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Dark matters: Pessimism and the problem of suffering

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nor I believe Berkeley successfully resolved: As an advocate of passive obedience to the current secular rulers, would not Berkeley have to condemn the fact that they themselves gained power by overthrowing the Stuart dynasty? And in recommending that Christians accept the doctrines of the current (Anglican) established church and not engage in 'free thinking', how could he avoid the conclusion that the founders of the Anglican church were wrong in not accepting the doctrines of the Catholic Church and asserting their own right to 'free thinking'? In fact, his embrace of passive obedience cost him preferment on some occasions, as critics rightly saw that it could be used to challenge the legitimacy of the House of Hanover. And, as Jones notes, his position on church authority was condemned by contemporaries as a "threat to the liberty from overbearing ecclesiastical authority that the Protestant movement itself represented" (421).

Of course, this review can touch on only a small portion of the fascinating material on Berkeley's life presented in this book. And despite the above quibbles, it is an excellent addition to the literature on Berkeley, one that gives the reader a rich feel not just for Berkeley's own life and works, but for the context in which that life and those works took place.

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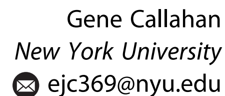

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Dark matters: Pessimism and the problem of suffering, by Mara van der Lugt, Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2021, pp. 472, $35.00/£28.00 (hb), ISBN: 9780691206622

Mara van der Lugt's *Dark Matters* is elegant in its composition and beautifully written. It offers a brilliant attempt to give both early modern optimism and pessimism their due as philosophical stances by excavating the ethical impetus behind them. In the process, the shared moral horizon of both schools of thought is uncovered and, as it turns out, they share much more than has been acknowledged in traditional accounts of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theodicies. Van der Lugt focuses on physical evil and value-oriented pessimism instead of on moral evil and future-oriented pessimism. This allows her not only to demonstrate

the crucial part played by Bayle half a century prior to the Lisbon earthquake, but also to delve much deeper into the conceptual logic of theodicy. Chapter One sets the scene for much that is to follow by identifying Pierre Bayle as the one philosopher who more or less created the modern debate on the nature of evil by sidestepping the Augustinian and scholastic traditions and focusing on the reality of physical evil. Ascertaining how Bayle actually felt, however, is a formidable challenge, which Van der Lugt addresses by concentrating on the entry "Xenophanes" in Bayle's *Dictionnaire*. Van der Lugt's Bayle is very much Voltaire's and Hume's: a philosophical pessimist. Crucial to Bayle's intervention, or so she argues, was his insistence on our experience of evil as well as Bayle's recognition, most poignantly expressed in his comments on Cicero's grief over the loss over his daughter, that complaining about genuine grief might not be as meaningless as the vast majority of early modern philosophers felt it to be.

Chapter Two charts the responses to Bayle's conclusion – that there is no rational justification for God's decision to create beings whose lives are not worth living – provided by Leibniz, Alexander Pope and William King, archbishop of Dublin. Unlike Bayle, Leibniz still adhered to the Augustinian tradition according to which physical evil is derivative of moral evil, and both Leibniz and King continued to assume that existence trumps non-existence. In order to demonstrate that existence is a good thing for the existent, the latter attempted to counter Bayle's claim that most (if not all) human beings at the end of their lives would respond negatively to the question whether they would be willing to relive the lives they had lived. According to Leibniz and King, the joys outweigh the sorrow and grief, and thus, Van der Lugt argues, "the optics of optimism" (67) originated: the moral duty to regard evil in its cosmic context rather than in its individual instantiation. By the time Voltaire's response to the Lisbon earthquake comes into view, the history of early modern pessimism and optimism has been rewritten completely. When Voltaire entered the fray (Chapter Three), the outlines of the debate had been drawn already, the more so as by the first half of the eighteenth century theodicy had become the subject of serious debate in Britain. It was Voltaire's intervention that caught the attention of a massive audience throughout Europe, first by his Poem on the Lisbon Disaster and next of course by *Candide*, which as Van der Lugt notes, does not sit well in the pessimist tradition, if only on account of its tone. The darkness typical of Bayle's meditations on human suffering and of the Poem is absent in *Candide*, which is simply too comical.

Chapter Four focuses on the growing uneasiness during the eighteenth century with the Stoic response to pessimism. Again, Bayle turns out to have precipitated much of what was to follow during the century which gradually had become obsessed with the subject of happiness. Even before Voltaire, La Mettrie had launched an anti-Stoic campaign, arguing not unlike Bayle, that happiness resides in our experience of happiness and that the Stoics were mistaken to think of happiness as a state of being which can be achieved. Bayle's lasting impact is evident also from Maupertuis' attempt to counter La Mettrie's, but it is Hume's contribution to the ongoing debate, in particular in his posthumously published *Dialogues*, taken up in Chapter Five, that demonstrates even more

