possible, Schopenhauer goes on to defend an ethics of compassion that owes much to the Christian tradition that he (and Nietzsche) claimed to despise. Even worse, Nietzsche sneers, Schopenhauer would play *the flute*:

Schopenhauer, pessimism notwithstanding, actually – played the flute ... every day, after dinner. You can read it in his biography. And just out of curiosity: a pessimist who negates both God and world but stops before morality, – who affirms a harm-no-one morality and plays his flute: excuse me? is this really – a pessimist?⁸

⁸ Nietzsche (1886), section 186.

The fact that Schopenhauer's philosophy of resignation did not undercut the philosopher's ethical and musical commitments reflects a truth about human agency that Nietzsche (but not Schopenhauer) was in a position to grasp: however we might evaluate life as a whole, we *live*, and living requires doing things that *affirm life* – valuing things, striving towards goals, improving ourselves, etc. In short, “the ‘pessimist’ will reveal their carefully concealed cheerful, life-affirming spirit as soon as they start to try to accomplish something.”⁹

To this extent, Nietzsche charges Schopenhauer with something like the problem of rational authority: if the lack of transcendent meaning is truly a *problem* for human life, why does it not seem to have much effect on our practical reasons for doing things even when we know that life lacks that kind of meaning? A life-affirming nihilism which does not see the lack of transcendent meaning as a problem for life would thus seem to enjoy some degree of confirmation over its pessimistic cousin.

Nietzsche challenges us to specify the connection between an unsatisfiable desire for transcendence and the problem of life. The challenge generalizes: why is it a problem that our lives are pointless or lack cosmic meaning? I confess that I am rather sympathetic with the life-affirming nihilist's idea that a lack of transcendent meaning does not necessarily mar life's value. At the same time, a lack of transcendent *meaning* may not be the only lack of transcendence that may pose a problem for human life. If we generally have unfulfillable desires for other forms of transcendence, perhaps our situation is a tragic one that warrants an attitude of regret. I think we do have such desires, and that they are revealed in our strong attachments.

3. Strong Attachments, Transcendence, and the Tragic

One lesson from Nietzsche's swipe at Schopenhauer's flute playing is that no matter how bleak our outlook on life may be, we are creatures who make plans, take up projects, and strive after goals. Practical agency requires attachment – a sense that my own well-being is bound up with how things are going with people, projects, relationships, and things which somehow “involve” me but which nevertheless maintain a degree of independent existence from me. The objects of

⁹ Smyth (2022), p. 67.

our attachments give us reasons to live, and these objects can seem worth pursuing and central to our conception of what matters in life even when we acknowledge their transience, fragility, and arbitrariness.

Strong attachments make much more stringent demands on the objects of attachment. In strong attachment, our knowledge of the transience and fragility of the object of attachment directly clashes with a strong (possibly unconscious) desire for the object of our attachment to last. Strong attachments thus involve a desire for *temporal* transcendence. We want the things we love to last forever (or at least for much longer than we know they can last), and they can't. This makes human life *tragic*, and to an extent regrettable, but it does not settle the question of what sort of *meaning* it might have (or lack). Or so I will argue.

Let's begin by characterizing strong attachments a bit more precisely:

Strong attachments:¹⁰

- i) provide us with non-instrumental reasons to look after the well-being or preservation of the object of the attachment for its own sake.
- ii) involve prolonged, active engagement with the object of attachment.
- iii) provide a source of authoritative prudential and instrumental reasons that we take into account in deliberating about “how to live” in a broad sense.
- iv) render us emotionally vulnerable to the decline or loss of the object of our attachment.
- v) involve a belief that the object of our attachment plays a central role in our own well-being.
- vi) involve a belief that the object of our attachment is irreplaceable.
- vii) involve a deep desire for the objects of our attachments to last forever, indefinitely, or much longer than we know they can last.

