

Schopenhauer's Pessimism

Byron Simmons, Texas A&M University

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Abstract: Optimism and pessimism are two diametrically opposed views about the value of existence. Optimists maintain that existence is better than non-existence, while pessimists hold that it is worse. Arthur Schopenhauer put forward a variety of arguments against optimism and for pessimism. I will offer a synoptic reading of these arguments, which aims to show that while Schopenhauer's case against optimism primarily focuses on the value or disvalue of life's contents, his case for pessimism focuses on the ways in which life as a whole is structurally defective.

1. Introduction

The most fundamental axiological questions concern the value of existence: Is the world something that ought to be? Is life a gift to be cherished? Is existence preferable to non-existence? *Optimists* answer such questions in the affirmative, *pessimists* answer them resoundingly in the negative. But while optimists and pessimists offer vastly different answers to these questions, they nevertheless proceed from a common starting point: namely, the observation that the world and life are marked by suffering and death (see SW 3: 176-7/WWR 2: 170).

Optimists seek to provide a theoretical justification for this suffering. They might, to this end, insist that this is the best of all possible worlds or else take the existence of our world to be 'justified by itself and therefore praise it' (SW 3: 187/WWR 2: 179). All is well, they might declare; 'Whatever IS, is RIGHT'.¹ For since 'everything which exists be according to a good order and for the best', there can be 'no such thing as real ill in the universe, nothing ill with respect to the whole'.² 'All partial Evil' is thus 'universal Good'.³ Optimists maintain, moreover, that human existence is 'a gift to be gratefully acknowledged, given by a supreme good governed by wisdom and therefore intrinsically praiseworthy, laudable and joyful' (SW 3: 653/WWR 2: 585). But they needn't deny that our existence contains various trials and tribulations; they simply take them to be accidental and avoidable, while life itself is taken to be 'a desirable state', the goal of which is to be happy (SW 3: 671/WWR 2: 600).

Pessimists, on the other hand, aim to show that there can be no practical compensation for suffering. They might insist that our world, far from being the best, 'is in fact the *worst* of all possible worlds' (SW 3: 669/WWR 2: 598), or otherwise declare that 'we should be sorry rather than glad about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; [and] that it is something that fundamentally should not be' (SW 3: 661/WWR 2: 592, see also SW 3: 187-8/WWR 2: 179). Pessimists maintain, moreover, that human existence 'far from having the character of a *gift*, has the completely opposite character of *guilty indebtedness*. The collection of this debt appears in the form of the urgent requirements, tortured desires, and endless need, all introduced by human

¹ Pope ([1733-34] 2016: Ep. I, 294).

² Shaftesbury ([1711] 1999: 164-5).

³ Pope ([1733-34] 2016: Ep. I, 292).

existence itself' (SW 3: 665-6/WWR 2: 595). Life, accordingly, is 'a constant suffering' (SW 3: 271/WWR 2: 252). It has no goal except perhaps for 'the recognition that we would have been better off not existing' (SW 3: 695/WWR 2: 620).

It should be clear that optimism and pessimism, so described, are not so much precisely specified theses as they are broadly characterized pictures. They bring together a variety of contrary—and not merely contradictory—claims, which might include: (1) a claim about the comparative goodness or badness of our world, about whether it is among the best or the worst of all possible worlds, (2) a claim about the intrinsic goodness or badness of our world, about whether it is justified by itself or something which should not really exist, or (3) a claim about the overall value or disvalue of human life or conscious existence, about whether it is better or worse than complete non-existence. These two pictures might be developed in different ways, but it is a general commitment about the value of existence which best brings them into focus.⁴

Optimism received its first systematic exposition in G. W. Leibniz's *Theodicy* (1710). God, being a supremely perfect being, was disposed by his very nature to create the best of all possible worlds:

⁴ I thus take the above claims to give expression to an *evaluative* conception of optimism and pessimism, which should be distinguished from both a *psychological* conception, where optimism and pessimism are inclinations to take a positive or a negative view of things, to believe in the best or worst possible outcomes (to be disposed, for example, to see the glass as half-full or half-empty), and an *historical* conception, where optimism and pessimism are claims that humans grow better or worse in society, that world-history is slowly progressing or declining. For helpful discussion, see Dahlkvist (2007: 13-14, 31-37), van der Lugt (2021: 9-13), and Segev (2022: 1-11).

this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best. For a lesser evil is a kind of good, even so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a greater good; and there would be something to correct in the actions of God if it were possible to do better.... [S]o it may be said...that if there were not the best (*optimum*) among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any. (G 6: 107/H 128)

Leibniz's argument is *a priori* in the pre-Kantian sense: it proceeds from the cause to its effect, namely, from the nature of God (which is prior) to the value of the world (which is posterior).

Leibniz's system of optimism was quickly accused of failing to conform to Christian dogma and was later satirized in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759).⁵ But it was not until the 19th century that the optimist's central commitment to the value of existence came under sustained philosophical attack. In the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), Arthur Schopenhauer argued that if optimism were true, happiness would be 'our being's end and aim'⁶ and must thereby be possible for us; but since it is not possible for us, optimism must be false. It was, however, really only in the supplementary essays contained in the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation* (1844) that Schopenhauer attempted to provide arguments not just for the falsity of optimism, but for the truth of pessimism as well.

