

# Interview with Colin Feltham

Interview originally conducted by Andreas Moss  
Late 2014, for Planet Zapffe,  
[www.planetzapffe.com](http://www.planetzapffe.com)

## Introducing

*Who is Colin Feltham?*

I'm a 64 year old Englishman living in Denmark. I'm semi-retired but still working part-time: some teaching, examining, mostly in my original discipline of counselling and psychotherapy. If you meant something deeper like 'Who I am I (really)?' I have no idea – just another human being living his life as well as he falteringly can.

*What is your background?*

I had working class parents, long dead now, I grew up in London, then lived in Sheffield, in the UK. I tried lots of jobs and disliked or became tired of most of them. I've worked in offices, in kitchens, for some years with offenders, later in various counselling roles, then in academia. I was always a 'seeker,' reading a lot, and my first degree was in theology. At one point in the 1970s I went to Los Angeles to have primal therapy: it didn't work. I've been married and divorced twice, and I have two sons in their 20s. My main professional identity has been as a professor of counselling and psychotherapy.

*Tell us about the books you have written?*

About 30 books (some of these co-authored or edited), mainly textbooks, on aspects of counselling and psychotherapy. I've written several that are critical of the field too. But a few have been about the human condition, about how we got to be so fucked up as a species: *What's Wrong With Us?* (2007); *Failure* (2012); *Keeping Ourselves in the Dark* (2014). I'm now working on a book specifically about Depressive Realism. Needless to say, sales are not quite up there with Harry Potter.

## **Introducing Depressive Realism**

*What is Depressive Realism? How would you define it?*

It's a term from psychology, from experiments in the late 1970s, that showed that people who were mildly depressed were more accurate at predicting certain things relating to trivial tasks than others were. Such people – 'dysthymic' – were called 'sadder but wiser'. The term has been used more widely since, for example in a book about the French novelist Michel Houellebecq, to refer to those who see the world in a negative, pessimistic or 'cynical' way. I would define it as a worldview in which human existence is essentially problematic. The central concerns of DR are death, meaninglessness, the indifference of the universe to suffering, the absurdities of society, the illusions and lies we live by; and the ways in which we cope with this situation – denial, depression, suicide, antinatalism, etc.

*Keeping Ourselves In The Dark is coming out on Nine Banded Books, what is it about?*

I started it as a series of essays on different topics and then I realised they were linked. The first chapter is about knowing what to think – what I call dizziness about the many truth claims on us, about information overload etc. I look at anthropathology, or what made us humans sick; depressive realism and its heroes; at life's illusions and taboos; at the hype of Denmark touted as the 'happiest county in the world' and the reality behind this; climate change; religion, therapy, psychology and fiction as illusions; ageing, dying and death; and how to live in this sorry world. The linking theme is that if we don't kill ourselves we have to find ways of living balanced against harsh realities. Much of what we do is illusion-based and we limit ourselves with many social taboos; but we have to 'keep (take care of ourselves) ourselves somehow in the dark.'

*Is the term Depressive Realism new? How old is it? I actually thought it was your coining, but that's not correct it seems.*

‘DR’ is relatively new. Certainly using it ‘positively’ (a bit like gay or mad pride) is quite new.

*Who would you put in the tradition of Depressive Realism?*

How exhaustive to be – some start with Sophocles. Then there’s the Buddha (‘all life is suffering’), Arthur Schopenhauer, Giacomo Leopardi, Carlo Michelstaedter, Edgar Saltus, Philipp Mainlander, Thomas Hardy, E.M.Cioran, Philip Larkin, Samuel Beckett, Peter Wessel Zapffe, David Benatar, John Gray, Thomas Ligotti, Ray Brassier. Also Lars von Trier, Edvard Munch, et al. It’s a bit difficult wondering whether to include or exclude Woody Allen (too funny?), Kierkegaard (too religious), Sartre (too politically active), Camus (?), Dostoevsky (?), Kafka (?), etc. Even Thomas Hardy is sometimes a bit too romantic. And all this is only based on my own views anyway.

### **Deeper questions on DR**

*As I understand it, DR, is based on the idea that people with a lighter form of depression see reality more clearly. This means people with a more clinical depression are coloured by their heavier mood? And if that is true, how can one differ between these?*

The original experiments suggested that people considered mildly depressed or dysthymic had better judgement than others but those diagnosable as severely depressed do not have better judgement at all, quite the reverse. Even Aaron Beck, creator of cognitive therapy, seems to agree with this. Severe or clinical depression is much deeper and most sufferers cannot function in the world during episodes of depression, usually they cannot enjoy life at all; whereas many of us probably have chronic mild depression and we work, have relationships and enjoy at least some aspects of life. But even clinical depression can come and go and eventually lift or be treated, and in one Dutch study it was found that a majority of people with mental illnesses are still ‘happy’ at least some of the time.

*I see! I was more thinking if some people with mild depressions see reality more clearly and those with a more clinical depression could*

*have their view of reality just as muddled as optimists, how could one differ one DR from the next, if they both identified as DRs? The reason I ask is because I've seen a couple of antinatalists who are obviously very intelligent, but probably over the borderline of being mildly depressed. They tend to get a lot more extreme in their views as a result. These are people that openly say they have periods of excessive depression. How do you see this?*

Good question! Sometimes I wonder about this – do the extreme DRs have more integrity, or are they just more depressed or disturbed? Maybe there's no answer but the radical DRs probably either kill themselves or others, or promote bitter ideas; the moderate DRs sit on the fence perhaps, or point out the negatives but don't do anything about them. Actually anyone who is severely depressed wouldn't have the necessary energy to promote DR or anything else, so the kinds of people you're talking about may be extremists of some other kind, or depressives in remission, or of course they may just be right. The Unabomber, Ted Kakzynski, was this extreme type. But it gets us into 'comorbidity' territory and it's probably not useful to try to 'diagnose' anyone remotely (if at all). I wonder if antinatalists have similar personalities – you can see *some* similarities in Thomas Hardy, Cioran, Beckett. And of course you don't have to be depressed to be an antinatalist, you may just see very clearly the problems of overpopulation and the suffering that procreation brings. I think promotion of voluntary human extinction is another kind of extreme.

