

**A Thousand Pleasures are Not Worth a Single Pain:
The Compensation Argument for Schopenhauer's Pessimism**

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Abstract: Pessimism is, roughly, the view that life is not worth living. In chapter 46 of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, Arthur Schopenhauer provides an oft-neglected argument for this view. The argument is that a life is worth living only if it does not contain any uncompensated evils; but since all our lives happen to contain such evils, none of them are worth living. The now standard interpretation of this argument (endorsed by Kuno Fischer and Christopher Janaway) proceeds from the claim that the *value*—or rather valuelessness—of life's goods makes compensation impossible. But this interpretation is neither philosophically attractive nor faithful to the text. In this paper, I develop and defend an alternative interpretation (suggested by Wilhelm Windelband and Mark Migotti) according to which it is instead the actual *temporal arrangement* of life's goods and evils that makes compensation impossible.

1 Introduction

Schopenhauer's pessimism may be expressed, somewhat indirectly, as the view 'that we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; [and] that it is something which at bottom

ought not to be' (SW 3: 661/ WWR 2: 576). It gives expression to 'the conviction that nothing whatever is worth our exertions, our efforts, and our struggles, that all good things are empty and fleeting, that the world on all sides is bankrupt, and that life is a business that does not cover the costs' (SW 3: 658/ WWR 2: 574). It is a claim about the value of our world as a whole and everything in it, but it also incorporates a claim about the value of the life of each human being. I take the view about human life to be that such a life is bad for the one who lives it, has 'entirely the character of a contracted debt' (SW 3: 665-6/ WWR 2: 580), and is such that 'complete non-existence would be decidedly preferable to it' (SW 2: 383/ WWR 1: 324); in short, life is simply not worth living.

Schopenhauer not only endorsed this bleak view, but provided a number of arguments in its favor. The lion's share of recent scholarly attention has gone to Schopenhauer's arguments in §§57-59 of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*.¹ But there has not been a great deal of careful, critical scrutiny paid to his arguments from the supplementary essays. This is, I think, rather unfortunate since unlike Schopenhauer's arguments in the main text, many of his arguments in the supplements do not appear to rely upon any controversial metaphysical assumptions about our essential nature. These arguments thus have a potentially broader appeal.

¹ See, for example, Janaway (1999), Young (2005, pp. 209-19), Reginster (2006, pp. 106-23), Fernández (2006), Soll (2012), and Woods (2014, pp. 48-63).

I will be concerned with a style of argument that Schopenhauer employs in chapter 46 of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*.² He argues, first, that it would be better if the world did not exist:

[I]t is quite superfluous to dispute whether there is more good or evil in the world; for the mere existence of evil decides the matter, since evil can never be wiped off [*getilgt*], and consequently can never be balanced [*ausgeglichen*], by the good that exists alongside or after it.

*Mille piacer' non vagliono un tormento.*³

For that thousands had lived in happiness and joy would never do away with [*höbe...auf*] the anguish and death-agony of one individual; and just as little does my present well-being undo [*macht...ungeschehen*] my previous sufferings. Therefore, were the evil in the world even a hundred times less than it is, its mere existence would still be sufficient to establish a truth that may be expressed in various ways, although always somewhat indirectly, namely that we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be

² These arguments are discussed—or, at least, alluded to—in Hartmann (1869, pp. 547-8/ 1884, vol. 3, pp. 21-3), Windelband ([1876] 1911, vol. 2, pp. 216-17), Fischer (1898, pp. 518-19), Volkelt (1900, p. 222), Simmel (1907, pp. 12, 88-93/ 1986, pp. 10, 63-6), Salter (1911, pp. 275-6), Tsanoff (1931, p. 287), Krusé (1932, p. 394), Young (1987, pp. 56-57, 68), Cartwright (1988, pp. 61-2), Janaway (1994, pp. 96-7), Migotti (1995, p. 651 n 13), Janaway (1999, p. 332), Dahlkvist (2007, pp. 49-51), Cartwright (2008, pp. 292-93, 306), Parfit (2011, vol. 2, pp. 611-12), Smith (2014, pp. 30-42), Woods (2014, pp. 64-74), Beiser (2016, p. 48), McDermid (2017, p. 119), and Vanden Auweele (2017, p. 136).

³ 'A thousand pleasures are not worth a single torment'. Petrarch, *Il Canzoniere*, Sonnet 195.

preferable to its existence; that it is something which at bottom ought not to be, and so on. (SW 3: 661/ WWR 2: 576)

He then provides the seeds for a more ambitious—and, I think, more interesting—argument which aims to show not just that it would be better if the world did not exist, but that the same can be said for each individual life:

If the world and life were an end in themselves, and accordingly were to require theoretically no justification, and practically no compensation [*Entschädigung*] or amends, ...then the sufferings and troubles of life would not indeed have to be fully compensated [*völlig ausgeglichen*] by the pleasures and well-being in it. For, as I have said, this is impossible, because my present pain is never abolished [*aufgehoben*] by future pleasures, the latter fill their time just as the former fills its own. On the contrary, there would have to be no sufferings at all, and of necessity there would also not be death, or else it would have no terrors for us. Only thus would life pay for itself. (SW 3: 662/ WWR 2: 577)

There are three basic themes present in both these passages. The first is that certain evils (such as the anguish and death-agony of one individual, my previous suffering, and my present pain) cannot be balanced or compensated (*ausgeglichen*) by various goods (such as the happiness and joy of thousands, my present well-being, or my future pleasures). The second is that compensation is not possible in these cases because the relevant evils cannot be wiped off or repaid (*getilgt*) by these goods, because they cannot be done away with or abolished (*aufgehoben*) by them. The third is that the mere existence of evil decides the matter.

I shall focus my attention on Schopenhauer's argument that none of our lives are worth living. The basic form of this argument can, I think, be plausibly reconstructed as follows:

- (1) If a life is worth living, then that life cannot contain any uncompensated evils.
- (2) Every life contains uncompensated evils.
- (3) *Therefore*, no life is worth living (from 1 and 2).⁴

It seems clear that Schopenhauer took a life to be worth living only if its evils receive some sort of compensation. This assumption also appears to be *prima facie* plausible. For if a life's evils were not counterbalanced, repaid, or otherwise made up for by various goods, it would be difficult to see how that life could really be preferable to the 'peace and quiet' (SW 3: 665/ WWR 2: 580)—or 'blissful repose' (SW 6: 318/ PP 2: 299)—of nothingness. But it is unclear why Schopenhauer maintained that every life contains uncompensated evils. Indeed, this claim stands in need of justification. Any interpretation of Schopenhauer's argument should primarily aim to capture and explain his stated reasons for thinking that there can be no compensation for life's evils, and, if possible, to validate his inferences on the basis of these reasons.

