Schopenhauer on the Futility of Suicide

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Abstract:

Schopenhauer repeatedly claims that suicide is both foolish and futile. But while many commentators have expressed sympathy for his charge of foolishness, most regard his charge of futility as indefensible even within his own system. In this paper, I offer a defense of Schopenhauer’s futility charge, based on metaphysical and psychological considerations. On the metaphysical front, Schopenhauer’s view implies that psychological connections extend beyond death. Drawing on Parfit’s discussion of personal identity, I argue that those connections have personal significance, such that suicide does not allow one to, as Hamlet hopes, simply “not to be.” On the psychological front, I argue that a distinction between agents’ intentions and underlying desires makes room for Schopenhauer to claim that paradigmatic suicidal agents ultimately desire the opposite of what suicide accomplishes. I conclude by showing how the resulting account of futility can buttress the charge of foolishness as well. My interpretation still leaves Schopenhauer vulnerable to certain objections, but shows that his account is significantly more defensible than previous commentators have realized.

Keywords:

Schopenhauer, suicide, personal identity, Parfit, palingenesis

A cornerstone of Schopenhauer’s philosophy is the claim that life is overwhelmingly miserable. As Schopenhauer recognized, that claim might seem to justify suicide. Quoting Shakespeare, Schopenhauer writes:

our condition is so miserable that complete non-being would be decidedly preferable.

Now if suicide really offered this, so that the alternative ‘to be or not to be’ lay before us

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1 Schopenhauer’s philosophical interest in suicide predates his mature philosophy, however, stemming from his father’s death in 1805. See (D. E. Cartwright, 2010, pp. 88–94).
in the full sense of the words, then it would be the clear choice, a highly desirable
completion (‘a consummation devoutly to be wish’d’). (WWR1 2:383)

Schopenhauer’s main work concludes with an endorsement of ascetic resignation, which can
involve “a form of suicide” in which someone “stops living simply because he has stopped
willing altogether” (WWR1 2:474). This form of suicide is an exception, however. Any other
form, Schopenhauer insists, is a “futile and foolish act [vergebliche und thörichte Handlung]”
(WWR1 2:472).

Schopenhauer’s stated opposition to non-ascetic suicide has two distinct prongs: futility
and foolishness. Foolishness is a broadly deontic epistemological property: an agent who acts
foolishly should have known better. Futility, however, need have no deontic epistemological
dimension: sometimes, actions fail to achieve an agent’s aims for reasons nobody could have
foreseen. Many futile actions, therefore, are not foolish. That said, one way for an action to be
foolish is for its futility to be knowable, and Schopenhauer sometimes suggests that suicide is
foolish because it is futile: “a futile and therefore [darum] foolish act” (WWR1 2:331). Even so,
the logical independence of these properties suggests Schopenhauer’s claims of foolishness and
futility are worth evaluating separately.

Commentators generally agree that Schopenhauer’s charge of foolishness is more
important and more defensible than his charge of futility. Dale Jacquette suggests that the issue
of futility is irrelevant to Schopenhauer’s main objection to suicide.3 Though Jacquette questions
the plausibility of the foolishness charge,4 other commentators have offered at least qualified
defenses. For example, in a recent paper, Michał Masny argues that, given Schopenhauer’s
broader views, suicide is indeed foolish. This is because, Masny argues, Schopenhauer believes
that intense suffering can lead one to an ascetic denial of the will that provides the ultimate
escape from suffering. Hence, committing suicide to end suffering is, to use an analogy

2 References to Schopenhauer’s work will use the following abbreviations: WWR1 = World as Will and
Representation, Volume I; WWR2, World as Will and Representation, Volume II; OBM = “Prize Essay on the Basis
of Morals”; PP2 = Parerga and Paralipomena, Volume 2. All references are to the volume and page numbers of the
Hübscher edition. Quotations are from the Cambridge translations.
3 (Jacquette, 2005, p. 134).
4 (Jacquette, 2005, p. 142).
Schopenhauer suggests, like a sick person prematurely ending a potentially curative surgery (WWR1 2:472).\(^5\)

Merely defending Schopenhauer’s foolishness charge, however, leaves it open whether the futility charge is also defensible. Yet this prong of Schopenhauer’s objection to suicide has generated more skepticism than the foolishness prong. To be sure, Schopenhauer claims that life in general is “futile, in vain, and contradictory” (WWR2 3:732), from which it would arguably follow that all actions, including suicide, are futile. But while Schopenhauer’s views make it clear how, say, the pursuit of happiness through fame is futile, it is hard to see how that would apply to suicide. In the first extended Anglophone discussion of the topic, Michael Fox writes that, contra Schopenhauer, “suicide is anything but futile, considering that the successful suicide accomplishes exactly what he intended, namely, to destroy his individual life, terminate his personal consciousness and his suffering”.\(^6\) Three decades later, Paulo Stellino and Michael Cholbi both reconsider and concur with Fox’s assessment.\(^7\)

My aim in this paper is to respond to Fox’s influential objection by explaining how the futility of suicide is implied by some of Schopenhauer’s psychological and metaphysical doctrines. Of course, such an approach amounts to a defense of Schopenhauer’s views only insofar as those other doctrines are themselves plausible – a full defense of a view must address more than its internal coherence. While some of Schopenhauer’s metaphysical views are, I concede, difficult to defend from a naturalistic contemporary perspective, his psychological views are not far from some widely accepted and broadly naturalistic contemporary views. Hence, Schopenhauer’s futility claim ends up being more defensible than many readers have supposed, even if it remains vulnerable to certain objections. In addition, appreciating the relation of the futility claim to Schopenhauer’s larger system helps bring to light aspects of that system that are often missed by Schopenhauer commentators.

