Does Your Worldview Affect Your Well-Being?
by Sam Woolfe

Our worldview, our beliefs about what reality is, our views on what (if anything) has value and meaning, what Aldous Huxley called an ‘individual’s philosophy of life’, contributes more significantly than we often think to our mental well-being. From pessimism to existentialism, might reading certain philosophical ideas actually lead to depression? The connection is not so simple. Philosophy can both depress and inspire us. But, at the end of the day, our worldview matters – it matters what we think, writes Sam Woolfe.

The psychology of philosophy is a relatively new field. It refers to the relationship between psychological traits and philosophical beliefs. This field garnered significant attention recently with the publication of a new study from the psychologist David B. Yaden and the philosopher Derek E. Anderson.

Published in the journal Philosophical Psychology, this study asked 314 professional philosophers about their views regarding certain philosophical questions, and then assessed them for psychological factors, such as personality, mental health, and life experiences, as well as demographics.

Yaden and Anderson include at the beginning of their study a line from William James’ book Pragmatism (1907): “The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments.” They include, too, an observation from Friedrich Nietzsche in Beyond Good and Evil (1886), in the section “On the Prejudice of Philosophers”, where he claimed that a philosopher’s particular view or position springs less from their disinterested search for truth than their instincts and personal life, which he or she then defends with post hoc rationalisations. As Nietzsche writes: “It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy up till now has consisted of—namely, the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious auto-biography.”

This line of thinking has definitely crossed my mind before. I do think it is true, to some extent, that disagreements in philosophy come down to a conflict between different personalities, preferences, desires, fears, life experiences, and states of mental health; even though many philosophers would like to think that philosophical arguments are purely rational.

The Connection Between Psychological Traits and Philosophical Beliefs

In their investigation, Yaden and Anderson found several associations between certain psychological traits and philosophical beliefs (although, interestingly, the authors discovered no substantial correlations between demographics or personality and specific philosophical views) Some correlations are unsurprising; such as theism and idealism being associated with having had a self-transcendent experience.
However, one interesting discovery is that philosophers who have used psychedelics and cannabis are more likely to have a more subjectivist view of morality and aesthetics (the view that there is no objective truth about what makes something ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’). Another is that hard determinism (the belief that human actions are wholly determined by the laws of nature and so genuine free will does not exist) is associated with lower life satisfaction and higher depression/anxiety.

The finding related to hard determinism and poorer mental health is particularly interesting to me, as I have previously explored the connections between philosophy and mental health.

What we are like as people can draw us to certain views, but the reverse also holds: certain views can change us as people. In this essay, I would like to discuss the question of whether philosophy can harm your mental health. It is commonly assumed that depressives may be more likely to be pessimists and antinatalists, but can some worldviews actually increase the likelihood of you becoming depressed? There are, moreover, several other philosophical views that I think can tie into different mental health outcomes.

Many philosophers struggled with their mental health, usually suffering from depression and nervous breakdowns; these figures include William James, John Stuart Mill, Søren Kierkegaard, Michel Foucault, and David Hume. Can the profession of philosophy, or their ideas specifically, be at all to blame for their poor mental health? Or would they have succumbed to these states of distress in the absence of philosophy? Maybe some had a temperament of the kind that put them at risk of mental health issues and which also attracted them to philosophy; and then their philosophical life, in the end, played some role in their mental health struggles.

Philosophical Pessimism/Antinatalism and Depression

Speaking personally, although I find both philosophical pessimism and antinatalism thought-provoking worldviews, whenever I pay too much attention to them (to the exclusion of other perspectives), this can, unsurprisingly, worsen my mood and feelings of life satisfaction. Kateřina Lachmanová, who edited the book History of Antinatalism: How Philosophy Challenged the Question of Procreation (2020), seemed to reveal a similar concern during her appearance on The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast: “I don’t want to research antinatalism full-time, just spend all my days [researching] such pessimistic, depressive topics...I’m just not able to do it.” And the writer Rob Doyle considered in a piece titled Winter in Paris, published in The Dublin Review, whether he was better off never having read certain pessimistic works. In Paris, where he was trying to pen an essay on Emil Cioran (the Romanian philosopher spent most of his life in the city), Doyle has a conversation with his friend Zoé:

“Through the window, the Paris skyline was slowly lighting up the late winter dusk. I said to Zoé, ‘It’s funny. The writers who mean the very most to me, often there’s a part of me that wishes I’d never read them at all.’