⁵ For a helpful overview of the reception of Leibniz's optimism, see Strickland (2019). For a more comprehensive survey, see Caro (2020).

⁶ Pope ([1733-34] 2016: Ep. IV, 1).

I will attempt to provide a synoptic reading of these arguments. In sections 2-3, I will present Schopenhauer's best-known argument against optimism and discuss some standard objections. In sections 4-6, I will examine some supplementary arguments which Schopenhauer developed in response to these kinds of objections. And, in sections 7-8, I will turn to Schopenhauer's arguments for pessimism, which, unlike his arguments against optimism, focus not on the value or disvalue of life's contents, but on the ways in which life as a whole is structurally defective.

2. The *a priori* argument

Schopenhauer's best-known argument against optimism appears in §§56-58 of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*.⁷ He there sets out to investigate

the primary, elementary characteristics of human life at the most universal level, with a view towards convincing [us] *a priori* that human life is dispositionally incapable of true happiness, that it is essentially a multifaceted suffering and a thoroughly disastrous condition. (SW 2: 381/WWR 1: 349)

This investigation, much like Leibniz's argument above, would appear to be *a priori* in the pre-Kantian sense: it proceeds from our essence as will (which is prior) to its manifestation

⁷ This argument has been widely discussed in the secondary literature. See, for instance, Young (1987: 56-61), Cartwright (1988: 56-9), Soll (1988: 110-12), Janaway (1999: 327-35), Young (2005: 209-18), Reginster (2006: 106-23), Fernández (2006), Gemes and Janaway (2012: 287-8), Soll (2012), Vasalou (2013: 127-41), Beiser (2014: 402-7), Vandenabeele (2015: 18-23), Beiser (2016: 49-51), Vanden Auweele (2017: 130-6), Hassan (2021), and van der Lugt (2021: 342-5).

in the world, i.e., to human life or conscious existence (which is posterior). Schopenhauer intends to show that the unavoidable suffering in human life is grounded in our essence. Pain and suffering are not, as the optimist maintains, accidental and avoidable, but are instead 'essential...and unavoidable' (SW 2: 372/WWR 1: 342). It is not pain and suffering but rather happiness, which, being purely negative, is only an accidental part of our existence.

Schopenhauer's argument proceeds in two steps: he, first, argues that given our inner essence as will, human life is a multifaceted suffering which is 'thrown back and forth between pain and boredom' (SW 2: 371/WWR 1: 341); he, then, argues that since '[a]ll satisfaction...is actually and essentially only ever *negative* and absolutely never positive' (SW 2: 376/WWR 1: 345), pain and boredom 'are the ingredients out of which [life] is ultimately composed' (SW 2: 368/WWR 1: 338). He thus concludes that life is not just a multifaceted suffering, it is also a thoroughly disastrous condition: one in which '[t]rue and lasting happiness is not possible' (SW 2: 378/WWR 1: 347) and cannot, therefore, be the goal of our existence.

Let's begin with Schopenhauer's account of human desire, which helps to underwrite his argument. The essence of every individual human being, we are told, is will: 'a striving without aim and without end' (SW 2: 379/WWR 1: 347, see also SW 2: 193-6/WWR 1: 187-9). But to strive is to suffer (see SW 2: 365/WWR 1: 336). And since our will is a constant striving, it cannot latch onto any end or goal and remain satisfied by its attainment. For, in order to achieve lasting and permanent satisfaction from the attainment of some end, we would need to have that end as our ultimate goal. But in the absence of such a goal, we are left to strive after one thing and then another. Every satisfaction is, then, 'only the beginning

of a new striving' (SW 2: 365/WWR 1: 336); the willing which constitutes our essence is, thus, 'fully comparable to an unquenchable thirst' (SW 2: 367/WWR 1: 338).

We can now proceed to Schopenhauer's argument. The first step is to show that due to our essence as will, our lives are a multifaceted suffering. There are, Schopenhauer maintains, two fundamental sources of human suffering: want, on the one hand, and, boredom, on the other (see SW 5: 355-6, 363/PP 1: 292, 299). *Want*, or *need*, arises from lack, from deficiency. For given our essence as striving, we cannot but strive to fill some lack or deficiency: we desire to remove it. This provides us with definite objects to will: when, for example, I am hungry, I desire food and aim to satisfy my hunger; when you are thirsty, you desire water and aim to quench your thirst. The attainment of these objects becomes a temporary goal which we strive to achieve. But the inhibition of such a goal is suffering, and it is experienced as pain. *Boredom*, unlike want and need, arises from an absence of deficiency, from emptiness. For when we lack definite objects to will, our inner essence as striving and willing asserts itself not as a desire, but as a 'longing without a definite object' (SW 2: 196/WWR 1: 189). We still strive, we still will, but 'the absence of a new desire is empty longing, languor, boredom' (SW 2: 307/WWR 1: 287). We experience boredom as 'an intolerable burden' (SW 2: 368/WWR 1: 338), 'a feeling of the most horrible desolation and emptiness' (SW 2: 430/WWR 1: 391), and thereby seek to escape it. We are set in motion by 'a striving to get rid of the burden of existence, ...to escape boredom' (SW 2: 369/WWR 1: 339).⁸ But when this striving is thwarted, we are led to suffer, and 'the struggle against