Three features of strong attachments are worth emphasizing. First, while I leave open the possibility that we can be strongly attached to objects such as social practices, treasured heirlooms, geographical features, or political ideals, I take it

¹⁰ My conception of “strong attachments” has points of overlap with Monique Wonderly’s (2016) definition of “security-based attachment” (particularly conditions iv) and vi)) as well as Matthew Dennis’ (2020) conception of “passionate attachments” (particularly conditions ii) and iii.) Condition vii) is unique to the category of “strong attachment.”

that most strong attachments are between *welfare subjects*, or beings capable of achieving well-being (e.g. a ring that is handed down as a treasured family heirloom can degrade in quality over time, and that might be highly consequential for me, but that is a matter of indifference to *it* – or at least many of us think so).¹¹

Second, strong attachments are incompatible with forms of attachment that are indifferent to or inimical to the well-being of the objects to which we are attached (such as obsession or severe hatred). Putting these together, we can see that strong attachments are most readily revealed in close friendships, intimate relationships, and parental and filial love.

Finally, we may, but need not, desire *personal* immortality in order to be strongly attached.¹² Indeed, in many cases we are strongly attached to things that we know or hope will survive our own deaths. This is the lesson of Samuel Scheffler’s “Doomsday Scenario,”¹³ in which we learn that 30 days after our own death, a sudden catastrophic event will bring about the extinction of the human race. Even though we would be spared the monumental suffering that would be associated with the catastrophe, most of us would react to this possibility with horror rather than indifference. This, Scheffler thinks, indicates 1) that we value many things independently of their ability to sensibly affect us, 2) that the importance we place on many of the things we value is conditional on the assumption that these things will continue to exist in the future, *even if we will not*. For example, much of the value we currently see in political activism, the pursuit of scientific discovery, or artistic achievement, rests on the assumption that there will be some *future* to which our activism, knowledge, or achievement makes a contribution. We want many of the things we care about to go on without

¹¹ Animist worldviews will likely have a more inclusive sense of “welfare subject” than non-animist worldviews. Consider also the phenomenon of “object sexuality,” in which people experience romantic and sexual attraction to “inanimate” objects such as a specific roller coaster or the Eiffel Tower. OS individuals often believe that the objects of their affection communicate, reciprocate their love, and can be positively or negatively affected by the relationship. By my definition, OS individuals can be strongly attached to these beloved objects regardless of whether or not those objects are “animate” or truly count as welfare subjects.

¹² When we die, so do our attachment relations themselves, since the basic *psychological* conditions needed for the above 7 conditions to apply to us are no longer satisfied (assuming there is no form of consciousness after death). Yet the *logical* conditions of the desire specified in condition 7 can be satisfied without requiring us to be immortal. As we will see, I think that as a matter of fact most of us are strongly attached to things that simply cannot last, and thus that the desire specified by condition 7 is almost always unsatisfied. This does leave logical space open for psychologically implausible cases in which a mortal person has a strong attachment to perpetual processes that will continue for eternity “without them,” such as the continual expansion of the universe.

¹³ Scheffler (2013).

us. The assumption that they will is part of the explanation for why we value them *now*.

What is the problem that strong attachments pose for life? In short, strong attachments give us practical reasons to live and organize our lives in particular ways. Yet the transience and fragility of the object of attachment (the ultimate source of these practical reasons) is doubly threatening. First, it is threatening because it guarantees the eventual loss, decline, or death of the beloved object, whose well-being we care about for its own sake. Second, it is threatening to *our* sense of who and what we are and how we “fit in” in the world. Strong attachments make us vulnerable. Losing the objects of our strong attachments, can threaten our practical identities and our sense of existential and psychological integrity.

Consider an example. Mohamed is a loving father strongly attached to his son. He is very much aware that his son will someday die (long after he himself does, he hopes), but the idea of his son’s ultimate mortality is a complicated piece of knowledge for him. How could the love he has for his son – a love that is irreplaceable, singular, unreplicable in all of human history, so central to his daily responses, feelings, and ideas of how to live, capable of organizing everything in the world in its proper place, giving him a sense of who and what and where he is – be based in a relationship between two finite, fragile beings that an indifferent universe will treat as utterly unimportant? “Heaven and earth are ruthless,” Lao Tzu proclaims in the *Tao Te Ching*, “and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs.” Maybe so, but can I really accept that *my child* is merely a straw dog from the point of view of the universe? The thought itself is challenging because it represents a contradiction between the intense claim to value that strong attachments make on parts of the universe (and the practical identities we form on the basis of those attachments) and the lack of value that the universe seems to place on that attachment. This in turn is the basis of a *tragic* tension in human life.