‘You mean like Cioran?’

I nodded.

‘But why? You’re free to take or leave any ideas you come across. That’s responsibility,
that’s what it means. Nobody forces you.’

‘But there are tendencies that writers like Cioran or Schopenhauer can encourage. Despair, withdrawal. In the religions, in Christianity, despair is a sin. That’s interesting.’

She considered this, then shook her head. ‘I find it very easy to step out of that tunnel when I close the book. I’m not going to reject the universe just because Schopenhauer or anybody else said so.’

‘Of course not. But you don’t have those inclinations waiting to be triggered. What I mean is, it’s a choice. This withdrawal. I feel that it’s dangerous, the danger is real. Burning down the world. Despairing. I feel I’m already hanging on with the tips of my fingers. Seriously, it seems very easy sometimes to just stop engaging, to turn away from everything. But that’s a kind of suicide, a spiritual suicide. That’s acedia.’ I cleared my throat, hesitant. ‘And it would finish me as a writer,’ I added.

Earlier on in this essay, Doyle said of Cioran: “He had exacerbated the very tendencies in myself I had spent my whole adult life trying to curb”, and then goes on to list such traits, including not just despair and withdrawal but also torpor, defeatism, isolation, rage, hostility.

Becoming engrossed in these writers’ ideas is similar to reading too much news, in a way. The news itself may be accurate and valuable – as certain pessimistic and antinatalist arguments might be – but the news also offers a one-sided and narrowly negative picture of the world. Now, if reading too much pessimistic or antinatalist writing exacerbates poor mental health, this does not invalidate either position. In fact, such a reaction could be understandable in light of the human and non-human animal suffering that these worldviews often emphasise.

This does not necessarily mean that philosophical pessimism or antinatalism should be ignored or rejected out of fear for increasing miserable feelings, but perhaps in some cases, an obsession with these topics is unhelpful – at least sometimes – for individuals with very troubling mental health issues. Philosophical pessimism and antinatalism can seem like the perfect justification for an extremely depressive outlook, but this felt vindication might make it even more difficult to see past one’s cognitive distortions and negativity bias; plus it may hamper attempts to get well or imagine a better future – any feelings of optimism, hope, joy, or gratitude could just be rejected as irrational and deluded.

Nevertheless, as I have argued in an article for The Apeiron, it is certainly possible and consistent to live a happy, joyful, and meaningful life while taking philosophical pessimism seriously.

Perhaps a belief in soft determinism (or compatibilism) will be less impactful on mental health. This refers to the belief that one’s actions are determined by a causal chain of events, yet human free will exists in the sense that we are morally responsible for our actions and have the capacity to act according to our nature and desires (although our nature and desires are still shaped by external factors like genes, society, and upbringing). Arthur Schopenhauer expressed something like this view when he said, “A man can do as he wills, but not will as he wills.”

Emmanuel Levinas said all of philosophy was a call to “infinite responsibility, to an untiring wakefulness, to a total insomnia.”
At the same time, regardless of whether or not hard or soft determinism is associated with worsened mental health, such an effect is not inevitable. It just means a belief in free will is more likely to be better for your psychological well-being.