⁴ Schopenhauer's argument that it would be better if our world did not exist can be reconstructed in similar fashion:

- (1*) If a world's existence is to be as good as or better than its non-existence, then that world cannot contain any uncompensated evils.
- (2*) Our world contains uncompensated evils.
- (3*) *Therefore*, our world's non-existence would be better than its existence (from 1* and 2*).

The standard interpretation assumes that compensation for life's evils is supposed to be impossible because the goods in life are all empty and without value. So if a life were to contain even a single evil, it would not be worth living. I will present the details of this interpretation in section 2. I contend that it not only fails to be philosophically attractive, but is at odds with the text. In section 3, I will defend an alternative interpretation according to which compensation for life's evils is not possible given the way things are actually arranged because the goods we experience at one time cannot compensate for the evils we experience at another. So provided that our lives were to retain the distributions of goods and evils that they actually have, they would still not be worth living even were the evils in them a hundred times less than they are. This interpretation appears to adequately capture Schopenhauer's stated reasons, but does not appear to validate his claim that the mere existence—rather than the amount or the arrangement—of evil decides the matter. In section 4, I will present what I take to be the best competing interpretation of the compensation argument. I then argue that it does not really capture or explain Schopenhauer's stated reasons. In section 5, I briefly explain why I take Schopenhauer's argument to be interesting in its own right.

2 The valuelessness of life's goods

The standard interpretation takes its cue from what I shall call the negativity thesis, which says that 'that which is good, in other words, all happiness and satisfaction, is negative, that is, the mere elimination of a desire and the ending of a pain' (SW 6: 310/ PP 2: 292).⁵ This

⁵ See also SW 2: 376-78, 443-44/ WWR 1: 319-21, 375, SW 4: 210-11/ BM 146-7, SW 5: 431-4/ PP 1: 404-6, and SW 6: 309-10/ PP 2: 291-2. The negativity thesis is discussed in Hartmann (1869, pp. 541-5/ 1884, vol. 3,

thesis is supposed to support the principle that compensation is never possible because the goods in life are all empty and without real value.

All satisfaction, or what is commonly called happiness, is really and essentially always *negative* only, and never positive. It is not a gratification which comes to us originally and of itself, but it must always be the satisfaction of a wish. For desire, that is to say, want, is the precedent condition of every pleasure; but with the satisfaction, the desire and therefore the pleasure cease; and so the satisfaction or gratification can never be more than deliverance from a pain, from a want. (SW 2: 376/ WWR 1: 319)

The nature of life's goods is very different from the nature of its evils. Take pleasure and pain, for example. Pain has a positive nature; it is something that comes to us of itself. It is something positive, namely, the state of suffering from a desire. Pleasure, on the other hand, does not have a positive nature; it is not something that comes to us originally or of itself. It is, instead, essentially something negative, namely, the cessation of a painful desire. There are, thus, really only two states in which we can find ourselves: a painful state and a painless state. But our experience of these states—of what it's like to be in them and to move between them—is quite different.

pp. 13-17), Windelband ([1876] 1911, vol. 2, p. 214), Paulsen (1891, vol. 1, pp. 231-2/ 1899, pp. 291-2), Fischer (1898, pp. 518-20), Volkelt (1900, pp. 215-16), Riehl (1903, pp. 210-11), Simmel (1907, pp. 74-77, 89/ 1986, pp. 54-6, 64), Ward (1911, pp. 322-30), Young (1987, pp. 56-57), Janaway (1994, p. 97, 1999, pp. 331-2, 333-4), Reginster (2005, pp. 164-71), Young (2005, pp. 214-19), Reginster (2006, pp. 110-11, 114-19), Dahlkvist (2007, pp. 49-51), Soll (2012, pp. 308-10), Beiser (2014, pp. 402, 405), Smith (2014, pp. 25-26), Woods (2014, pp. 68-72), Vandenabeele (2015, pp. 17, 22), and Beiser (2016, p. 50).

We feel pain, but not painlessness; care, but not freedom from care; fear, but not safety and security. We feel the desire as we feel hunger and thirst; but as soon as it has been satisfied, it is like the mouthful of food which has been taken, and which ceases to exist for our feelings the moment it is swallowed. We painfully feel the loss of pleasures and enjoyments, as soon as they fail to appear; but when pains cease even after being present for a long time, their absence is not directly felt, but at most they are thought of intentionally by means of reflection. For only pain and want can be felt positively; and therefore they proclaim themselves; well-being, on the contrary, is merely negative. (SW 3: 659-60/ WWR 2: 575)

We feel pain whenever we are in a painful state. It is 'immediately given to us' (SW 2: 377/ WWR 1: 319). Our experience of pain is direct, it is 'felt positively'. We don't, however, feel anything simply in virtue of being in a painless state. There is nothing to be given to us directly. But when we move from a painful state to a painless one and become aware of this transition, our painlessness can appear pleasant. Painlessness can only be experienced as pleasure 'by remembering the preceding suffering' (SW 2: 377/ WWR 1: 319). Our experience of pleasure is indirect, it is 'merely negative'.

Pleasure is not unique in this respect. The 'three greatest blessings of life' are also, Schopenhauer thinks, negations: freedom is the absence of impediment, health is the absence of sickness, and youth is presumably the absence of impediment and sickness that comes with old age. We experience the pain of sickness and the frustration of impediment directly. But we experience our blessings only indirectly. We do not become aware of them as goods 'as long as we possess them, but only after we have lost them.... We notice that certain days

of our life were happy only after they have made room for unhappy ones' (SW 3: 660/ WWR 2: 575).

The negativity thesis has two interrelated and mutually supportive components. The first is a *metaphysical* thesis about the nature of life's goods, the second is an *experiential* thesis about our experience of these goods. The metaphysical thesis entails the experiential thesis: if the nature of a good is negative, then since we cannot directly experience an absence, our experience of that good must be negative as well. And the experiential thesis gives *prima facie* support to the metaphysical thesis: if the nature of life's good were positive, then we should be able to directly experience those goods. The metaphysical thesis best explains our inability to do so. We cannot, as we have just remarked, directly experience an absence. But we immediately—and painfully—feel the loss of certain goods, such as pleasures and enjoyments, 'as soon as they fail to appear'. This would be surprising if pleasure were something positive, but not if it were something negative. We are not even aware of certain other goods, such as freedom, health, and youth, 'as long as we possess them, but only after we have lost them'. This would be surprising if these goods were positive, but not if they were negative.