⁸ On the currently dominant interpretation, Schopenhauer takes boredom to result from the frustration of a will to will, i.e. from the frustration of a second-order desire to have—or, variably, to pursue the objects of—first-order desires. This interpretation is endorsed by Reginster (2004: 54-55, 2006: 122-3, 2007: 21-5, 2012:

[boredom] is just as tormenting [*quälend*] as the struggle against want' (SW 2: 370/WWR 1: 340, translation slightly modified). Thus, since we must always move between a state of deficiency and a state of the absence of deficiency, our lives will contain a multifaceted suffering: they will swing 'back and forth like a pendulum between pain and boredom' (SW 2: 368/WWR 1: 338). Any happiness we might manage to achieve will inevitably be interrupted and is therefore dispositionally unstable.⁹

The second step is to establish the negativity thesis. For even if Schopenhauer were to have shown that we are 'dispositionally incapable' of lasting happiness, he would not have shown that life does not contain moments of pure joy, and thus that it is 'a thoroughly disastrous condition'. There might, for all that has been said, still be some intrinsically desirable, positive state of pleasure that lies between pain and boredom. In order to rule out this possibility, Schopenhauer attempts to motivate the thesis that '[a]ll satisfaction, or what is generally called happiness, is actually and essentially only ever *negative* and absolutely

351-2), Young (2005: 210-13), Fernández (2006: 660-2), and Vanden Auweele (2017: 132-4). For dissenting opinions, see Fox (2022), who takes boredom to arise not from the frustration of a will to will, but from the frustration of a will to cognize, i.e., of a desire to engage in mental activity, and Woods (2019: 996-7), who takes the torment of boredom to be 'an objective, albeit introspective, *sensation*', not the 'mere subjective feeling' which corresponds with 'the frustration of a second-order willing'.

⁹ Leibniz claimed, in the *New Essays* (1704), that '*happiness* is a lasting state of pleasure, which cannot occur without continual progress to new pleasures' (G 5: 180/RB 194). Similarly, Bolingbroke maintained, in his posthumously published *Fragments or Minutes of Essays*, that happiness is 'a continued permanent series of agreeable sensations or of pleasure' ([1754] 1841: 364). But if Schopenhauer is correct, this kind of happiness cannot last for very long since it will inevitably be interrupted by pain or boredom.

never positive' (SW 2: 376/WWR 1: 345). There is, Schopenhauer argues, no positive state of pleasure:

because a desire, i.e. lack, is the prior condition for every pleasure. But the desire ends with satisfaction and so, consequently, does the pleasure. Thus satisfaction or happiness can never be anything more than the liberation from a pain or need.... (SW 2: 376/WWR 1: 345)

Pleasure, on this account, is essentially connected to the satisfaction of a desire, i.e., a striving for a definite object to fill some lack. It arises when we become aware of a move from a painful state of want, need, or lack, to a painless state where our desires are satisfied. But we do not feel anything simply in virtue of being in a painless state. For, unlike a state of lack or pain which is positive, there is nothing to be given to us directly. There is nothing about a painless state itself which could drive us to remain in it. A painless state can, however, appear pleasant when compared to a painful one from which we have been released. Indeed, Schopenhauer goes so far as to insist that being pleased at the recollection of 'needs, illnesses, wants and similar things that we have survived...is the only way for us to enjoy our present possessions' (SW 2: 377/WWR 1: 346).¹⁰

He concludes that since our lives contain a multifaced suffering without any positive pleasures, no true or lasting happiness is possible for us, and so cannot be the goal of our existence. Instead, our existence is a thoroughly disastrous condition in which pain and boredom 'are the ingredients out of which it is ultimately composed' (SW 2: 368/WWR 1:

¹⁰ See the discussion of impure pleasures in Plato's *Republic* IX, 538b-585a, which Schopenhauer himself refers to when presenting the negativity thesis at SW 4: 210/BM: 202. Also relevant is Kant's discussion of pleasure and pain in the *Anthropology* (7: 230-2).

338). Life, then, is a miserable journey whose final and unavoidable goal is death (see SW 2: 369/WWR 1: 339). We simply do not exist—as the optimist maintains—to be happy. There is nothing about human life that could make it preferable to non-existence. Thus, optimism is ‘not only an absurd, but even a truly *wicked* way of thinking, a bitter mockery of the unspeakable sufferings of humanity’ (SW 2: 385/WWR 1: 352).

3. The standard objections to the *a priori* argument

There are three standard objections to this argument. The first targets the claim that desiring implies pain and suffering: I might, for example, desire world peace, good weather, or maybe just a quiet place to sit and think, but the frustration—or non-satisfaction—of these desires does not thereby seem to cause me pain. I suffer them only insofar as they happen to me. Schopenhauer would thus appear to conflate mere non-satisfaction with genuine dissatisfaction.¹¹

This objection fails, however, to appreciate Schopenhauer’s special use of ‘desire’ as an active striving after a definite object intended to fill some need or lack. When we desire something in this sense, we do not merely sit back and idly wish for something to happen. We must actively strive to attain a definite object, not just passively hope for some state of affairs to obtain. It is because desiring is an active striving, an ‘anxious activity’ (SW 5: 363/PP 1: 299), born out of a dissatisfaction with our condition, and aimed at filling some need or lack, that ‘[t]he nature of every desire is pain’ (SW 2: 370/WWR 1: 340).