Tragedy often unfolds by way of a contradiction between a character’s *aspiration* to a certain goal or station and that same character’s *real* personal and contextual circumstances. In tragedy, the real threatens to undermine the aspiration and succeeds. Here the real can come in the form of a protagonist’s tragic flaw, the inalterable course of fate, or a horrific contingency that undoes the best-laid plans. The sense of the tragic is partially constituted by our recognition

of (and perhaps identification with) the regret and anguish that this clash between aspiration and reality warrants.

Conceiving of the tragic in this way invites comparison and contrast with Thomas Nagel's influential analysis of "the absurd." Nagel uses the language of "aspiration" and "reality" to describe "the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt."¹⁴ We stress over many aspects of our lives: our jobs, our relationships, our appearance, our decisions, our social identities and status. Most of the time, the question of the importance of these things does not arise for us. They "automatically" give us practical reasons to pursue them. And yet when we step back into the more abstract, third-personal view, we notice that the importance we claim for these activities cannot be grounded in any suitably "objective" point of view that would vindicate these claims to significance:

We step back to find that the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question.¹⁵

Nagel thinks that this ability to "step back" is unlimited – even the overarching systems that anchor our sense of "the meaning of life" can be questioned:

If we can step back from the purposes of individual life and doubt their point, we can step back also from the progress of human history, or of science, or the success of a society, or the kingdom, power, and glory of God, and put all these things into question in the same way. What seems to us to confer meaning, justification, significance, does so in virtue of the fact that we need no more reasons after a certain point.

If our lives are absurd, they are so because of a tension between the seriousness and significance we claim for our lives, our ability to see those same lives as unserious and insignificant, and our inability to provide a subject-independent

¹⁴ Nagel (1971), p. 718.

¹⁵ Nagel (1971), p. 720.

“view from nowhere” from which our claims to our lives’ seriousness and significance can be decisively vindicated once and for all time. To this extent, “the absurd” results from an irresolvable tension in human consciousness, and one that we cope with by getting to a point where we more or less arbitrarily decide that “we need no more reasons” to engage with our lives.

“The absurd” and “the tragic” both involve an irresolvable tension in human life having to do with the gap between aspiration and reality. Moreover, the feature that makes life “absurd” or “tragic” is in each case a subjective feature – the feeling or sense that life is absurd (or tragic) is part of what *makes it the case* that life is absurd (or tragic). A creature that cannot appreciate or notice the clash between aspiration and reality cannot live an absurd or tragic life (Nagel’s example: the life of a mouse cannot be absurd, since a mouse cannot care about the ultimate rational justification of its mouselike pursuits).

Yet it is important to underline a few differences as well. Most centrally, the clash between aspiration and reality in Nagel’s absurd arises from a search for a kind of *rational* justification we cannot have, but which our consciousness nevertheless asks for. In the tragic, what is at stake is not rational justification, but the *permanent satisfaction of a desire* which we “know” is unattainable – and yet our desire still asks for that form of satisfaction. The question “what’s the point of this?” is not precisely the same as the question as “(why) must this end?” To this extent, the experience of the tragic arises “within” Nagel’s lived first-person perspective. It does not ask for the ultimate reasons which might justify its pursuit, since those reasons have already been settled by the strength of our strong attachments. We do not ask about the *point* of our desire (since the desire itself strikes us as so obviously, viscerally important) so much as we lament its unsatisfiability.