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\(^5\) (Masny, 2021). Other commentators have explored this line as well, though with less emphasis on the charge of foolishness. See, e.g., (Young, 2013, p. 128), (Stellino, 2020, pp. 108–110), and (Janaway, 2022b, p. 121).

\(^6\) (Fox, 1980, p. 168).

\(^7\) (Stellino, 2020, p. 103), (Cholbi, 2021, p. 153). See also (van der Lugt, 2021, p. 381). Fox, Stellino, and Cholbi all assume that futility is to be evaluated relative to the agent’s actual aims. Julian Young, however, seems to suggest that its futility holds relative to “the problem of cosmic suffering,” whether or not the suicidal agent cares about that cosmic problem (Young, 2013, p. 129). I set aside this suggestion here, though it is compatible with what I offer below.
Four preliminary points. First, though moral questions about suicide mattered to Schopenhauer, I set those questions aside. Second, I also generally set aside Schopenhauer’s views on asceticism and ascetic suicide, which raise their own difficulties. Hence, “suicide” in what follows refers only to non-ascetic suicide. Third, it is not clear in Schopenhauer’s discussions whether he holds that every instance of non-ascetic suicide is both futile and foolish, or whether he holds that paradigmatic instances of non-ascetic suicide are both futile and foolish – instances where someone decides “not to be” in order to escape what Hamlet describes as the “heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” To simplify my discussion, I take the latter reading, leaving open that some instances of suicide might, for Schopenhauer, lack either futility or foolishness. Finally, though Schopenhauer’s charge of futility is separable from his charge of foolishness, I will return to the latter issue at the end, where I explain how my defense of Schopenhauer can complement defenses of the foolishness charge like Masny’s.

My discussion has two parts. I begin by discussing Schopenhauer’s views on the metaphysics of survival and death. I then turn to his views on the psychology of suicide.

1. The Metaphysics of Survival and Death

Fox’s objection hinges on a necessary condition for futility: an act is futile only if it fails to achieve what an agent’s aims at or desires. Fox’s objection to Schopenhauer therefore can be broken into two parts: first, the claim that suicidal agents aim at or desire the destruction of their individual life, consciousness, and suffering; and second, the claim that suicide results in exactly that destruction.

In this section, I set aside the question of what suicidal agents hope to accomplish, and consider what, on Schopenhauer’s view, the result of suicide is. I will argue that the destruction of the individual that results from suicide is less personally significant, given Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, than it is on most other views. Personal significance can be understood as those relations that are most relevant to the prudential question, “how does that bear on me?”, though it

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8 The main presentation of Schopenhauer’s view is PP2 6:325-30. See (Stellino, 2020, pp. 78–90) for discussion.
9 Act 3, Scene 1, 70.
10 After all, Schopenhauer does not condemn heroic self-sacrifice (see, e.g., WWR 1:402, 545).
11 This condition is not sufficient for futility, however. As a referee for Mind points out, a futile action must also be one that was bound to fail, as opposed to just happening to fail. The parts of Schopenhauer’s doctrine I appeal to below do, I believe, satisfy this condition, since they are meant to be modally robust.
is a non-trivial question whether those same relations stretch beyond the limits of individual persons. If suicidal death is of less personal significance than we ordinarily assume, then suicide may result in less than a paradigmatic suicidal agent ultimately desires – though whether that is so will depend on what those desires are.

1.1. Fox’s Objection and Parfit on Psychological Connections

Fox is right that, on Schopenhauer’s view, suicide results in the end of an individual’s life, consciousness, and suffering. Schopenhauer ties our individual conscious lives to our living bodies (see, e.g., WWR1 2:23-24, 118, 123), so the destruction of the latter entails the destruction of the former. Hence, Schopenhauer claims that the person who commits suicide “negates… the individual” (WWR1 2:472). Nonetheless, Schopenhauer claims, suicide does not destroy our inner essence, our nature in ourselves. It leaves “the thing in itself untouched” (WWR1 2:472). This inner essence is the will, or will to life, which “is the sole metaphysical entity or thing in itself”, which is such that “no violence can break it” (WWR1 2:474). For those who value life, he claims, this fact can provide consolation in the face of death:

since human beings are nature itself… anyone who has grasped and retained this perspective can… rightly console himself over his own death and that of his friends by looking at the immortal life of nature that he himself is (WWR1 2:325-36).

