



# Schopenhauer on suicide and negation of the will

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## ABSTRACT

Schopenhauer's argument against suicide has served as a punching bag for many modern-day commentators. Dale Jacquette, Sandra Shapshay, and David Hamlyn all argue that the premises of this argument or its conclusion are inconsistent with Schopenhauer's wider metaphysical and ethical project. This paper defends Schopenhauer from these charges. Along the way, it examines the relations between suicide, death by voluntary starvation, negation of the will, compassion, and Schopenhauer's critiques of cynicism and stoicism. The paper concludes that there may be gaps in Schopenhauer's system, but not where the aforementioned commentators tried to locate them.

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## 1. Introduction

Schopenhauer's argument against suicide has served as a punching bag for many modern-day commentators. It is often claimed that its premises or conclusion are inconsistent with Schopenhauer's wider metaphysical and ethical project.

For instance, Dale Jacquette ("Schopenhauer on Death"; "The Ethics of Suicide"; *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*) argues that even if Schopenhauer succeeds in showing that suicide is often objectionable, he has no effective objection to 'philosophically enlightened suicide'. This claim is endorsed by Sandra Shapshay ("Review") and supplemented by the worry that Schopenhauer has no good answer to the question 'why not annihilate all sentient creatures?'. In *Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics*, Shapshay also argues that there is a tension between the Schopenhauerian ideals of resignation and compassion, which puts some pressure on the argument against suicide. A further blow comes from David Hamlyn (*Schopenhauer*) who suggests that Schopenhauer's argument utilizes an unsupported premise that something better can be achieved by abstaining from suicide.

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This article defends Schopenhauer's argument against suicide from these charges. The first part develops a novel reading of this argument. Section 2 explains the core tenets of Schopenhauer's system relevant to the present discussion. Section 3 reconstructs the argument against suicide. Section 4 suggests that the connections between this argument and Schopenhauer's critiques of stoicism provide further support for the presented interpretation. Section 5 discusses how to make sense of the apparent desirability of death by voluntary starvation.

The second part, which spans sections 6 through 9, addresses a range of interpretative questions which arise for this reading and the aforementioned challenges to the soundness of Schopenhauer's argument.

The paper concludes that there may be gaps in Schopenhauer's system, but not where the aforementioned commentators tried to locate them.

## 2. Preliminaries

Before we get to the details of Schopenhauer's argument against suicide, it is important to outline the core elements of his philosophical system.

Schopenhauer follows Kant in distinguishing between two aspects of the world: *the thing in itself* and *representation*. The objects of our experience belong to the latter aspect and are ordered by space and time, and by relations of cause and effect.

Unlike Kant, however, Schopenhauer thinks that the thing in itself is knowable and identifies it with *the will*.<sup>1</sup> He sees it as something that at the fundamental level lacks any end or purpose:

Regarded simply in itself, the will is just a blind and inexorable impulse, devoid of cognition.

(*WWR I*, §54, 301)<sup>2</sup>

At the level of representation, however, "what the will wills is always life" (*WWR I*, §54, 301). More precisely, the will aims at the well-being of the individual in which it is objectified and at the preservation of the species. For this reason, Schopenhauer frequently refers to the will at the level of representation as *the will to life*.

This metaphysical system gives rise to a famously pessimistic perspective about the lot of humanity. Since the will pervades the entire world as its

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<sup>1</sup>This standard reading has been challenged. For instance, Young ("Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Death") argues that, at least late in his life, Schopenhauer maintained that the thing in itself is unknowable and the will is merely the penultimate reality. See also Neeley ("Schopenhauer and the Limits"), De Cian and Segala ("What is Will?"), Jacquette ("Schopenhauer's Proof"), Wicks (*Schopenhauer*), and Shapshay ("Poetic Intuition"; *Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics*).

<sup>2</sup>All page references to *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1 and both volumes of *Parerga and Paralipomena* are to the Cambridge edition translated by Christopher Janaway and colleagues. All page references to the second volume of *WWR* are to the E. F. J. Payne edition.

essence, to live is to perpetually develop new desires and urges. But, Schopenhauer thinks, striving to satisfy our desires is painful. And even if we manage to satisfy them, we either enter the painful state of boredom, or else develop new desires and start the cycle anew. Schopenhauer illustrates this in a memorable quote:

Whether we hunt or we flee, whether we fear harm or chase pleasure, it is fundamentally all the same: concern for the constant demands of the will, whatever form they take, continuously fills consciousness and keeps it in motion: but without peace, there can be no true well-being. So the subject of willing remains on the revolving wheel of Ixion, keeps drawing water from the sieve of Danaids, is the eternally yearning Tantalus.

(*WWR I*, §38, 220)

It does not matter what our objects of desire are and how efficient we are at finding ways of fulfilling them; our life is bound to be filled with suffering.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in the pursuit of our desires, we inevitably inflict suffering on one another:

So the will to life constantly lives and feeds off itself in its different forms up to the human race which overpowers all others ... this is the same human race in which this struggle, this self-rupturing of the will, reveals itself with the most terrible clarity and *man is a wolf to man*.

(*WWR I*, §27, 172)

Schopenhauer identifies two ways of escaping this cycle of willing and suffering. A partial and temporary solution is offered by aesthetic contemplation. Describing the artist in the final paragraph of Book 3, Schopenhauer writes:

For him that pure, true and profound cognition of the essence of the world becomes a goal in itself: he comes to a stop there. Hence, this cognition ... redeems him from life, not forever but only momentarily.

(*WWR I*, §52, 295)

A permanent solution to the problem of willing is identified by Schopenhauer in the negation (*Verneinung*) of the will to life which culminates in the state of will-lessness (*Willenslosigkeit*). We will examine this phenomenon in great detail in subsequent sections. For now, it suffices to say that in that state the individual no longer wills in the ordinary, individualistic way.