So why would Schopenhauer take the negativity thesis to show that life's goods are empty and without value? I want to suggest that, on this way of reading Schopenhauer, he intends to place an experiential requirement on the value of goods and evils, according to which something can have value for us only if we can directly experience it.⁶ But, he seems

⁶ It might be thought that the goods in life lack value for us simply because of their negative nature. This explanation is, however, neither complete nor satisfying. A better explanation will, I think, incorporate the claim that these goods lack value for us because we cannot directly experience them. There is still an

to think, careful attention to our phenomenology provides evidence that we never directly experience any of life's so-called goods.

We can reconstruct Schopenhauer's rationale for premise (2) as follows:

(2.1) Every life contains some evils.

(2.2) No good can compensate for any evil.

(2.3) *Therefore*, every life contains uncompensated evils (from 2.1 and 2.2).

Premise (2.1) should be entirely uncontroversial. We all experience some amount of pain and disappointment no matter how slight. Every one of our lives is thus exposed to some evils.

Premise (2.2) is based upon the experiential thesis: we cannot directly experience any of life's goods. But since only experiential goods can have value for us, all of the so-called goods in life will be empty and without value. They cannot provide compensation for any of life's evils.

We have now arrived at what I am calling the standard interpretation of the compensation argument.⁷ The basic idea is that we do not need to calculate the aggregate

explanatory role for the negative nature of life's goods to play. It's just that its role is not to explain why these goods have no value for us, but rather why we cannot directly experience them.

⁷ Fisher (1898, pp. 518-19), Janaway (1994, pp. 96-7, 1999, p. 332), Dahlkvist (2007, p. 51), Vanden Auweele (2017, p. 136), and McDermid (2017, p. 119) explicitly interpret the compensation argument along these lines, while Simmel (1907, p. 89/ 1986, p. 64) and Cartwright (1988, p. 62 n 2) merely suggest that it is meant to draw support from the negativity thesis. Some dissent comes from Young (1987, pp. 56-7), who briefly considers an argument based upon this thesis, but ultimately rejects its attribution to Schopenhauer.

It should also be noted that Woods (2014, pp. 67-72) defends a non-standard variant of this interpretation according to which the negative nature of life's goods is what makes compensation impossible.

value of the goods and evils in our lives because the goods are all empty and without value. I do not directly experience my present well-being any more than I directly experience the happiness of a thousand others. So these goods can have no value for me. They cannot repay even the mildest suffering. Thus, the mere existence of evil will be sufficient to show that our lives are not worth living. But this interpretation is neither philosophically attractive nor faithful to the text.

2.1 Philosophical objections

I'll begin with some philosophical objections. The first is that the experiential thesis is clearly false: we can directly experience certain pleasures.⁸ When eating a delicious meal, I don't just sit back and reflect afterward about how good it was—I savor each bite! The intense sensory pleasure that I derive from my favorite foods stirs my will. When reflecting upon my past accomplishments, I take some comfort in them. The low-level sensory pleasure that accompanies these reflections also stirs my will. When anticipating some future event, I get excited about it. The pleasure that I get once again stirs my will. These experiences all have

He appears to take the problem to lie not with the comparative values of life's goods and evils, but with the relations between them—life's goods, as absences, are not properly related to life's evils and so cannot compensate for them.

⁸ This objection is raised by Hartmann (1869, pp. 541-5/ 1884, vol. 3, pp. 13-17), Meyer (1872, pp. 6-7), Windelband ([1876] 1911, vol. 2, p. 214), Paulsen (1891, vol. 1, p. 232/ 1899, pp. 291), Volkelt (1900, p. 216), Riehl (1903, p. 211), Simmel (1907, p. 89/ 1986, p. 64), Ward (1911, pp. 324, 328), Janaway (1999, p. 333), Reginster (2005, p. 166, 2006, p. 117), Soll (2012, p. 308), and Smith (2014, p. 26).

positive value for me. But if these goods have positive value, then they should be able to compensate for some of life's evils. Thus, premise (2.2) appears to be false.

The second objection is that the metaphysical thesis is clearly false: we can experience certain pleasures without antecedently experiencing a painful desire.⁹ I might wake from a peaceful sleep to a beautiful piece of music. A child might watch in awe as the vendor at the fair spins some cotton candy for him to eat. It seems that we can experience pleasure without antecedently experiencing pain. There are also pleasant surprises in life. So, for example, there are some foods that I have no desire to eat, which I have never tried. But I might find that I enjoy them; they might come as a pleasant surprise. It seems that we can experience pleasure without an antecedent desire. But if the metaphysical thesis is false, there should be something it's like to be in a pleasurable state, and so pleasure should have positive value for us. Thus, premise (2.2) appears to be false.

The third objection is that the experiential requirement is probably false: we have some reason to think that non-experiential goods can sometimes have value for us.¹⁰ I might want to be buried rather than cremated after I die. Suppose I get what I want. There's nothing it's like for me to get what I want in this case. It seems like this might be good for me even though I cannot experience it. You might live an extremely virtuous life. Suppose you take no

⁹ This objection is raised by Windelband ([1876] 1911, vol. 2, p. 214), Paulsen (1891, vol. 1, p. 232/ 1899, pp. 291-2), Volkelt (1900, p. 216), Reginster (2005, pp. 166-7, 2006, pp. 111, 117-18), Soll (2012, pp. 309-10), and Smith (2014, p. 26).

¹⁰ This objection is raised by Meyer (1872, pp. 17-21), Riehl (1903, pp. 218-19), Simmel (1907, pp. 73-4/ 1986, p. 53), Janaway (1999, p. 334), Young (2005, pp. 218-19), Vasalou (2013, pp. 132-5), and Vandenabeele (2015, p. 22). It is often couched as an objection to Schopenhauer's perceived hedonism.

pleasure in this. There's nothing it's like for you to live virtuously. It still seems like this might be good for you even though you cannot directly experience it. It seems to make your life go well. It's something that I might want for you for your own sake. But if these non-experiential goods have value for us, then they should be able to compensate for some of life's evils. Thus, premise (2.2) appears to be false.

2.2 Textual difficulties

I'll turn next to some textual difficulties. The first is that there are passages where Schopenhauer asserts the existence of positive pleasures. He claims, for example, that:

the source of aesthetic enjoyment will lie sometimes rather in the apprehension of the known idea, sometimes rather in the bliss and peace of mind of pure knowledge free from all willing, and thus from all individuality and the pain that results therefrom. (SW 2: 250/ WWR 1: 212)

But, as Paul Guyer (1996, p. 126) points out, Schopenhauer does not here claim that 'there are two conditions for the occurrence of aesthetic pleasure, but that there are two different sources of such pleasure...which could be called positive and negative on account of their etiology'. Indeed, in one place, Schopenhauer goes so far as to claim, of the artistic genius, that:

The pleasure of everything beautiful, the consolation afforded by art, the enthusiasm of the artist which enables him to forget the cares of life...alone compensates [*entschädigt*] him for his suffering.... (SW 2: 315/ WWR 1: 267)

Thus, there are not only places where Schopenhauer asserts the existence of positive pleasures, but where he appears to take such pleasures to have compensatory power. It seems, then, that he does not accept the negativity thesis in full generality.

