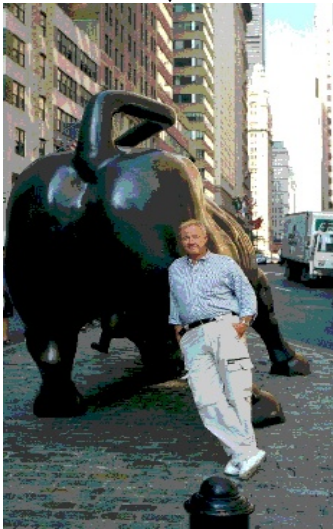




THE “HOW” OF OPTIMISM



By
Jay B. Gaskill

We all know something about the “Why” of optimism. We fare better with optimism as a motivator than with its opposite.

“A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” **Winston Churchill**

“I am an optimist. Anyone interested in the future has to be otherwise he would simply shoot himself.” **Arthur C Clarke**

“Optimism is a force multiplier.” **Colin Powell**

The dark opposite of optimism is *fatalism* -- well named. The bleak acceptance of “no exit” and “nothing changes for the better” has led many who fall under the pessimistic spell to slip into *fatal* outcomes, while better choices were available, if not obvious.

The future belongs to the life-affirming, creative-adaptive among us. If you doubt this, just ask the dinosaurs who had a thirty million year run at developing a space-faring civilization before they were wiped out by a giant meteor strike about 66 million years ago. Oh, that’s right: They didn’t develop language; left no trace of their thought patterns, so you can’t ask them. But the “**Why**” answer should be obvious.

Optimum vs. Paralysis

“The moment you definitely commit yourself, providence moves, too. All sorts of things occur to help you that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issue from your decision, raising in your favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no one could have dreamed would have come your way.” **Author unknown, usually attributed to Goethe**

The Pessimist’s Corollary: “The moment you succumb to ambivalence, providence stalls. All sorts of things seem to occur to block you that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of obstacles issue from your ambivalence, raising in your path all manner of difficulties, risks and portents, including the indifference of those you expected to offer assistance. All of these difficulties were anticipated by your pessimistic mind.”

Realistic optimism

We need to address the “*how*” questions of optimism within the framework of a global optimistic mindset, the kind that requires us to integrate the perspective of history and its lessons. This is *essential* or world-view optimism. This form of optimism operates on a different level than the micro-scale of immediate personal advantage. It animates the fierce parent who charges into danger with the realistic expectation that at least some of the children will survive. It is qualitatively distinct from that defiant, against-all-odds

optimism of the prisoner on the gallows, and even from the transcendent optimism of the faithful for whom death itself has no dominion¹. It is solidly anchored in the realistic, day-to-day human experience, writ large.

The “how” questions come down to this one: **How can you reasonably think that?**

Here’s an insight not often acknowledged:

*Optimism, on the practical level, cannot even be **conceived** in the absence of a value framework within which competing outcomes can be assessed as good, bad, optimal, suboptimal and so forth. Such an evaluative framework is normative in the general moral sense.*

But *moral systems can differ*.

For example, the homicidal racists of Nazi Germany founded their optimism on a narrow doctrine - the will to power of a race, the superiority of which was based on the discredited pseudoscience of racial eugenics. The bloody-minded communists of Stalin’s Russia based their optimism on another shaky foundation - an authoritarian economic model, Karl Marx’s theory of value leading to a workers' utopia. It was supposed to be historically inevitable. Instead, another pseudoscience was discredited by history.

Getting to a durable optimistic perspective requires us to do some work on our moral foundations. We'll get that topic before the end of this essay.

And *practical circumstances vary*.

For every practical problem there exists a set of possible responses in real time. They cluster around the optimum set at one end of the decision scale and the foolish or disastrous set at the other end. Because all real world decision-time is less than optimal, and because the future presents its choices to us through the fog of uncertainty, very few decisions we make can be trusted uncritically: our threshold choices may take us to a better place...or they may be mistakes. The realistic optimists among us understand the limitations of decision making, and keep the ongoing prospect of a plan’s timely revision always open...even the prospect of reconsideration of one’s ideological bent.

Why Realism is Optimism’s Friend

Analogy 1.0

¹ Of course, this is a secular, not a religious essay. But I would be remiss if I didn’t identify myself with those for whom there **is** something real beyond the material/physical confines of one’s human life. Particularly where **justice** is concerned, I am persuaded on several levels that death is not the final answer...but that discussion is another essay.