On Schopenhauer’s view, however, those same metaphysical facts imply the futility of suicide. Fox compares Schopenhauer’s doctrine with the modern physicalist view that, since “matter and energy are interchangeable and whatever exists is ultimately made of the same ‘stuff’, everyone is, in some abiding sense, one with the cosmos”. This comparison reinforces Fox’s objection to Schopenhauer. For few people hoping for immortality would be encouraged by learning that they are constituted by the same stuff as the rest of the cosmos. Similarly, few people attempting to end their individual existence would take this modern view as a reason to abandon their attempts. To put it in my terms: the fact that their constituent stuff is of the same

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12 For a general discussion of why Schopenhauer takes these facts to be consoling, see (Janaway, 2022b).
13 (Fox, 1980, p. 157), but cf. (Janaway, 2022b, p. 125) and WWR2 3:549.
type as the rest of the cosmos, and that this stuff will persist beyond their death, is of negligible personal significance. If Schopenhauer’s view is indeed comparable to this physicalist view, then his charge of futility would be implausible by his own lights, as Fox claims.

However, Fox’s comparison is misleading, both philosophically and interpretively. Setting aside interpretive questions for now, consider the philosophical question: is the end of one’s individual life necessarily the end of everything personally significant? There is a case to be made for a negative answer, based on a view of persons that is several steps removed from Schopenhauer’s: that of Derek Parfit. Parfit describes hypothetical cases of personal fission and fusion. In fission, one person’s brain is divided and put in two bodies, resulting in two people. In fusion, two people merge their brains and bodies. Appealing to some broadly naturalistic assumptions, Parfit argues that the original individuals (the ‘ancestors’) do not survive in either case. However, he argues, in both cases, the ancestors can be psychologically connected to the ‘descendent’ people, and this connection has the same sort of value that ordinary survival has to us – hence, in my terms, that having connected descendants shares the same type of personal significance as ordinary individual survival. Memory (or memory-like) connections are the most obvious form of significant psychological connection between ancestors and descendants, but Parfit grants that other types of connection may be significant and so allow for survival in, e.g., cases of amnesia. Hence, Parfit claims there are ways in which an individual can be destroyed that are, with respect to personal significance, closer to ordinary survival than to complete annihilation.

Consider what Parfit’s conclusions might mean for the futility of suicide. Say that a suicidal person is offered an opportunity to end their individual existence and undergo Parfitian fission, yielding two psychologically connected descendants, both of whose lives would be filled with suffering. Though this act might result in the end of the suicidal person’s individual conscious suffering, the suicidal person might be reasonably convinced that the act of fission

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14 Parfit’s metaphysics of persons differs from Schopenhauer’s in many respects, but it is noteworthy that both find affinities between their views and certain Buddhist doctrines (see (Parfit, 1986, p. 273)). I am indebted here to (Persson, 2021) for demonstrating the fruitfulness of putting Parfit and Schopenhauer in conversation. 15 (Parfit, 1986, pp. 254–255, 1986, p. 298). 16 “The value to me of my relation to a resulting person depends both (1) on my degree of connectedness to this person, and (2) on the value, in my view, of this person’s physical and psychological features.” (Parfit, 1986, p. 299). 17 (Parfit, 1986, p. 208).
would be futile. They might be so convinced even if they could ensure that both descendants would be amnesic, lacking any memories of their ancestors.

With that philosophical point in place, we can return to interpretive issues. Schopenhauer would reject most of Parfit’s naturalistic framework, but his view of what happens in death is closer to Parfit’s fission and fusion cases than to the physicalist view Fox invokes. This is because, for Parfit, what matters most in survival are psychological connections, regardless of whether these hold between stages of a single individual. By contrast, on the physicalist view Fox invokes, an individual who dies would have no psychological connections to any succeeding being. Now, Schopenhauer flatly denies that there are any memory connections that extend beyond an individual’s death: “just as the individual has no memory of his existence before birth, neither will he be able to remember his present existence after death” (WWR2 3:561). However, Schopenhauer does hold there are other psychological connections, which I turn to next.

1.2. Psychological Connections Beyond Death

What types of psychological connections does Schopenhauer think stretch beyond the death of individual? There are at least two: one that holds between individuals, and another that holds between individuals and something deeper than individuals.

First, on psychological connections between individuals: Schopenhauer thinks that idealism and our shared essence of will make possible some interpersonal psychological relations that only idealist views can account for. One of these connections happens in compassion, in which someone literally feels another’s token states of suffering (see, e.g., OBM 4:211-12) – something possible only because, Schopenhauer claims, “all plurality is apparent” and “in all the individuals of this world… only one and the same truly existing essence really manifests itself” (OBM 4:268).18 Tellingly, Schopenhauer also takes the compassionate person to view others as “I once more,” aligning psychological links with personal significance (see OBM 4:271).