¹¹ This objection is raised by Young (1987: 58), Cartwright (1988: 57-9), Soll (1988: 112), Young (2005: 217-18), and Soll (2012: 302-4). It is discussed by Janaway (1999: 329-30) and Hassan (2021: 1492-3).

A second, more serious, objection targets the negativity thesis: there are, it would seem, positive states of pleasure which do not depend upon the satisfaction of a desire. There are some pleasures that would seem to be experienced directly: when we savor a delicious meal, marvel at some past accomplishment, or anticipate some future event, the pleasures we experience would seem to have an extendable duration and a consistent intensity. But if these pleasures merely arise from the satisfaction of a desire, we should expect them to diminish as the lack or need they fill diminishes. And yet what we find instead is that we are sometimes seemingly held suspended in a pleasurable state.¹² There are, moreover, other pleasures that would seem to arise in the absence of a pre-existing desire: when the smell of someone cooking in the other room comes to me unbidden and unannounced, when the taste of a new food strikes me as a surprise, or when the sound of beautiful music awakens me from my slumbers, I can enjoy these things and take pleasure in them. I don't need to have actively desired or even passively wished for any of them beforehand. Nor would my enjoyment of these things seem to depend upon a recognition that my current state is comparatively better than some prior state in which I lacked them. For, I can take pleasure in these things without first diverting my attention away from them. Thus, the pleasure that I experience in these cases does not appear to arise from the recognition that I am no longer

¹² This version of the objection was raised by Hartmann (1869: 541-543/1884: vol. 3, 13-15), Meyer (1872: 6-7), Volkelt ([1900] 1907: 240-1), and Simmel (1907: 89/1986: 64). It has been raised more recently by Janaway (1999: 333), Soll (2012: 308), and Simmons (2021: 124). It should be distinguished from a similar objection raised by Windelband ([1876] 1911: vol. 2, 214), Paulsen (1896: vol. 1, 267-8/1899: 291), and Riehl (1903: 211), which takes Schopenhauer to claim that there is no experience of pleasure at all, and then insists that there is something that we experience when we satisfy a painful desire.

in a disadvantageous state. It would instead appear to arise from the fact that I am drawn to stay in my present, pleasurable state.¹³ There are, finally, certain pleasures that arise not at the end of some activity, but during that very activity itself: my enjoyment of going for a run, reading a good book, or dancing at a party, does not come when I finish my run, when I get to the end of the book, or when I stop dancing. It is present throughout these activities. It comes not from having done something, but from doing it. It would seem that there are pleasures of action, not just of satisfaction.¹⁴ There would thus appear to be a variety of different positive states of pleasure.

In response to this objection, Schopenhauer might grant, for the sake of argument, that there are positive pleasures, but insist that they are either few and far between or else greatly outweighed by pain. He claims that ‘if we were to call everyone’s attention to the terrible pains and torments [*Quaalen*] their lives are constantly exposed to, they would be seized with horror’ (SW 2: 383/WWR 1: 351, translation slightly modified), and insists that if we ‘stop and compare the sum of all possible joys that a human being can have in his life with the sum of all possible sufferings that can afflict him in his life’, the balance will be clear

¹³ This version of the objection was raised by Windelband ([1876] 1911: vol. 2, 214), Paulsen (1896: 268/1899: 291-2), Volkelt ([1900] 1907: 240), and Riehl (1903: 211). It has been raised more recently by Reginster (2006: 111, 117-18), Soll (2012: 309-10), Vandenabeele (2015: 21-2), and Simmons (2021: 124).

¹⁴ This version of the objection was raised by Meyer (1872: 17), Paulsen (1896: vol. 1, 271-2/1899: 294-6), Volkelt ([1900] 1907: 238-9), Riehl (1903: 219), and Simmel (1907: 76-7/1986: 55-6). It has been raised more recently by Young (1987: 58), Soll (1988: 112, 2012: 303), Migotti (1995: 649), Young (2005: 217-18), Vasalou (2013: 135-41), and Vandenabeele (2015: 21). For discussion, see Beiser (2014: 404-5) and Hassan (2021: 1496-7).

(SW 3: 661/WWR 2: 591, cf. HN 3: 459/MR 3: 501). Life, he maintains, contains far less pleasure than pain. It is a living hell.

The main problem with this response is that absent any kind of hedonic calculus, none of Schopenhauer's evocative thought experiments or moving depictions of life's suffering are likely to persuade a recalcitrant optimist.¹⁵ Indeed, Schopenhauer was not content to insist, on the basis of any particular facts about the will's manifestation in the world, that life—or the world itself—contains less pleasure than pain. For he feared that any such insistence 'could easily be considered a simple declamation of human misery' (SW 2: 381/WWR 1: 350). Thus, if Schopenhauer is to concede—even just for the sake of argument—that there are positive states of pleasure, he will need to find some other way to demonstrate the falsity of the optimist's claim that life is a desirable state whose goal is to be happy.