Colloquially speaking, the “rocket scientist” is the icon of smartness. In the 1930's, legendary rocket scientists were dedicated to the exquisitely exacting science of ballistics, while under the radar a patent clerk named Albert Einstein was quietly tweaking the very foundations of space and time. The mundane goal of achieving perfect aim and perfect trajectory over increasingly distances is increasingly unobtainable: The longer the shot, the greater the number and complexity of variables to be accounted for. But the notion of the perfect long shot has given way to something more adaptive. Compare a semi-autonomous self-guided cruise missile with any cannon, mortar or gun.

The perfect shot belongs to the *smart bullet*.

Analogy 2.0

In biological evolution, new species have emerged over great spans of time by seizing the survival edge with brilliant, but highly specialized adaptations. Think of the heavy armor and horns of the triceratops and the other dinosaur exaggerations. When the felicitous conditions go away, the rigid, exaggerated adaptations to environmental and ecological conditions lose value like a bad pick on the stock market in a neglected portfolio. More often than not, the failure to adapt takes the burdened species down with it.

By contrast, the supreme adaptation, first manifested on this planet by *homo sapiens civilis*, was the acquisition of a brilliant suite of faculties that permitted intelligent foresight, innovative adaptation and facilitated social cooperation. This trumped all of the other adaptations. Clever thinking coupled with intelligent social cooperation are the adaptations of all adaptations because, with them, we humans can build, imitate, work around or trump all of the advantages that the less clever species inherited with their bodies. Realistic optimism depends on the strategy for which the human mind, foremost among all of the adaptive processes in nature, is best equipped: creative, flexible, foresight-coupled reason.

Optimism’s Force-Multiplier: *Why the Life-Affirming Moral Compass is Realism’s Friend*

We may be nature’s *smart bullets*, but our success or failure – which is the ultimate measure of realistic optimism – is a *target selection* issue. And the target selection issue brings us squarely into the realm of morality in its very largest sense.

The origins of the human moral compass can be located in the baseline drives of the evolutionary process. Charles Darwin described the general survival imperative as it operates in nature to drive the mechanisms of natural selection.

The survival urge, taken as a biological imperative, *can also be understood as the core ethical imperative*. Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) advanced the cause of an ethical system founded in the “Reverence for Life”²

Dr. Schweitzer’s ethical model, reverence for life, was colored by a tragic vision in which he saw a *universal* will-to-live torn by the Darwinian struggle. We can trace his sense of revulsion to the deeper normative unity implied by the use of the term “universal”. I located Dr. Albert Schweitzer’s compelling aphorism, “The world presents the ghastly spectacle of a universal will-to-live divided against itself”, in his book, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, long out of print. Put so elegantly, his inadequately differentiated life affirmation seemed to blur the distinction between intelligent, morally conscious human life and animal life. But when framed as the centering principle of a specifically *humanist* moral system, life affirmation undergirds an essential optimistic moral framework. This describes our various moral systems (mostly convergent) that are grounded in the human condition and anchored in the principle of the affirmation of (or even reverence for) human life in the context of a civilization that operates as its primary support system.

Our species’ moral compass points us towards life-affirmation - particularly that of *human life*. This has huge implications for optimism because the direction embraces our immediate lives and well being, but takes us further in space and time into *the lives of those who will come after us*. At the very terminus of intellectual analysis, this is where we encounter the one of optimism that endures all assaults: It is the sturdy optimism in those souls who can raise their sights to the cherished great values which will endure after they are gone.

The 960 Jewish warriors and loved ones who stood against the Romans at the fortress on Masada two millennia ago, refusing to surrender, killing themselves rather than giving the attackers the satisfaction of victory...were realistic *optimists*. This was the same kind of optimism of the earliest Christians who initially scattered after their Lord and Messiah was tortured and executed, but later rallied, and in a few short generations had forever altered the history of Western civilization. It is the optimism of the struggling immigrant parents who work themselves into bone deep weariness day and night so their children will have better futures. It is the optimism of the inventor, the creative artists and all those others who understand that in the sacrifices and rewards of their personal creative struggles it is actually possible for a few to lift up the lives of the many who will come after them. It is the optimism of those who understand that setbacks and failures are built into the processes of creation. It is the essential optimism of those of us who believe in the future.³

The Target Zone

² See “*Out of my Life and Thought*” by Albert Schweitzer Holt & Co 1938, 1949, Johns Hopkins University Press 1998 and “*The Philosophy of Civilization*” McMillan 1949, 1987 Prometheus Books.