Philosophy and Insomnia

In my article for The Partially Examined Life on Cioran, I described how the philosopher's struggles with insomnia influenced his thinking and ideas. But it is also true that the causality can be reversed: philosophy itself may cause insomnia. Some thinkers even see the two as closely interlinked. For example, in Totality and Infinity (1961), Emmanuel Levinas said all of philosophy was a call to “infinite responsibility, to an untiring wakefulness, to a total insomnia.” And the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Anne Dufourmantelle expressed a similar sentiment in Blind Date: Sex and Philosophy (2003), arguing that “philosophy was born with anxiety, with questioning, with insomnia. It takes upon itself the ills of the world, and thus it cannot sleep.”

How is this so? Well, philosophy, given its nature, can lead to non-stop analysing, whereby you turn over a philosophical problem in your head to the point of obsession and restlessness. Philosophy is a continuous and never-ending process of arguing and counterarguing on deep and complicated questions. The incessant doubting, revising, and abandoning of views that previously felt so stable and secure can keep one up late. You might try to get to a place of restful conclusion but never quite arrive there. Philosophy may also encourage you to have imaginary arguments in your head when you're alone with your thoughts. This internal chatter is not very peaceful and sleep-inducing, to put it mildly.

For those who are already susceptible to overthinking and insomnia, it is possible that philosophising can end up magnifying these tendencies. I've definitely experienced this on occasion. There have been times that I've been thinking about a philosophical position or written about one, but then kept questioning my stance on it and finding holes in my argument. It should be – and often is – possible to just put off these thoughts and writing amendments for the next day, but that can be difficult sometimes. Indeed, philosophy can lend itself to the “untiring wakefulness” that Levinas describes.

Existentialism and Mental Health

Since depression and anxiety can be both existential in character; that is; related to the human condition, studying some existentialist philosophies may reinforce this type of depression and anxiety. Interestingly, much of existentialist thought focuses on the notion that humans are fundamentally free, yet this has been seen in problematic terms; Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, said we are “condemned to be free” (emphasis added), while Kierkegaard opined that “anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.”

Thus, while a belief in free will may benefit the mental health of some people, it may also cause feelings of anxiety and guilt in others; for if we are fundamentally free then we have a dizzying array of possible choices to make, the power to make many life-altering decisions, and all while being solely responsible for whatever we do.

Then we have the theory of existential nihilism: the idea that human life is inherently futile and meaningless (expounded in Albert Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus), which can easily provoke, bolster, or exacerbate depression. Of course, Camus did present a way of dealing with the meaninglessness of life, namely by making the choice to be happy
regardless. But this prescription may not be satisfactory to many people, in which case his bleak diagnosis of the human condition is still a problem to contend with.

Again, spending a great deal of time thinking, reading, and writing about these concerns may not be troublesome for everyone – Camus personally took enjoyment in the little things in life and didn't see everything as pointless: “Everything seems futile here except the sun, our kisses, and the wild scents of the earth.... Here, I leave order and moderation to others. The great free love of nature and the sea absorbs me completely.”

But it is possible that reading certain texts in states of severe depression may not be helpful for everyone. While Camus invites readers to imagine being happy about living a pointless life, this act of wilful and defiant happiness can feel unimaginable and ridiculous when depressed. On the other hand, this counterintuitive resolution could be just what a person needs, simply because it presents the idea that there is some choice in how one feels. There is no easy way to tell how ideas about the problems of human existence – and the solutions to them – will affect mental well-being.

Concluding Remarks

The aim of this discussion has not been to show that philosophy is a serious risk factor for mental illness to be concerned about. I could have equally written a post on how philosophy can benefit your mental health, which would be more in keeping with positive psychology: this would involve looking at how philosophical beliefs and the discipline of philosophy can provide you with positive experiences and improve your quality of life. That’s for another post, perhaps.

The psychology of philosophy is still in its infancy as a field and hopefully, future research will shed light on how what we think is true changes us as individuals. Philosophy is and always will be a discipline that has the potential to create dramatic shifts in how we think, feel, and act; for better or for worse.

The above is a shortened version a longer piece you can find here.

8th November, 2021