*If you picture future potential therapy clinics that leaned on Depressive Realism as a therapy. What would that look like? Could giving a depressed, or let's even say suicidal, person the view of depressive realism help in any way?*

Well, DR isn't a therapy, and some DRs (e.g. Carlo Michelstaedter, Jean Amery, Mitchell Heisman and probably many unknowns) have killed themselves. On the other hand, Cioran said his writing was a kind of therapy for him. It's certainly the case that reading authors like Thomas Hardy (especially *Jude the Obscure*) helped me enormously when I was about 18 – realising that someone else sees the world in this bleak way, that you're not alone. Existential therapy

looks at many of the same issues as DR, it's mainly atheistic and death-informed, but it emphasises freedom and hope within that context. The leading existential therapist Irvin Yalom wrote a novel – *The Schopenhauer Cure* – that puts a modern Schopenhauerian character in intimate group therapy, where his pessimistic nature is happily thawed out. But using DR therapeutically would be difficult, with most people. Yet, interestingly, Freud is sometimes counted among the arch-pessimists for his view that psychoanalysis merely restores people to common unhappiness from hysterical misery, and some analysts regard their work as simply disillusioning people rather than making them ecstatic. Today Compassion-Focused Therapy and one or two other models of therapy inform clients that we are evolved creatures who cannot blame ourselves and our own actions for our problems. 'Radical honesty', which developed from Gestalt therapy, values complete honesty, including negatives. And Buddhism - and some derivatives of Zen therapy – contains many DR-like features, e.g. life as transient, as based on illusions, etc.

*Herman Tønnessen seemed to claim you have to choose between happiness or truth. Do you see it the same way? Or is it possible to choose both?*

Good question. I'm not sure one chooses anyway, I suspect it's a matter of temperament. Diogenes of Sinope is one of my heroes – truth above everything. I'm not sure I believe in happiness, at least not as anything more than a fleeting state. Many modern thinkers don't believe in 'truth' but might sign up to truth-*seeking*. The positive psychologists appear to think that some degree of illusion is necessary to happiness and that's where there is a serious parting of the ways. We all have illusions but I think DRs are temperamentally unable to settle for obvious illusions like God, free will, nationalism, lifelong monogamous love, eternal progress etc. If your happiness depends on illusions you're not going to welcome truth. This is an old question in philosophy, with Plato for example valuing truth above poetry. But there is a clear danger in anyone believing himself to be a warrior for truth, as we see in radical Islam, extreme left- or right-wing politics, or for that matter in DR. 'Truth above everything' can become a self-deluding or persecutory mantra. Cioran always

struggled to question himself and I think that's very important. We all die after a few decades of struggle, so you can say 'what difference does it make if you comfort yourself with a few illusions?' But broadly, I think we tend to stay the way we are across a lifetime.

*You relate in a sense to David Benatar, Jim Crawford, Thomas Ligotti and the antinatalism movement, but you don't see eye-to-eye on everything. The procreation question you seem to be more open to than them, although you don't seem to mind the ideas, but find them interesting. What is the main difference between antinatalism and DR, as you see it?*

I admire Benatar's bravery in taking on this most unpopular topic, and I believe getting quite some insults for it. Crawford's book too I like for his candid confessions, and Ligotti's for his unbridled, angry nihilism (I know he doesn't use that term). Beckett spoke about 'accursed progenitors' and had no children, and Larkin, most famous for his 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad' line, had no kids. Like Crawford I have had kids myself, so I can't claim to have taken an antinatalist stand. I admire those who do, however, but I'm not too sure that antinatalism will get very far as a social movement. It's also ironic that probably the most thoughtless and religious people will have the largest families. It's a very big topic with many nuances. I'm all for stabilising or reducing world population and it may be that, as is happening in some countries, people will instinctively desist from having many kids. But population control is extremely emotive because it triggers fears about eugenics and genocide. People who refrain from procreation may not always do so for the moral reasons Benatar and others give. And climate change worst scenarios could in future wipe out many populations. There really isn't *one* form of DR or one correct kind of antinatalism. I'm keen to read Sarah Perry's forthcoming book because so much of this debate comes from men.

*You've proposed something you've called Scandinavian Gloom, and it seems you suggest DR is more common in Scandinavian countries. How do you reason this?*

Well, I don't mean this entirely seriously and I have no real evidence

but I speculate. Perhaps as a Brit I have grown up with a humorous caricature of Scandinavians as gloomy types. This is linked with key writers, artists and film-makers like Kierkegaard, Strindberg, Ibsen, Hamsun, Zapffe, Munch, Bergman and von Trier. But other associations are these – it's dark and cold in the north, seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is more common there, people are more introverted (and introversion and shyness are linked with depression). The cold makes people huddle together indoors (*hygge*). Historically, I wonder if northerners have had to be more industrious, to work harder, and in doing so to suppress lighter, more frivolous emotions. One would expect to find more DR in the north generally, not only in Scandinavia, but in Canada, Alaska, Russia, Japan, Ireland – and I think it's true, if you include figures like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Tønnessen, Beckett, Mishima, and others (even Shakespeare, as in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*). Harsher climatic conditions create greater inventiveness and industry but also higher levels of introversion or reclusiveness. Mediterranean and developing world citizens enjoy better climates and greater conviviality, broadly speaking, but they also endure more physical suffering, so they tend to be more religious, and their fight for improvement and justice is important to them. Affluent capitalists in the north must wonder what it's all been for, all this work and routine with its downside of stress, boredom, overthinking, and still having to face death. Or perhaps it goes in cycles, since many Indians are now hooked on capitalism and technology, and have put Gandhian politics and Buddhist renunciation behind them. Living in Denmark, I am struck by the mismatch between the 'happiest country in the world' claim and everyday observations of a somewhat reclusive, heavy drinking, smoking, and antidepressant-consuming populace. Of course, these are all generalisations that many of my academic peers would dismiss.

*Reading some of your material you do seem to suggest that gender could be important when it comes to DR? And do you think age matters?*

Yes, I think gender and age count quite a lot. It looks like men are more 'grumpy' than women, especially in old age, much more inclined to think about death, to be 'unspiritual', rational and

scientific. A majority of women enjoy relationships, want or have children, look forward to seeing grandchildren growing up, have a high degree of romantic and spiritual thinking, refuse to talk about the dark side, try to hide their age, live longer, and so on. Many women also blame historical and ongoing patriarchy for our human woes, so they are involved in the hope and fight for justice, which is at odds with the nihilism of DR. I think it's also true that most women are still more emotionally expressive than men, and that is probably cathartic, while men tend to hold emotions in or 'act them out' and suffer from that. Age-wise, many DRs seem always to have been rather gloomy, and some adolescent male risk-taking and suicide (and aggression and religiosity) probably stems from questioning the meaning of life. Old age is particularly challenging for some, when you can clearly see many disappointments, witness your body deteriorate, and often the old become poorer and more lonely than before.

*In your upcoming book Keeping Ourselves in The Dark, in perhaps my favourite chapter, "Three Cheers for Depressive Realism" you list a lot of pessimistic thinkers, authors, poets and so on that you find relevant for the DR worldview. Do you see something in common with DRs? And what are the biggest differences between them?*

Yes I do see a commonality between them (most of these are listed above). The arts have always attracted quite a number of melancholy types whose preoccupations have included death, broken romances, the follies of our civilisation, tragedy, meaninglessness, horror, etc. Perhaps the differences are to do with the degree of radicality and bitterness. Ligotti is one of the most extreme, I think. Some, like Larkin, Houellebecq and Beckett, were and are strangely popular, or relatively so for DR writers. Posthumously, Beckett has a very large academic following. My guess is that philosophers like Benatar and Brassier have quite small readerships because their philosophy is both pessimistic and difficult.