³ The reasonable optimism of the entrepreneur with a potentially valuable innovation is grounded in the creative experience, in contrast with the unreasonable optimism of the obsessive gambler.

The limits of the *smart bullet* metaphor are apparent when we contemplate the elusive and effusive nature of the target zone itself. This is because realistic optimism selects just not one target, but an entire life zone. That zone is the harbor for all the unexpected possibilities that further human life, and enhance the human condition. Among those who are able to approach this zone most closely, are the men and women who are suffused with a light-hearted humility, those for whom error and random variation are the givens – and the expectation of eventual *meliorative change is the norm*.

The target zone is a future than can be foreseen only in its most general features. Its outlines are lit up by a convergence of certain grand, life-affirming values and goals, multi-layered, *pan-tribal* and *multi-generational*. This is why life affirming, creative/adaptive intelligence, seasoned with realistic optimism, has been the very engine of human progress. Neither high motivation directed at narrow, rigidly defined targets (relying on exact aim over creative adaptation), nor weak motivation without aim have served us nearly as well.

It follows that, just as we have become aware of the inherent limits to “dumb ballistics” and “smart bullets”, there are limits to all our rigidly detailed visions of progress. Although our most cherished ideologies have occasionally been useful in generating optimism in the short term, *over time they all became traps*. This is evident, for example, whenever ideologies generate authoritarian bureaucracies. The bureaucratic mindset suffocates creative genius. And another dysfunction becomes evident when ideologies become obsessed with the “unfairness” of success and achievement in their various forms. The more exaggerated forms of the “leveling” ideologies kill optimism and paralyze the creative enterprise. Moreover, similar negative side effects are generated by those ideologies that rigidly protect inherited privilege and/or entrenched political favoritism. Creative adaptive human intelligence, tasked to enhancing life, the human condition and the continuation of the human creative enterprise, *abhors all dead ends*.

The iconic series, Star Trek, was a model of essential optimism (over and above the storylines of individual episodes) because its underlying premise was that there really is a future. I love that recurring scene aboard the Starship Enterprise, when the First Officer asks, “Heading Sir?” and Captain Kirk confidently replies, “Out there!”

The target zone of the realistic optimist is also “out there”...in the life zone.

Our life-affirming moral compasses point us toward a Great Intersection between three convergent affirmations. Together, these three affirmations are the core animating principles of all of our ethics, however imperfectly they are captured, expressed or taught within the various secular and religious traditions. They consist of Life Affirmation, especially of human life; the Affirmation of Creation, especially of the human creative enterprise and the Affirmation of Intelligent Being, especially as human intelligence (the one instance of Intelligent Being with which we are familiar on a moment-to-moment

basis) exercises its faculties of compassion (necessary for social cooperation), creative innovation and foresight. These three affirmations are the root normative triad.⁴

These three animating principles or affirmations behave as motivating forces. We can visualize them as convergent beams, the primary colors, if you will, of human moral intelligence. Each ray suffuses and brightens the other two in a variety of unpredictable but wonderful ways. When sufficiently integrated, they motivate and guide us to band together in civilizations, and - by extension - to organize our lives within a set of mutually protective rules⁵, but also under conditions that provide and protect sufficient freedom that the human creative/adaptive spirit can thrive⁶.

Over the great span of human history, the integration of life, creativity, and intelligent being (with all that implies and entails) remains incomplete. I believe it can only be *approached* in any finite part of space-time, never quite fully achieved - the tendency to full integration operating much like the asymptotic convergence of line and curve in geometry.

But the *quest* for this deep integration of all thinking about reality, based on the belief that all reality is integrated, has always been the Great Attractor of human existence. As a background world view, it operates as part of the underlying support structure of world ethical systems, and accounts for the general tendency towards the universalization of values and moral rules. Think of the baseline prohibitions against cheating, theft and assault as first applying only within a tribe, then a race, then a country, then as applying to all humans everywhere. There is a gradual integration of disparate moral codes that were based on arbitrary differences between people. The process leads to the increasing universalization of the essence those codes, as in the transition from “Don't steal from the in-group”, to “Don't steal from anyone”.