### 3. The argument against suicide

Schopenhauer directly addresses suicide only in two short sections, §69 of *WWR I* and Chapter 13 of *PP II*, but various remarks about it can be found

<sup>3</sup>For a critical discussion of Schopenhauer's pessimism, see Atwell (*Schopenhauer*), Janaway ("Schopenhauer's Pessimism"), and Shapshay (*Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics*).

throughout the corpus of his work. First-time readers often find it surprising that, having characterized existence as a nightmare, Schopenhauer goes on to oppose suicide. This section reconstructs his case for this conclusion.

In *PP II*, Schopenhauer summarizes his argument in the following way:

I illustrated the only relevant moral reason against suicide in my main work, vol. 1, §69. It lies in the fact that suicide is counter to achieving the highest moral goal insofar as it substitutes a merely illusory redemption from this world of misery for the real one.

(*PP II*, §157, 329)

In a nutshell: suicide is objectionable because it prevents one from attaining salvation in the state of will-lessness, which is superior to the outcome of suicide. It will be helpful to break this argument into four claims and examine each of them in detail:

- (1) Suicide does not lead to salvation.
- (2) Suicide prevents one from attaining salvation.
- (3) Salvation is attainable via some alternative path.
- (4) Salvation is superior to the outcome of death.

Consider the first claim. Schopenhauer thinks that suicide does not lead to salvation because (i) salvation requires the negation of the will, and (ii) suicide does not involve the negation of the will.

Regarding (i), let's just note for now that Schopenhauer writes that:

true salvation, redemption from life and suffering, is unthinkable without the complete negation of the will.

(*WWR I*, §69, 424)

What salvation amounts to and how the negation of the will makes it possible are issues that merit longer discussions and we will return to them later.

In support of (ii) Schopenhauer argues that genuine negation of the will involves detesting the essential feature of life, not merely the contingent ones. As he sees it, the phenomenology of suicide is very different:

The person who commits suicide wills life, and is only unsatisfied with the conditions under which life has been given to him.

(*WWR I*, §69, 425)

In fact, Schopenhauer suggests, suicide is the opposite of the negation of the will: it is "a strong affirmation of the will" (*WWR I*, §69, 425). He explains that in certain circumstances the will "reaches the decision" to push an individual to commit suicide because it "finds itself so totally constrained in this particular appearance that it cannot develop its strivings" (*WWR I*, §69, 426). Because the will is unaffected by the death of any particular individual, the act of suicide can be seen as the will's attempt to free itself from that individual. The

person who commits suicide is deceived that they negate the will, but end up affirming it.

The second claim is that suicide prevents one from attaining salvation. This is so in two ways. First, trivially, if one commits suicide, they lose the opportunity to negate the will and hence the possibility of salvation. Second, more substantially, according to Schopenhauer the very suffering that motivated one to commit suicide, if endured, could have led to the negation of the will and salvation. He offers a powerful analogy here:

someone who commits suicide is like a sick person who, having started undergoing operation that could cure him completely, does not allow it to be completed and would rather stay sick.

(*WWR I*, §69, 427)

To appreciate this point fully, we must examine Schopenhauer's account of the ways in which the negation of the will can originate. In §68 of *WWR I*, Schopenhauer explains that the negation of the will requires attainment of a high degree of insight into the essence of the world. He writes:

if this seeing through the *principium individuationis*, this immediate cognition of the identity of the will in all of its appearances, is present at a high degree of clarity, then it will at once show an even greater influence on the will.

(*WWR I*, §68, 405)

He goes on to describe in some detail the content of this cognition. For instance, a person who attained it "no longer makes the egoistic distinction between his person and that of others" and "no longer bears in mind the changing well-being and woe of his own person" (*WWR I*, §68, 405). But these are just implications, as it were, of the more fundamental thought that at the core the world is will and that all living beings are bound to suffer.

As Schopenhauer explains, this insight can be achieved in two ways:

The difference that we have presented by means of two paths is whether this recognition is called into existence by suffering that is merely and purely *cognized*, and which is freely approached by our seeing through the *principium individuationis*, or whether, on the other hand, recognition comes from one's own immediate *feeling* of suffering.

(*WWR I*, §68, 424)

In other words, the insight that makes negation of the will possible can originate in intellectual understanding – either intuitive or abstract – or (more commonly) in one's own intense suffering. We can thus see that when Schopenhauer compares someone who commits suicide to a sick person who interrupts the operation that could cure them, his point is that the same immediately felt suffering leads to suicide in the unfortunate case, and to the negation of the will in the fortunate one.

The third key claim is that salvation is attainable via some alternative path. This step is important because even if Schopenhauer succeeds in showing that suicide does not lead to salvation and impedes the process that might have led to it, he must also demonstrate that salvation is attainable. If it were not, then suicide would be better than continuing to live and suffer. He writes that through the negation of the will:

A human being achieves the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete will-lessness.

(*WWR I*, §68, 406)

More precisely, the path to salvation leads through asceticism, chastity, intentional poverty, welcoming suffering inflicted by others, and self-mortification, which are all manifestations of the negation of the will. And it is that state of complete will-lessness which Schopenhauer identifies with salvation.

The fourth main claim is that salvation is superior to whatever is achieved through suicide, death, or continuing to live and suffer. And, indeed, Schopenhauer describes the state of will-lessness in the following terms:

Rather, it is an imperturbable peace, a profound calm and inner serenity; and when we behold this person with our eyes or in our imagination, we cannot help feeling the greatest longing, since we acknowledge that *this alone is in the right and infinitely superior to everything else*, and our better spirit calls to us the great 'Dare to know'.

(*WWR I*, §68, 417; emphasis added)

That said, like some earlier questions regarding the negation of the will, the issue of whether Schopenhauer is justified in holding that salvation is superior to the outcome of suicide merits a much longer discussion and needs to be postponed.

These gaps notwithstanding, it appears that Schopenhauer has a clear argument against suicide that is securely embedded in his wider metaphysical and ethical framework. This makes the accusations of inconsistency mentioned at the beginning of this paper all the more intriguing. We turn to them in section 6. Before that, however, it is important to consider further evidence that this is the correct interpretation and to get clearer on what Schopenhauer is actually opposing. This is what the next two sections set out to do.