*When you first contacted me through the Planet Zapffe website you sent me a very interesting article you wrote, which I really liked. "Four psychologies: humanistic, existential, critical and Zapffeian". You proposed something you called "Zapffeian psychology", among*



*three other directions Humanistic, Critical, and Existential. What is the difference between them, and what did you want to express with this article?*

There are hundreds of different and competing theories in the therapy world. Yet none of them really takes seriously a DR-dark view of the human condition. I just wanted to address this gap. Humanistic psychology came out of the 1960s, especially out of California, with people like Maslow, Perls, Reich, Moreno, Assagioli, Berne, Rogers, Janov. Broadly speaking, it's an optimistic mindset seeing great hopes for human potential, higher states of consciousness and self-fulfilment. Existential psychology and therapy is closest to DR, drawing on people like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Laing. It is generally less upbeat than humanistic, focusing on meaninglessness, isolation, death and freedom, but as *therapy* it is necessarily somewhat hopeful. Critical psychology is critical of most of the approaches that privilege psychology, that focus on what goes on inside your head instead of around you, in society. So I was trying to contrast these with a 'Zapffean psychology', which none of the readers of *Self and Society* journal would have heard of. I didn't get any direct feedback but the editors asked me to arrange a symposium on 'Depressive realism and humanistic psychology' which I'm doing now with five authors, scheduled for publication in 2016.

*What is Zapffean Psychology?*

Zapffe was a philosopher, not a psychologist, but he drew on Freudian ideas and existential writers among others. His four defence mechanisms – isolation, anchoring, distraction and sublimation – might be readily understood by Freudians, I think, but they are unique to Zapffe as far as I know. 'Zapffean psychology' is a view of how the human mind works, based on speculation about surplus consciousness, so it deserves to be known as a form of psychology alongside others. It has some similarities with Ernest Becker's work (particularly *The Denial of Death*) and with terror management theory, but these are still quite conventional and academic, and don't move on to consider related concepts like antinatalism. I would call Zapffe's a radically negative psychology, and it's against the grain of

today's uncritical positive psychology, which I would say is based on (Zapffeian) isolation, i.e. 'let's not think about the bad stuff'. Strangely enough, though, many positive psychologists concede that life is highly negative, which is why so much positive counter-effort is required to make us happy and keep ourselves happy!

*How did you come across Peter Wessel Zapffe? And how did you react to his ideas? Do they overlap with the ideas of DR?*

In short, from reading Ligotti's *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. I am always looking for interesting new angles on DR. Then I looked at various wiki-articles, at Gisle Tangenes' translation of *The Last Messiah*, and at Planet Zapffe. I am very frustrated that I can't read more Zapffe, and I consider it a weird neglect of his work – especially *Om det tragiske* - not to have it translated into English as the most common language.

*Some people has said Peter Wessel Zapffe has borrowed some of his terminology, "subllimation" etc, from Freudian theory. In what ways in Zapffe's four defense mechanisms similiar to Freud and his use of these terms, and in what ways do they differ from Freuds?*

I think some of the language is Freudian, like isolation. Psychoanalysis has many concepts of denial and disavowal. Sublimation, yes, also used in a way similar to Freud. But Freud's defence mechanisms were more about sex and other troubling, anti-social thoughts. Freud did discuss anxiety about death but not as much or as centrally as Zapffe, and Freud didn't say much about meaninglessness. But Freud is often referred to as a pessimist (see Dienstag's book), and a misanthropist (he referred to humanity as 'trash' and believed that 'man is a wolf to man'), which is interesting for the one who launched the primarily hopeful business of psychotherapy.

*There's the usual prejudice against, at least the antinatalists, but I would expect the same criticism would be relevant to DRs as well. It's almost funny how often you hear it, but a usual knee-jerk reaction is "then why don't you kill yourself?" It's funny how often people say*

*this. This phrase does come in different forms I've noticed, sometimes in a very angry tone, although sometimes more earnest as well. What do you think is the cause of such a reaction for someone just holding such a position to life?*

My mother used to say she wished she'd never had kids. Not very helpful, but honest. The mothers of Cioran and Houellebecq both voiced their wish that their sons had never been born. I suppose I don't hear it much among my therapy-related associates but I'm aware of it. More often I've had a few people say to me, 'If I felt like that I'd kill myself'. I guess some people feel offended and angry to hear DR views if they've never heard them before. But some are frightened because they would never allow themselves to feel so negative, and if you voice such views they are shocked and they lash out. Perhaps they are afraid that if they ever gave way to such thoughts they might kill *themselves*. A bit like aggressive homophobia that may mask doubts about one's own sexuality.

*You've mentioned that nihilism is an important feature of Depressive Realism. What do you mean by that? Would you have to be a nihilist to fully grasp DR, would you say? What does nihilism mean to you?*

I suppose you might be a Christian with a mildly depressive streak. Or a left-wing activist, say. But I think the likelihood is that if you're obsessed with relentless truth-seeking, you're sceptical by nature, and you can't help seeing flaws in arguments and common hypocrisy, then eventually you approach nihilism. God doesn't exist, democracy doesn't work well, therapy fails, love disappears, and so on. Now, this needn't be depressing, it could be greeted neutrally or humorously, but most often it's disenchanting. You can grow weary of one thing (say, some anchor, in Zapffe's terms) and find another, and another, perhaps. In the Hindu-Buddhist tradition they speak about *neti neti*, or not this, not that. And some forms of meditation see through everything, every truth claim, every flutter of superfluous thought. Existentialism is pretty sceptical but retains belief in freedom, choice and authenticity; Buddhism aims for a kind of neutrality and transcendence. Perhaps DR is like being stuck at a point of maximum scepticism, with no way of going back to belief and no way forward

to enlightenment. But even avowed nihilists, unless they commit suicide, rely on distractions, sublimation and anchors, like a work routine, sex, food, sport, or some other pastime. I used to suffer from being called a cynic but now I value my DR position or nihilism and don't apologise for it.

*Personally I always found it confusing for someone to say they care about suffering and see it as a negative, but at the same time claim they are a moral nihilist. How do you see this? I suppose I find morality quite relative myself, but not totally. If you rob a beggar versus giving a beggar a few coins, I don't understand how one act isn't better than the other, even if the universe doesn't care.*

I can understand someone being overwhelmed by the enormity of suffering. However much you try to help, there is always more suffering, and often the best solutions would probably be political or upstream ones, not make-do personal ones. But I guess the real point here is that you can hold theoretical views that are challenged by everyday events and surprises. Some things are just more immediate and practical. I might help someone to find a job, say, even though I think it's a pointless, shitty job, because at that time the person needs a job, any job. Or I know the beggar is lying to me, and will buy booze or drugs with the coins I give him, but a little compassion for his immediate need seems more important than moral purity.

