Resilience:
Vulnerabilist or Invulnerabilist?

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Philosopher Todd May conceptualizes a novel dichotomy within the philosophies that aim to remedy *suffering*—Stoicism, Daoism, Epicureanism, Buddhism, and so on—referring to the positions as *vunlnerabilism* and *invulnerabilism* respectively. Both positions can genuinely engage with these philosophies, meaning that the vulnerabilist and invulnerabilist can equally participate in any of the aforementioned methodologies, yet they will each utilize these towards different goals. The invulnerabilist is in many ways the typical caricature of these philosophies, one that encounters the problem of suffering in *a life* and then seeks to overcome it so as to remain undisturbed by the presence of suffering; this is understood as a desire to achieve equanimity.[1] In response to this characterization, May formulates a vulnerabilist position out of their skepticism and concern vis-à-vis one's ability to actualize the state of equanimity. The vulnerabilist likewise encounters suffering but instead seeks to live with its presence as best as they possibly can, thus cultivating a desire to achieve acceptance.[2] As May puts it, while the invulnerabilist seeks to establish peace with suffering, the best the vulnerabilist can hope to establish is a truce.

The aim of the following study, while multifaceted, is to examine the positive psychological concept of resilience as it can be applied, studied, and understood through this framework. Although before beginning this analysis, I write briefly about the practical value of this endeavor and my own approach to it; that is to explore the why and how of this study so that we may continue with some mutual understanding. In its development, positive psychology—a branch of psychology concerned primarily with

human flourishing—has positioned itself to be the face of the field both clinically and empirically. Its concepts, such as the concept of resilience which is discussed in section four, have recently become socially prolific, as both administrative and institutional organizations have become interested in developments occurring in the field. As concepts such as resilience enter everyday parlance more frequently, there becomes a clear practical value in conceptualizing and theorizing these and like terms. This study demonstrates this and that there is a great interdisciplinary opportunity to be found in similar examinations.

Beyond the attempt to establish a fruitful foundation for interdisciplinary opportunities, I want to alert the reader to a philosophical undercurrent within this paper that comes out of my personal tension with May's philosophy. The paradigm constructed by May is practically useful in diagnosing potentially harmful interactions with and dispositions of the philosophies in question, yet May's overall argument against invulnerabilism settles into an unsatisfactory position of *realistic optimism*. Against this, I propose my own concept of *disappointed optimism* (section three) in an attempt to reconcile May's worthwhile criticisms with a satisfactory conceptualization of invulnerabilism—just as the vulnerabilist can learn from the invulnerabilist, so to can the invulnerabilist from the vulnerabilist.

I.   On Suffering

Before exploring the compatibility and possible function of resilience within May's paradigm, we must first explore the nature of human suffering; that is to explore first the problem and then the response. Doing so not only allows us to see what a sufficient remedy will alleviate but also conceptualizes the potential limitations and, thus, the various perspectives on suffering. Perhaps, as I examine later, it is the case that suffering cannot be overcome. This would be a condition that places the invulnerabilist paradigm in crisis, but one that is surmountable. Yet to even understand what could overcome or remedy suffering, we must first map out the conditions of this state. An obvious form of suffering is physical pain, characterized by a somatic discomfort induced by an injury or some other condition. This is suffering perhaps at its most primordial expression, a state so

immediately recognizable—we have all at some point felt physical pain—that it may seem banal to even contemplate this form of suffering. As May says, this is not often the form of suffering we think of to be overcome, and it is frankly hard to imagine exactly how or what overcoming this would look like; a stubbed toe still hurts even the most stoic of us.[3] Yet this is to overlook the ripples of such suffering. Not only do we register the physical pain of a stubbed toe, but we can also become emotionally upset that this discomfort occurred at all. Perhaps, as is the case with the most painful stubbed toes, it induces so much suffering that our identity is so disrupted that for a moment we are consumed by this psychosomatic pain. We are a toe, and we have been stubbed.[4]

