

Optimist

An optimist and an idealist have much in common. However the idealist nurses the belief that things belong to a sphere of supreme value and that the human world we live in will turn out for the best, while the optimist thinks that the world we are currently living is the best that can be, despite obvious appearances to the contrary. If you tell the optimist that the world is out of joint, and give examples from world hunger, disease spread, endless regional wars, he/she may reply that each of these ills is in fact a step toward a higher good—the discovery of new forms of agricultural production, the spur to an all encompassing vaccine, or the ultimate proof that war is counter productive. Are you an optimist?

Examples

1

I always assume that the world is fundamentally good and is gradually getting better. Around me I see poverty, disease, corruption. But I assume that these degraded conditions do not reflect the true nature of reality. Here's an example. I am a sports fan. When my team is two runs down in the bottom of the seventh, and the other side's shortstop is scooping up everything we can hit, I never give up. I assume there will be a turnaround in the bottom of the eighth—our strongest lineup comes out then—and that we will pull the victory out at the last minute. What is this 'never give up?' It is unreasonable. It has nothing behind it but optimism. It may be wrong, it may be right. It may ultimately intersect with faith, 'the evidence of things not seen.'

2

Optimism in oneself is useful and of value for organizing the ongoing pattern of personal experience. Optimism in another person—'hey Fred, isn't this a glorious sunny morning?'—can be annoying because it seems to impose optimism on us. I may speak only for myself, but I know that another person's optimism can never carry the flavor of encouragement I feel when I utter comments about 'the glorious sunny morning' from within myself. Another's upbeat slogans seem to me brittle and unusable, while my own slogans have the creative power of mantras, to carry me over hurdles.