#### 4. Critiques of stoicism

The presented interpretation finds further support in the fact that Schopenhauer's critiques of stoicism are closely connected to his argument against suicide.

According to Schopenhauer, the primary concern of ethics in the ancient world was how to attain the greatest possible happiness. The Cynics, he writes:

started from the insight that the motions in which the will is put by the objects that stimulate and stir it, and the laborious and often frustrated efforts to attain

them, or the fear of losing them when they are attained, and finally also the loss itself, produce far greater pains and sorrows than the want of all these objects ever can.

(*WWR II*, Ch. 16, 152)

This proto-Schopenhauerian insight led them to the conclusion that, instead of directly pursuing happiness, one should aim to minimize suffering by living a life of “greatest possible privation” (*WWR II*, Ch. 16, 152). The Stoics, as Schopenhauer sees them, turned that into an attitude of indifference:

They were of the opinion that *actual* dispensing with everything that can be discarded is not required, but that it is sufficient for us constantly to regard possession and enjoyment as *dispensable*, and as held in the hand of chance; for then the actual privation, should it eventually occur, would not be unexpected, nor would it be a burden.

(*WWR II*, Ch. 16, 155)

Despite the similarity in terms of insight and attitude between the Stoics and the ascetics whom he describes in laudatory terms, Schopenhauer is critical of stoicism. In Chapter 14 of *PP II*, Schopenhauer argues that it cannot offer a remedy to the omnipresence of suffering:

Whoever realizes through such considerations how necessary distress and suffering usually are for our salvation will recognize that we should envy others not so much for their fortune but for their misfortune. For the same reason stoicism of disposition, which defies fates, is of course also a good armour against the suffering of life and useful in order to better endure the present, but *it stands in the way of true salvation because it hardens the heart.*

(*PP II*, §170, 340–1; emphasis added)

The thought here appears to be that the suffering which the Stoics seek to avoid could lead one to the negation of the will and salvation. To use Schopenhauer’s earlier illustration, the Stoic is like a sick person who does not allow a painful operation that could cure them to be completed. And thus, just like suicide prevents one from attaining salvation, so does genuine stoicism of disposition.

Schopenhauer’s further critique of stoicism in §16 of *WWR I* is also connected to his thoughts on suicide. He thinks that even perfecting the stoic disposition is not going to be sufficient to eliminate all suffering from one’s life. Consequently, “it is rather completely contradictory to want to live without suffering” (*WWR I*, §16, 117). That is, if their goal really is to minimize suffering, then:

the Stoics are forced to include in their guide for a blessed life ... recommendation for suicide in the case of excessive and incurable bodily suffering incapable of being philosophized away.

(*WWR I*, §16, 117)

But, as we have seen, Schopenhauer holds that the outcome of suicide is inferior to the negation of the will that could arise otherwise.

These connections and similarities provide further evidence for the accuracy of the reading of Schopenhauer's argument against suicide presented earlier.

## 5. Death by voluntary starvation

It is also important to get clearer on what Schopenhauer is actually opposing. One might think that Schopenhauer does not oppose suicide altogether, but only some kinds of it. This is because he appears to exempt "death by voluntary starvation that emerges at the highest levels of asceticism" (*WWR I*, §69, 428) from the import of his argument. It is thus worth asking what's special about this kind of death.

An initial thought might be that it is *the method* that makes death by voluntary starvation stand out. Perhaps it matters how long it takes for one to die and how painful it is. Starvation clearly outclasses in these respects more common methods of suicide such as hanging oneself or overdosing medications. However, duration and painfulness cannot be what sets death by voluntary starvation apart because there are conceivable methods of suicide that beat starvation in terms of both the duration and the intensity of suffering.

A further thought might be that death by voluntary starvation differs from other kinds of suicide because *death is unwilled*. This interpretation finds some support in Schopenhauer's suggestion that death by voluntary starvation is not the result of the ascetic's will to die, but of her indifference to life and death:

Far from stemming from the will to life, in this kind of suicide an ascetic of this type stops living simply because he has stopped willing altogether.  
(*WWR I*, §69, 428)

However, that death is unintended cannot be the bottom of things. After all, dying in a car accident or drowning are also often unwilled. These cases seem radically different from death by voluntary starvation.

Finally, one might think that what ultimately matters is *in what state death occurs*. This is the most promising reading of Schopenhauer's view. Describing a genuine ascetic, he writes that:

it is not really conceivable that he would die in any other way than starvation ... because the intention of shortening misery would actually involve a degree of affirmation of the will.

(*WWR I*, §69, 428)

Thus, Schopenhauer thinks that only death by voluntary starvation could occur in the state of will-lessness. This is what separates it from the common kinds of suicide.

Two further comments about this reading are in order. First, it is worth noting that while Schopenhauer seems right to claim that one could not



hang oneself in the state of will-lessness, he seems to overlook the possibility of other kinds of death occurring in that state. For we can easily think of a case in which someone in the state of will-lessness accidentally cuts herself and abstains from stopping the bleeding or else a case in which they are crushed under a collapsing building whose foundations were damaged by an earthquake. And, taking on board everything that Schopenhauer says about the negation of the will, there is intuitively nothing tragic about these sorts of death in the state of will-lessness as opposed to dying as a result of starvation minutes later. Thus, if it matters just in what state death occurs, Schopenhauer would welcome these other kinds of death in the state of will-lessness.

Second, one might wonder whether death by voluntary starvation should really be thought of as a kind of suicide within Schopenhauer's system. He certainly refers to it as "a form of suicide" and as "this kind of suicide" (*WWR I*, §69, 428). But there are reasons not to classify it as such.

For one thing, when introducing death by voluntary starvation, Schopenhauer also says that it is "completely different from the usual kind [of suicide]" and that it "might still not be well enough established" (*WWR I*, §69, 428). And he provides a long list of real-world examples of this phenomenon. This suggests that he is conscious of the fact that he is speaking of something that is not well-known. He might be thinking that his audience is likely to classify this death as a kind of suicide and is trying to accommodate these intuitions.