But more generally, the problem that strong attachments pose for life is not that they present us with a crisis of *meaning*. The fact that we know that the objects of our strong attachments will not last forever does not undercut our sense of their importance or value. On the contrary, there is a sense in which the transience and fragility of the objects of our strong attachments *underline* their importance for us. For example, it would be very strange if Mohamed’s anguished knowledge of his child’s finitude and fragility were to lead him to regard his strong attachment as somehow insignificant, arbitrary, or not ultimately “worth it.” That seems to give the “perspective of the universe” too much deference – the objects of my strong attachments matter to me *despite* what the universe has to say about their

value. The feeling of absurdity is not the feeling that arises for the person confronting the transience and fragility of their strong attachments.

Nevertheless, when considered as a feeling arising from a fundamental aspect of the human condition, the absurd and the tragic might be similarly irresolvable. In *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations* Miguel de Unamuno claimed that the tragic is generated by a contradiction between the demands of Reason and the demands of Life. Reason supplies us with the “knowledge” that we will die “utterly,” while Life endows us with the “longing not to die, the hunger for personal immortality, the striving to persevere indefinitely in our own being.”¹⁶ For Unamuno, the satisfaction of Reason’s demand is fundamentally incompatible with the satisfaction of Life’s demand. A similar thought is expressed in Tolstoy’s famous narration of Ivan Ilyich’s thoughts as he gradually comes to realize that he is lying on his deathbed:

The example of a syllogism he had studied in Kiesewetter’s logic – Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal-had seemed to him all his life to be correct only in relation to Caius, but by no means to himself. For the man Caius, man in general, it was perfectly correct; but he was not Caius and not man in general, he had always been quite, quite separate from all other beings; he was Vanya, with mama, with papa, with Mitya and Volodya, with toys, the coachman, with a nanny, then With Katenka, with all the joys, griefs, and delights of childhood, boyhood, youth. Was it for Caius, the smell of the striped leather ball – that Vanya had loved so much? Was it Caius who had kissed his mother’s hand like that, and was it for Caius that the silk folds of his mother’s dress had rustled like that? Was it he who had mutinied against bad food in law school? Was it Caius who had been in love like that? Was it Caius who could conduct a court session like that? And Caius is indeed mortal, and it’s right that he die, but for me, Vanya, Ivan Ilyich, with all my feelings and thoughts-for me it’s another matter. And it cannot be that I should die. It would be too terrible.¹⁷

Ivan Ilyich’s anxiety does not seem to arise from the sense that his life is absurd, or lacking in ultimate justification “from the perspective of the cosmos.” Rather, it arises from an inability to reconcile what Reason and Life demand. Of course,

¹⁶ Unamuno (1912), p. 42.

¹⁷ Tolstoy (1886), p. 70.

Ivan Ilyich has always *known* that he is mortal, and that he is not exempt from the logic of the syllogism. Yet that knowledge is of no help in grappling with the reality of his own impending death. There is a seed of contradiction in his thoughts: “I knew the rules applied to me, but I didn’t know they applied to *me!*” After all, everyone else bound by the rule is not *him*, with his particular experiences, memories, relationships, passions, struggles – and yet here he is, it seems, a straw dog like the rest. “I couldn’t possibly be a straw dog! Could a straw dog have lived a life like *this?*” Reason says yes. Life says no. And what could possibly resolve such a contradiction?

4. Strong Attachments as a Feature of Human Psychology

My argument has been that strong attachments involve a desire for a valuable kind of transcendence which (I believe) is ultimately unavailable to human beings. This means that life is generally a tragic prospect, and we have good reasons to regret that these are the constraints of our predicament. Yet this does not presume an answer to the question of what sort of *meaning* human life has. Life might be tragic and meaningful, or tragic and meaningless. Either way, strong attachments represent a problem for life.

Of course, this falls well short of *proof* that life is tragic. First, one could recognize the power of strong attachments but deny that they always involve an unsatisfiable desire. For example, if there is an afterlife in which human desires for transcendence can be completely fulfilled in perpetuity, our situation is less tragic. Second, one could acknowledge that our strong attachments involve unsatisfiable desires, but deny that this constitutes a *tragic* tension worth regretting. Why give in to regret when we could approach this situation with acceptance, or even humor?

