

# On Optimism, Pessimism, and Happiness



An optimist stays up to see the New Year in. A pessimist waits to make sure the old one leaves.

—Bill Vaughan<sup>1</sup>

The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds; and the pessimist fears this is true.

—James Branch Cabell, 1926<sup>2</sup>

Idealism is what precedes experience; cynicism is what follows.

—David T. Wolf<sup>3</sup>

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It is difficult not to write satire.

—Juvenal<sup>4</sup>

That power of accurate observation is commonly called cynicism by those who have not got it.

—George Bernard Shaw, 1894

Cynic, *n.* A blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are, not as they ought to be.

—Ambrose Bierce, 1906

Cynicism is an unpleasant way of saying the truth.

—Lillian Hellman, 1939

Being cynical is the only way to deal with modern civilization.

—Frank Zappa, 1982

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<sup>1</sup>As quoted, without a date, in several reliable collections, including *Wikiquote*.

<sup>2</sup>Sometimes misattributed to J. Robert Oppenheimer.

<sup>3</sup>As quoted, without a date, in several generally reliable collections, starting not later than 1987.

<sup>4</sup>From his *Satires*, written in the early second century AD.

No matter how cynical you get, it's never enough to keep up.

—Jane Wagner, 1985<sup>5</sup>

The nice part about being a pessimist is that you are constantly being either proven right or pleasantly surprised.

—George Will, 1994

If you keep saying things are going to be bad, you have a good chance of being a prophet.

—Isaac Bashevis Singer<sup>6</sup>

Everything that can go wrong, will.<sup>7</sup>

—Anonymous

If anything just can't go wrong, it will anyway.

—Francis P. Chisholm, 1963

Walls sink and dunghills rise.

—European proverb

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Who could live without hope?

—French proverb

Two worst foes of man's existence [are] Fear and Hope.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1832

Hope is a good breakfast, but it is a bad supper.

—Francis Bacon, 1624

Hope deceives more men than cunning does.

—Luc de Clapiers, 1746

Hope, like faith, is nothing if it is not courageous; it is nothing if it is not ridiculous.

—Thornton Wilder, 1967

A man without hope is a man without fear.

—Frank Miller, 1986

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<sup>5</sup>This line (as well as all other quotes by Jane Wagner in this collection) is frequently attributed to Lily Tomlin - the actress it was written for.

<sup>6</sup>As quoted, without a date, in several generally reliable sources, starting not later than 2003.

<sup>7</sup>This is my favorite formulation of the so-called *Murphy Law*, reportedly based on an oral, more personal statement by some Edward A. Murphy made in the 1940s, and first quoted by several authors in the early 1950s. Of its innumerable later forms and twists, I especially like the *1st Chisholm Law* quoted next, its corollary, "Anytime things appear to be going better, you have overlooked something", and the ultimately succinct (anonymous?) maxim: "Constants aren't".

I hope for nothing.  
I fear nothing.  
I am free.

—*Nikos Kazantzakis*, 1957<sup>8</sup>

Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed.

—*Alexander Pope*, 1727<sup>9</sup>

Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

—*Bertrand Russell*, 1910

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I find nothing more depressing than optimism.

—*Paul Fussell*, 1990

Optimism [...] is the obstinacy of maintaining that everything is best when it is worst.

—*Voltaire*, 1759

Optimist, *n.* A proponent of the doctrine that black is white.

—*Ambrose Bierce*, 1911

The place where optimism most flourishes is the lunatic asylum.

—*Havelock Ellis*, 1923

Positive, *adj.* Mistaken at the top of one's voice.

—*Ambrose Bierce*, 1911

Only fools are positive.

—*Anonymous*<sup>10</sup>

When they come downstairs from their Ivory Towers, idealists are very apt to walk straight into the gutter.

—*Logan Pearsall Smith*, 1931

At least two thirds of our miseries spring from human stupidity, human malice, and those great motivators and justifiers of malice and stupidity: idealism, dogmatism and proselytizing zeal on behalf of religious or political idols.

—*Aldous Huxley*, 1952

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<sup>8</sup>His self-epitaph.

<sup>9</sup>A. Pope declared this was a ninth Beatitude, added by him to the eight ones listed in the Bible (Matthew 5:3–12).

<sup>10</sup>I have seen this quote attributed to actor Moe Howard, but could not find a reliable confirmation of his authorship.

One does not, sir, prove oneself a superior man by perceiving the world in an odious light.

—*François-René de Chateaubriand*, 1802

It is easier to blame than do better.

—*German proverb*

How much easier it is to be critical than to be correct.

—*Benjamin Disraeli*, 1860

Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain—and most fools do.