Though compassionate actions are rare, in Schopenhauer’s view, some amount of compassion is

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18 For more discussion, see, e.g., (D. Cartwright, 2012) and (Marshall, 2021).
present in all humans (OBM 4:252-53), implying that everyone is directly psychologically connected to at least one other individual.\[^{19}\]

In addition to connections through compassion, Schopenhauer invokes his metaphysics to explain a rarer sort of psychological connection: paranormal events. Schopenhauer takes some reports of such events at face value:

the vegetative life… is a life shared by all, in virtue of which they can even communicate under exceptional circumstances, for instance, in the direct communication of dreams, or when the thoughts of the magnetist go directly into the somnambulist, or finally in the magnetic or even magical influences that come from intentional willing. Such a thing… is wholly different in kind from every other physical influence in being a true action at a distance in which the will… performs its actions in its metaphysical capacity as the omnipresent substrate of the whole of nature (WWR2 3:371-72).

Many contemporary readers might think that Schopenhauer is wrong to give credence to reports of such paranormal psychological connections. Regardless, the fact that he does so shows that he allows for direct psychological connections beyond the boundaries of individuals.

At first pass, the psychological connections Schopenhauer posits in compassions and paranormal events might seem to be restricted to simultaneously-existing people, and so not carry over to the case of suicide. However, Schopenhauer follows Kant in claiming that time is ideal, not pertaining to things in themselves: “The most thorough response to the question of the continued existence of the individual after death lies in Kant’s great doctrine of the ideality of time… The concepts of ceasing to be and continuing on can be applied only to appearances” (WWR2 3:564). Hence, whatever psychological connections support compassion or paranormal events in virtue of idealism and the shared essence of will could also extend beyond the present, and so, it would seem, beyond death.

Next, on psychological connections between individuals and something deeper than individuals: even though Schopenhauer believes that “consciousness presupposes individuality”

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\[^{19}\] Similarly, Schopenhauer invokes his idealist metaphysical monism to support the doctrine of eternal justice, according to which, “tormentor and the tormented are one. The former is mistaken in thinking he does not share the torment, the latter in thinking he does not share the guilt” (WWR1 2:418-19). The claim that they “share the torment” can be understood as some kind of psychological connection.
(WWR2 3:370), he also held that some sort of psychological state was present even after the
death of the individual – a state similar to one sometimes ascribed to the divine intellect:

when we forfeit the intellect through death, we are thereby only transferred [versetzt] to
the primal state without cognition, which however is not therefore simply unconscious;
instead it will be a state elevated beyond that form, one where the contrast between
subject and object disappears… see the formulation of Giordano Bruno…: ‘The divine
mind, and the absolute unity, without any difference is itself that which knows and that
which is known.’ (PP2 6:292)

Note the word “transferred,” which indicates a connection of some sort to a new psychological
(or quasi-psychological) state. This resulting “not… simply unconscious” state does not count as
ordinary individual consciousness, by Schopenhauer’s lights, but our being transferred to it
would seem to have personal significance. In fact, Schopenhauer’s invocation of Bruno suggests
it would have the significance of acquiring or merging with a super-human mind (though, in
Schopenhauer’s view, this mind would not be blissful).

The transfer to this not-unconscious state would presumably involve a loss of memory.
That would seem to make the loss of our individual intellect, on Schopenhauer’s view, similar to
a case of Parfitian fusion plus amnesia, and so of at least some personal significance. Given
that “the in-itself of life, the will, existence itself, is a constant suffering, partly miserable, partly
horrible” (WWR1 2:315), however, this would seem to mean that suicide does not provide an
escape from all suffering – something of personal significance to the suicidal agent survives, and
continues to suffer. All this assumes, of course, that Parfit is right in taking direct psychological
connections to have personal significance, and though that view has been widely accepted since
“the justly world-famous work of Locke” (WWR2 3:668), it could be rejected. Yet given that

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20 So it would be too strong to say, as Dale Jacquette does, that this state “is not like anything at all” (Jacquette,

21 Schopenhauer rejects the Cartesian view that the intellect is our proper self (see (Zöller, 1999)). In addition, there
are passages that suggest that the conscious ‘I’ itself survives death in some non-individual way. For instance,
Schopenhauer writes that “the subject… does not lie in either space or time because it is present complete and
undivided in each representing being” (WWR1 2:60). See also WWR2 3:557, 580.

22 Within the European tradition, the main alternative would be to link personal significance to an immaterial soul
those identity did not require psychological connections. Both Parfit and Schopenhauer reject this view (see (Parfit,
1986, pp. 224–228) and WWR1 2:345)
assumption and Schopenhauer’s larger metaphysics, there would indeed be grounds for holding
that suicide was futile.