The second problem is that when presenting the compensation argument, Schopenhauer appears to treat pleasures as if they were positive. For he there claims that my future pleasures ‘fill [*füllen*] their time just as [my present pain] fills its own’ (SW 3: 662/WWR 2: 577). But since nothing that is purely negative could properly be said to fill anything at all (or, at the very least, nothing that is purely negative could be said to fill anything in the very same way as something positive), this suggests that—at least in these passages—Schopenhauer treats the experience of pleasure as if it were positive.

I don’t want to place too much emphasis on these two problems. For while Schopenhauer certainly asserts that aesthetic pleasures are positive, it is not clear that this assertion is really compatible with most of his other views; and although Schopenhauer certainly asserts that my future pleasures fill their time just my present pain fills its own, this might simply mean that that these pleasures and pains occupy or appear at different times.

There is, however, a third, more serious, problem for the standard interpretation: namely, that Schopenhauer does not explicitly appeal to the negativity thesis in order to explain why he thinks that my future pleasures do not compensate for my past pain, but instead to the fact that these pleasures and pains fill—or, perhaps simply, occupy—different times. It is not clear how this fact would be relevant were the impossibility of compensation supposed to stem from the negativity of pleasure. Thus, while the negativity thesis might provide some other reason to think that the mere existence of evil decides the matter, it

cannot be what underwrites Schopenhauer's inference here.¹¹ We must therefore look elsewhere if we are to adequately explain Schopenhauer's compensation argument.

3 The actual arrangement of life's goods and evils

An alternative interpretation, which I prefer, has been almost entirely overlooked.¹² It relies upon an analogy between interpersonal and intrapersonal compensation. This analogy is

¹¹ Smith (2014, p. 39) suggests that Schopenhauer takes compensation to be impossible because evils have 'infinite negative value'. But it should be clear that his suggestion faces a similar problem.

¹² Windelband ([1876] 1911) and Migotti (1995) are notable exceptions. In a discussion that contains clear allusions to Schopenhauer, Windelband argues that in order to make sense of the question of whether the world contains a preponderance of pleasure or displeasure we must postulate 'a universal consciousness, in which all feelings of all beings of all times are as one moment, a single state of feeling, which balances every joy and compensates one against another' ([1876] 1911, vol. 2, p. 217). The reason for this comes from the claim that feelings of pleasure can provide compensation for feelings of pain only if 'they occur simultaneously in the same individual as opposing moments of his emotional states' ([1876] 1911, vol. 2, p. 216). This is a point which Windelband appears to grant to Schopenhauer. But Windelband further assumes that unless feelings of pleasure occur together in consciousness with feelings of pain, then talk of the aggregate value of those pleasures and pains 'will remain meaningless' ([1876] 1911, vol. 2, p. 217).

In a brief footnote, Migotti asks why Schopenhauer thinks that 'there would have to be no sufferings at all' in order for life to 'pay for itself' and writes:

Schopenhauer's answer is obscure: the reason, he states, is that 'my present pain is never abolished by future pleasures, since the latter fill up their time just as the former fill its own' ([SW 3: 662/ WWR: 577]). The best I can make of this is the thought that Schopenhauer is relying on [a different argument, which] purports to establish pessimism as a consequence of the nature of temporal existence. (1995, p. 651 n 13)

supposed to support the principle that compensation across stages of a person's life is not possible because the goods we experience at one time are not properly related to the evils we experience at another.

[E]vil can never be wiped off, and consequently can never be balanced, by the good that exists alongside or after it.... For that thousands had lived in happiness and joy would never do away with the anguish and death-agony of one individual; and just as little does my present well-being undo my previous sufferings. (SW 3: 661/ WWR 2: 576)

Take an evil at some time in an individual's life. Let the goods that exist 'alongside' this evil be the goods at that time in the lives of other individuals, and let the goods that exist 'after it' be the future goods in this individual's life. Schopenhauer, on this interpretation, wants to defend the principle that an evil at one time in one individual's life cannot be compensated by (i) a good at the same time in a different individual's life, or by (ii) a good at a different time in that same individual's life.

We might try to expand upon Schopenhauer's brief remark by telling some analogous stories. First, suppose we were asked to distribute pains and pleasures throughout a large population. We might have the following thought: if only a single person were to have a greater distribution of pain than pleasure, it shouldn't matter to her how many other people there were who lived in happiness and joy. We could make the rest of the population happier

Migotti does not attempt to develop this suggestion, adding only that this further argument can be summarized in Schopenhauer's claim that '*[t]ime and the fleeting nature of all things therein, and by means thereof, are merely the form wherein is revealed to the will-to-live, which as the thing-in-itself is imperishable, the vanity of that striving*' (SW 6: 301/ PP 2: 283).

and happier, but it would not make her misery any more palatable. Their happiness would fill up their lives just as her misery would fill up her own. Thus, it should not make the distribution of goods throughout the population any more acceptable. Next, suppose we were asked to distribute pains and pleasures throughout a single life. We might have an analogous thought in this case: if only a single moment of time in my life were to have a greater distribution of pain than pleasure, it would not matter how many earlier or later times in my life were full of pleasures. We could make the rest of my life better and better, but it would not make the misery at that time any more palatable. My future pleasures would ‘fill their time just as [my present pain] fills its own’ (SW 3: 662/ WWR 2: 577). Thus, it should not make the distribution of goods throughout my life any more acceptable.

If interpersonal and cross-temporal, intrapersonal compensation are indeed genuinely analogous, then we should expect to find any pair of structurally similar interpersonal and cross-temporal, intrapersonal stories equally plausible. I find the above stories—schematic though they may be—equally plausible. I take this to give us *prima facie* reason to think that these cases might indeed be analogous. But it doesn’t tell us what they have in common. It suggests an analogy, but doesn’t explain it. If we knew why Schopenhauer thought that cross-temporal, intrapersonal compensation was a problem, then we might be able to explain what interpersonal and cross-temporal, intrapersonal compensation are supposed to have in common.

So why did Schopenhauer think it impossible for goods experienced at one time to compensate for evils experienced at another? We don’t have much to go on here. All he says in his published writings is that:

this is impossible, because my present pain is never abolished by future pleasures, the latter fill their time just as the former fills its own. (SW 3: 662/ WWR 2: 577)

But he says a bit more in the margin of his notebooks:

They can no more compensate [*kompensiren*] one another than can the happiness of one individual compensate the suffering of another; for in the end it is all the same whether the pleasure and pain, appearing at different times, take place in one and the same consciousness or in two different ones. (HN 3: 651 n/ MR 3: 706 n)

A good must appear in consciousness at the same time as an evil if that good is to compensate for it. Unless they appear together in consciousness, it doesn't matter whether they appear in one stream of consciousness or in two.