Before stubbing our toe, we were heading to the kitchen to grab some lunch, but now we are curled up on the floor in pain. This instance reveals to us another form of suffering, that of unfulfilled desires. Understood here as unsatisfied or unobtainable libidinal objects, unfulfilled desires can induce extreme and acute suffering within us.[5] An example many of us may relate to is the pain of one-sided love. Especially when we are young and lacking nuanced responses to suffering, facing romantic rejection can be confusingly painful. Romantic interests become libidinal objects of intensive value to us and not being able to satisfy this desire—a satisfaction that does not require romantic reciprocation—can cause us immense suffering. Now, if we consider the invulnerabilist's desire for equanimity, one will naturally assume that if such an outcome was not achievable that would cause its adherents suffering. But not only would their desires remain unfulfilled, the invulnerabilist project itself would seem to be in jeopardy. May indicates that obstacles or limitations to our projects are another potential form of suffering. The insidiousness of this form is that even if our desires are fulfilled new avenues of potential suffering open and our fulfillment can easily return to unfulfillment.[6] Consider if my infatuation was reciprocated by the potential romantic interest. While I am no doubt elated for a time, this happiness can fade over the course of the relationship, leaving me once again in a state of longing. Additionally, conflicts might erupt that cause me even more distress. Suddenly, this libidinal object begins to take on new qualities that I did not consider, and I suffer with the very thing that I wanted.

Even if we never encounter physical pain or never fail to satisfy our desires, we must turn to the extent of this life and realize that it will one day end. This existential condition is the last form of suffering to consider, a prospect characterized by anxiety and hopelessness. Death can evoke all the previous forms of suffering within us: we fear dying in excruciating ways and we realize that death is both the end of our desires and our projects. The contemplation of death is the realization of a form of finitude, the thought itself enough to induce despair for some. This form of suffering is often the concern par excellence for the philosophies that promise to inoculate us, a facet revealing of their methodological concerns as death is simultaneously the totality and undoing of our existential condition; *a life as it exists completely is the extent of these philosophies*.[7] This facet reveals to us precisely that each form of suffering is a *problematization* of a life's process, *eudaimonia*—the activity of living well or flourishing. Each form of suffering is an obstacle to living well. Yet understanding this can change our conceptual understanding of the relationship between growth and eudaimonia.[8] It is our contemplation of death, the most dramatic of the forms considered, that makes this last point clear. This inevitable end looms over our lives like a shadow, its logic coloring all other forms of suffering as we must grasp that our projects, desires, and bodies perhaps die along with us. The weight of it can be consuming. Suffering can and likely has altered the way we hold our lives. Yet it is here that we see the *conatus*, striving, of a life as we attempt to respond to suffering, consequently changing intrapersonally what eudaimonia is.[9]

II.   Responses to Suffering

With the problem of suffering being established, we can now consider the strategies that seek to respond to such conditions found within a life. How a response fashions itself depends on its perspective of suffering and what potential relationship we may have to it. If a certain perspective on suffering holds that it cannot be overcome, at least within a particular instance of suffering, then its subsequent response will not seek equanimity. Keeping in mind May's paradigm, this last point will hold a particular weight in contemplating the vulnerabilist and invulnerabilist positions. Let us consider the following: a certain individual holds that the key to

living well is to acquire valuable social assets that enrich their material condition. Over time, this individual develops and organizes the means by which such things can be readily secured. Despite a few setbacks, this method continually supplies them with what they are looking for; they have optimized their methodology in order to maximize the object of value—their desires are fulfilled, their projects are secure, and suffering is seemingly staved off. Yet, over time, something becomes conspicuous within this relationship in their method and their life. Perhaps the social world they occupy becomes difficult or hostile to keep up with and their method fails them, or maybe despite their relative success, they are still unsatisfied, still longing for eudaimonia.

Whatever the reason, they begin to consider what will truly make them happy, making them adapt their conceptualization of living well and their methodology of acquiring this state—they alter their desires and projects according to the needs of a life to overcome suffering. This difference between optimizing and adapting is put forth by Steven Luper and is both a response to suffering and a framework by which to categorize other responses to suffering.[10] As a response, the former is a behavior that seeks to increase one's ability to fulfill themselves, and the latter attempts to change the conditions for fulfillment. One is a disposition, as Luper sees it, that attempts to change the world to fulfill themselves, and the other attempts to change themselves to fit within the world. These responses can be then transposed as labels or categories for a variety of other responses. Thus, beyond individual responses, methodologies can be understood as either optimization-oriented, like the individual before, or adaptation-oriented, like the individual after.

