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DEPRESSIVE REALISM: COMMENTARY AND RESPONSE

Introduction

In issue 44 (2) of the journal we featured a major theme symposium, guest edited by Colin Feltham, on Depressive Realism. We asked several eminent practitioners for a commentary on the theme papers, and we then asked guest editor Colin Feltham to respond. We hope you will agree that the following mini-symposium significantly deepens the discussion spawned by Feltham's provocative theme issue.

The Editors

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Depressive Realism

A response by Ernesto Spinelli

I am a great admirer (as is also John Gray, I believe) of Isaiah Berlin's arguments regarding *value pluralism* (Berlin, 2006). In brief, value pluralism focuses on human values, which is to say those principles, standards, convictions and beliefs – such as honesty, trustworthiness, kindness and care – that people adopt as their guidelines for living. Value pluralism criticizes the dominant Western assumption that any true or correct theory of human values will reveal an inherent coherence between them such that, when viewed together, the various values can be seen to be 'combinable in a harmonious whole. Conflicts of values are to be seen as symptoms of error that in principle can always be resolved' (Gray, 2006, p. 20). Berlin emphatically rejected this view, and argued that this ideal of harmony and perfection in human values was a key factor in generating the social and political cataclysms of tyranny that had overshadowed his lifetime. Instead, value pluralism proposes that human beings are faced with perpetual and unresolvable conflicts between their maintained values. Value pluralism enjoins us to embrace a 'messier' and more complex view of ourselves and our values, emphasizing 'openness' and 'uncertainty' rather than the ultimately destructive and illusory value views of coherence and completeness.

I state all this because, for me, the concerns expressed by value pluralism capture both what is intriguing and what is disappointing about depressive realism (DR). DR, at least initially, seems to me to be arriving at conclusions similar to those proposed by Berlin's value pluralism. However, once faced with the complex possibilities of openness and uncertainty, it then typically adopts a position that rejects pluralism and, instead, seeks to return to some sort of coherence and completeness – even if such

must be a coherence and completeness founded upon pessimism, disenchantment, meaninglessness and disappointment.

As has been alluded to by others contributors to the theme issue under discussion, DR acts as a sort of 'dark mirror' to the various strands of 'positive psychology'. In doing so, however, I would argue that, as with its counterpart, it ends up promoting an equally lopsided view of human experience and existence. In addition, and again as other contributors to the theme issue have noted, at the heart of DR there exists an all-too-inevitable contradiction: in advocating notions such as meaninglessness and uncertainty as foundational conditions to our experience of being, DR itself becomes a theory of meaning and certainty.

It becomes so because, like so much within Western thought, DR adopts a mutually exclusive, separatist 'either/or' stance towards the focus of its concerns: either certainty or uncertainty, either meaning or meaninglessness, either coherence or incoherence, and so forth.

Is there any alternative to this? I believe there is.

As other contributors to this theme issue have stated, there exist various significant links between DR and existential phenomenology. For instance, existential phenomenological literature also places central emphasis on notions of meaning/meaninglessness and certainty/uncertainty (Spinelli, 2005, 2015; Yalom, 1980). However, it is in *the way* that existential phenomenology addresses the relation between these concepts that critical differences between DR and existential phenomenology become evident.

Unlike DR's 'either/or' stance of mutual exclusivity and separateness, existential phenomenology proposes a 'both/and' perspective that seeks to express complementarity and paradox. This 'both/and' perspective is uncommon in the 'either/or' separatist preference of Western thought. Even our language reflects this 'either/or' dominance. For example, other than via mathematics, it seems to be impossible to adequately express the complementary/paradoxical view of 'wave–particle theory' (Selleri, 2013) without resorting to contradictory/separatist language.

To clarify this point and its relevance to the discussion on DR, let us focus on certainty/uncertainty.

From the 'either/or' stance adopted by DR, I can claim that something is either certain or uncertain. If I declare it to be certain, then I am adopting a position of certainty. Equally, however, my opposite declaration of uncertainty is also rooted in certainty in that I am now arguing that I am certain that something is uncertain. Both these claims can be seen to rely upon a foundational stance of certainty. From an 'either/or' stance, all statements about either certainty or uncertainty are actually always statements of certainty – either the *certainty of certainty* or the *certainty of uncertainty*.

Existential phenomenology argues that Western reflections upon our existence, especially since Descartes, are dominated by an 'either/or' perspective. Self/other, subject/object, inner/outer, thought/emotion are examples of our particularly separatist Western way of dualistic reflection. This way has allowed us to construe human beings as 'boundaried' or 'bounded' and individualistically/subjectively dominated, rather than relationally attuned. In contrast, existential phenomenology promotes a 'both/and' stance that enjoins us to attempt to 'hold the tension' between *apparently* contrasting, separate and contradictory concerns so that they can be reflectively experienced as co-existent and inter-dependent inseparable polarities. As such, when considering notions such as certainty and uncertainty, from this interweaving 'both/and' stance, no certainty (including the *certainty of uncertainty*) can ever be wholly

certain; there can only be *uncertain certainties* and *uncertain uncertainties*. This initially counterintuitive view has significant implications for how we both understand and live our lives. For instance, from a 'both/and' orientation, uncertainty expresses its presence not only in the surprising events in our lives, but just as equally and forcefully in the expected and (seemingly) fixed or certain meanings and circumstances of everyday life, and urges us to treat each instance of expected certainty as novel, full of previously unforeseen and uncertain qualities and possibilities.

Nearly 400 years ago, a very wise man named Blaise Pascal pointed out that '[i]t is not certain that everything is uncertain' (Pascal, 2006, p. 105). I look forward to the challenges put before us by future theories of depressive realism that acknowledge this conclusion.

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Depressive Realism

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There are facts, there is selection of facts, and there are interpretations of facts. The early studies of Alloy and Abramson quoted by Feltham in his introduction to the theme issue on depressive realism (DR) (Feltham, 2016) recognized that people in ordinary mind-states tend to distort the former, assessing their chances more highly than their neighbours and selectively viewing their experiences according to the dictates of an in-built optimism, whereas those with mildly depressive mind-states tend towards a more realistic and sober assessment of their situations and prospects. Does this mean that one has to be depressed in order to have a better grasp of the truth?

At first reading, depressive realism appeals to me as a Buddhist. Indeed, Feltham includes the Buddha among the many diverse proponents of DR whom he catalogues in his theme issue introduction. His description of the DR movement as rooted in a recognition that 'we suffer, some pleasures notwithstanding. We are susceptible to accidents and disasters, we age in decades and deteriorate; we die, decompose and are forgotten' (88) reads with remarkable, and perhaps not coincidental, similarity to the textual descriptions of *dukkha* (affliction), the First Noble Truth, which, according to Buddhism, we must wrestle with in order to reach a place of equanimity.

The Buddha's spiritual journey began as a quest to discover the meaning of suffering, spurred on by his encounter with four sights representing sickness, old age, death