powerfully the extent to which *le philosophe de Rotterdam* continued to inspire the debate on pessimism. At the end of Chapter Five, Van der Lugt delves into Hume's *Essays*, arguing they offer a radical innovation in their insistence our passions and dispositions should not be thought of as moral goods and evils but as physical or natural. As a consequence, philosophy is left powerless when it comes to contributing to happiness and Van der Lugt shows deftly how deep this move cut since it turned not just our experience of suffering into an evil, but added the very fact of being disposed to have this experience in the first place an evil as well. In Chapter Six Rousseau's response to Voltaire is analysed. Van der Lugt takes her point of departure from the way in which Rousseau's second *Discours* painted the misery of man living in 'civilisation'. In his Letter to Voltaire, Rousseau accused Voltaire of a moral failure: optimism has a consoling effect and as far as he was concerned the rule of Providence could not be questioned. Instead, as *Émile* teaches us, we are best advised to learn how to come to terms with suffering and how to avoid grief. At the heart of his educational project Rousseau situated a genuine 'art of suffering'.

Traditionally, Kant's essay "On the Fortune of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" has been regarded the end to this philosophical genre. However, as Van der Lugt observes, much as Kant would have agreed with this verdict, this lecture shortly was preceded by a serious effort from Kant to provide a theodicy himself. What is more, in his early days Kant had been a dedicated optimist, broadly supporting Pope. In his essay, Kant appears to refute himself, but after having established the impotence of human reason facing God's moral domain over the world we live in, he introduced the notion of an 'authentic' theodicy, to be found in the Book of Job. It is only in the sincerity of Job's conviction that he did not deserve to be struck by misfortune in the way he was, that the full depth of the problem of theodicy is revealed. Kant scholars have been wrestling with this twist in the second half of the Essay: in which sense does it still belong to the traditional genre and was Kant out to shut it down or bent on reformulating it? Van der Lugt cautiously proposes that his final stance entailed an attempt to replace the habitual assumption of a faith based on morality by the fideist move to base morality on faith. Like Job, she holds, Kant invites us to embrace the idea that the world is moral as long as we are sincere in our belief, like a "shadow postulate of practical reason" (324).

In Chapter Eight, Van der Lugt turns to Arthur Schopenhauer, arguably the one major philosopher for whom pessimism made up the heart of his philosophy. Unlike Bayle and Voltaire, however, Schopenhauer's insistence on the essentially miserable nature of existence rested initially on a priori arguments: Schopenhauer, or so Van der Lugt argues, only gradually came to embrace Bayle's creaturely perspective on the misery of existence. In view of his gradualist approach towards the distinction between humans and animals, Schopenhauer appears to have extended his pessimism to the animal realm. What makes his position truly unique, meanwhile, is his conviction that 'eternal justice' provides a perfect balance between suffering and guilt, misery and sin. This alignment, in Schopenhauer's perspective, makes sense to the extent that he regarded existence itself as a source of guilt: life should not be thought of as a gift but as a

source of indebtedness and as it turns out, Schopenhauer ended up endorsing a pessimist theodicy. In the final chapter of *Dark Matters*, Schopenhauer's feeling that in the end pessimism might actually be a source of consolation serves as the point of departure of a highly personal reflection on pessimism as a moral source. Looking back on what *Dark Matters* sought to achieve as a contribution to our understanding of the ways in which the early modern problem of evil was connected to the rise of pessimism in philosophy, its author completes her quest by cautiously pleading in favour of allowing at least some intimacy in our engagement with philosophical questions that genuinely matter to our lives. She feels optimism is overvalued in our culture while pessimism carries the greater potential for moral consolation since it renders us sensitive to the suffering of others. Unlike optimism it does not minimize the pain of others. By its recognition of the fragility of life, instead it motivates us to care. Quoting Julian Barnes, Marilynn Robinson and many others along the lines of Hölderlin's assurance that "where dangers threatens/That which saves from it also grows" (395), she ends by articulating a hopeful pessimism. Reading this book is a rare event and something of an adventure in that it is as solidly argued as it is eloquent and as learned as it is moving. Those who feel philosophers no longer care to address truly vital issues are especially in for a treat.

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Uncivil Mirth: Ridicule in Enlightenment Britain, by Ross Carroll, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021, pp. xiii + 255, $35.00/£28.00 (hb), ISBN: 978-0-691-18255-1

In *Uncivil Mirth*, Ross Carroll skilfully draws our attention to the Enlightenment debate in Britain on the "*politics* of ridicule" that questions the virtue or effectiveness of, broadly, laughing, jesting, raillery, and mirth to civilize and advance political truths (*Uncivil Mirth*, 2). By initially highlighting that the early moderns' interest in ridicule arose out of a combination of factors that clearly mirror our current political and societal mêlée, Carroll undeniably motivates his ultimate aim that the "retrieval" of this historical debate should not only be taken seriously by historians but also political theorists (*Uncivil Mirth*, 14–7). As Carroll concludes: "Although the specific debate … has long petered out, the problems that inspired it are very much still with us" (*Uncivil Mirth*, 214). To illustrate, and consistent with