Certainly, we should grant that there are many ways of posing the challenge that strong attachments pose to life (if they pose one at all). The problem I have focused on in this paper emerges from a debate within the pessimist tradition about the value of transcendence. Those who do not share the background assumptions of that debate are likely to draw different conclusions about whether and to what extent strong attachments are a problem.

The claim most threatening to my argument, however, is that strong attachments are simply not a widespread feature of human psychology. If the vast majority of us do not have strong attachments, then most of us lack a necessary

condition for experiencing our lives as tragic in the particular sense I have outlined here. We would therefore also lack practical reasons to regret this putatively tragic feature of our predicament. Recall that the problem of rational authority pushes us to root the sense of life's tragedy and the practical reasons we have to regret our predicament in a widely shared and universally frustrated desire for transcendence. Discovering that strong attachments exist only in a possibly pathological minority of individuals would seriously hamper that attempt.

Admittedly, the claim that strong attachments are a widespread feature of human psychology is at least partly empirical in nature, and I have no empirical evidence to offer. Instead, I'll close with a more indirect reason to believe it: philosophical traditions at all times and places have been centrally devoted to the question of how to navigate strong attachments. The examples I point to are intentionally drawn from outside the modern European context to suggest a degree of cross-cultural stability to the type of attachment I mean to describe.

First, consider American Indian thought. The anthropologist Paul Radin claimed that the "tragic sense of life" was a noticeable current in the philosophical discourse of the Winnebago (Ho-Chunk) tribe in Wisconsin, among whom he did his doctoral fieldwork. Radin claimed that the Winnebago acknowledged a conceptual distinction between "tragedy," in which accidental circumstances conspire to undo us, and "doom," meaning "more specifically the inevitable tragedy arising from the expression of strong ambitions, feelings, and desires, which, though easily explicable, bring only ruin in their train."¹⁸ Stories of doom counsel against overstepping the bounds appropriate to human life, and to avoid "the sin" of "attempting to attain something which is beyond human power."¹⁹ Strong attachments appear to be a central way in which human beings can overstep their proper bounds:

[Doom arises from] the ceaseless conflict and strife, within each man, of his own passions, desires, and ambitions. More particularly is it ascribed to that irresistible craving which exacts from man and the world more than he is entitled to and more than his abilities and powers warrant – more, in fact, than he can adequately hope to cope with. The resulting tragedy ... is the price to be paid for any deviation from that fundamental sense of reality

¹⁸ Radin 1957, p. 175.

¹⁹ Radin 1957, pp. 176-177.

which ordains ... that an old man may not enjoy what is the prerogative of youth nor a youth hope to escape death.²⁰

It is fair to wonder whether Radin – a Polish-born Jewish-American anthropologist writing in the first half of the 20th century who explicitly references Unamuno’s “tragic sense of life” in articulating his observations – is filtering his conversations with the Winnebago people through his own intellectual and cultural matrix. Yet Native scholars have also attested that the theme of strong, undisciplined desire or attachment leading to harmful overstep and eventual ruin appears repeatedly in American Indian thought. For example, there is the figure of the *Wiindigo* – “the cannibal monster of Anishinaabe legend that ‘symbolizes the potentially addictive part of the human condition – when certain desires are indulged,’ stimulating ‘more indulgence until all reason and control are lost’”²¹ – as well as the Lakota conception of *Wasi’chu*, a word which literally means “greedy one who takes the fat,” but which also refers to “white people,” and “a human condition based on greed, inhumanity, and exploitation” which emerges from the brutal, undisciplined, violent desires of settler colonialism.²²