A third, and potentially devastating, objection targets Schopenhauer's evaluative inference: even if his descriptive characterization of life as suffering were correct and life were to contain far less pleasure than pain, he wouldn't have succeeded in showing anything about the value of life; at least, not without adopting an extreme form of hedonism according to which pleasure and pain alone have intrinsic value. For our lives might contain other sources of value: they might be valuable on the whole not because of anything they contain, but because they are engaged in the potentially painful pursuit of something meaningful, valuable, or worthwhile; or life might even be an end in itself, our mere existence might simply be a blessing, it might just be good to be alive. Thus, a sophisticated optimist might

¹⁵ Schopenhauer has, in fact, been criticized on just this point. See, for instance, Meyer (1872: 11-12) and Paulsen (1896: vol. 1, 265-6/1899: 289-90). For discussion, see Beiser (2014: 404, 2016: 177-8).

insist that pleasure is not the only—or even the most valuable—gift which life bestows upon us.¹⁶

Schopenhauer was not content, however, to rest his case against the optimist on the *a priori* argument. In the years that followed the publication of his magnum opus, he sought to bolster his case by providing additional arguments against optimism. Many of these arguments first appeared in the manuscript-book *Adversaria* (1828-1830), and were later reworked into the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation* (1844) and the *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851). They can, I think, be seen as conceding to the optimist that there might be positive pleasures and as granting, moreover, that they aren't the only goods in life. But, as we shall see in sections 4-6, Schopenhauer thinks that we are fundamentally mistaken about the value we assign to such goods.

4. The bad business argument

Schopenhauer's primary supplementary argument against optimism appears in chapter 28 of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*.¹⁷ He there aims to show that even if life is not 'in fact a constant suffering', it is 'at least...a business that does not cover its costs' (SW 3: 271/WWR 2: 252). The argument begins with the observation that the strength

¹⁶ This objection was raised by Riehl (1903: 218-19) and Volkelt (1907: 248). It has been raised more recently by Janaway (1999: 334), Young (2005: 218-19), Vasalou (2013: 132-35), and Vandenabeele (2015: 22).

¹⁷ This argument first appeared in the manuscript-books *Foliant* [272-7] in 1827 and *Adversaria* [182-4] in 1829 (see HN 3: 326-9, 531-2/MR 3: 358-60, 579-80). It is discussed in Volkelt ([1900] 1907: 243-6).

of our efforts is vastly disproportionate to—and, thus, cannot be explained or justified by—the value of our aims. For

if...we compare people's restless, serious, and laborious strivings with what they get from it, or even what they could get, then the disproportion...becomes apparent, since we know that what is to be attained is utterly inadequate as an animating force for explaining that movement and restless drive. (SW 3: 408/WWR 2: 372)

We must exert a tremendous amount of energy either to stay alive or else to occupy our time. But what does, or could, this get us? 'What', as Schopenhauer puts it, 'is a brief deferral of death, a slight alleviation of need, a postponement of pain, a momentary silencing of desire' (SW 3: 408/WWR 2: 372)? What, we might add, are all the positive pleasures we might manage to experience in life?¹⁸ Are any of these things really worth the effort we put into them? Schopenhauer's answer is a resounding: 'No!'

If we look at both the indescribable artfulness of the preparations, the inexpressible wealth of the means, and the paltriness of what was aimed at and what was achieved side by side, then we are forced to realize that life is a business whose revenues fall by a long way to cover its costs. (SW 3: 403/WWR 2: 368)

But if there is such a 'clear disproportion between effort and reward', then our attachment to life is 'objectively foolish' (SW 3: 407/WWR 2: 372), and 'cannot be grounded in its *object*'

¹⁸ As Kant puts it in the *Critique of Judgment*: 'It is easy to decide what sort of value life has for us if it is assessed merely by what one enjoys (the natural end of the sum of all inclinations, happiness). Less than zero: for who would start life anew under the same conditions, or even according to a new and self-designed plan (but one still in accord with the course of nature), which would, however, still be aimed merely at enjoyment?' (5: 434 n)

(SW 3: 271/WWR 2: 252). Thus, given the fact that the strength of our efforts is vastly disproportionate to the value of our aims, it follows that our attachment to life is based on a gross overestimation of its value.

This argument does not target optimism directly: it does not show that life is no better than non-existence. It should, however, help to undermine our confidence in the value of life ‘so that our will might turn away from it’ (SW 3: 658/WWR 2: 589). But it aims to do this without denying the existence of positive pleasures or appealing to hedonic considerations. For Schopenhauer is not here weighing the value of life’s pleasures against the value of its pains, he is comparing the actual value of life’s goods to their perceived value.

The main problem with this argument is that Schopenhauer has yet to justify the claim that life’s goods aren’t as valuable as we take them to be. He has simply assumed that we devote all our efforts ‘for something that has no value’ (SW 3: 407/WWR 2: 372). But, as we will see in the following sections, Schopenhauer attempted to provide two auxiliary arguments for this assumption.