*Could a DR view of life be good in some ways? What can you gain from accepting a DR view?*

Yes, I value the truth-seeking element of DR. I think I understand the need people have for comforting illusions (in religion, politics, therapy, fiction, etc.). But ultimately it's a challenge to see if one can accept a life without (or with very few) lies and illusions in it. It's a stripping-away process, quite like meditation. It's about finding your own questions and answers. It's intriguing to think about possibilities. I think *New Scientist* magazine once ran a feature called 'What would happen if everyone stopped believing in God tomorrow?' I see such thinking as having potential for quantum changes. But I'm a failure when it comes to uncompromising DR. I wish I could speak with

constant radical honesty and not fear the consequences. To some extent, in therapy-type groups many years ago, I did feel able to do that. DR might help us as a society to be more compassionate about suffering and assisted suicide, and more caring as regards equality since we're all in the same terminal boat. Finally, if I'm right that there is a DR personality type some are born with, then it's better to accept it and find allies than struggle alone to deny it, as gays have discovered.

*You mentioned you once studied theology. Does this mean you were religious at some point, but later turned atheist? How did this happen, and can you tell about your initial arrival at the conclusion that there is no God?*

At 22, I was casting around for what to do with my life, I was a disconsolate 'seeker' and got a university place (St Andrews, Scotland) to study theology for four years, so I took it, even though I was pretty much an atheist already but interested in philosophy, Jiddu Krishnamurti, yoga and related stuff. My parents were never religious believers but my schools were still very influenced by Christianity, and it took me years to really shake off superstitions and fears about sin, the devil etc. Some say that Samuel Beckett, though in effect an atheist, could never totally shake off the Christianity he grew up with, or at least its metaphors. Actually theology can confirm atheism in that it looks analytically at archaeological and historical scholarship, and the analytic philosophy of religion. Religion just doesn't stand up to reason, only to emotion. I realised that one could have an interest in looking for deep truths about human existence and higher states of consciousness outside of traditional religion, in people like Krishnamurti. That interest stayed with me for many years. Buddhism has roots with many similarities to DR.

*What music and movies would you put in the DR-tradition?*

I'm not very well-informed musically but a lot of classical music is tragic or melancholy. I love Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*, for example. I like a lot of Eno's music. Most of the blues, folk and

country and western are built on achingly DR themes. Pop music including Gary Jules *Mad World* and Lana Del Rey's *Born to Die* and *Summertime Sadness* fit well here. Movies – most of Bergman, von Trier's *Melancholia*, *Threads*, *The Road*, *Into the Wild*, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* I love Mike Leigh's films, which contain DR themes but also a lot of tenderness. Also Terrence Malick, with his sense of transience, love and wonder. I love the animation *Waking Life* too.

## **Criticisms of DR**

*"The opposite view is that life is good, filled with reasons to be happy, and depressed and pessimistic people, killjoys, wilfully want to spoil it. And we have no way of objectively measuring how intrinsically good or bad life is. So we usually end up with the stand-off between Pollyannas and Eeyores, 'agreeing to disagree'."* ~ quote from *Keeping Ourselves In The Dark*

*Do you see DR as the end-all-be-all to the world? Do you see it as some kind of absolute truth?*

I hope not! I realise I am tempted to become obsessed by it because I am always reading and writing about it. I have plenty of intellectual interests (not many hobbies or activities) and I push myself to question DR. But it is my default position, yes. I don't think there are many or any absolute truths. We can all turn out to be wrong. It's interesting how much we depend on having a fixed view and how disturbed we can be if proven wrong or threatened intellectually. When I first heard that the Big Bang might not be the correct, final explanation for the beginning of the universe I felt a bit troubled but then intrigued.

*You've mentioned before that probably the main opponent in psychology for DR is cognitive behaviourism, and Aaron Beck as its front person. What would this mean in a broader sense? Where lies the disagreement?*

Beck believes that most of our psychological distress comes from our

‘negative automatic thoughts’ and these can be identified and corrected in CBT. It’s how we think that makes us miserable and depressed, not what happens to us. DR (or my version of DR) argues that we are complex beings who have evolved for millennia, we have genetic and neurological susceptibilities to suffering, greed, deceit, etc., we live in mad societies and are bombarded by demands; we know in our bones that no God protects us, we’re going to age and die and be forgotten. Mostly we’re happy to be swept along by social myths that deny all this but when something unusual troubles us our worldview is disturbed. CBT gets you to control your own mind and think ‘realistically’ and it can work sometimes for some problems of anxiety and depression. Who wants to feel constantly miserable and wretched? DR, I suppose, says that life is a problem, there will always be problems. Beckett said ‘You’re on Earth, there’s no cure for that.’ Freud is much closer to DR than Beck is.

*How do cognitive behaviourists see DRs? And how do DRs view cognitive behaviourists?*

I doubt if CBT practitioners and theorists think much at all about DRs but in some journal articles I have seen a little discussion about the differences between dysthymia and clinical depression, and the ‘mystery’ of why some illusions may make us ‘mentally healthier’. DRs aren’t necessarily familiar with CBT but where they are, my guess is that they find it superficial. I suspect that many DRs have a high level of intelligence and are not taken in by CBT techniques.

*Could there be a slight chance they could still be right? Could DRs, antinatalists and anyone who hold a pessimistic philosophy in general just be coloured by their depression and "short comings" in life? Shaped by some unlucky fortune in life, and become "sour and bitter" from experience? That's what some people probably would argue, and probably a common prejudice. What is the best way of responding to a question like this?*

Yes it’s quite possible. Anyone interested in this could read Yalom’s book *The Schopenhauer Cure*, or Ian Miller’s psychoanalytic book about Samuel Beckett’s therapy with Bion. The general argument

would be that DRs have had unsatisfactory relationships with their parents (especially mothers, which seems true of Schopenhauer, Cioran, Beckett, Houellebecq and Larkin), or they've just somehow grown up schizoid, cut off from others. But this is a little like the argument that gay people's sexuality is determined by bad early relationships, cold mothers, harsh fathers, sexual abuse and so on. This might be true for some but there is no evidence for it, and now it is even considered unethical to try to convert gay people to heterosexuality. Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Smile or Die* suggests that many Americans are under pressure to act more positively than they feel, and she compares this with citizens of the former USSR who were pressurised to always sound positive about conditions there. So perhaps one day in the future DRs will be accepted as a valid, non-pathological minority group.