Beyond considering how one goes about embodying fulfillment in their life, we also need to consider the qualities of fulfillment and, thus, the outcomes envisioned by those who seek to overcome suffering. Here we explore May's paradigm of vulnerabilism and invulnerabilism as it seeks to capture what our eudaimonic engagement is ultimately working towards: should we desire equanimity, peace from suffering, or acceptance, a truce with suffering? How one answers this question will depend on how they view the nature of suffering and the ability to overcome it among other things. As we saw, it is the invulnerabilist who seeks

the latter goal of equanimity, but what exactly does this peace from suffering look like? According to May, the invulnerabilist here seeks the complete elimination of suffering from their lives through various means. As May indicates, this goal is lofty and requires a serious commitment; the invulnerabilist holds their relationship with living well as a central project of their life and strongly desire equanimity, longingly so.[11] Although, it is still the case that equanimity remains conspicuous as the actualization of such a state free from suffering remains questionable. From this conspicuousness, the vulnerabilist is skeptical. They not only doubt the possibility of peace within a life, but they are concerned that the pursuit of equanimity alienates us from something fundamentally important—our humanity. There are times, the vulnerabilist holds, when we cannot have peace, let alone a truce with suffering, and must accept that the conditions we find ourselves in are irreconcilable with our eudaimonic aspirations; that is, there are times we must realistically abandon the pursuit of living well and accept that this is the best we can expect. While eudaimonia is likely still an important and beautiful goal in some respects to the vulnerabilist, they do not hold their response to suffering as a central project—such steps being too drastic and even dangerous.[12]

May's conceptualization and subsequent alignment with the vulnerabilist position creates a strong alternative in our ability to respond to suffering, one that functions effectively while also not sacrificing important emotions such as grief or love. As May said, such things are important expressions of our humanity—an abstract identity centering around our affective existence—and we may not wish to sacrifice them in our pursuit to overcome suffering. This is the strength of May's vulnerabilist conceptualization of the eudaimonic philosophies as it allows for the addressment of certain unsatisfactory engagements with these philosophies, ones that overemphasize the image of an unmovable individual that is unaffected by the world around them, while also not negating these philosophies in their entirety. Although we find what May is responding to worthwhile criticism, it is a bit of a caricature. Undoubtedly, there are those engaging with these methodologies in this way, such as in the online Stoicism revival movement, but is it representative of the entire spectrum of those

who would understand themselves to be searching for equanimity? This impasse reveals an opportunity for us to conceptualize a satisfactory invulnerabilism rather than abandon the position in favor of May's vulnerabilism. This satisfactory invulnerabilism needs to address May's concerns at least in part while also maintaining a conceivable and functioning relationship with the desire towards equanimity. While the invulnerabilist still encounter suffering, suffering that they will feel, their goal is to not have that affect their eudaimonic aspirations. Thus, the invulnerabilist's attention and focus shift from the problem of suffering and is placed squarely on eudaimonia holistically; that is, the invulnerabilist will not accept an overcoming of suffering at the expense of a life well lived but understands that an adequate response to suffering is required to live in such a way, one that preserves the possibility for pure peace.

As a response to suffering, we see a very interesting dichotomy between these two positions. The invulnerabilist, in an attempt to overcome suffering, opens themselves up to another potential form of suffering—towards their projects—that the vulnerabilist does not. If the vulnerabilist position is accurate with their skepticism, the invulnerabilist will never be able to achieve eudaimonia. But, as I claimed before, this problem is surmountable if we stop viewing suffering as something to be overcome and rather view it as something to be reconciled with eudaimonia itself. If suffering is a part of a life, then it must be a part of living well. A sentiment that captures this aptly is for one to "appreciate their weeds." Doing so not only accepts the inevitability of suffering for the invulnerabilist but also leaves room for them to accept their desire for equanimity—paradoxically, the most vulnerable thing the invulnerabilist can admit is that they understand the challenge they face and still desire equanimity regardless.[13] To characterize this dichotomy further, it could be said that the vulnerabilist is practicing a vein of realistic optimism, a position that places hope in outcomes that seem likely to occur. By doing so, the vulnerabilist avoids the disappointment of longing for an equanimity that seems out of reach. What then could we call the invulnerabilist position? I call it disappointed optimism, a position that continues to engage with and believes in outcomes despite the individual's distance from them.[14] As stated previously, the disappointment of longing

is accepted by the invulnerabilist and can itself be held as something beautiful and valuable.[15] In a reversal of roles, just as May worries that in their pursuit of equanimity, the invulnerabilist foregoes their humanity, now the invulnerabilist can express their concerns clearly—perhaps, in a very human way, some dreams are worth failing for even if they're beyond our reach.