5. The boredom argument

In chapter 11 of the second volume of the *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer puts forward a transcendental argument for the intrinsic worthlessness of existence.¹⁹ The argument begins with the observation that boredom is possible, that it is something that we can—and sometimes do—experience. For ‘boredom is precisely the sensation of the

¹⁹ This argument first appeared in the manuscript-book *Adversaria* [196] in 1829 (see HN 3: 542-3/MR 3: 590-1). It is discussed in Woods (2019: 966) and Fox (2022: 488-94).

emptiness of existence' (SW 6: 305/PP 2: 259). Whenever we are 'reduced to existence itself', i.e., whenever our existence is unaugmented by anything that might otherwise adorn it or distract us from it, 'we are transported by its lack of substance and its nothingness—and that is boredom' (SW 6: 306/PP 2: 259). But, the argument continues, the intrinsic worthlessness of existence is a necessary condition for the very possibility of boredom: we could only be struck by 'the utter desolation and emptiness of existence' if there were 'no *true genuine substance to it*' (SW 6: 305/PP 2: 258-9); we could only become bored with our existence if it were intrinsically worthless. For, as Schopenhauer puts it,

[i]f life...had a positive value and real substance in itself, then there could be no boredom; instead mere existence in itself would have to fully satisfy us. (SW 6: 305/PP 2: 259)

An intrinsically valuable existence would be capable of fully satisfying anyone who turned their proper attention to it. It would immediately be recognized as valuable. And yet, when all else fades away and we come to stand before our very existence itself, we are confronted by its utter desolation and emptiness. Thus, given both that boredom is possible for us and that the intrinsic worthlessness of existence is a necessary condition for the very possibility of boredom, it follows that our existence must be intrinsically worthless.

The boredom argument, if successful, would not show that optimism is false. But it would help to strengthen Schopenhauer's overall case against it. There is, however, one crucial objection to this argument. For the possibility of boredom does not obviously depend upon the emptiness of existence. We might become bored not because we direct our attention toward existence and see its lack of value, but because we direct our attention away

from existence and fail to see its value. Thus, the intrinsic worthlessness of existence is not a necessary condition for the possibility of boredom.

In response to this objection, Schopenhauer might point out that this suggestion flies in the face of experience. For, as he observes, being distracted from our existence—whether by the poverty of need or the wealth of the mind—is necessary for starving off boredom, which sets in with the ‘lethargy of the will and of cognition bound up with it’ (SW 2: 377/WWR 1: 347). We thus experience boredom not when we direct our attention away from our existence, but when we are forced to face it.²⁰

6. The nothingness argument

In chapter 46 of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer sought to show not just that our very existence is worthless, but that everything that adorns it—everything we might hope to achieve in life—is ultimately worthless as well.²¹ The

²⁰ Indeed, as Kant claims in the *Anthropology*, boredom is ‘the *disgust* with one’s existence, which arises when the mind is empty of the sensations toward which it incessantly strives’ (7: 151). Thus, ‘even if no positive pain stimulates us to activity, if necessary a negative one, *boredom*, will often affect us in such a manner that we feel driven to do something harmful to ourselves rather than nothing at all. For boredom is perceived as a *void* of sensation by the human being who is used to an alteration of sensations in himself, and who is striving to fill up his instinct for life with something or other’ (7: 232-3).

²¹ This argument first appeared in the manuscript-book *Adversaria* [186, 225] in 1829 (see HN 3: 533-4, 566-7/MR 3: 581-2, 615-16). An earlier version from 1820 can be found in the manuscript-book *Reisebuch* [77] (see HN 3: 26-7/MR 3: 30-1). It would later appear in the manuscript-books *Pandectae* [364] in 1837 and *Spicilegia* [103] in 1838. It is discussed in Volkelt ([1900] 1907: 259-64) and Riehl (1903: 210).

argument begins with the claim that nothing that is fleeting and transitory can have any real value. An object's value is, Schopenhauer maintains, reflected by its existence in time. It is only because something has no value, and thus no genuine substance, that it can fade away.

Time is the form in which the nothingness of things appears as their perishability, in that by virtue of it [they] turn to nothing in our hands and we then ask in amazement where they had been. This nothingness itself is therefore the only thing *objective* about time, i.e. that aspect of the essence in itself of things that correspond to time, and so that of which time is the expression. (SW 3: 658/WWR 2: 589)

It seems, then, that anything 'which in the next moment no longer exists and completely vanishes like a dream has no value' (HN 3: 567/MR 3: 616), while anything with real, objective value must thereby enjoy a kind of permanence: it can neither lose its existence nor its value.²² But, the argument continues, everything in life, everything we want, and everything we might hope to achieve is fleeting and transitory. For, as Schopenhauer puts it,

everything must present itself in time, even we ourselves. As such, life is, in the first instance, like a payment made to us only in copper pennies and for which we must nevertheless then provide a receipt; the pennies are the days, the receipt is death. Ultimately time pronounces nature's judgment on the value of all of the beings appearing in it, by annihilating them... (SW 3: 658-9/WWR 2: 589)

²² Or, as Schopenhauer puts it elsewhere, '*Time* is that by virtue of which everything at every moment turns to nothing in our hands, whereby it loses all true value [*wahren Werth*]' (SW 6: 301/PP 2: 255).