There is a related quest for the essential integration of *all* reality (inside and outside our heads, if you will) in the context of the wonderful varieties of existential variation we witness everywhere. Among other historical effects, it has led mystics to the grasp the unity of being⁷, and humanists (both religious and secular) to transcend tribal boundaries,

⁴ There is more on the root normative triad and its connection to all ethical systems in my other essays.

⁵ These are the core moral precepts that we can find embedded within most religions and legal traditions, particularly as they include prohibitions against fraud, lying, cheating, oath-breaking, stealing, assault and murder.

⁶ The need to protect freedom is not just a political or ideological matter. Nor is it a derivative concern, in the sense that a respect for freedom can be derived from the core moral prohibitions (against fraud, lying, cheating, oath-breaking, stealing, assault and murder) by holding the state accountable along with its citizens. No, protecting freedom is a stand-alone value, essential under real world conditions to the viability of the human creative enterprise. The implications are developed in my other essays.

⁷ This core idea is a starting point for a pan-religious metaphysical model in which deity (by whatever name or no name at all) represents (in whole or part) the perfect integration of the three axes of the moral order, life affirmation, the affirmation of creativity, and of intelligence, particularly as such an Intelligent Being is infinitely living, infinitely life affirming, infinitely creative and infinitely compassionate. The task of unpacking that idea is the subject of several of my essays.

and the early thinkers of the Enlightenment to reject the arbitrary social classifications and boundaries of royal privilege.

A version of this same quest has driven the scientific enterprise from the very beginning, in a specialized form of integration limited to the study of the physical processes that occur within the natural world. The Holy Grail of theoretical science is the elegant, comprehensive, explanatory and predictive integration of the physical universe. The belief that such a comprehensive integration of physical reality *really exists* in a form that can be grasped by human intelligence is the baseline *faith* of working scientists everywhere, even those who profess no faith at all.⁸

The still larger integration of the narrowly physical/material perspective of the sciences with the moral and esthetic perspective of intelligent, feeling, valuing beings, marks the threshold of a great human awakening.⁹ The result is essential optimism, the kind is not limited or defined by one's mortal life span or particular circumstances.

As a species, we have done very well indeed, and we are doing better and better as we come awake in the foregoing sense. No earthly utopia imagined in the last five thousand years can come close to the actual human progress achieved over the same period.

Congenital (or habitual) pessimists are too trapped in the micro-perspective of their immediate life experiences to see the magnificence of human progress - from our hard scrabble, frightened beginnings to life within the best of the later civilizations. It is as if millions of pessimistic ants are crawling through a gallery of stunning beauty, surrounded by exalted music, oblivious to the entire scene.

This is about the sturdy, long-view optimism of buoyant maturity, the form we can call *essential optimism*. It is to be distinguished from the pessimism of the apocalyptic mind, and from that existential pessimism we all must occasionally feel, and for the bitter pessimism of the tired and defeated. And this view trumps the defensive pessimism of those driven by the inordinate fear of disappointment, while it provides some authentic solace to those whose circumstances have closed in around them.

Chronic pessimism is an anesthetic against the surprise of joy. But optimism, in its essential and realistic sense, is the stimulant that makes joy possible, and *accomplishment inevitable*...if not for every person who strives, but over time for increasing numbers of those who will come after us.

⁸ Faith is the willingness to accept the reality of aspects of reality that can't be fully verified by experience or experiment. Without it, we would have no civilization because interpersonal trust is an act of faith.

⁹ Science awakes to a new humility, recognizing that its practitioners need moral guidance, but that experimental science, as such, does not produce or reveal *meaning* or *value* or *moral guidance*. And the faith traditions awaken to a new humility. While they have been reassured that they are "onto something", they humbly open their doors wide to life-affirming creativity and intelligence, and to the manifestations of Holy Being as essentially beyond the exclusive ownership or control of any one tradition or individual.

We are among the first in new generations that have been born into the age of essential optimism. The word will spread.

Of course, not everyone has awakened in that essentially optimistic place. Take heart. The Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich, told the world, 600 years ago that “All will be well”. She was sharing a revealed truth about the unfolding human story. In spite of all the dark episodes of our history, the evil, depravity and calamity, Julian was onto something. As long as the good people can hold the evil forces and tendencies in the human psyche at bay, Julian’s dictum will hold. This is the ultimate power of optimism over all the contrary forces.