—*Dale Carnegie*, 1936

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Cynics are right nine times out of ten; what undoes them is their belief that they are right ten times out of ten.

—*Charles Issawi*, 1973<sup>11</sup>

An idealist believes the short run doesn't count. A cynic believes the long run does not matter. A realist believes that what is done (or left undone) in the short run determines the long run.

—*Sidney J. Harris*, 1979

I'm a pessimist about probabilities, I'm an optimist about possibilities.

—*Lewis Mumford*<sup>12</sup>

The essence of my optimism is constructive pessimism.

—*Fausto Cercignani*, 2004

No man who is correctly informed as to the past, will be disposed to take a morose or desponding view of the present.

—*Thomas Babington Macaulay*, 1861

I have always been—I think any student of history almost inevitably is—a cheerful pessimist.

—*Jacques Barzun*<sup>13</sup>

There are two ways to slide easily through life; to believe everything or to doubt everything. Both ways save us from thinking.

—*Alfred Korzybski*, 1921

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Happiness is an imaginary condition, formerly attributed by the living to the dead, now usually attributed by adults to children, and by children to adults.

—*Thomas Szasz*, 1973

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<sup>11</sup>The first clause of this statement is frequently misattributed to H. L. Mencken.

<sup>12</sup>As quoted, without a date, by Carey Winfrey in 1977.

<sup>13</sup>As quoted, without a date, by Thomas Vinciguerra in 2006.

Happiness isn't something you experience; it's something you remember.

—*Oscar Levant*, 1972

The true paradises are the paradises that we have lost.

—*Marcel Proust*, 1927<sup>14</sup>

Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory.

—*Albert Schweitzer*<sup>15</sup>

Happiness, *n.* An agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of others.<sup>16</sup>

—*Ambrose Bierce*, 1906

Our happiness or unhappiness depends more upon the way in which we meet the events of life, than upon the nature of those events themselves.

—*Wilhelm von Humboldt*, 1849<sup>17</sup>

A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of.

—*Jane Austen*, 1814

Money doesn't always bring happiness. People with ten million dollars are no happier than people with nine million dollars.<sup>18</sup>

—*Anonymous*<sup>19</sup>

If happiness truly consisted in physical ease and freedom from care, then the happiest individual would not be a man or a woman, it would be, I think, an American cow.

—*William Lyon Phelps*, 1927

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.

—*John Stuart Mill*, 1861

Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know.

—*Ernest Hemingway*, 1986

A person is never happy except at the price of some ignorance.

—*Anatole France*, 1923<sup>20</sup>

To be stupid, selfish, and have good health are three requirements for happiness, though if stupidity is lacking, all is lost.

—*Gustave Flaubert*, 1846

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<sup>14</sup>Frequently paraphrased as “The only paradise is the paradise lost”.

<sup>15</sup>As quoted in several generally reliable sources, starting not later than 1960.

<sup>16</sup>Looks like a development of a much earlier line by François de La Rochefoucauld: “We all have strength enough to endure the misfortune of others”.

<sup>17</sup>Sometimes misattributed to his younger brother, naturalist Alexander von Humboldt.

<sup>18</sup>Apparently a reaction to the common proverb “Money can't buy happiness”.

<sup>19</sup>Frequently attributed to Hobart Brown, but I was unable to find a reliable confirmation of his authorship.

<sup>20</sup>The date of the apparently first English publication.

The greatest happiness you can have is knowing that you do not necessarily require happiness.

—*William Saroyan*, 1939

The pursuit of happiness is a most ridiculous phrase; if you pursue happiness you'll never find it.

—*Carrie Snow*<sup>21</sup>

Happiness is not achieved by the conscious pursuit of happiness; it is generally the by-product of other activities.

—*Aldous Huxley*, 1945

The secret of being miserable is to have leisure to bother about whether you are happy or not. The cure for it is occupation.

—*George Bernard Shaw*, 1910

To abandon the struggle for private happiness, to expel all eagerness for temporary desire, to burn with passion for eternal things—this is emancipation.

—*Bernard Russell*, 1903

I cannot believe that the purpose of life is to be happy. I think the purpose of life is to be useful, [...] to have made some difference that you lived at all.

—*Leo Calvin Rosten*, 1965

The only true happiness comes from squandering ourselves for a purpose.

—*John Mason Brown*, 1947

Nobody of [the scientists] knew exactly what is happiness and what constitutes the meaning of life. So they have accepted a working hypothesis that happiness is in a continuing exploration of the unknown, and the meaning of life is in the same.

—*Arkady and Boris Strugatsky*, 1965

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<sup>21</sup>As quoted, without a date, in several reputable collections; sometimes misattributed to C. P. Snow.