1.3. Palingenesis and Individual Continuity

It may be possible to go further in supporting Schopenhauer’s futility charge, however.
Schopenhauer at times appears to favorably entertain (if not endorse) the possibility of
palingenesis, in which particular humans’ wills (not just the single will, as thing in itself\(^2\))
survive death, taking on new intellects in rebirth.\(^3\) Without abandoning his claim that
individuality pertains only to the level of spatiotemporal phenomena,\(^4\) Schopenhauer writes:

death separates a person’s will, in itself individual, from the intellect… and now
according to its modified constitution receives a new intellect through a new act of
procreation (WWR2 3:575-76)

Every newborn being[‘s]… fresh existence is paid for by the age and death of some
deceased person who has perished, but who contained the indestructible seed from which
this new existence has arisen: they are a single being (WWR2 3:577)

Death openly proclaims itself as the end of the individual, but in this individual lies the
seed to a new being. Accordingly, then, nothing of all that dies does so forever… What
dies perishes, but a seed is left over from which a new being proceeds which now enters
existence without knowing whence it comes from (PP2 6:293)

\(^2\) Stellino rightly considers palingenesis as a test case for the futility of suicide, but (a) assumes the doctrine
concerns the will in itself, not individual wills (i.e., intelligible characters – see PP2 6:242) and (b) follows
(Janaway, 2022b) in holding that Schopenhauer cannot accept palingenesis at face value (Stellino, 2020, p. 106).
WWR2 3:575-76, quoted next, shows that (a) is incorrect, however, and (b) is questionable, for reasons noted below.
On the two uses of “will”, see (Shapshay, 2008).

\(^3\) Schopenhauer contrasts the doctrine of palingenesis with that of metempsychosis, in which individual intellects
survive death. While Schopenhauer thinks metempsychosis serves as one of the “mythological cloaks for truths that
are inaccessible to the untutored human senses” (WWR1 2:420), he insists it cannot be literally true. Hence, despite
his sympathy for parapsychology, Schopenhauer would reject most contemporary parapsychological work on
surviving death, which focuses on memory (e.g. (Matlock & Mishlove, 2019)).

\(^4\) For some discussion of how to make sense of non-spatiotemporal particulars for Schopenhauer, see (Marshall,
2021, p. 788). It is likely that Schopenhauer himself would remind us here that “[a]nswering transcendent questions
in the language created for immanent cognition can indeed lead to contradictions” (PP2 6:297).
Schopenhauer claims that there are empirical grounds for believing in palingenesis: “the great fertility of the human race that arises as the result of devastating epidemics” (WWR2 3:576). He cites the prominent pathologist Johann Ludwig Casper as demonstrating that, “at all times and places, the number of deaths and births increases or diminishes in the same proportion” (WWR2 3:577).

Schopenhauer asserts that the doctrine of palingenesis “accords greatly with my doctrine of the metaphysical permanence of the will” (PP2 6:294), and provides no explicit reason for rejecting it. If he really is open to this doctrine, then death would not merely involve some level of direct interpersonal connection or psychological fusion, but would also, as Fox notes, be a non-religious version of Judeo-Christian doctrines of personal immortality. Of course, many contemporary readers will, like Fox, reject palingenesis as “pure fancy.” In addition, charitable interpreters of Schopenhauer might worry that palingenesis contradicts other, more central aspects of his views, such as his restriction of individuation to the realm of space and time. I myself am unsure how seriously Schopenhauer took the possibility of palingenesis. There is also ample textual evidence that his opposition to suicide long predated his understanding of palingenesis – his claim about the futility of suicide appeared already in the 1818 edition of World as Will and Representation, whereas his explicit discussions of palingenesis begin only in the 1850’s. Hence, his reasons for the futility charge cannot be limited to the doctrine of palingenesis.

Regardless of what we make of Schopenhauer’s attitude towards palingenesis, however, there is ample textual evidence that Schopenhauer believed that death did not mark the limit of everything significant to the person dying. Instead, he believed in psychological connections between individual consciousness and subsequent (or timeless) beings, and these connections,

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26 This would seem to imply that each suicide paves the way for a new birth, and thus supports procreation. If so, then suicide would be an affirmation of the will in perhaps the strongest sense, since “[t]he affirmation of the will to life… is… centered around the act of generation” (WWR2 3:655). Schopenhauer does not explicitly draw this connection when he claims that suicide is an act of affirming the will (WWR1 2:471), but it would seem to follow directly from the doctrine of palingenesis, and would fit well with his suggestion that lovers’ attraction to each other “is in fact already the life-will of the new individual who they want to conceive” (WWR2 3:613).

27 (Fox, 1980, p. 167). (Langone, Forthcoming) argues that Schopenhauer’s eventually acceptance of palingenesis, understood as the ultimate reality of individual wills, conflicted with some of his monist and idealist commitments.

28 (Fox, 1980, p. 153). But see (Ketcham, 2018) on similarities between palingenesis, as Schopenhauer understands it, and Buddhist views.

29 See (Langone, 2022, p. 87).
like those that would exist in Parfitian fission, carry at least some personal significance. Of course, some contemporary readers will find those metaphysical doctrines implausible, but, at a minimum, they show that Schopenhauer’s charge of futility cannot be dismissed without engaging in broader metaphysical issues.

2. The Psychology of Suicide

In the previous section, I argued that Schopenhauer’s metaphysical views imply that suicide has less personal significance than people often assume. Even so, Fox’s objection to the futility charge might still hold, if the paradigmatic suicidal agent really desired nothing more than the destruction of themselves qua individual. In this section, I argue that, on Schopenhauer’s broader psychological views, paradigmatic suicidal agents desire more than that, though they may not always have that desire at the front of their minds. Moreover, while the metaphysical views described in the last paragraph may be hard for many contemporary readers to accept, Schopenhauer’s psychological views, I suggest, at least partly align with some contemporary views.

