

Earnest was not your garden variety pessimist. Like his former idol, N., he was not satisfied just complaining. He had to destroy everything he found that was hopeful or good. Hope was an emotion and could not be trusted, and goodness was for the weak who needed directions on how to live. N. had also rejected all religions as variations on the same theme of creating purpose and the evidence to support it. And it wasn't just the inflamed radicals with deadly political objectives. It was also the ordinary believers who observed Ramadan, Easter, Yom Kippur, Vesak, or Diwali but were otherwise unremarkable. Drawing from a common belief in hope and goodness, they were all misguided.

N.'s problem had been that he was so successful, in his mind, that he lost the fire and enthusiasm that first drove him to demolish these hollow belief systems. Once done, Earnest recalled, N. became bored and turned pessimism against itself. Ironically, N. was converted to his new quest. He constructed his own elaborate philosophy and became guardedly optimistic-hopeful and in tune with goodness. In Earnest's view, N. had betrayed pessimism.


Earnest vowed to avoid the performative contradictions that had undermined N.'s later philosophy. For that to happen, he had to avoid N.'s mistake of challenging his own beliefs. He had to take as given that critique, destruction and pessimism were the essence of the eternally real. Because it was not belief but instead the very foundation upon which belief was built, it could not be logically removed without self-contradiction. To disconfirm is as much an affirmation as any belief, and pessimism is an attitude towards or belief about something. Yet something persists that is more fundamental than pessimism, and that is doubt. Unlike pessimism, doubt can be infinitely regressed. That was Earnest's contribution which he felt completed N.'s work.

Theoretical skepticism and practical skepticism were two different things, Earnest discovered. He ended up believing in nothing, not even doubt. He couldn't be sure that he trusted anything, and so he decided to accept that everything could be confirmed and denied, good and bad, right and wrong, believed and doubted. To live or to die, to love or not to love, to be successful or to fail were equally good and bad. Nothing was fixed. Even his bed might not be his bed, his apartment downtown might not be his apartment and might not even be downtown. Furthermore, nothing was his-not the bicycle, the book collection, the clock on the bedside table, the toothbrush on the bathroom sink. All of these things might not even belong to him. But what was most disturbing was the possibility that his very thoughts were unreal and were not about real things and that they only appeared to be the thoughts of a person who might not even exist.

Earnest felt but stopped thinking. He felt cold, lonely, depressed, and confused, and having no home to go to or identity to fall back on, he wandered the streets and slept where he fell. But this could not last indefinitely, and it didn't. He was picked up by the police, interrogated, and placed in a psychiatric hospital where thanks to an aggressive chemical intervention regime he discovered a new side of himself-the gullible buffoon.

Cover image: [Portrait of Pablo Picasso, by Juan Gris](#)

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