For another, when Schopenhauer first describes suicide, he says that it is a "phenomenon of a strong affirmation of will" (*WWR I*, §69, 425). Death by voluntary starvation, however, does not appear to be willed in any relevant sense. Instead, it seems to be a mere by-product of being in the state of will-lessness.

If this is right, then it emerges that Schopenhauer opposes all forms of suicide. Death by voluntary starvation is not objectionable because it is not a kind of suicide and does not stand in the way of salvation. But, of course, this is only a matter of classification; it does not affect the extension of Schopenhauer's view.

## 6. Philosophically enlightened suicide

With the preceding in place, we are finally in a position to evaluate objections to Schopenhauer's argument against suicide raised by contemporary commentators. This discussion will further illuminate Schopenhauer's treatment of suicide and enhance our understanding of his ethical and metaphysical project.

One stage-setting assumption before we begin. Since our primary concern is with the consistency of Schopenhauer's project, Sections 6–8 take two

claims from Section 3 for granted: (i) that the negation of the will is necessary for salvation, and (ii) that salvation in the state of will-lessness is superior to the outcome of ordinary death and suicide. Section 9 evaluates these assumptions.

Dale Jacquette raises a number of objections to Schopenhauer's argument against suicide. His central worry is this:

Why according to Schopenhauer should a person not do so [commit suicide] while enjoying good health, the love of family and friends, productive activity, and all of life's pleasures, precisely in order to fulfil life's purpose by ending it for philosophical reasons immediately upon achieving realisation of the appearance-reality distinction?

(*"The Ethics of Suicide"*, 54; *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 142)

Jacquette's point here is that Schopenhauer has no effective argument against what might be called 'philosophically enlightened suicide'. It has the following features: (i) the subject has recognized that the will is the essence of the world, (ii) the subject is not trying to free herself from the contingencies of life, and (iii) the subject is not deluded that she negates the will as the thing in itself. In these circumstances, Jacquette suggests, the subject could "simply will to end [their] life" (*The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 139).

There are two main problems with Jacquette's objection. The first is that a person who meets the above conditions would not choose to commit suicide. On Schopenhauer's account, it would be psychologically impossible for them to do so. For suppose that an individual has recognized that the will is the essence of the world. If this person is also 'enjoying all of life's pleasures', then this recognition must have had its origin in intellectual understanding rather than personally felt suffering. Now, Schopenhauer is adamant that:

the recognition of the whole, of the essence of things in themselves such as we have described becomes the *tranquilizer* [*Quietiv*] of all and every willing.

(*WWR I*, §68, 406)

There are two ways to interpret this thought. One, that the recognition of the essence of the world is sufficient to make one negate the will and enter the state of will-lessness. But, in this state, one is meant to cease willing and be indifferent towards life and death. This rules out the possibility of willing to end one's life.

Two, even if the recognition of the essence of the world is not sufficient to make one enter the state of will-lessness, it would presumably involve awareness that salvation is possible through the negation of the will. It would therefore prompt the individual to abstain from committing suicide and to step on the path of ascetic renunciation instead.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Section 9 of this paper discusses further textual support for this thought and explains in more detail how attaining sufficient insight into the essence of the world leads to a transformation in the individual.

If, on the other hand, one commits suicide, this serves as excellent evidence that this person did not fully grasp the nature of reality. This is reminiscent of Schopenhauer's critique of cynicism from Chapter 16 of *WWR II*. There, he notes that unlike the ascetics, the Cynics are not typically characterized by a compassionate attitude towards other people. This indicates that the insight which Cynics have into the essence of the world is severely limited, for they fail to recognize that the boundaries between them and other people are merely illusory.

The second problem with Jacquette's objection is related. Irrespective of whether it would be psychologically possible for someone who attained the highest degree of insight to commit suicide, it is clear that on Schopenhauer's account that person would have no reason to do so. They would have no objective reason to commit suicide because there is something better to be achieved in the state of will-lessness. And they would have no subjective reason to commit suicide because, if they really possessed the highest degree of insight, they would also recognize that there is something better to be achieved through salvation.

Of course, we are yet to examine whether Schopenhauer is justified in claiming that there is something better to be achieved in the state of will-lessness. But what matters presently is that, although Schopenhauer never explicitly addresses the possibility of philosophically enlightened suicide, his argument against suicide in general straightforwardly extends to this kind as well.<sup>5</sup>

## 7. The value of suffering and compassion

Another challenge raised by Jacquette is captured in the following question:

If suffering sanctifies, and if sanctification is a good thing, should it not then be wrong to avoid, let alone willfully avoid, the vicissitudes of the will to life, no matter how unpleasant?

(“The Ethics of Suicide”, 54; *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 143)

Jacquette's point appears to be that there is a contradiction in Schopenhauer's endorsement of asceticism: suffering is supposed to sanctify and Schopenhauer endorses stepping on a path that inevitably ends our suffering.

As we will see, there is no genuine contradiction here. To begin with, let's get clearer on the issue of sanctification. Schopenhauer refers to suffering in these terms in the following passage:

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<sup>5</sup>A further issue with Jacquette's argument concerns his characterization of the prospective suicide as someone who enjoys ‘all of life's pleasures’. That may be understood as a life that is overall happy. Schopenhauer admittedly never considers whether salvation in the state of will-lessness would be better than continuing or ending such a life. But this is because he is adamant that such existence is impossible; for suffering is unavoidable and all pleasure is merely negative. See section 2 of this paper, and *WWR*, Ch. 46; PP I, 334; PP II, §172a.

Because all suffering is mortification and a call to resignation, it has the potential to be a sanctifying force; this explains why great unhappiness and deep pain themselves inspire a certain respect.