Second, strong attachments are clearly recognized by the Buddhist tradition, insofar as they are one of the forms of “desire” or “craving” that lie at the root of suffering (*dukkha*). In our ignorance we become attached to things which are impermanent and which therefore cannot satisfy the expectations our attachments place upon them. For those of us who remain in ignorance, this impermanence of all things is a condition of suffering. Our strong attachments might be directed toward “external” objects, but we can also be strongly attached to *ourselves*. This is particularly emphasized by the “no-self” (*anatman*) view in Mahayana Buddhism, in which our sufferings are generated by a tension between the illusion of substantial, essential “own-being” of the self on the one hand, and the reality of a world in constant flux in which nothing has “own-being” on the other. What keeps us returning again and again to the unsatisfactoriness of samsara is our cherished illusion that there is a permanent and changeless “essence” to ourselves, our desires, and the objects of our desires. Liberation from samsara consists partially in the realization of the impermanence of all things, including the self,

²⁰ Radin (1957), p. 175.

²¹ Simpson (2011), p. 70; Laduke and Cowen (2020), p. 244.

²² Johansen and Maestas (1979).

and the attendant cessation of desire. Not only does the assumption of stability and permanence provide an explanation of how desires (and particularly strong attachments) lead us into suffering, but it also anchors the source of those desires. Our ignorant perception of an ultimately illusory substantial “self” must give way to an enlightened perception of an insubstantial, processual, and impermanent “no-self.”²³

Finally, the ethical core of Stoicism arises in part from its acknowledgment of the distorting influences of strong attachments. These prevent us from cultivating the disciplined perception, judgment, and will necessary for living in accordance with the developments of a rationally ordered world in which everything is ordained by the *logos*. “If you wish your children, and your wife, and your friends to live forever,” Epictetus claims, “you are stupid” (EN Chapter 14). Perhaps he is right. Yet it would be puzzling to find this declaration in the *Enchiridion* (a general “handbook” for the reader who seeks to live according to Stoic principles) if Epictetus didn’t think he was speaking about a relatively widespread feature of human psychology. Several chapters of the *Enchiridion* are devoted to advice for keeping (strong) attachments at bay:

Concerning each one of the things that give you delight, or are useful, or that you love, remember to think about what kind of thing it is, beginning from the least. If you love a ceramic cup, [say] “I love a cup.” Then if it breaks you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your own child or wife, [say] that you kiss a human. Then when they die you will not be disturbed.²⁴

Cups break, human beings die, and all of this is out of our control. The message is clear: suffering comes from our failure to draw the distinction between what we can and cannot control, and our undisciplined desire to control what is not up to us. From the point of view of a Stoic, strong attachments surely represent a particularly egregious failure to draw the line in the proper place.

5. W(h)ither Strong Attachments?

This brief survey of strong attachments across philosophical traditions is enough to indicate that they cannot simply be dismissed as pathological desires

²³ Gowans (2003).

²⁴ Epictetus (1983), chapter 3. Translation from Hogg (2014), p. 99.

shared by idiosyncratic individuals. On the contrary, the ethical prescriptions of American Indian, Buddhist, and Stoic thought each recognize the ways in which an unsatisfiable desire for transcendence (and particularly, the permanence of the things we love) can mar the quality of human life. Indeed, strong attachments seem to be a central cause of suffering in all three traditions – they may be dangerous, distorting, or even stupid, but they are certainly not abnormal.

I myself do not have a general prescription to share concerning how we should navigate the problem that strong attachments pose for life. My view does imply that if we want to avoid living tragic lives, one thing we should do is avoid having strong attachments. Should we avoid them? Regardless of how we answer this question, the problem of the tragic has a tendency to restate itself. Certainly, as American Indian, Buddhist, and Stoic traditions indicate, there is value in cultivating the discipline required to avoid the anguish of an irresolvable contradiction between what we want and what we can have. And yet again, to say that a contradiction between Reason and Life can be *avoided* is not to say that it can be *solved*.

Perhaps avoidance of the tension is the best we can hope for. Yet for those of us who experience our strong attachments as the best part of an unfortunate situation, avoidance may be neither possible nor desirable. Here, as elsewhere, the pessimist tradition is illuminating: as fragile, limited, attached creatures in a universe devoid of transcendent value, it may be that living requires us to choose between the demands of wisdom and the demands of love. And that could be the most tragic situation of all.

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