*Someone I argued with online a year ago, Anekantavad, who wanted to understand DR, after I asked for his opinion and sending one of your texts, seemed to wonder if DR somehow tries to frame or promote depression as something positive, or at the very least desirable, and he found it confusing. How would you respond to this?*

No, I don't see depression as positive, certainly not in its serious clinical form. But I think it's probably inevitable and may always be with us. Melancholy or dysthymia is another matter, and I suppose the ideal, if we could choose, would be some variability in mood, so we could all experience optimal ups and downs and their benefits. Some therapists, e.g. some Jungians, do promote a degree of depression as positive insofar as it signals a need for temporary withdrawal and change, say. But it looks as if some of us are born susceptible to pessimism and some to optimism, with life events and epigenetics influencing the development of our predominant mindset. 'Optimism bias' is also noted as not always a good thing, by the way. And the causes of depression are not agreed, with some psychologists pointing to socio-political factors as responsible: so it's quite possible that depression will wax and wane, and the World Health Organization predicts a continuing rise in depression.

*The same person, and I would probably put in him some kind of*



*postmodernist thought tradition, claimed the biggest problem with DR is how would one decide what is "real"? What is realism, he argued. How can one "accurately" portray what is true from what is false? How can one show what is reality or what is truth? There probably would be a fringe arguing that there is no reality, and no truth. Do you find arguments like this interesting, and how would you respond to them?*

I know these arguments and of course there is something in them. This is a huge philosophical problem with no satisfactory solution. I think I see many things more clearly than others do but naturally I realise I may be deluded. I doubt myself when I read forceful and articulate opposing views (such as those of Raymond Tallis). Referring back in my own memory to a few times when I think I had 'mystical' moments of transcendence, I think I saw ('non-DR') reality more clearly then, so it is possible that some people see like that all the time, and that that is the true reality. But the existence of God, or the common take on God, is I am pretty sure nonsense, unreal, wishful thinking. I am pretty sure creationism is not real, nor are most conspiracy or alien invasion theories, nor astrology. But more mundanely, is so-called statistical evidence 'real,' for example all that stuff that tells me egalitarian societies are mentally healthier than others, or that CBT is more effective than other therapies? How far does one trust others rather than one's own senses when deciding what is real? Should I trust the Lacanians who talk about the imaginary, the symbolic and the Real? Can I trust the Dalai Lama or the Pope? No-one is able to consume all the available research literature on what matters and even if you could, much of it is contradictory. I believe there is no God or given purpose (beyond surviving), the universe is indifferent to me and you, society is at least partly built on absurdities and deceptions, when we die our bodies immediately start decomposing like a dog's, and eventually the human species will perish, and the universe itself. In the meantime, most of us have some variable mixture of fun and unhappiness in our lives. I may be wrong, but that's my ultimate reality.

*The same person asked the question "Are happy people stupid?" Following that he certainly doesn't think so. Are happy people stupid?*

*And is it condescending and even elitist to claim so?*

This question makes me laugh. The British novelist Howard Jacobson said he had never met an intelligent optimist. I secretly think DRs are more intelligent but I do know some very bright optimists. On the other hand, many people dislike talking or thinking seriously. Extraverts are less likely to be depressed, I believe, and they may have more so-called social intelligence than traditional high IQs. Actually the divisions into happy and unhappy people, happy and stupid, elitist and democratic, are rather blunt ones.

*An interesting question I sometimes hear from critics of AN, and it would probably go for DR too, and that is criticizing the argument of meaninglessness. DRs would probably argue there is something futile about things being meaningless in nature, in universe, and so on and that is seen as a bad thing, but what would a universe and existence with meaning look like?*

Well, some (or most) spiritual people claim to see great order in the universe. Teilhard de Chardin did, I think. Some scientists do, or at least they look for order. It looks like the vast majority of the world population still believes in God and in some sort of meaning that is hidden from us until after we die. I think that is nonsense. But I can see some way forward with the idea that humans make their own (post-human) reality, for example by exploring space. Therapists like Frankl of course see meaning in everything, even in the concentration camp.

*You once said that you didn't see DR as a science, even if there is some research to back it up as a theory. I wondered if you could elaborate on this. Don't you consider the field of psychology to be a sort of science then?*

I don't consider DR to be a science, no, nor psychology, though psychologists have struggled to gain scientific identity for a long time. It's contentious to say so, but I think the hard sciences like physics and chemistry are far superior to the social sciences. Psychology will never do anything even nearly equivalent to sending

a probe to a comet or curing cancer. DR draws a bit on psychology, indeed the term comes from psychology, but it's much wider than that. DR is a worldview held by people with pessimistic personalities, and the interesting question is whether we are right, and if it can be proven one way or the other. It can't! I do think many academics are often deluded, obsessed with minutiae, or protecting their own livelihoods rather than pursuing relevant truths.

*What do you make of Steven Pinker, who has claimed in his book The Better Angels of Our Nature, that humanity is gradually getting better, even if it doesn't seem like it. He claims there is moral progress in humanity, but it just goes slower than most would like. He uses examples that a hundred years ago people debated if gays should be hanged publicly or not, but these days it's more about them getting married and if they should be able to adopt children. Another example he uses is that we no longer throw our enemies to lions for entertainment in arenas, it would be unthinkable in most societies today, which is a sign of social progress. Would you agree with him on that there is some progress, and would that be a reason for slight optimism? Or would you accuse him of only being selective in his examples or something of that nature?*

Yes I read Pinker's big book on the decline of violence three years ago. It seems very convincing in the many examples, statistics and trends he gives and it did make me feel briefly optimistic, yes. But I think he admits we can't predict when wars will or won't break out, and we can never be sure we're in the clear, we can always revert to barbarism, especially in tough times. John Gray reviewed it and thought it unconvincing. I think the forms of violence have changed, in fact I think the world has become more 'feminine' and peaceful – but it's hard to picture a thoroughly peaceful and non-violent world. Humans just aren't made to live in everlasting tranquil harmony, we get bored and restless. I'm not saying violence is good, but that its opposite is also a problem, and our tragedy is that we're stuck in the middle. Also, I suspect that a lot of our progress has been bought at the price of suppression, not that everyone actually agrees with all progress in human rights but that they have been silenced by shame, yet a violent backlash remains quite possible. I noticed too that Pinker

has no problem with capitalism e.g. with moneylending, which can also be seen as forms of subtle violence, or as preparing the ground for violence.

*In the movie The Matrix, I'm not a huge huge fan of it myself, but it does put an interesting philosophical question. The whole red pill vs blue pill-dilemma. This being that taking the red pill means seeing reality as it really is, without no sugarcoating, and the blue pill meaning to live in some ignorant bliss. To put DR in a very pop-popular terms here. That would be taking the red pill, right? Why would one take the red pill if it means less happiness?*

Of course DRs would opt for the red pill! It's like the question about your identity – if you could change, or come back to life, would you rather be someone else? Most of us are very attached to who we are, however bad it is. On the other hand, the allure of drugs is very clear, and it's no accident that many people end their lives on morphine (heroin). We all take drugs in fact, whether it's caffeine, sugar, salt, nicotine, alcohol or stronger stuff, or getting a buzz from sex, sport, dieting or whatever. The optimal choice is to try both red and blue pills if possible, and some like Tallis claim to see reality as it is and simultaneously to be happy, presumably without drugs. But it's a good question, why we would prefer unhappy reality to happy unreality. In acute pain, I would prefer the blue pill. It's fascinating that Aldous Huxley had intravenous LSD when he was dying: lucky for him his last trip was apparently a good one.