(*WWR I*, §68, 423)

Importantly, Schopenhauer sees suffering as sanctifying only in the sense that it can lead one to recognize the essence of the world. As we have seen in section 3, Schopenhauer sees personally felt suffering as a common path to such insight. But then suffering is ‘a good thing’ only instrumentally. Schopenhauer’s earlier analogy proves illuminating here: there is nothing finally desirable in a medical operation; it is desirable only in virtue of curing one’s harmful condition. This reading is further confirmed by Schopenhauer’s remarks further in the same section:

He [the sufferer] *only becomes awe-inspiring when* he lifts his gaze from the particular to the universal, when he views his own suffering as a mere example of the whole and, becoming a genius in the ethical sense, treats it as one case in a thousand, so that the whole of life, seen essentially as suffering, brings him to the point of resignation.

(*WWR I*, §68, 423; emphasis added)

Indeed, as Christopher Janaway reports, Schopenhauer stresses at one point that not merely suffering, but also the moral attitudes and actions he describes in laudatory terms throughout the fourth book of *WWR I*, have merely instrumental, or *transcendent*, value. In an 1844 letter to his long-time correspondent, Johann August Becker, Schopenhauer writes:

*Now as to what this value of moral action ultimately rests on—*... the value that such actions have for the one who performs them himself is a transcendent value, inasmuch as it lies in their leading him towards the sole path of salvation, i.e. deliverance from this world of being born, suffering and dying ... So this contains the really *final elucidation* concerning the value of morality, which value is not itself something absolutely final but rather a step towards it.

(*GB*, 220; quoted from Janaway, “What’s So Good”, 660)

With this in place, let’s turn to the issue of Schopenhauer’s endorsement of avoiding suffering. There are multiple questions here.

First, does Schopenhauer recommend *avoiding our suffering*? One might think that he does because he endorses the negation of the will, which leads to the state of will-lessness. In this state, one appears to no longer experience any suffering. And one is likely to die from voluntary starvation which permanently prevents suffering. But there is no contradiction here. It is consistent to claim that suffering is instrumentally good (because it has the potential to bring about salvation) and that only salvation is finally good (because it brings an end to suffering).

Second, one may wonder whether this implies that we should actively *seek out suffering for ourselves* to facilitate the negation of the will. In principle, we

should. In *WWR I*, Schopenhauer's descriptions of the ascetic life that leads to salvation include not just welcoming suffering coming your way, abstinence, and giving away your possessions, but also "self-torture to completely mortify the will" (*WWR I*, §68, 415). In the second volume, however, Schopenhauer qualifies this:

Now since, according to this, poverty, privations, and special sufferings of many kinds are produced by the most complete exercise of moral virtues, *asceticism* in the narrowest sense, the giving up of all property, the deliberate search for the unpleasant and repulsive, self-torture, fasting, the hair garment, mortification of the flesh; all these are rejected by many as superfluous, and perhaps rightly so. Justice itself is the hairy garment that causes its owner constant hardship, and philanthropy that gives away what is necessary provides us with constant fasting. For this reason, *Buddhism* is free from that strict and excessive asceticism that plays a large part in Brahmanism, and thus from deliberate self-mortification.

(*WWR II*, Ch. 48, 608)

The thought here appears to be that it is unnecessary to actively seek out suffering, because mere renunciation is bound to bring enough hardship for us to end up negating the will.

The preceding discussion concerns Schopenhauer's view about *our* suffering. But it is also worth thinking about the place of the suffering of *others* in this system.

In *Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics*, Sandra Shapshay makes a strong case for the claim that Schopenhauer's ideals of compassion and resignation are in tension in two ways, one of which is this. On the one hand, Schopenhauer claims that personal suffering has great instrumental value for that sufferer. Indeed, as we have seen, suicide is objectionable precisely because it cuts our suffering short and thus prevents us from attaining salvation. On the other hand, Schopenhauer frequently praises compassionate action which aims at alleviating the suffering of others. In *OBM*, for instance, Schopenhauer celebrates institutional efforts to end slavery and animal cruelty. But if compassionate action reduces others' suffering, then why isn't it objectionable like suicide?

This is an important challenge, and one that Schopenhauer does not explicitly address. But he seems to have the resources to answer it. To see this, we need to examine in greater detail the effects of compassionate action both on the sufferer and on the agent.

Consider *the sufferer*, first. Compassionate action certainly aims at alleviating another's suffering. Schopenhauer acknowledges that it can also be effective in reducing suffering, at least in the short term. For example, he writes that compassion "manifests a decided and truly miraculous effectiveness, daily prevents many a wrong and calls into being many a good deed" (*OBM*, 223). However, there are reasons to think that Schopenhauer sees it

as largely inconsequential in the long term. This reading finds support in a series of remarks that Schopenhauer makes when he elaborates on the idea of unavoidability of pain:

The perpetual efforts to banish suffering do nothing more than alter its form. This is originally lack, need, worries over how to sustain life. If (and this is extremely difficult) we are successful in driving out pain in this form, then it immediately appears in a thousand others, varying, according to age and circumstances, as sex drive, passionate love, envy, jealousy, hatred, anxiety, ambition, greed, illness, etc., etc. If it ultimately cannot find any other form in which to appear, then it comes in the sad grey garments of satiety and boredom, and we then try hard to fend it off. Even if we finally succeed in driving these away, it can hardly be done without letting the pain back in one of its previous forms and so beginning the dance all over again.

(*WWR I*, §57, 341)

Importantly, his claim is not just that the *presence* of suffering in one's life is unavoidable but also that its total *amount* is largely predetermined:

This would mean that a person's suffering or well-being would not be determined externally at all, but instead it would be a function of that pre-set amount or arrangement. It certainly might increase or decrease at different times due to physical constitution, but overall it would remain the same.

(*WWR I*, §57, 342)

The picture that emerges from these considerations is that compassionate action has no lasting influence on the amount of suffering endured by its intended beneficiary. And so, it does not have the effect of moving the sufferer further away from salvation.<sup>6</sup> If that's right, then the first tension identified by Shapshay is resolved.