2.1. The Intentions and Desires of the Suicidal Agent

Before turning to textual questions, a distinction will be useful. Say that an agent’s intention is the motivational state that immediately guides their action, directed at a specific state of affairs, whereas their underlying desire is the motivational state that ultimately fuels that intention. These most obviously come apart when the agent takes their underlying desire to not be fully realizable. For example, say that my underlying desire is to get a snack that is both filling and enjoyable, yet none of the foods I can purchase are enjoyable. In such a case, I might give up on the enjoyable and form the intention of buying a merely tolerable filling snack. If it turns out that all of the items available were merely tolerable and not at all filling, I would regard that purchase as futile. In terms of my intention, the action was not entirely futile: I took myself to be buying something that was merely tolerable, and that was the result. But the real question of futility rests on my underlying desire, which, it turns out, could not be even partly satisfied. In that case, I could probably recognize what my underlying desire was through reflection, but in
other cases, we can get so wrapped up in realizing our intentions that we lose sight of our underlying desires, such as when we get so involved in winning a game that we forget we’re playing it to have fun.

With that distinction in place, we can start untangling Schopenhauer’s views on the intentions and underlying desires of someone attempting suicide. Consider the immediate context for his futility charge:

We have already found that for the will to life, life is always a certainty, and suffering is essential to life, so it follows that suicide, the wilful destruction of one single appearance that leaves the thing in itself untouched, just as the rainbow remains stable however rapidly the drops that support it at any given moment might change, is a futile… act. (WWR1 2:472)

This passage might be read as showing that Schopenhauer believes that the suicidal agent’s underlying desire is the destruction of the thing in itself, the will that is the essence of all things. Michael Cholbi interprets Schopenhauer this way, and registers his disagreement, saying that Schopenhauer’s “complaint appears to be that suicide does nothing to annihilate will itself,” but that he is thereby “imputing to the suicidal individual a motivation she almost certainly does not have.” Similarly, Paolo Stellino conjectures that Schopenhauer is “projecting his metaphysical worldview” onto the suicidal agent.

However, while Schopenhauer does think that suffering can lead to the desire to negate the will itself, he does not impute that (ascetic) desire to the suicidal person. Instead, he writes,

The person who commits suicide wills life, and is only unsatisfied with the conditions under which life has been given to him. Thus, when he destroys the individual appearance he is relinquishing only life, not the will to life. He wills life, wills the unimpeded existence and affirmation of his body, but the tangle of circumstances does not allow him this and he undergoes great suffering. (WWR1 2:471)

31 (Stellino, 2020, p. 104).
Suicidal agent’s underlying desires, then, is simultaneously for (a) the continued existence of their individual body and (b) an escape from suffering, where suffering is “the conditions under which life has been given to him.”\(^{32}\) The agent takes the joint realization of (a) and (b) to be out of reach, and so forms an intention to bring about (b) without (a).

If the suicidal person’s underlying desire is for both (a) and (b), is the action of suicide then entirely futile? Suicide, of course, does not secure (a), but it might seem to secure (b). However, in light of the previous section, we can see that, on Schopenhauer’s view, suicide leaves personally significant connections to future beings.\(^{33}\) Add to this Schopenhauer’s view that suffering is essential to life (e.g., WWR1 2:366, 374-5), and the result is that suicide does not provide an escape from suffering.

That said, suicide could lead to a reduction in suffering, for Schopenhauer recognizes that suffering came in degrees, and that not all lives are equally miserable.\(^{34}\) Assuming the truth of palingenesis, for example, suicide could lead to an individual will transitioning to a new life in which they experienced less suffering than in their previous life. Of course, the result could also be negative, and it might end up with a life involving more suffering. Even so, the possibility of a reduction in suffering would be enough to undermine the unqualified claim that all acts of suicide are futile.

In light of that, we need to refine our reading of Schopenhauer’s statements about suicidal agents’ underlying desires. I suggest that, in order for Schopenhauer to coherently hold that any act of suicide is futile relative to the agent’s underlying desire, he must understand that desire in absolutist terms: as an escape from absolutely all suffering. Such an absolutist desire would be structurally similar to Kant’s infamously inflexible attitude towards lying, as well as to certain religious attitudes according to which all sins are absolutely prohibited.\(^{35}\) Schopenhauer takes the ascetic to adopt such an attitude towards the will, as an unqualified “loathing for… the will to life” (WWR1 2:449). Similarly, in the Aphorisms, Schopenhauer describes a tendency to

\(^{32}\) Of course, non-paradigmatic suicidal agents might have different basic desires. Someone could, in principle, basically desire to join with the God-like, “not unconscious” state described in §1.2, even if that came with novel forms of suffering. Such an agent’s actions would not, by Schopenhauer’s lights, be futile, though Schopenhauer might deny such an agent was possible.

\(^{33}\) Cf. Hamlet again: “To die, to sleep— to sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause” (Act 3, Scene 1, 72-76). For Hamlet, then, the possibility of psychological continuity beyond death counts against suicide.