I think Schopenhauer has some kind of experiential requirement here, according to which an experiential evil can be compensated by a good only if it is experientially related to that good. Unlike the requirement we saw above, this is not a requirement on the value of goods and evils. There might well be some weighty non-experiential goods (including freedom, health, virtue, and youth). But while these goods might be good for us regardless of whether we experience them, the same cannot be said for whether they provide us compensation.¹³ A person might be free, healthy, virtuous, and young, but she will receive no compensation from these goods unless she takes some comfort in them. But then it will be the experience of solace that primarily compensates for her suffering, and not simply the

¹³ To give an extreme example: suppose there were a cult whose members believed that by subjecting their children to extreme torture, they could summon a benign race of space aliens who would take their children away to paradise. These children might be deeply loved by their misguided parents, but the non-experiential good of being loved would seem to do nothing on its own to compensate for the evils they must endure.

goods that provide her with that solace. The present requirement is not a requirement on the value of goods and evils, but on the relation in which these goods and evils must stand for compensation to occur. They must, it seems, be simultaneously experienced.¹⁴

It is not, as is commonly held, the separateness of persons that matters for compensation, but rather the separateness of experience.¹⁵ Another person's pleasure cannot compensate for my pain because I cannot properly experience that pleasure together with my own. It takes place in his consciousness, not mine. It fills him up, and cannot spill

¹⁴ Windelband is, as mentioned in footnote 12 above, wholly in agreement with Schopenhauer on this point. He claims that feelings of pleasure cannot provide compensation for feelings of displeasure unless 'they occur simultaneously in the same individual as opposing moments of his emotional states' ([1876] 1911, vol. 2, p. 216). Indeed, Windelband not only endorses 'the saying that the glass of beer we drink today does not compensate for the thirst that plagued us ten years ago', he also endorses 'the more general proposition...that no misfortune that once afflicted us can be made good by any future happiness' ([1876] 1911, vol. 2, pp. 216-17). But he doesn't seem to realize that he has thereby played right into Schopenhauer's hands.

¹⁵ Note that the moral reading of the compensation argument suggested by Cartwright (2008, pp. 292-3, 306) and Parfit (2011, vol. 2, pp. 610-12) takes its cue from a moral intuition about the importance of the separateness of persons: namely, that the suffering of one person cannot be morally justified by the happiness of others. There are, however, two main problems with this reading. The first is that it lacks textual support: 'there is', as Woods (2014, p. 74) points out, 'little in the argument itself to suggest that Schopenhauer intended for it to be understood as resting on a moral basis'. A second—much deeper—problem with this reading is that, as Beiser (2016, p. 48) points out, 'it does not reflect fully the intention behind Schopenhauer's argument. [For] Schopenhauer's case against pain is meant to apply not only between individuals but also within one individual'. The interpretation I am developing here seeks to avoid both these problems: first, by focusing on the language of compensation present in the text; and, second, by accounting for both interpersonal as well as intrapersonal compensation.

over into me. But my past and future experiences are alike this respect. They take place in my past or future consciousness, not in my present consciousness. They fill up their time, and cannot spill over into the present. I cannot experience my past—or even my future—pleasures together with my present pains, and so they can do nothing to compensate for them.¹⁶ My past and future pleasures are experientially partitioned off from my present suffering just as your present well-being is experientially sectioned off from my present suffering. It is because of this partitioning of experience that it doesn't matter whether goods and evils experienced at different time 'take place in the same consciousness or in two'.

We can reconstruct the rationale for premise (2) as follows:

(2.4) Every life contains evils that exist at some time in that life and are not compensated by any goods that exist at that same time in that same life.

(2.5) All compensation must either take place between goods and evils that exist at the same time in the same life or else between goods and evils that exist at different times in the same life.

(2.6) No good that exists at one time in a life can compensate for any evil that exists at another time in that same life.

(2.7) *Therefore*, every life contains uncompensated evils (from 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6).

Premise (2.4) comes from the observation that there are moments in each of our lives that contain nothing but evils. We need only look to the margins of life to find them. So, for

¹⁶ This is not to say that past pleasures and pains cannot reverberate in the present, that they cannot cause present pleasures or pains. I think they can. The memory of a pleasant experience might bring some comfort, while the trauma of a past experience might cause great pain. But the pleasures and pains we experience in such cases are present ones, not past ones. Windelband ([1876] 1911, vol. 2, p. 217) makes a similar point.

example, the process of dying can be quite painful. It is often filled with nothing but anguish and agony. By focusing on such ills, Schopenhauer locates the problematic moments near the end of life. But we could just as well locate them near the beginning. Infants and young children cry when they are teething, when they are hungry, when they soil themselves. Even the most fabulous lives will contain moments that are exposed to such evils. We have no reason to think that anyone is immune to them. All our lives thus appear to contain evils that are not even partially compensated by any contemporaneous goods.

Premise (2.5) is based on the thesis that interpersonal compensation is impossible: goods had by one person can never compensate for evils had by another. All compensation must be intrapersonal. But since everything that is good for us is good for us at some time,¹⁷ all intrapersonal compensation must either take place between goods and evils that exist at the same time or else between goods and evils that exist at different times.

Premise (2.6) falls out of the experiential constraint on compensation. Goods and evils that exist at different times cannot appear together in experience. Thus, cross-temporal, intrapersonal compensation is impossible: goods had by a person at one time can never compensate for evils had by that very same person at another time.

We have now the resources to provide an alternative interpretation of the compensation argument: Life's goods are not properly situated to compensate for all of its evils. Some of those evils either need to be rearranged or removed. But, given the way things are arranged, those evils can never be repaid. Thus, holding fixed the overall distribution of

¹⁷ We might deny the generality of this claim. For perhaps some non-experiential goods are not good for us at any particular time. But the claim that everything that is experientially good for us must be good for us at some time looks to be true, which is all that we require here.

goods and evils, our lives wouldn't be worth living even 'were the evil in the world...a hundred times less than it is' (SW 3: 661/ WWR 2: 576).

This interpretation of the argument allows us to avoid many of the complaints that have been lodged against it. David Cartwright (1988, p. 61) complains that for Schopenhauer the mere existence of evil 'devalues life' and so '[t]he only type of world that would be justified is a world in which there is *no* suffering'. Similarly, Christopher Janaway (1994, p. 97) complains that Schopenhauer is committed to thinking 'that seventy years of contentment are rendered worthless by a single episode of pain'. But Schopenhauer does not need to claim that life's goods are devalued or rendered worthless by any of its evils. These goods can retain their value, but they will do nothing to compensate for life's evils.