But one might wonder at this point whether this resolution does not come at the price of creating an inconsistency elsewhere. For if compassion has little or no benefit for the sufferer, why is it praised by Schopenhauer?

The answer is that compassion is valuable primarily in virtue of its effect on the agent. Schopenhauer writes that the genuinely compassionate person:

must also regard the endless suffering of all living things as his own, and take upon himself the pain of the whole world. No suffering is foreign to him. All the miseries of others that he sees and is so rarely in a position to alleviate, *all these affect his spirit as if they were his own.*

(*WWR I*, §68, 405; emphasis added)

The effect in question is, of course, that "the will begins turning away from life" (*WWR I*, §68, 406). Schopenhauer's point is that taking a genuinely compassionate stance delivers that final push towards salvation by crushing the agent

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<sup>6</sup>Schopenhauer makes similar remarks in other contexts. For instance, in §62 of *WWR I*, he suggests that even if the institution of the state miraculously managed to prevent people from harming one another, the void would be quickly filled by other forms of suffering.

with the amount of suffering that they could never experience on their own.<sup>7</sup> This reading is further confirmed by Schopenhauer's remarks in *WWR II*:

[the compassionate person] takes over also the sufferings that originally fall to the lot of others; he therefore appropriates to himself a greater share of these than would come to him as an individual in the ordinary course of things.  
(*WWR II*, Ch. 48, 606)

It is in virtue of this role that compassion is valuable, and not because of the effect it has on its intended beneficiaries.<sup>8</sup>

These considerations also offer a way of addressing the second inconsistency that Shapshay attributes to Schopenhauer. The first one, recall, was that compassionate action seems to undermine others' renunciation. The second one is that our renunciation seems to undermine the possibility of realizing the ideal of compassion captured by the principle "Harm no one; rather help everyone to the extent that you can" (*OBM*, 140). This is because the truly resigned person no longer actively helps others by alleviating their suffering.

However, this tension is only apparent. First, as suggested above, the value of compassion lies primarily in its effect on the agent. Once the state of willlessness is attained, compassionate action has no further role to play. Thus, it matters little that we can no longer actively help others by alleviating their suffering.

Second, to the extent that helping others is important also in virtue of its effect on them, the truly resigned person does indeed help others in an important way. This does not take the form of alleviating their suffering (which, as we have seen, would be largely futile anyway). Instead, this help takes the form of serving as a source of knowledge and as a role model for those who are still within the grip of *principium individuationis*. This reading finds textual support in *WWR I*:

*the greatest, most important and most significant appearance that the world can show us is not someone who conquers the world, but rather someone who overcomes it . . .* Thus, as badly written as these biographies usually are, even though they are mixed with superstition and nonsense, the significance of the material makes these descriptions *incomparably more instructive* and important for the philosopher than even Plutarch and Livy.

(*WWR I*, §68, 412–3; emphasis added)

<sup>7</sup>It is worth noting that some of Schopenhauer's discussions of compassion have a more optimistic tone. For instance, earlier in *WWR I*, he writes that engaging in acts of compassion can "make the heart feel larger" and "lend our mood certain cheerfulness" (§66, 400-1). This might be taken to imply that the value of compassion is *also* eudaimonistic, and thus anti-resignationist. However, even if that's right, Schopenhauer's later remarks (such as those quoted above) strongly suggest that taking a compassionate stance towards the world brings upon us disproportionately more suffering than joy.

<sup>8</sup>Likewise, malicious action which aims to inflict suffering on others is primarily objectionable not because of its effect on another, but because it reinforces the agent's attachment to egoistic distinctions and moves them further away from salvation.

and

when we behold this person with our eyes or in our imagination, we cannot help feeling the greatest longing, since we acknowledge that this alone is in the right and infinitely superior to everything else, and our better spirit calls to us the great 'Dare to know'.

(*WWR I*, §68, 417)

In other terms, observing and reflecting upon the lives of those who negated the will can bring about a significant transformation in us and prompt us to step on the path towards the negation of the will. Thus, on Schopenhauer's view, short of undermining the injunction to 'help everyone to the extent that you can', ascetic resignation offers the most potent way of complying with it.

Now, Shapshay acknowledges the possibility that "renunciation helps others as much as one can by modeling the attitude that would be best for them too" (*Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics*, 28). But she does not discuss the two passages quoted above and dismisses this reading fairly quickly. She writes:

First, non-human animals are incapable of renunciation, and this modeling will not help them at all; second, sainthood is an exceedingly rare option for human beings, and so a very tenuous way to 'help others as much as you can'.

(*Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics*, 28–9)

However, as noted above, Schopenhauer sees compassionate actions as having no lasting influence on the amount of suffering that individuals endure in their lifetime. Thus, the situation of animals is inescapably tragic: they cannot be helped anyway. And, however 'tenuous' it may be, serving as a source of knowledge and a role model is the best way of helping other people.

In sum, there is no genuine inconsistency in Schopenhauer's treatment of suffering, compassion, and the negation of the will. Suffering and compassion are merely instruments of achieving salvation in the state of will-lessness. Compassionate action, in particular, does not undermine our and others' efforts to attain it. Thus, it is not objectionable on the same grounds as suicide.

## 8. An end to all willing?

A further challenge to Schopenhauer's argument against suicide is articulated in Shapshay's review of Jacquette's book:

I have long been worried, as is Jacquette, that Schopenhauer's thought (despite the philosopher's protestations) has no effective answer to the question: why not suicide? Or even worse, why not annihilate all sentient creatures in the world as a whole?

("Review", 804)



Let's examine the possibility of annihilation of all sentient life in more detail. Schopenhauer does not address this issue, but there are sufficient resources in his system to explain why it would not be desirable.

First, there are reasons to doubt that the annihilation of all sentient beings would lead to the annihilation of the will itself. On Schopenhauer's metaphysical picture, the will pervades the entire physical world, not just sentient beings. For instance, explaining how we may come to attain the insight into the essence of the world, Schopenhauer writes:

because it is everywhere one and the same, – just as the first light of dawn shares the same sunlight with the bright rays of noon, – it must be called *will* here as well as there, a name signifying the being in-itself of every thing in the world and the sole kernel of every appearance.