*And why do you suppose so many people take the "blue pill", the happy pill? Is it by choice or by nature people do it?*

Who wouldn't want bliss? Actually I suspect that in our 'natural state' of animality we wouldn't need any drug but we're so fucked-up that we now crave blue pills. Although I gather drug use has a very long history, well before the Garden of Eden, and some animals discover and ingest plants that are sources of natural highs, so maybe it's not down to anthropathology but to badly designed nature!

*If we picture a hypothetical world where all people were unthinking*

*Pollyannas, all people believed in a happy god and that everything is good, and there were no sceptics - what would the biggest problem with such a society be? Could a society of ignorant bliss work, or is it ultimately headed for doom in some way or the other?*

Well, I think the idea behind all utopias is that they could only be maintained by totalitarian control or deep propaganda. Life just isn't all happy, or even nearly so, and any attempt to produce such a society must fail. Whether it's *Brave New World*, *Stepford*, or whatever, it could only work by centralised control and suppression, or by converting human beings into emotionless beings (robots). Interestingly, if we take Freud's idea of our own civilization as an effort to produce a smoothly functioning proto-utopia, it only 'works' at the expense of truth, of buying into illusions and harmful control. There was a thought experiment – what would the world be like if everyone stopped believing in God tomorrow? Well, we could reverse that and ask your question. In some ways we've already had it – early Christianity had heaven on earth, a community of love, but it quickly folded. Many regard Denmark today as the happiest country in the world, based on 'research' which amounts to merely biased self-reporting. It's all based on socialist utopian propaganda I think.

### **Where to go from DR?**

*If we grant that DR is "the truth", or as close to reality as we can come anyway, what would the options be from there on?*

Hmm, well I'm not sure DR is the truth but maybe it's the penultimate truth. The last stop before nirvana! I think we need dialogue between pessimists and optimists, as in other areas of life, to try to discover common ground or expose misunderstandings, or just to confirm that we are helplessly different.

*What do you think about people using DR as an argument for antinatalism?*

I don't think you can use DR arguments in themselves to persuade non-DRs but if (a) you could produce empirical evidence to support

Benatar's claims about how bad life is, or (b) wait for the next human-made disaster like a giant famine (or get enough people to watch *The Road*), then we might see more sympathy with the antinatalist view. Actually, I think many people say they wouldn't want to bring children into this cruel world, or some parents say they wouldn't have kids again. I suspect many (of the relatively few DRs) don't have kids anyway. One great problem here is that many, particularly women, and most religious people, see the meaning of life precisely in having children, and Scheffler's philosophy book *Death and the Afterlife* suggests that most people value the continuation of human life after their own deaths even more than their own lives. So large scale antinatalism seems an unlikely scenario to me.

*There's also transhumanism, as people like Herman Tønnessen, seemed to have idealized about already in the 70s, and later, David Pearce and The Hedonistic Imperative. The idea that we can fix human nature, kill off all the bad stuff in our genes, with some means of genetic biology. What do you think about transhumanism?*

There is some logic to this – tools, human ingenuity and technology seem to have been our allies for thousands of years. The HI people agree that human existence is fraught with suffering but they want to better it rather than to see us fade away. Ray Kurzweil, Aubrey de Grey, Nick Bostrom and others are intent on such ways forward. Perhaps if we could see realistic prospects of reduced suffering, delayed ageing, painless death, enhanced mood, and so on, some of us might feel differently about suicide, antinatalism and DR generally. But it's a very big IF right now, and too late for me.

*If you could fix humans, or indeed nature, for the better as transhumanists promote it, how would you fix it?*

That's a compelling but deeply uncomfortable question. For example, if you could find the brain mechanism that stops us from being in direct experiential contact with rich material reality (as on LSD), would you (I) make it widely available, or even force it on people, if it was safe? I would make it available, yes. Suppose we could identify

the genes or brain mechanism responsible for dysthymia, and we could banish DR, would we do it? Would I want to see the lifespan extended significantly? Probably not, although the prospect is tantalising. But all this research is already happening and will presumably continue. We live longer, cosmetic surgery becomes commonplace, all sorts of transplants are possible: how can this be stopped? Our entire evolution has been via artificiality, so why should it stop now? One problem is seen in the film *Limitless*, where expanded intelligence looks like a fantastic advantage, but only if you have it and others don't; if they have it and you don't, look out! Or if everyone gets it, then what? It seems to make sense to switch to non-carbon based fuels. The means of food production has to be changed in a world with high population. The thought of space travel is enticing. The only thing that can stop indefinite scientific and technological change is catastrophe, which I think is quite possible via climate change, asteroid collision, disease, nuclear war, or many other scenarios. I guess our efforts should be mainly on anti-catastrophe research, although Bjorn Lomborg would disagree.

*You also talked about, I quote, "compassionate nihilism, pragmatic stoicism, mystical transcendence" as other valid responses to DR. Could you elaborate on these?*

There is the kind of nihilism associated with early Russian terrorists and Nietzsche but another kind we can call compassionate that, like Buddhism, seeks nothing for itself but has compassion for others. Pragmatic stoicism, well, the CBT people and others from the time of Epictetus advocated various forms of stoicism: learn to endure it. Albert Ellis wrote a book called *How to stubbornly refuse to make yourself miserable about anything – yes anything!* That's one possible reaction. Mystical transcendence, well, if accounts of the experiences of the Buddha, Jiddu Krishnamurti, U.G. Krishnamurti and Suzanne Segal are true (another big IF), then I think these are promising possibilities. U.G. Krishnamurti in particular was scathingly nihilistic but seemed genuine in his transformed state. But for most of these, the transcendence was fortuitous, so unfortunately we don't know

how to achieve it, but there is a lot of hype around false claims.

*What do you think about the "New Atheism" movement, and in particular the view of science and exploring the unknown as a source of spirituality and wonder?*

Atheism has grown in confidence and I think will continue to do so. The New Atheism is, I suppose, more offensive, but why not? Creationism is nonsense, as are most Biblical supernatural stories. I'm a big fan of Darwin and have visited his house in England several times. I admire people who seek the truth and prioritise it over personal comfort and superstition. I have no belief in God at all, even though in my 20s I did a theology degree and thought deeply about it all. The New Atheists, like fundamentalist DRs or anyone else, can become boring and annoying if they want to shove it down your throat. Dawkins has his own agenda and limitations; he doesn't choose, for example, to expose the absurdities of academia or capitalism (nor does Michael Shermer). To be a complete sceptic, without self-interest, would be admirable, indeed heroic. As to a source of wonder, that's right but it's not something that can be commanded, only invited and encouraged. Many mystics are atheists; the dialogues between Jiddu Krishnamurti and David Bohm are interesting in that sense.