\(^{34}\) See (Shapshay, 2008, pp. 16-20).

\(^{35}\) See, e.g., https://pastorunlikely.com/there-are-no-such-things-as-little-sins.
suicide as arising from a general “weariness of life” (PP1 5:348). So there are some grounds for thinking he means to ascribe a absolutist aversion to suffering to the suicidal person. Given such absolutism, the underlying desire would remain unfulfilled if any suffering remains – as it inevitably does, given Schopenhauer’s broader views.

If Schopenhauer does ascribe such an absolutist underlying desire to the suicidal person, that would help explain why he singles out suicide as being futile, even while holding that all striving is futile (WWR2 3:732). The explanation suggested by the absolutist understanding of the suicidal agent is that the suicidal agent’s underlying desire gives that action absolute futility, whereas most other actions have only partial futility. Many of our actions, whether egoistic or compassionate, can realize our underlying desires to some degree – we can postpone death for a while, and can at least refrain from harming certain other people. Provided that the agent has some non-absolute underlying desires, those achievements can imply that their actions are not entirely futile. By contrast, the absolute nature of the suicidal person’s underlying desire means their action is entirely futile.

So given the absolutist characterization of the suicidal agent’s underlying desire, suicide achieves neither component of the agent’s underlying desire, and so is futile. What the agent really wants is a continuation of their individual bodily existence that is entirely free from suffering, yet what they get is a discontinuation of that individual existence combined with continued (and perhaps lesser, perhaps greater) suffering.

2.2. A Rejoinder: An Implausible Psychology?

The previous subsection does not provide a full answer to Fox, though. For we might still worry that Schopenhauer simply attributes to the suicidal individual a underlying desire that they clearly do not have, even if it’s not the particular desire that Cholbi and Stellino describe.

That worry could be reinforced with two potential arguments:

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36 The Aphorisms are not a reliable report of Schopenhauer’s considered views, since he states up front that his discussion there “retains the ordinary, empirical standpoint and adheres to its error” (PP1 5:333-34). That is probably why he seems to countenance suicide “committed by the healthy and cheerful person entirely for objective reasons,” namely, when “the magnitude of the sufferings or of the inevitably approaching disaster vanquishes the fear of death” (PP1 5:348).

37 In addition, as a referee for Mind points out, it’s plausible that Schopenhauer also focused on this case because it provided an important chance to head of misunderstandings of some of his core doctrines.
(1) Insofar as some of us have had suicidal urges at points in our lives, of the paradigmatic sort, we might find the ascription introspectively implausible – perhaps we really desired to end our suffering as the individuals we were. Moreover, perhaps we would have introspectively found a preference for (e.g.) some combination of amnesia and psychological fusion as a change of pace, even if that change of pace came with greater (but novel) suffering. If so, introspection might give us reason to deny that paradigmatic suicidal agents have the underlying desire that Schopenhauer posits.

(2) Other things being equal, we should be charitable in interpreting others’ actions. Part of that charity would seem to involve attributing desires to agents that made sense of their actions. In light of that, we should ascribe to suicidal individuals underlying desires on which their actions would make sense, instead of being futile.38

Both these arguments carry real force, in my view. Nonetheless, I think it is possible to respond to both on Schopenhauer’s behalf. The responses will not be enough to show that Schopenhauer’s view is correct, but they would show that his view is not easily refuted.

Against the first, introspective argument, Schopenhauer follows some of his predecessors (such as Hume and Kant) in claiming that the motivational aspects of our psychology are often not easily accessible through introspection. With an eye towards self-flattering moral corruption, he writes that “we are often quite mistaken even about the real motive we have for doing or forgoing something” (WWR2 3:235). Similarly, he holds that

[m]any a person would be amazed if he saw what his conscience, which presents itself to him in such stately fashion, is genuinely composed of: 1/5 fear of human beings, 1/5 fear of the gods, 1/5 prejudice, 1/5 vanity and 1/5 habit (OBM 4:192)

Broadly speaking, then, Schopenhauer puts little stock in introspective reports of our motivations, so the first argument has limited dialectical force against him.

Against the second argument, Schopenhauer actually does accept a certain version of the principle of charity in the interpretation of actions. However, his principle applies not so much at the level of individuals as at the level of the agent’s inner essence, the (non-individual) will. He

38 An objection along these lines is expressed in (Stellino, 2020, p. 110). Stellino offers cases in which agents’ basic desires would seem to be quite different from the one Schopenhauer ascribes to them.
writes that

The will to life as such finds itself so totally constrained in this particular appearance that it cannot develop its striving. So it reaches a decision in accordance with its intrinsic essence… the will affirms itself here through the very abolition of its appearance, because it can no longer affirm itself in any other way (WWR1 2:471-72).