Thus, given both that everything we might hope to achieve in life is impermanent and that nothing that is impermanent can have any real value, it follows that nothing we could hope to achieve has any real value, and thus that all of our endeavors are ultimately pointless.

The nothingness argument, if successful, would show that optimism is false. For if nothing in life has any real value, life cannot be any better than complete non-existence. There are, however, at least two objections to this argument. The first is that it is not clear that everything in life is impermanent.²³ For we can compose beautiful songs and write powerful novels. But, when we do, we would seem to create abstract objects: Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* cannot be identified with any particular performance; George Eliot's *Middlemarch* cannot be identified with any particular copy. These works might someday be irretrievably lost, future generations might eventually forget that they ever existed, but once they are brought into existence, they enjoy a kind of permanence. For they would seem to exist outside of space and time. They are, in this respect, neither fleeting nor transitory. Thus, attempting to create certain works of art is not a pointless endeavor.

A second, more serious, objection is that something can be intrinsically good without being eternal.²⁴ Schopenhauer would seem to conflate the plausible suggestion that an object has a property intrinsically only if it has that property at every time it exists with the implausible suggestion that an object has a property intrinsically only if it has that property at every time whatsoever. Indeed, it is the latter suggestion that seems to lurk behind

²³ A similar objection was raised by Volkelt ([1900] 1907: 261-2).

²⁴ A similar objection was raised by Riehl (1903: 210).

Schopenhauer's claim that anything that is intrinsically valuable must enjoy a kind of permanence.

But while this might undermine the motivation for the claim that whatever is fleeting and transitory is ultimately of no real significance, I suspect that this claim enjoys an intuitive force that is stronger than anything that might be said for or against it.²⁵ The thought that nothing is of any lasting value can be a source of existential dread, but it can also be a potential source of comfort. For not only will all the good things in life pass away, but all our pain and all our suffering will someday be nothing as well. It too is fleeting, and so it too would seem to be of no real significance. But, then, given that none of life's contents have any real value, it would seem to follow that being and nothingness are equally valuable.

It would thus seem that any argument for the claim that our existence is somehow *worse* than non-existence, must be based on something other than a claim about the value or disvalue of life's goods and evils. Indeed, as we will see in sections 7-8, Schopenhauer's case for pessimism focuses not on the value of life's contents, but on the ways in which life as a whole is structurally defective.

²⁵ It is, for example, a major theme of *Ecclesiastes* and is eloquently expressed in chapter 4 of Tolstoy's *Confession*.

7. The compensation argument

Schopenhauer presents an argument for pessimism in chapter 46 of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*.²⁶ The argument begins with the claim that if life—or the world—were something whose existence we should be glad about, the suffering which marks it would have to be repaid by the goods it contains, otherwise there would be no reason to prefer it to the ‘blissful calm’ (SW 6: 318/PP 2: 269) or ‘peace’ (SW 3: 665/WWR 2: 595) of non-existence. But, as Schopenhauer insists, even assuming that there are positive pleasures,

it is fundamentally beside the point to argue whether there is more good or evil in the world: for the very existence of evil already decides the matter since it can never be repaid [*getilgt*], and therefore cannot be compensated [*ausgeglichen*], by any good that might exist alongside or after it.... For even if thousands had lived in happiness and delight, this would never annul the anxiety and tortured death of a single person; and my present well-being does just as little to undo my earlier suffering. (SW 3: 661/WWR 2: 591, translation slightly modified)

²⁶ This argument first appeared in the manuscript-book *Adversaria* [335, 346-7] in 1829 (see HN 3: 641, 650-1/MR 3: 696-7, 706). It is frequently mentioned in the secondary literature but is usually treated as a curiosity and is rarely discussed in much detail. See Hartmann (1869: 547-8/1884: vol. 3, pp. 21-3), Windelband ([1876] 1911: vol. 2, 216-17), Volkelt ([1900] 1907: 247), Simmel (1907: 12, 88-93/1986: 10, 63-6), Young (1987: 56-57, 68), Cartwright (1988: 61-2), Janaway (1994: 96-7), Migotti (1995: 651 n 13), Pauen (1997: 104-5, 110), Janaway (1999: 332), Dahlkvist (2007: 49-51), Vandenabeele (2015: 32 n 10), Beiser (2016: 48), Vanden Auweele (2017: 136), van der Lugt (2021: 348-50), and additional references in Simmons (2021: 133 n 2). For detailed discussion, see Simmons (2021) and Bather Woods (2022).

There is, Schopenhauer thinks, a parallel between the interpersonal and the intrapersonal case: for just as the goods enjoyed by one person can never repay the evils suffered by another, so too the goods that one person enjoys at one time can never repay the evils which that very same person suffers at another. In both cases, the goods and evils in question are experientially partitioned off. It thus follows both that the world as a whole will contain uncompensated evils if the life of even a single individual contains evils which are not repaid by any goods in that life, and that the life of a single individual will contain uncompensated evils if, at even a single time, that life contains evils which are not repaid by any goods at that time.²⁷ It does not matter, then, whether there are any positive pleasures. Our lives could be full of such pleasures, but if they are not simultaneous with our suffering, they cannot touch that suffering in our experience and thus cannot repay it at all. It is ‘impossible’, then, for ‘the sufferings and plagues of life...to be fully compensated [*völlig ausgeglichen*] by its pleasures and well-being’ (SW 3: 662/WWR 2: 592, translation slightly modified). Thus, it seems that life is something whose existence ‘we should be sorry rather than glad about’, something whose ‘non-existence would be preferable to its existence’, and ‘something that fundamentally should not be’ (SW 3: 661/WWR 2: 591-2).