*What do you think about topics such as assisted suicide, or even the darker topics suggested by people like Thomas Ligotti, of having open suicides clinics for people that want to leave existence? Is suicide that rational?*

There are different kinds of suicide and most are not 'rational' but result from severe depression or mental torment. Some suicide is rational, a delivery from severe and pointless pain and suffering. I am in favour of changes in the law to allow this more, with suitable safeguards, so that suicide doesn't have to be sordid, people don't have to travel to Switzerland, and it's not so distressing for those left behind, traumatised. The most difficult cases are probably those of young people who may seem to have 'everything to live for' but they themselves don't feel that way. But anyone determined enough can always find a way.



*Are there some distractions, as Zapffe puts it, that are better than others?*

Where distraction ends and other defence mechanisms begin is a difficult question. Is watching a lot of rubbish TV less worthy than the opera or reading serious literature? In the overall, meaningless scheme of things, surely not, it's just a matter of taste and class. I like to think of my thinking and writing as sublimation but I may be kidding myself. U.G. Krishnamurti often mocked spiritual seekers, saying that it was all a lot of 'spiritual materialism' and I think that's true. I know people, old hippies, who are still earnestly looking for the Holy Grail into their 70s and it's just never going to happen; meanwhile they are critical of shallow hedonists. Maybe dedicating yourself to fighting climate change or racism is better than gambling or drinking but as the saying goes 'in the long run we are all dead'. Is mountaineering better than going to the gym, or sitting on your sofa? I don't know. Better for what or for whom?

### **Other types of psychologies vs DR**

*How would DR fit into the ideas of the two famous psychologists Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung?*

As I mentioned, Freud is often considered a pessimist, he was also an atheist, so his ideas can fit quite well with DR, at least in some ways. But psychoanalysis wants to see our problems as stemming from both innate drives and early relationships, but generally not going into genetic, evolutionary and political territory; it seems to hedge its bets – we are determined by the past and yet open to change via analysis. Jung of course believed in God and mysterious psychic forces including the astrological, and although he acknowledged the 'shadow', the 'trickster' and so on, for my liking he is far too spiritual and metaphor-addicted. Some later Jungians have incorporated evolutionary psychology to good effect, I think. CBT on the other hand is quite practical but superficial, popular with some politicians, and I think it is naïve and dishonest about the social conditions that

exacerbate depression and other problems.

*Are Freud's and Jung's theories still relevant in modern psychology anyway would you say, as far as you see it?*

Well, they are both still quite well supported, not so widely in academia but in the therapy world. They have changed a lot over the decades. I think both have serious flaws and I don't recommend them for everyday personal problems. Actually they're more interesting to me theoretically than clinically. But Jungian psychology can embrace evolutionary psychology, which I think contains a lot of 'truth' about the human condition. And Freudian theory has some interest in death anxiety. They themselves see their approaches as rich, vibrant and helpful, of course, especially in relation to neurology (Freudian) and social and spiritual issues (Jungian).

*What is your opinion on David Buss on the evolutionary psychology field, and how does it compare to DR?*

I admire a lot of the work of Buss and others, and I know it's hated and derided by optimists like Raymond Tallis. I am attracted by it and it fits my observations of many behaviours. But I think EP tries to explain too much in too much speculative detail, and it's bound to be mainly speculative because it can't really be tested. On the other hand, which other theories can convincingly explain male and female sexual drives, kinship behaviour, tribalism, xenophobia, stubborn habit-formation, resistance to necessary new learning, animal phobias, etc? I think EP can form part of the DR view in explaining evolutionary mismatch theory. We can't readily change our ways because they have very deep roots.

*I think I saw some dispute from the evolutionary psychology field on the Terror Management Theory (it's on the TMT-wiki page). What do you make of that?*

I see TMT and EP as quite compatible. When human consciousness realised the inevitability of death and the hideousness of decomposition, the 'worldview defence' (in TMT terms) or anchoring

in Zapffe's terms kicked in. And that continues. Investment in cultural institutions and beliefs keeps the nihilistic terror away. Interestingly, investment in academic activities like TMT, EP and DR (and their debated micro-differences) also does this! People can make good money writing endlessly about all this stuff. Psychological disputes are just like theological disputes. But for me the 'true' DR reaction to these disputes is actually one of weary indifference, a sort of 'so what?' Like arguing about how the deckchairs should be arranged on the deck of the Titanic.

*You mentioned that you have written texts, or perhaps even books, that have been critical of the field of psychotherapy. What have been your biggest problems with the field?*

Well, my involvement with primal therapy at Janov's place in Los Angeles in the 1970s first showed me that big claims don't always (or often) match up to reality. Other experiences were similar. I trained as a counsellor and encountered a lot of different theories and people in the field, and realised how pluralistic and muddled it is. I read a lot, and wrote or edited a few books about this – *Psychotherapy and its Discontents* (1992), *What is Counselling?* (1995), *Controversies in Psychotherapy and Counselling* (1999), and so on. The whole field contains hundreds of conflicting theories and clinical approaches, contradictions, unconvincing outcome studies, and non-credible aspects. It does sometimes help but perhaps more through simple listening, common affection, concern, support, placebo factors and so on, than in its theories and techniques. I think it is in many ways an extension of religious hopes. It is a belief system, in Zapffe's terms an anchor.

*What is your opinion on positive psychology? As I'm sure you're well aware, it's quite a huge business. I even heard it's one of the bestselling genres of books/audiobooks in the US. Do you see this as problematic, or do you have a more neutral stance on it? Is it dangerous in any way?*

I think positive psychology is really no more dangerous than anything else. But it is part of changing intellectual fashions. Barbara

Ehrenreich's book *Smile or Die* critiqued it very well, including much of what Martin Seligman does. There is an interesting case of intellectual fraud, or error, in an article written by Fredrickson and Losada in 2005, claiming to identify the 'mathematics of happiness,' which had to be withdrawn when it was spotted. In the UK Richard Layard's 'science of happiness' claims to link social and economic theory with happiness in Scandinavia (more equal societies) and with CBT. I think these are all flimsy opportunistic creations and will fade and die completely within a few years. Not so long ago stress management and emotional intelligence were in fashion, now it's positive psychology, mindfulness, etc., as if the answer has been found. It hasn't, not at all. A few decades ago, with Maslow, Perls, Rogers and others, it was all about self-actualisation and the fully functioning person.

*You mention Raymond Tallis as someone as having opposing views to DR and yours. Who is he, and what are his central arguments, and how do you view mentioned arguments?*

Who is Raymond Tallis? He's a British writer who savagely attacks pessimists (especially John Gray, in his book *Aping Mankind*), defends Enlightenment values, hope, reason, progress. He attacks 'Darwinitis', 'neuromania' and 'theorrhea' and defends free will and the self. He was a professor of geriatric medicine but has also written a lot of philosophy and other things. Very learned and often appears among lists of top intellectuals. But he is stubbornly set against the gloomy picture of humanity. .