The last response to suffering to consider is one that is often overlooked due to the difficulty of conceptualizing it as a response. Rather, it could be thought of as lacking a response. We are here examining hopelessness as an expression of learned helplessness. And as a behavioral phenotype related to suffering, it is argued here that hopelessness is genuinely a response to suffering. As a response, hopelessness is a position that does nothing in the face of suffering and, at least at those moments, abandons any potential eudaimonia or effective response to suffering. Here, the full weight of suffering lies on us, and we are helpless in our relationship with it. While more could be said about hopelessness, the importance of its consideration here is to fill out the spectrum of responses a life has towards suffering. We have conceptualized on one end a response that fully seeks eudaimonia and on the other a response that abandons it. Additionally, each of these responses should not be considered exclusive, but, as Luper hints, they may be interchangeable. The advantage of interchangeable responses is that they allow us to respond to a variety of situations as we may need to.

III.   On Resilience

The conceptualization of resilience has gone through various renditions and even now still escapes a single terminological definition within the literature. In the earliest stages of study, resilience was thought to be a static personality trait; resilience was viewed as something one either possesses or not. Contemporary views on resilience have moved away from this understanding, preferring to view resilience as a process of development in which the aforementioned can be variable to a variety of personal and environmental factors. While the following understanding has its flaws, we can roughly view resilience as a protective factor for eudaimonia against suffering, yet I strive to show that resilience can be considered in a more robust way.[16]

Particularly, resilience can be considered as a methodology—a repertoire of various behavioral responses—akin to the philosophies considered by May.

One such potential view of resilience is established by psychologist Rick Hanson. In their conceptualization, resilience acts to satisfy three of our most basic needs—safety, satisfaction, and connection—in four unique ways, thus establishing twelve virtues that comprise the larger concept of resilience: 1.) recognizing compassion, mindfulness, and learning, 2.) resourcing as grit, gratitude, and confidence, 3.) regulating as calm, motivation, and intimacy, and 4.) relating to courage, aspiration, and generosity. While each of these virtues can be developed over time, their satisfaction inoculates one from a particular form of suffering associated with the needs listed above. For example, compassion is understood by Hanson as the recognition of pain accompanied by a desire to alleviate it. Developing this virtue is to develop one's ability to see suffering and strengthen the will to overcome it; compassion, that is, is a particular response to suffering that seeks to make our lives safe from it.[17] While this paradigm desperately requires more attention, this is sufficient for us to view resilience as a methodology that promotes eudaimonia as it has been discussed thus far. Consequently, we can begin to view resilience through the lens of the above analysis and finally consider resilience in relation to vulnerabilism and invulnerabilism.

Continuing with Hanson's view, if we are to take the subtitle of their book literally, they wish to, "grow an unshakable core of calm, strength, and happiness."[18] Compared to our own considerations, it seems that Hanson's view is an invulnerabilist one. Here, the outcome of developing resilience is to ensure that eudaimonia is unaffected by suffering as much as possible. Thus, resilience, or developing it, becomes a central project for those who would seek this outcome. Some of the other resilience literature supports this view, even going as far as to say that vulnerability and resilience are incompatible terms.[19] Yet not all studies support this conceptualization of resilience, in particular the studies that focus on the relationship between resilience and posttraumatic growth. In these studies, posttraumatic growth is understood to be the breakdown of resilience to some form of suffering yet marked by an increase in overall well-being after a