Another complaint, due to Julian Young (1987, p. 68), is that Schopenhauer is guilty of perfectionist thinking: that is, that he infers from the fact that something can never be perfect, that it would be better if it didn't exist. But Schopenhauer does not demand that there be no evils at all. He simply demands that there be no uncompensated evils.

A third complaint, due to Frederick Beiser (2016, p. 48), is that the argument betrays 'an extraordinary sensitivity to pain. After all, most people prefer enduring root canal treatment for the pleasure of eating with their natural teeth'. But Schopenhauer does not need to deny this. He only needs to deny that these pleasures provide compensation for the pain and suffering that makes them possible; he could even claim that while we sit in the dentist's chair, our anticipation of such pleasures can compensate for whatever pains we concurrently endure by making them easier to bear.

3.1 Philosophical objections and replies

Let's turn now to some objections to this argument. The first objection is based on the claim that it is good simply to be alive. This idea is developed quite nicely by Thomas Nagel:

There are elements which if added to one's experience make life better; there are other elements which, if added to one's experience make life worse. But what remains when these are set aside is not merely *neutral*: it is emphatically positive. Therefore life is worth living even when the bad elements of experience are plentiful, and the good ones too meager to outweigh the bad ones on their own. The additional positive weight is supplied by experience itself, rather than by any of its contents. (1979, p. 2)

We possess this good at every moment of our lives. It thus stands in the right structural relations to all of the myriad evils we might experience. But if compensation could be had on the cheap, then the good we get simply by being alive might be able to compensate for the evils we experience in life. Thus, premise (2.4) appears to be false.

Schopenhauer replies that we experience boredom as 'the feeling of [life's] emptiness'. But if life had 'a positive value and in itself a real intrinsic worth, there could not possibly be any boredom. On the contrary, mere existence in itself would necessarily fill our hearts and satisfy us' (SW 6: 305/ PP 2: 287). Schopenhauer here turns Nagel on his head. He wants to say: set aside all those elements which when added to experience make life better or worse. What remains is not merely neutral: it is emphatically *negative*! Imagine the incessant boredom that would ensue were we to experience such an unaugmented existence for an extended period of time. We shouldn't prefer that to nonexistence. No, we should rather prefer non-existence to it. I think Schopenhauer is overstating his case a bit here. But the basic idea is a good one. If Nagel were right that the value of an unaugmented existence

is positive, then we should prefer it to non-existence. We would, after all, be getting a little bit of good and we wouldn't be getting anything bad. But surely we make no mistake if we are indifferent between non-existence and an unaugmented existence. It's just not the case that it is good simply to be alive. And so we will need to look elsewhere if we want to find compensation for life's evils.

The second objection begins with the observation that we often make great sacrifices for the sake of our children. We give up sleep, work longer hours, change jobs, or take on additional employment, all simply to secure the mere possibility of better opportunities for them. We would gladly suffer a greater hardship to save them from a lesser one; we'd even sacrifice our lives for them. The evils in our lives can sometimes be compensated by goods in the lives of those we care about (see Parfit 1984, p. 337, 1986, pp. 870-1). But what is the exception for interpersonal compensation seems to be the rule for cross-temporal, intrapersonal compensation. We tend to care about our future selves. But if our present evils can be compensated by the present and future goods of those we care about, they can be compensated by our own future goods as well. The principles about the impossibility of interpersonal and cross-temporal, intrapersonal compensation both admit of qualification. Thus, premises (2.5) and (2.6) are both false.

I reply on Schopenhauer's behalf that we don't, as infants, have any concern for our adult selves. But if so, then it doesn't seem as though the evils we experience as infants can be compensated by goods we experience later in life. For if cross-temporal compensation is made possible by our concern for the well-being of those we care about, then this only shows that forward-looking (or future-directed) cross-temporal compensation is possible. It doesn't show that backward-looking cross-temporal compensation is possible. I might now

gain some consolation for evils I have suffered in the past, but if my past self didn't (yet) care about my present well-being, he will receive no such consolation. There is, it seems, a difference between undergoing an evil with the intention of producing a good for one's future self or for someone else, on the one hand, and undergoing an evil without such an intention and a good nevertheless being produced, on the other.¹⁸ The cases in which goods for someone else, and likewise goods for our future selves, intuitively compensate for the evils that we endure all appear to be ones where an intention to produce such goods is present. Indeed, even some death bed cases might be ones where we intentionally undergo evils for the sake of future goods. So, for example, a person might elect to die later, and painfully, rather than earlier, and painlessly, because doing so affords her an opportunity to meet her grandchildren. But in the case of infancy, no corresponding intention is present.¹⁹ Thus, by placing the moments where the evils we experience go uncompensated by any simultaneously existing goods in our infancy (rather than at our death), I mean to bypass the

¹⁸ Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this helpful formulation.

¹⁹ One might worry that this reply fails to consider the possibility of a parent intentionally allowing his infant child to undergo an evil for the sake of a good to be enjoyed by that child's future self. But, in this case, the intention to produce a future good is not had by the affected party. It is the parent, and not the child, who here intends for the child to undergo an evil with the intention of producing a good for that child's future self. The child does not herself elect to undergo this evil; she does not—and cannot—sign off on it. This is, thus, not a case in which a person herself undergoes an evil with the intention to producing some future good, but rather a case in which she undergoes an evil without such an intention where a good is nevertheless produced. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

worry introduced above. The objection might hold, but a revised version of the argument will still go through.²⁰

The third objection accepts the ban on cross-temporal, intrapersonal compensation, but seeks to find other ways for compensation to take place. The key here is that compensation needn't take place between the proper parts of a life; it might take place between the whole of a life and its parts. The goods of a life as a whole seem properly poised to compensate for its evils. We might grant that my pain at one time can never be compensated by my pleasures at other times, but add that it could be compensated by the lasting happiness of my life as a whole. Here we might ask: but at what time are goods had by the whole of my life good for me? If they are good for me at every time, then there will be no moment in my life where the evils are not compensated by any contemporaneous goods. If they are good for me at no time, then not all compensation needs to take place between goods and evils that exist at some time in a single life. Thus, if there are goods that attach to our lives as a whole, then either premise (2.4) or (2.5) will be false.