This argument is, however, subject to three objections. The first is that it is simply not the case that evils suffered by one person can never be repaid by goods enjoyed by another. Parents, for instance, often make sacrifices for the present or future well-being of their children—even to the point of giving up their lives for them. But given that we might gladly make such sacrifices with no benefits to ourselves, it seems that the evils which we

²⁷ I defend this interpretation in Simmons (2021). For criticism, see Bather Woods (2022).

voluntarily undergo can be repaid by the goods that those we care about enjoy. Thus, it is simply false that the goods enjoyed by one person can never help to repay the evils suffered by another.

A second, related objection is that while the ills we suffer in the present might not always be repaid by the goods we enjoy in the future, that is not to say that they can never be repaid. For what might be the exception in the interpersonal case is the norm in the intrapersonal case. We tend, after all, to care about our future selves. And, based on such a concern, we might presently elect to undergo various hardships. But when we voluntarily suffer for the sake of our future projects or well-being, our present ills would seem to be repaid by future goods. Thus, it appears to be false that the goods that one person enjoys at one time can never help to repay the evils which that very same person suffers at another.

In response to these objections, Schopenhauer might grant, for the sake of argument, that compensation is possible when we voluntarily undergo hardship for the sake of someone we care about (such as our children or our future selves), and focus on the pain and suffering we endure as infants. For we do not as infants have any concern for our future selves. So we cannot as infants elect to suffer evils for the sake of our future well-being. Thus, assuming that there is some time during our infancy where we suffer various evils that are not repaid by any simultaneous goods, our lives will all contain uncompensated evils.

The third objection comes from the claim that life—and the world as well—is just an end in itself. Our existence is simply a blessing. We don't need any additional goods to help repay life's evils. For our mere existence rather than anything that adorns it already does that. The suffering we endure as infants would, in this case, be immediately compensated by our very existence. Indeed, as even Schopenhauer admits, if 'the world and life were an end

in themselves [*Selbstzweck*], their existence would need 'neither to be justified through reasons nor redeemed by consequences' (SW 3: 662/WWR 2: 592).

In response to this objection, Schopenhauer seems to suggest that the existence of evil provides us with evidence that the world is not an end in itself. For were the world an end in itself, the world's evils would not 'have their roots in the origin of things, or in the inner core of the world itself' (SW 3: 190/WWR 2: 181). But, in that case, their existence would somehow need to be explained: perhaps by appeal to the freedom of the will (see SW 3: 190/WWR 2: 181), or perhaps by appeal to existing forms of government (see SW 6: 275/PP 2: 233). Schopenhauer thinks, however, that these evils are best explained as having their existence at the root, in the inner core, of the world itself. Indeed, he ultimately maintains that 'because it would be better for our situation not to exist, everything around us bears the trace of this—just as everything in hell reeks of sulphur' (SW 3: 662/WWR 2: 592).

8. The mismatch argument

In some places, Schopenhauer provides the seeds for a different argument for pessimism based upon the fundamental mismatch between the value of life and our attachment to it. He takes it to have been established that life has no objective value. Thus our 'attachment to life cannot be grounded in its *object*' (SW 3: 271/WWR 2: 252). It can, he tells us,

be grounded only in its *subject*. It is not however grounded in the *intellect*, it is not a result of deliberation and is absolutely not a matter of choice; rather this life-willing is something self-evident: it is a thing prior to the *intellect* itself. We are ourselves the will to life: thus we must live, well or badly. It is only by keeping in mind that this

attachment to this life, which is of such little value [*so wenig Werth*], is entirely a priori [i.e., from the will] and not a posteriori [i.e., from life], that we can explain the overwhelming fear of death inherent in all living things...which would be lost if life were assessed at its objective value [*objektiven Werthe*]. (SW 3: 271/WWR 2: 252-3, translation slightly modified)

It is, Schopenhauer tells us, part of our very nature to value life. And, yet, this life that we cannot help but value is itself utterly worthless and 'ought to be detested' (SW 3: 409/WWR 2: 373). This is a bad situation to be in. And it isn't a situation in which we are accidentally placed. Indeed, the entire human race 'ceaselessly stirs itself, strives, drives, suffers, struggles, and performs the whole tragicomedy of world history' over and over again, it 'preserves in such a mockery of existence' for 'as long as it is even possible for anyone to do so' (SW 3: 408/WWR 2: 373). Thus, it is the fact that life essentially has this mismatched character that makes it something which should not be.

9. Conclusion

It should now be clear that while Schopenhauer's case against optimism primarily focuses on the value or disvalue of life's contents, his case for pessimism does not. It focuses on the ways in which life as a whole is structurally defective: either because the evils we suffer are not properly repaid by the goods we enjoy or else because we are essentially compelled to chase after something that is utterly worthless.

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