period of time—hence the term posttraumatic growth. Such growth does not need to be seen across every dimension of an individual but only towards their response to a particular instance of suffering. Resilience in this dynamic is then viewed as a state of equilibrium, relegated to more of a bulwark against suffering rather than a pure response to it.[20] While it is unclear if posttraumatic growth is still towards an outcome of equanimity, resilience is vulnerable to suffering in this view and, perhaps, such should be accepted. Therefore, it seems that there are also vulnerabilist interpretations of resilience that do not hold out for equanimity. As May states, both the vulnerabilist and invulnerabilist interpretations of these methods are genuine perspectives that seek to honestly respond to the problem of suffering. The same can also be said for resilience granted that it is viewed as a methodology. Yet, resilience interestingly comes out of a radically different tradition than the philosophies considered by May in that it is conceptualized within scientific psychology. Taking some time to consider how resilience is conceptualized—whether vulnerabilist or invulnerabilist—impacts the empirical observation of said construct and, subsequently, the data generated by those who study resilience. The point here is to stress the importance of what we have examined thus far, as each view will potentially skew the paradigm of resilience in its own direction. As such, communication of resilience will not be unified, and the phenomenon cannot be analyzed as deeply as it could be—an issue for the scientifically inclined.[21] Resolving this issue is beyond the scope of this study, yet the enumeration of resilience vis-à-vis vulnerabilism and invulnerabilism should assist in further studies.

An interesting example I would like to consider is the pedagogical implications that arise out of our examination. If resilience can be habituated, there is a clear incentive for education administrations to include opportunities to do so within their curriculums or overall plans. Education facilities will turn to the work done by positive psychologists in order to appropriately inform their new programs, yet without the following considerations these plans will be left without the means to say what one ought to desire; the student may become resilient, but not understand why they should want this outcome. Additionally, considering May's vulnerabilism, we may be able to apply the same

criticisms or even new ones to the concept of resilience to challenge developmental views that are unsatisfactory. If a concept of resilience, for example, over-emphasizes a pull-yourself-up mentality, then we could apply May's criticisms as a way of critiquing the scientific approach taken towards resilience. Scientific materialism as a method is unable to address these questions, a point that highlights again that these matters are interdisciplinary in nature.

IV. Conclusion

A vulnerabilist and invulnerabilist conceptualization of resilience has hopefully been shown to be a genuine and helpful view of the concept. Yet, moving forward, the tensions this produces within the paradigm of resilience ought to be corrected. This will require a more in-depth examination of resilience and other methodologies that seek to inoculate eudaimonia. Future avenues could consider the positive psychology movement more generally or look to other theorists on their views of a life's relationship to suffering, but for now we can end our examination looking forward to the great potential for exchange between various fields.

Notes

[1] May, 6-7.
[2] May, 6-7.
[3] May, 20-22.
[4] May, 20-22.
[5] Luper, -3, 6.
[6] May, 8-11, 18-19.
[7] May, 40, 43, 58, 60.
[8] Deleuze, 25-32.
[9] This conceptualization of eudaimonia comes out of my interpretation and engagement with the philosopher Gilles Deleuze among others. In the spirit of this thinker, eudaimonia becomes an actively creative project in which one discovers the effects that nourish their life enough that they may overcome the problems presented by a particular form of suffering. A life, as the purely immanent, transcendental field, acts as the stage for this dialectical game between affirmation and negation. The questions that act as our litmus test here are the following: Would I want to live my life this way? How would I want to live my life? Eudaimonia is the creative, existential project that seeks to answer these questions in a satisfactory way. Such a creative project is always happening within the now, sharing a resonance with Stoic philosophy.
[10] Luper, 44-77.
[11] May, 123-125, 159-163.
[12] May, 123-125, 159-163.
[13] Suzuki, 20-21[14] Disappointed Optimism is a concept I formulated not as an immediate response to Todd May, but actually to someone who went under the name "Oswald Spengler." The person using this name is your typical alt-right intellectual type, someone painting a rather gloomy image of the world (for all the wrong reasons) with our only saving grace being a kind of barbaric heroism. Within this situation, "Oswald Spengler" proposed that the appropriate disposition of this heroic man is one of *brave pessimism*; that is an attitude that, despite the complete abolition of the Good, resolves themselves to act free of moral paralysis. This problem left quite an impression on me and inspired my own line of thought that led me to conceptualize disappointed optimism, a disposition I find more powerful and effective in its life-affirming qualities. Yet, indebted to Deleuze yet again, I saw that disappointed optimism could be considered immanently and, thus, placed in various relationships other than the one with brave pessimism. Subsequently, I found disappointed optimism to capture the tensions I felt reading Todd May.

[15] Sartwell, 4.
[16] Fletcher & Sakar, 12-23.
[17] Hanson & Hanson, 4, 9-21.
[18] Hanson & Hanson, 30.
[19] Hart, 1-13.
[20] Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1-18.
[21] Kuhn, 52-91.

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