I take Schopenhauer's reply to be that there aren't any features of a life as a whole which could do any compensatory work. There are three main candidates: a life as a whole might be good due to the mere *presence* of certain goods in it, the sheer *amount* of various goods in it, or the overall *distribution* of all those goods throughout it. We might think, first,

²⁰ A similar argument has recently been put forward by Belshaw (2012), who argues that the evils experienced by our infant selves are not compensated by the goods experienced by our later selves. But, for Belshaw, this is due to facts about personal identity: I am not the same person as my infant self, and so compensation between his evils and my goods is not possible. The argument that I attribute to Schopenhauer does not rely upon any such radical claims about personal identity.

that a life as a whole could be good simply by containing some special kind of good. But if there were such a good, it would have to be something complete, a *summum bonum*, and Schopenhauer thinks that there is no such thing (cf. SW 2: 428/ WWR 1: 362). We might think, next, that a life as a whole could be good simply by containing more good than evil. But this can't be enough on its own; the shape of that life also seems to matter.²¹ We might think, last, that a life with the right distribution of goods and evils would be good as a whole. But Schopenhauer seems to think that any such distribution would need to contain periods of lasting happiness, and he thinks that such a life is unattainable (cf. SW 2: 366-81/ WWR 1: 311-23).

Let us take stock. The argument that I have attributed to Schopenhauer does not give him everything he wants. It doesn't show that if death were the complete and total end of our existence, 'so that the alternative "to be or not to be" lay before us in the full sense of the words, it could be chosen unconditionally as a highly desirable termination ("a consummation devoutly to be wish'd")' (SW 2: 383/ WWR 1: 324). My life will, for all we have seen, still be worth finishing provided that there are no uncompensated evils in my future. But, given that there are uncompensated evils in my past, Schopenhauer's compensation argument—if sound—will have managed to show that my life was not worth starting.²²

²¹ The importance of the shape of a life has been stressed by Velleman (1991). These considerations have been echoed in the present context by Benatar (2006, pp. 61-3).

²² The distinction between a life's being worth starting and a life's being worth continuing is due to Benatar (2006, pp. 22-3). A similar distinction between a life's being ultimately choiceworthy and its being worth living

3.2 A lingering textual difficulty

There is, however, a lingering textual difficulty for my interpretation. The argument I've attributed to Schopenhauer will only go through if we are all exposed to *bare evils*: evils that are not accompanied by any simultaneous goods. But Schopenhauer draws a much stronger inference; namely, that 'the mere existence of evil decides the matter' (SW 3: 661/ WWR 2: 576), that 'there would have to be no sufferings at all' in order for life to 'pay for itself' (SW 3: 662/ WWR 2: 577). We might attempt to circumvent this problem by somehow validating Schopenhauer's inference or—as a last resort—by simply insisting that he has overstated his case.

In order to both validate Schopenhauer's inference and preserve my interpretation of his stated reasons, we would need to attribute an additional assumption to Schopenhauer which ensures that our lives contain bare evils if they contain any evils at all, but is not itself sufficient to show that our lives contain uncompensated evils. So, for example, were Schopenhauer to assume that the experience of pain is incompatible with the experience of pleasure, he could legitimately infer the existence of bare evil from the mere existence of evil, but he would still need to claim that bare evils cannot be compensated by goods that are experienced at other times in order to show that our lives all contain uncompensated evils. Thus, the incompatibility thesis is all I need to square my interpretation with Schopenhauer's more extreme claims.

for those who are already alive has been drawn in the secondary literature on Schopenhauer (see Migotti 1995, p. 657).

But is there any reason to attribute this thesis to Schopenhauer? It might draw some textual support from Schopenhauer's claim that my future pleasures 'fill their time just as [my present pain] fills its own' (SW 3: 662/ WWR 2: 577). For if pleasures and pains were supposed to *completely* fill their respective times, then they would turn out to be incompatible with each other. It could then draw additional support from Schopenhauer's observation that painful experiences distract us from otherwise enjoying ourselves: we can, he thinks, 'be made perfectly miserable by trifling incidents, but perfectly happy by nothing in the world' (SW 3: 663/ WWR 2: 578). Or, as he puts it elsewhere,

[j]ust as we *do not feel* the health of our body, but only the small spot where the shoe pinches, so we do not think of all our affairs that are going perfectly well, but only of some insignificant trifle that annoys us. (SW 6: 309/ PP 2: 291)

It seems that Schopenhauer, at least sometimes, appears to endorse the claim that the experience of pain—no matter how slight—crowds out, and is thus incompatible with, the experience of pleasure.

It is not, however, entirely clear whether Schopenhauer is ultimately committed to this thesis. For, almost immediately after presenting the compensation argument, he claims that 'everything agreeable is mixed with something disagreeable, every enjoyment is always only half an enjoyment' (SW 3: 662/ WWR 2: 577). This does not look like something Schopenhauer would say if he thought that the experience of pain was incompatible with the experience of pleasure and thus that the experience of pleasure completely fills its own time.²³ This claim will, however, only conflict with the incompatibility thesis if Schopenhauer

²³ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me on this point.

takes everything agreeable not simply to be surrounded by—not simply to precede and be followed by—something disagreeable but to be simultaneously mixed together with it in experience. But although I don't think it is entirely clear whether Schopenhauer does this, I admit that the textual support for the incompatibility thesis is far from compelling. Thus, it seems that I must either insist that Schopenhauer is overstating his case or else admit that there is something wrong with my interpretation of his argument.

I would prefer not to have to say that Schopenhauer is overstating his case. But this is, I think, only a *prima facie* mark against my interpretation. If there were no more plausible way to capture and explain Schopenhauer's stated reasons (and there were no auxiliary assumptions that could be plausibly attributed to him), it would be best and most charitable overall to assume that he is simply overstating his case. I shall turn, then, to what I take to be the best competing interpretation.

4 The mere existence of evil

Some commentators have focused their attention on Schopenhauer's claim that the mere existence of evil decides the matter. So, for example, Johannes Volkelt claims that on Schopenhauer's view:

it is wrong to suppose that any determinate degree of pain could be balanced [*ausgeglichen*] by the same degree of pleasure. Every pain is, even when followed by great joy, unbalanceable [*unausgleichbar*], unabolishable [*unaufhebbar*]. Even the happiness of thousands could never make up [*aufwiegen*] for the anguish and death-agony of one individual. (1900, p. 222)

Similarly, Georg Simmel claims that for Schopenhauer:

no proportion of happiness and suffering could be “just” [I]t is not the magnitude of suffering, but rather the fact that there is any suffering at all which makes the existence of the world inexplicable [*Unverantwortlichem*], and gives an infinite advantage to nonbeing over being; because pain as such cannot be balanced [*aufgewogen*], no joy of whatever amount could make good any suffering. (1907, pp. 88-9/ 1986, pp. 63-4)

These commentators assert that, for Schopenhauer, pain and suffering cannot be balanced or offset by any goods. But they don't explain why Schopenhauer would have believed this. The only textual support for attributing this claim to Schopenhauer comes not in chapter 46 when he is presenting the compensation argument, but in chapter 17 where he is discussing the problem of evil. Schopenhauer there claims that:

Even if [the evil and wickedness in the world] were in the most just relation to each other, and were also far outweighed [*überwogen*] by the good, they are nevertheless something that absolutely and in general ought not to be. (SW 3: 190/ WWR 2: 171-2)

The suggestion here seems to be that the evils of the world—and, more important for our purposes, the evils of life—do not admit of compensation because they are something that should not exist. A good could compensate for an evil only if it could eliminate, expunge, remove, take away, or otherwise undo that evil. But once an evil has occurred, it cannot be undone by any subsequent (or even simultaneous) goods. Thus, a life that contains a single evil, contains an uncompensated evil.