The Seven Elements of the How

1. Understand that you have the power to “select the target” by framing the narrative of your life in its largest context.

Every uplifting narrative is the result of the selection of that moment when the story ends. The difference between a naturalistic “we are but corks on the sea” tragedy and of a classic heroic “ta-da!” story is whether the chosen end is the hero’s lonely end in a rest home or the moment of triumph over the loathsome menace. The embedded meaning of a narrative is chosen. All lives, all stories and chronicles end, but their meaning lies in the notion of *legacy*. [See #7, below.]

2. Free yourself from unearned and unavoidable guilt; allocate all the rest to the “lessons learned” category, and act accordingly...and with *essential* optimism.

Real time decision making is flawed. Choices are complicated. No one of us, especially those most confident of our benign motives, can get through even a single month of life without causing harm, failing to prevent harm, falling short of expectations, self-generated or others, being oblivious to someone's suffering or.... Well, you get the idea. We tend to forgive children because they are still developing. But the brutal fact is that we all are larger and older versions of those same children caught in an uncompleted stage of development through which we suffer ongoing trial and error aiming at a wise adulthood, say, at the age of 500 years. We accumulate guilt like a ship accumulates barnacles. Enjoy today whenever you can.

3. Use your foresight judiciously; then put it aside and cultivate confidence in your innate adaptivity. Foresight is a gift with limits. Adaptability is the gift *without limits*.

4. Raise your sights. Optimism is not just about you or your immediate material circumstances.

5. Ordinary pessimism is the energy lull between optimistic surges: keep it in its proper place.

6. Creative procrastination – after the necessary prudent preparation has been done – reinforces the *habit of optimism* for all those occasions when you will most need it.

7. Keep your attention on the crests of the wave form of the chain of life.

From the Beginning, life was *preceded* as well as followed by death, in an endless cycle of renewal. The Eastern cultures have inherited a “Great Wheel” world view that transcends the religions that express the same idea. This assumption, when unexamined and taken as a given, can color everything in life with an essential pessimism. I’m describing the notion that all is repeated endlessly, that all novelty is repetition, and that both triumph and defeat are “fate”; and that the only release from the Great Wheel is through the disciplines of detachment. This world view is essentially antithetical to the Western world view which – whether secular or religious – finds its roots in the Judeo-Christian world view in which the notion of progress from a Beginning is taken as a given.¹⁰

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The human species is specially equipped with a unique suite of faculties and capabilities, among them the faculties of compassion, creativity, and intelligent life-affirming adaptation. This has changed the life game. We humans on the third planet of a yellow star in a spiral arm of a certain galaxy in a very large universe are in the business of adding to the useful legacy data base of the human condition. It is no accident that most human progress – in overcoming caste, disease, starvation and squalor, has come about when the optimists within the subjugated cultures shook off great wheel fatalism.

The technologies that made this possible began with our most profound, history altering social technology: that of civilization itself, the most precious legacy of all. The waveform of life, writ large, resembles the double helix of DNA more than the tidal waves of the sea.

One end of the helix-shaped human waveform is open to the future.

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¹⁰ This view is well developed in Thomas Cahill’s very readable, *The Gift of the Jews*, Anchor Doubleday 1998-1999.



THE AUTHOR, Jay B. Gaskill, is a well-known California trial and appellate lawyer who served as a Public Defender until 1999, but left his “life of crime” to devote more time to his writing projects. He loves humor and philosophy equally; science and science fiction interchangeably; Manhattan and the western wilderness irresistibly. Among his non-fiction essays, readers of *Optimism 101* will want to read:

A New Social Compact – a free download - <http://jaygaskill.com/Compact.pdf>

Creativity & Survival –a free download - <http://jaygaskill.com/CreativityAndSurvival.pdf>

Thugology 101 – a free download - <http://jaygaskill.com/THUGOLOGY101.pdf>

Two of Mr. Gaskill’s fiction works are available as e-books from **Amazon** and **Barnes & Noble**:

Information about Gaskill’s thought provoking thriller, “*The Stranded Ones*”, is available at <http://jaygaskill.com/ReadTheStrandedOnes.pdf>, and you can read about his haunting and engaging “*Lost Souls Coffee Shop*” at <http://jaygaskill.com/AboutTheLostSoulsCoffeeShop.pdf>. For all reprint

permissions, and information on other publications and essays, please contact the author via e-mail:

law@jaygaskill.com