

AGATHISM



*for when you're feeling disillusionment
or struggling to remain positive*

It can be difficult to stay optimistic when times are hard. Even the brightest and most upbeat of outlooks on life can be turned on its head by some unwelcome shift in circumstances or a run of tough luck. When those hard times seem to be all around us – personally, locally, nationally and even globally – then the weight of all those troubles and problems can prove even more difficult to escape. Your customary optimism drifts slowly towards pessimism and, as dark clouds gather on the horizon, it proves all too easy to sink into gloomy disillusionment.

Thankfully, there is a superb word worth holding on to at times like these (albeit a fairly obscure and unfamiliar one). To appreciate both it and the role it

takes in our vocabulary fully, we first need to understand a pair of much more familiar words, whose meanings and origins are perhaps a little more complex than we might appreciate.

Today, we think of *optimism* as little more than a synonym for positivity or hopefulness, but that hasn't always been the case. Derived from *optimum*, Latin for 'best', its roots lie in the philosophical writings of Gottfried Leibniz, an eighteenth-century German mathematician, thinker and inventor whose work across countless fields formed one of the cornerstones of the European Enlightenment.

In 1710, Leibniz published a collection of essays on 'the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil', called the *Théodicée*. In it, he introduced the theory that this world – our world – must surely be the greatest of all possible worlds. 'As it is in mathematics when there is no maximum nor minimum', he wrote, 'everything is done equally – or, when that is not possible, nothing is done at all. So may it be said likewise . . . that if this were not the best [or] optimum among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any at all.'

In other words, Leibniz believed that any divine creator we wish to credit with the existence of our

world must, we can presume, have been happy with their creation. If they were not, surely they would have been omnipotent enough, and felt compelled enough, to abandon this world and start again, improving on any mistakes or shortcomings in their grand redesign. Ultimately, the fact that this world and everything in it exists and continues to exist at all – regardless of its flaws and problems – proves without question that it is the best world that any great creative force could ever possibly have wrought.

Later writers and philosophers picked up on Leibniz's theory and expanded on it, with his fellow Enlightenment thinker Voltaire first attaching the word *optimism* to it in 1737. So far from meaning simply 'positivity' or 'hopefulness', *optimism* referred originally to Leibniz's grand notion that our world is the best of all possible worlds, where the most good can be achieved with the least amount of evil.

Whereas *optimism* derives from the Latin for 'best', its opposite, *pessimism*, came to us from the Latin for 'worst', *pessimus*. It first emerged somewhat later than its positive counterpart, in the late eighteenth century, as a general term for the worst or most deprived possible condition of something. As Leibniz's theory became more widespread, however, *pessimism* came to

be attached to a model or viewpoint entirely antithetical to it – namely, that this world is the worst of all possible worlds, as its innumerable flaws, inequities and imperfections bear out.

From these philosophical beginnings, it wasn't until the nineteenth century that the meanings of *optimism* and *pessimism* finally began to broaden, and they began to be used, as they still are today, to refer merely to hopefulness and hopelessness, and positivity and negativity, respectively. Back when they still represented these two polar opposite theories – these profound and strictly defined outlooks on life – a third term was coined to occupy the middle ground between them. Between the two extremes of *optimism* and *pessimism* lies *agathism* – a word that is well worth holding on to when times turn hard and it becomes difficult to see a tolerable future.

In 1816, Dr George Miller, a fellow of the Royal Irish Academy, gave an address in which he spoke of a colleague at the University of Dublin who considered himself 'not an optimist, but an agathist'. His colleague, Miller continued, 'did not think himself competent to determine what was absolutely the best', but despite the obvious problems and flaws in the world today, nevertheless believed that 'everything tended to good'. It was Dr Miller's speech that seemingly first sparked interest

in the term *agathism*, and from there the word fell into occasional use in nineteenth-century philosophical discussions as the implications of Dr Miller's address – and his colleague's personal outlook on life – began to be considered more widely.

Agathism is ultimately defined as the doctrine that all things tend eventually to work towards the good, but the means of getting there – and of deciding precisely what constitutes good and bad – might not be easy. It is possible, the so-called *agathist* believes, for this world to be on an ever improving trajectory while still suffering flaws and setbacks, troubles and countless imperfections. Indeed, sometimes these flaws and setbacks are necessary in order to learn from our mistakes and build and prepare for a fairer, better and more robust world in the future. *Agathism* stands as a more level-headed alternative to *optimism* and *pessimism*; elements of both viewpoints are accepted, but the world is not seen so extremely as the 'best' or 'worst' of anything. For that reason, etymologically, *agathism* simply derives from *agathos*, the Greek word for 'good'.

No matter which of these theories seems to strike a chord with you, *agathism* can be a timely reminder that, although things might not be quite so bright right now, they will be brighter in the future. All we have to do is

wait, enduring the bad times as best we can, and focusing on the good times that will – no matter how distant they might feel at the moment – eventually return.

See also: eucatastrophe, interfulgent, meliorism