We can thus reconstruct the rationale for premise (2) of the compensation argument as follows:

(2.8) Every life contains some evils.

(2.9) Evils cannot be compensated.

(2.10) *Therefore*, every life contains uncompensated evils (from 2.8 and 2.9).

Premise (2.8) should be entirely uncontroversial. We all experience pain no matter how slight. Thus, our lives all contain some evil.

Premise (2.9) comes from the claim that evil is something that absolutely should not exist. But something that absolutely should not exist cannot be compensated, it can only be eradicated. Thus, since nothing that has occurred can be undone, the evils in life do not admit of compensation.

We have arrived at what I take to be the best competitor to my own interpretation.²⁴ The main advantage of this interpretation over my own is that it appears to validate Schopenhauer's more extreme inferences on the basis of his stated reasons. I do not believe, however, that it adequately captures or ultimately explains those reasons.

The first problem with this interpretation is that it places undue emphasis on the impossibility of eliminating evils that have already occurred. For while Schopenhauer does claim that compensation is impossible because 'evil can never be wiped off (*getilgt*)...by the good that exists alongside or after it' (SW 3: 661/ WWR 2: 576) and that 'my present pain is never abolished (*aufgehoben*) by future pleasures' (SW 3: 662/ WWR 2: 577), he does so in the context of a running monetary metaphor where these claims are best understood in

²⁴ Volkelt (1900, p. 222), Simmel (1907, pp. 88-9/ 1986, pp. 63-4), Salter (1911, pp. 274-5), Tsanoff (1931, p. 287), Krusé (1932, p. 394), and Cartwright (1988, p. 62) all appear to interpret Schopenhauer along these lines. Janaway (1994, p. 96, 1999, p. 332) and Woods (2014, pp. 67-8) consider similar suggestions, but ultimately take the problem to stem from the negativity thesis.

terms of the wiping away (or repayment) and the abolition (or cancellation) of a debt. The claim that my present well-being does not undo (*ungeschehen macht*) my previous sufferings is the exception here, not the rule.

A second, related, problem is that while Schopenhauer's examples both place my pain and suffering at an earlier time than my pleasures or well-being, it is not the order of these goods and evils that ultimately seems to matter for him but rather the fact that they appear at different times (HN 3: 651 n/ MR 3: 706 n). This suggests that the impossibility of compensation should not rest on the fact that anything that has already occurred cannot be undone.

A third, more serious, problem is that Schopenhauer appears to take the claim that evil is something that should not exist to be a consequence rather than a premise of the compensation argument. For immediately after presenting this argument, Schopenhauer claims that:

since our state or condition is rather something that it were better should not be, everything that surrounds us bears the traces of this—just as in hell everything smells of sulphur—since everything is always imperfect and deceptive, everything agreeable is mixed with something disagreeable, every enjoyment is always only half an enjoyment, every gratification introduces its own disturbance, every relief new worries and troubles, every expedient for our daily and hourly needs leaves us in the lurch at every moment, and denies its service. (SW 3: 662/ WWR 2: 577)

Schopenhauer claims not that our state or condition is something that should not exist because it contains evils which themselves ought not to be; but rather that it is because our state or condition is something that ought not to be, that the evils which surround us bear

traces of this. Thus, to argue that life is not worth living because pain and suffering are ultimately something that should not exist is to get the explanation the wrong way around.

The best competing interpretation of the compensation argument thus fails to capture and explain Schopenhauer's stated reasons. But since this is the primary task of any interpretation of this argument and since my preferred interpretation is the only available interpretation capable of carrying out this task, we should prefer it to its competitors even though it does not appear to validate Schopenhauer's more extreme inferences.

5 Conclusion

The argument I have attributed to Schopenhauer captures and explains his stated reasons and relies solely upon premises that are *prima facie* plausible. We have all, as infants, experienced evils that were not experientially related to any goods. This is an undeniable, empirical fact. But we now face a trilemma. The following claims all have some plausibility.

The demand for compensation: a life is worth living only if its evils are partially compensated by its goods.

The experiential requirement: an evil can be compensated by some goods only if it is experientially related to those goods.

The naive optimistic thesis: some of our lives are worth living.

Yet, given an undeniable fact about our infancy, these claims turn out to be mutually inconsistent. One of them must be false. We might side with Schopenhauer and take the compensation argument to show that the problem lies with the naive optimistic thesis. Or we might side against Schopenhauer and attempt to locate the problem elsewhere.

We might take the problem to lie with the demand for compensation.²⁵ One knee-jerk response is to claim that the only reason we take this demand to be plausible is because we naively assume that uncompensated evils are so bad as to make our non-existence preferable to existence. But, the response continues, once we come to appreciate the experiential requirement, we will see that this naive assumption is mistaken: for the fact that an evil is uncompensated has very little to do with how bad it is. We might simply claim that the goods in life can be worth the evils we suffer even though they do not—and cannot—compensate for them. But since the demand for compensation has a great deal of *prima facie* plausibility, it must be stressed that this would in itself be a surprising and philosophically interesting result.

It has not been my intention to show that the compensation argument is sound. I certainly hope that it is not. But, given the gravity of its conclusion and the plausibility of its premises, it cannot be ignored. In the end, Schopenhauer's argument is philosophically

²⁵ Parfit, for example, rejects an analogous demand that a world not contain any uncompensated evils. He asks us to

suppose [that] there have been many wretched people whose lives were worse than nothing, but whose lives were not very bad, since they do not involve long periods of intense suffering. Suppose next that, for each one person who has lived such a life, there have been at least a hundred people whose lives were very well worth living. (2011, vol. 2, p. 611)

In this case, the demand for compensation would, he thinks, be 'too extreme'. The overwhelming amount of goods would seem to be worth 'the uncompensated suffering of the unfortunate minority' (2011, vol. 2, p. 611). But while such a world appears to be worth starting even though it contains uncompensated evils, this may, as even Parfit admits, just 'be wishful thinking' (2011, vol. 2, p. 612).

interesting because even if we want to avoid it, we must still give up something that seems *prima facie* plausible.

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