## **Politics & DR**

*Would you like to see a political movement of DR? If that was possible?*

Well, yes and no. I admire Brad Blanton's effort to bring radical honesty into American politics, though it's probably doomed. Politics is a dirty business, full of broken promises, hypocrisy and concealed self-interest. John Gray regularly attacks the naivety of political hopes (left and right) and utopian dreams. If anything, I would welcome

some sort of compassionate, pragmatic social system that recognises human limitations and suffering. I'm all for free health care and a certain degree of egalitarianism, especially a 'socialism of old age' where money is better distributed in order to provide better care, relief and distraction for all in their last years. I'd like to see much greater gun control; DR included in education; religion being removed from politics; more intelligent, deeper debate about violence; and about population control. On the other hand, as something of a loner, I am not comfortable being part of any movement, or at least *having to* subscribe to any set of beliefs or actions.

*Would you see DRs as being "left-wing"? Do you see it as politically neutral? Would right-wing people traditionally reject it?*

I think the majority reject it and I doubt if most DRs are actively political at all because that requires hope and belief. But if anything, rightly or wrongly, I suspect it's seen as slightly more right-wing insofar as existence is regarded as brutally determined and essentially unchangeable. I think DR can be a compassionate, if nihilistic, worldview, as in Buddhism. But Schopenhauer, Cioran, Larkin, Zapffe, and Houellebecq, so I believe, all had or have some strands of misanthropy or intolerance (including racism, sexism, hatred of religion) in their lives or writings. On the other hand, Cioran lived very frugally and Beckett was indifferent to wealth. I don't think DR has an explicit politics. I go with 'life is a sad struggle for all, so let's be as compassionate as possible.' But I don't think answers are to be found in politics.

*You seem to refer to politics, left-wing or right-wing, as futile. At least something close to futile. Could you elaborate on this and why you think so? Is this out of some deterministic view that it's impossible to change anything? Or have you been disillusioned by ideals you perhaps had when younger? Or is it something else you react to, like the nature of how politics and politicians work, or other things?*

In the short-term, I think politics necessarily changes *some* things. But democracy itself, which in the UK began in about the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, no longer works well, it's become a farce in so many ways.

No, I was never very political but I grew up in a socialist household and always voted Labour (or Green) when I bothered to vote at all. But society has changed, it's no longer the workers versus the bosses, it's much more fragmented, containing many different interest groups. Part of me is nihilistic about politics, religion, education and almost everything else, but we all have to live somehow, and we need to cling to social systems and even to some illusions. Maybe some illusions are better or less harmful than others. But I can't pretend to get excited about phoney political leaders or systems. I know the Danes tend to take politics and voting very seriously, which puzzles me when Denmark is such a solidly socialist country. Maybe we need a mature meta-political view now, recognising that pragmatism is key – we just need to manage what we have as well as possible, and control injustices, rather than dream that we're heading for utopia.

*Are your views close to John Gray, who infamously even launched critiques against left-wing intellectual heroes like Noam Chomsky? Are all politics really futile?*

Yes, my views are mainly similar. Gray seems to like being a contrarian and I often like his iconoclastic style and sweep. (Incidentally, I see a problem here that in taking on the DR label one becomes almost pressurised to be consistently gloomy! Most of us, being human, are prone to some degree of inconsistency.) I agree that neither the left nor right has the answers. Both have totalitarian tendencies, brutalities and naiveties. Short-term, glaring injustices have to be challenged. All long-term politics are probably futile, but short-term corrections seem necessary. On the other hand, climate change demands urgent and sustained international action, almost a meta-politics – *if* we really want to survive or avoid massive catastrophe. Population reduction is a must, and Gray agrees, but it's enormously controversial because it stirs up Holocaust fears and Chinese totalitarianism, and accusations of human rights abuses. Gray puts into perspective the fact that humans are not here to stay long-term, and that we overrate our importance (as Zapffe also says). We are an accident, we make the most of it, but in doing so we easily become politically doctrinaire. Chomsky is right to point to US hypocrisies but that is only a small battle in an ongoing war against

injustices that will never end, against biological forces that ensure we all perish, in a cosmos that is utterly indifferent.

*You mentioned that Richard Dawkins and others don't highlight the absurdities of capitalism and academia. Could you highlight what absurdities these are?*

I think capitalism, or market fundamentalism, is seriously flawed because it depends on lies in advertising, on many dishonesties in fact, on exploitation of labour, and it creates huge, untenable wealth inequalities and ravages societies. But its opposite, socialism, is just as flawed, relying on state control, heavy bureaucracy, propaganda, and suppression of individuality. Unfortunately, I think human evolution places us in this tragic position, where whatever we do has unintended consequences; sometimes our social cures are worse than the social diseases, and so on, or they lead to unforeseen side-effects.

Academia used to have some admirable sense of passionate enquiry and discovery but is now far too state controlled, and also subservient to markets. Paradoxically, much of academia also remains steeped in arcane traditions and hierarchies, instead of addressing real world problems. Both these systems are interrelated and in a sense quite religious, or ritualistic, yet the target for Dawkins and others like Michael Shermer is mostly just religion (and sometimes complementary medicine and paranormal claims). True scepticality has to be 'pancritical,' not just targeting our favourite enemy beliefs. Religion is a very old human institution, philosophy slightly less old, democracy not so old, and they all entropically lose their original usefulness. That's also why DR can't stand immune from criticism, otherwise it becomes another silly institution. Can you imagine someone being called a Professor of Depressive Realism?

### **Coming out as a DR**

*Is there any kind of taboo being a DR? What has been your experience been with any kinds of reaction to it been so far?*

Yes, it's well established that most people are uncomfortable around

pessimists, and DRs probably don't fare very well in the career market. In my profession/s – counselling and academia – DR is kind of taboo. I think I'd be economically poorer tomorrow if some of my contacts knew my real views (obviously counting on them not reading this!). 'Flourishing', well-being and thriving are currently very fashionable and lucrative concepts, and many academics are left-wing progressives who believe in gradual, meaningful social change. Mostly I play my own DR down, or I am humoured or ignored. Many people simply don't get it, because they harbour some political and spiritual hopes, and they enjoy life sufficiently to want to dismiss DR. Those with small children find it most uncongenial. It's also not a good pitch if you're going on dating websites!

*Do you think there's a lot of closet DRs? Do you think it's difficult to "come out"?*

Definitely. DR is probably closely related to introversion, and Susan Cain's recent book *Quiet*, and her TED talk, show that even innocent introversion is still quite taboo, especially in the USA. Many people awkwardly try to cover their shyness up, and mental illness remains pretty stigmatic. I think it's now safer for gays to come out than for DRs. Once in Kenya I asked someone how my atheist identity would be greeted and he said most Kenyans would think me mad (insane) not to believe in God. Yes, coming out as a DR is a bit like admitting you have some awful disease: your party invitations will definitely dry up!