(*WWR I*, §23, 143)

That the will itself would not be annihilated is important. This is because there would remain the possibility of sentient life re-emerging, and so annihilation of all sentient life could prove futile. It would be a short-term remedy at best.

Second, we might think of the annihilation of sentient life as a 'mass suicide'. This helps us see that this action would be objectionable for the same reasons as suicide: namely, it would deprive people of the possibility of attaining salvation in the state of will-lessness which is better than the outcome of death and suicide.<sup>9</sup>

## 9. The value of salvation

The preceding sections argued that the challenges to Schopenhauer's argument against suicide raised by modern-day commentators do not go through. This discussion depended on the assumption that salvation is superior to the outcome of death. The possibility of defending this claim within Schopenhauer's system may be challenged. Indeed, Hamlyn writes:

Suicide is useless only if in those circumstances there is something better to be achieved. Schopenhauer of course thinks that there is, in the denial of the will, but it is the very obscurity that attaches to the question what that state brings for the person concerned that is different from ordinary death that casts doubt on the claim that suicide is by comparison useless.

(*Schopenhauer*, 160)

To find an answer to this obscure question, we need to better understand what is involved in the negation of the will.

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<sup>9</sup>Why not annihilate all non-human animals, though? Schopenhauer emphasises that they lack the capacity to see through the *principium individuationis*, and thus the possibility to attain salvation (*WWR I*, §70, 431). So, the second objection does not apply and there seems to be no reason not to kill any particular non-human animal in a respectful and painless way. But the first still does apply: Schopenhauer would presumably see the attempt to eradicate all non-human animals as bound to be futile in the long run.

We have already examined its first important feature, namely that it requires the attainment of a high degree of insight into essence of the world, either through abstract cognition or through immediately felt suffering.

The second important feature is how the negation of the will and the state of will-lessness are brought about in the subject. Schopenhauer sometimes writes as if this is something that the subject comes to desire and bring on themselves. For instance he talks about:

adopting a difficult, penitent way of life and seeking out everything they find unpleasant; anything in order to subdue the will that will always strive anew.  
(*WWR I*, §68, 418)

And he makes analogous remarks about the transition to the state of pure aesthetic contemplation (*WWR I*, §39, 225–6).

However, Schopenhauer is best understood as claiming that the negation of the will is something that is brought upon us. Welcoming suffering or inflicting it on ourselves is merely a condition of the possibility of a transformation in the individual.<sup>10</sup> It is the insight into the essence of the world that is the efficient cause of it. In the second book of *WWR I*, Schopenhauer foreshadows a more detailed discussion of the role of cognition in the following way:

Originally in the service of the will and determined by the accomplishment of its aim, cognition remains almost entirely in its service throughout: this is the case in all animals and in almost all human beings. Nonetheless, in the Third Book we will see how in certain people knowledge evades this servitude, throws off its yoke and can exist free from any purposes of the will and purely for itself, simply as a clear mirror of the world; and this is the origin of art. Finally, in the Fourth Book we will see *how this sort of cognition, acting back on the will, can bring about the will's self-abolition*, i.e. the resignation that is the final goal, indeed the innermost essence of all virtue and holiness and is redemption from the world.

(*WWR I*, §27, 177; emphasis added)

The thought here is that cognition is the only thing that could have influence on the will. When we attain a sufficient degree of insight into the essence of the world, the will which is objectified in the individual catches a glimpse of itself, as it were. It sees the inevitability of suffering, the futility of striving, and the role of willing in it. It is in such circumstances that the will seeks to abolish itself and the individual develops a desire to be free from ordinary individualistic desires.

The third feature we need to examine is the nature of willing that is at work in the negation of the will. Janaway (“What’s So Good”) offers the most systematic treatment of this issue in the contemporary literature and the ensuing discussion follows his lead.

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<sup>10</sup>Schopenhauer’s view thus bears close resemblance to the Molinist view that human cooperation is the condition of the possibility of divine grace. For a helpful overview of the latter topic, see Freddoso, “Introduction”.

The central idea is that there are two kinds of willing in operation in Schopenhauer's system. On the one hand, there is the kind of individualistic willing that is subject to the will to life. It is aimed at the well-being of the individual and the preservation of the species. This is what Schopenhauer calls the affirmation of the will. On the other hand, there is the kind of willing which is made possible by the recognition of the essence of the world. It aims at the state of will-lessness in which one is free of the individualistic desires of the first kind.

In addition to the previously cited passages, it is worth considering in this context Schopenhauer's remarks about the effects of tragedy on the spectator:

The horrors on the stage hold up to him the bitterness and worthlessness of life, and so the vanity of all its efforts and endeavours. The effect of this impression must be that he becomes aware, although only in an obscure feeling, that it is better to tear his heart away from life, to turn his willing away from it, not to love the world and life. Thus in depth of his being the consciousness is then stirred that *for a different kind of willing* there must be a different kind of existence also.

(*WWR II*, Ch. 37, 435; emphasis added)

Moreover, in the fourth book of *WWR I*, Schopenhauer makes a reference to "striving that tends in a direction diametrically opposed to that of happiness, i.e. of well-being and life" (*WWR I*, §65, 388).

These excerpts provide considerable evidence for the claim that Schopenhauer in fact recognized two kinds of desiring and willing.

This distinction between two kinds of willing helps us make sense of how salvation in the state of will-lessness can be 'good' or 'desirable' at all. After all, Schopenhauer writes early on in the fourth book of *WWR I* that:

anything that is agreeable to the will in any of its expressions, that is conducive to its purposes, is intended in the concept of *good*.

(*WWR I*, §65, 387)

If something is good just in case it is conducive to the purpose of willing, then the claim that the state of will-lessness is good for an individual might appear paradoxical. Schopenhauer seems aware of this as he writes:

*Absolute good* is thus a contradiction: highest good or *summum bonum* mean the same thing, denoting properly an ultimate satisfaction for the will, following which there will be no new willing, an ultimate motive whose accomplishment will give lasting satisfaction to the will.