Given the goal of developing its striving, it makes sense for the will to dispose of certain individuals. As Schopenhauer writes elsewhere, individuals as such are insignificant in nature:

What nature says is: the life or death of the individual does not matter at all. Nature expresses this by abandoning the life of every animal and even of the human being to the most insignificant of accidents without stepping in to help (WWR2 3:541)

To be sure, the voice of nature Schopenhauer articulates does not seem to be a full expression of the will (nature, as Schopenhauer construes her, sometimes sounds kind and caring, e.g., WWR2 3:542). Nature is, however, connected to the deep motivations that drive each being, which includes self-sacrifice for one’s offspring (see, e.g., WWR1 2:326-27). Strife and struggle are what issues from the will itself (e.g., WWR1 2:366), so insofar as suicide expresses this strife and struggle in an especially strong form, perhaps especially insofar as it involves a foolish and futile act, it makes sense from the perspective of the will.

What we find, then, are three levels of drive or motivation. Within an individual agent, there is the distinction between intention and underlying desires. When we go deeper than the individual, though, there are the goals, drives, or aims of the species, nature, or the will itself. For an individual, an action’s futility is evaluated relative to their underlying desire, but that same action can be anything but futile relative to the aims of nature or the will.

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39 Schopenhauer claims that “[a]ll instances of being in love, however ethereal they might pretend to be… are in fact nothing but more precisely determined… individualized instances of sex drive” (WWR2 3:610), so that the “final goal of all love affairs” is “the composition of the next generation” (WWR2 3:611). As Christopher Janaway summarizes Schopenhauer’s view: “sexual love is: sex drive + delusion” (Janaway, 2022a, p. 107).

40 There, of course, a challenge in making sense of the goals or drives of the will, given that it is intrinsically “blind” (WWR1 2:178).
It may be because of the deep, sub-individual aims that Schopenhauer frames his discussion as a description of why suicide is futile, not as an attempt to talk someone out of committing suicide. He shows no signs of thinking that his account could dissuade someone from ending their life, perhaps because he thinks the driving forces are beyond the reach of an individual’s deliberation.

I’ll close this section by noting that, while Schopenhauer’s views on introspection and deep motivation are not obviously correct, they do fit well with some contemporary views. First, even outside of depth psychology, many psychologists today believe we often fail to identify our genuine motivations, making us, at times, “strangers to ourselves.” Second, and relatedly, though depression and suicide are prima facie puzzling from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, some explanations of them have been offered – for example, that suicide can benefit surviving kin. None of that would entail that Schopenhauer’s view is correct (not least because evolutionary pressures need not manifest as any entity’s motivations), but it makes it harder to claim that Schopenhauer is simply wrong in what he says about the aims behind suicide, which set the most important standard for whether their actions are futile.

2.3. Foolishness Reconsidered

Before closing this section, recall the other part of Schopenhauer’s charge against suicide: its foolishness. As I noted in the introduction, one arguably sufficient condition for an action being foolish is if the agent could recognize its futility on reflection. That condition is at least partly met here: Schopenhauer thinks that all sentient beings are to some degree aware of the indestructability of their essence:

an innermost consciousness of their imperishable nature gives rise to the security and peace of mind that every animal, and even the human individual, possesses as it wanders carelessly through a sea of accidents that could annihilate it at any moment (WWR2 3:552-53)

41 This phrase is from (Wilson, 2002), who distances himself from Freudian views.  
42 For a critical overview of the relevant literature, see (Chatterjee & Rai, 2021).
This innermost consciousness is not always prominent in our minds – that is why Schopenhauer thinks we can fail to recognize both our motivations and our own cognitive states. To the degree that it is accessible in principle, though, this would support the charge of foolishness.

This explanation can complement the defensive of foolishness offered by commentators like Masny. Recall that Masny claims that, for Schopenhauer, suicide is foolish because it takes us off the path towards a greater good (ascetic renunciation). Masny rests his reading largely on Schopenhauer’s comparison with a sick person who prematurely leaves the operating table.

Someone sympathetic to Fox’s objection might think that Schopenhauer’s comparison is misleading, since a sick person leaving the operating table must then contend with their illness, whereas someone who commits suicide is not entirely foolish, since they succeed in their intention of escaping the illness of ordinary suffering (albeit in a way that prevents them from reaching some greater good). By contrast, on the reading I have offered, the person who commits suicide does not succeed in escaping ordinary suffering, even if they may cease existing as an individual. That means they both fail to realize their underlying desire and (for the reasons Masny identifies) cut themselves off from a greater good that they might not yet desire. Hence, the account of futility I have offered can show a further dimension along which their act was foolish: its (in principle) knowable futility.

3. Conclusion

I have argued that, in response to Fox’s objection, Schopenhauer takes suicidal agents to accomplish less of personal significance than Fox assumes, and that their underlying desires may not be introspectively accessible. This suggests a wide gap between the underlying desire and the result of suicide. Hence, Schopenhauer’s claim that suicide is futile is defensible at least within his broader system. Moreover, I have suggested that some of the relevant aspects of that system align, at least in part, with some contemporary views. That is not enough to show that his views on suicide are defensible overall, or that they fully cohere with either his broader pessimism or
his doctrine of ascetic suicide. It does suggest, though, that his views on suicide may be worthy of greater attention than many previous commentators have thought.\textsuperscript{43}

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