(*WWR I*, §65, 389)

However, having claimed that there is no absolute good *per se*, he elaborates that we might figuratively use this notion to refer to the state of will-lessness:

But ... we might figuratively call the complete self-abolition and negation of the will, the true absence of will, the only thing that can staunch and appease the

impulses of the will forever, the only thing that can give everlasting contentment, the only thing that can redeem the world ... the *summum bonum*.  
(*WWR I*, §65, 389)

The way to make sense of these seemingly divergent claims is to recognize that, just like there are two kinds of willing in operation, there are two kinds of goodness. Most things are good in virtue of satisfying individualistic desires. By contrast, salvation in the state of will-lessness is good in virtue of satisfying a different kind of desire or willing: the desire to be free from individualistic desires.

This does not address Hamlyn's challenge yet. For one must show not only that salvation is good, but also that it is *better* than the outcome of death or suicide. After all, they are also characterized by the absence of individualistic desires.

If Schopenhauer is to be redeemed here, there must be more to the state of will-lessness than the name suggests. And, indeed, Schopenhauer claims that there is more to it than the mere absence of individualistic desires. Speaking about the *summum bonum* in the passage cited above, Schopenhauer writes that the state of will-lessness is characterized by 'everlasting contentment'. Moreover, further in the same section, he suggests that through the negation of the will:

A human being achieves the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, *true composure*, and complete will-lessness.

(*WWR I*, §68, 406; emphasis added)

Finally, he talks about "peace and blissfulness" (*WWR I*, §68, 418) and "ecstasy" (*WWR I*, §68, 438) when characterizing the psychological state of people who achieved the perfect negation of the will. This suggests that Schopenhauer understands the state of will-lessness as involving a special kind of experiential state which is related to, but distinct from, the mere absence of individualistic desires.

Thus, there is a substantial difference between merely satisfying a desire to be rid of individualistic desiring (which can be achieved through death and suicide) and satisfying a desire to experience the peace and contentment of having no individualistic desires. To put it in Wittgensteinian terms, if you deduct one from another, you are left with the experiential state of will-lessness. It is in virtue of that state that Schopenhauerian salvation is better than death.

At this point, one could worry that there is another tension here. If what an ascetic truly desires is the experience of having no individualistic desires, how could they be indifferent between life and death? Clearly, there is no prospect of such experience after death. Consequently, it seems that someone in the state of will-lessness would have a reason to postpone death as long as possible in order to continue enjoying this experience.

Schopenhauer seems to have a solution to this puzzle, too. He appears to construe the state of will-lessness as experienced in a timeless way. For instance, he writes:

If we have recognized all this, we will certainly not evade the consequence that along with the free negation, the abandonment, of the will, *all those appearances are also abolished*, those constant urges and drives that have no goal or pause, that operate on all levels of objecthood in which and through which the world exists, *the manifold forms that follow each other in succession*, the will's whole appearance and *ultimately its universal forms as well, time and space*, and its final fundamental form, subject and object.

(*WWR I*, §70, 438; emphasis added)

Consequently, a longer experience of being free from individualistic desires would not be preferable to a shorter one, other things being equal. But it would presumably be better for a person to enter the state of will-lessness earlier rather than later in their life, so that they endure less suffering.

## 10. Concluding remarks

The first part of this paper developed a reading of Schopenhauer's argument against suicide. Section 3 argued that his objection is that suicide prevents one from attaining salvation in the state of will-lessness which is better than the outcome of suicide. Section 4 pointed out that the connection between this argument and Schopenhauer's critiques of stoicism provides further support for the accuracy of this interpretation. Section 5 then suggested that what makes death by voluntary starvation admirable is that it occurs in the state of will-lessness and that it is not fact a kind of suicide.

The second part of the paper argued that the apparent inconsistencies put forward by Jacquette, Shapshay, and Hamlyn can be resolved without any concessions on Schopenhauer's part. We saw that his argument applies equally to philosophically enlightened suicide which would also prevent one from attaining salvation. We further saw that the tension between the ideals of compassion and resignation is only apparent. Although compassionate action aims to alleviate others' suffering, it is largely inconsequential in this respect, and so does not prevent them from attaining salvation. Thus, it is not objectionable on the same grounds as suicide. And, short of going against the injunction to help others, ascetic resignation is the most significant way of complying with it. Finally, we saw that salvation in the state of will-lessness is superior to the outcome of death because it involves an experiential state of peace and contentment associated with having no individualistic desires.

That said, one difficulty in reconstructing Schopenhauer's thought is that it often seems that as we clog up one purported hole in his system, other holes begin to surface. It is thus worth closing with two issues which are worthy of attention in future scholarship.

The first is this. Schopenhauer frequently remarks that non-existence would be superior to existence. For instance:

The essential content of the world-famous monologue in Hamlet is, if summarized: our condition is so miserable that complete non-being would be decidedly preferable.

(*WWR I*, §59, 351)

Thus, his view appears to be that (i) never having been born is preferable to (ii) existing and attaining the state of will-lessness, which is preferable to (iii) existing and dying (e.g. by suicide) without attaining salvation. There is no logical inconsistency here. However, as soon as we recognize that *the state* of will-lessness is genuinely positive in virtue of that experiential state of peace and contentment associated with having no individualistic, we may be inclined to conclude that *the entire life* in which that state is attained is genuinely good as well. And this puts some pressure on the justifiability of the claim that non-existence would be better than this kind of life.

The second issue is that Schopenhauer's account of salvation may strike us as disappointingly individualistic. So what, we might ask, that this or that individual attained the state of will-lessness? In the grand scheme of things, that's a mere spark of light in the never-ending night of suffering. Indeed, we might probe further, how could something be genuinely good *for an individual*? The boundaries between different people were supposed to be an illusion, made possible the failure to see through the *principium individuationis*.

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