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PHILOSOPHICAL PESSIMISM: A STUDY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARTHUR  
SCHOPENHAUER

by

CAMERON SMITH

ABSTRACT

Schopenhauer argues, strikingly, that it would have been better if life had not come into existence. In this essay I consider this pessimistic judgment from a philosophical perspective. I take on the following three tasks. First, I consider whether such judgments, apparently products of temperament rather than reason, can be the subject of productive philosophical analysis. I argue that they can be, since, importantly, we can separate arguments for such judgments that establish them as plausible from those that do not. Second, I evaluate Schopenhauer's arguments for pessimism. I argue that although we must reject Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism, he has another, more plausible argument for pessimism that hitherto has been neglected by scholars. Finally, I argue that although pessimism can be established as the correct judgment about life in some possible worlds, *in our world* the question of pessimism or optimism cannot be definitively answered.

INDEX WORDS: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Pessimism, Optimism, Death, Suicide, Salvation

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SCHOPENHAUER

by

CAMERON SMITH

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Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2014

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2014

PHILOSOPHICAL PESSIMISM: A STUDY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARTHUR  
SCHOPENHAUER

by

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*If you try to imagine, as nearly as you can, what an amount of misery, pain and suffering of every kind the sun shines upon in its course, you will admit that it would be much better if, on the earth as little as on the moon, the sun were able to call forth the phenomena of life; and if, here as there, the surface were still in a crystalline state.*

-Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World"<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In this essay I consider the following two questions and propose answers to them on the basis of a close study of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer: First, can pessimistic judgments about life, such as the one expressed in the quote by Schopenhauer above, be the subject of productive philosophical analysis? I will revisit the question of what counts as productive philosophical analysis below, but for now it will suffice to say that I mean analysis of an argument that ultimately establishes either that it is sound or unsound, or, at the very least, that it is plausible or implausible. My second question is, if the answer to the first question is "yes," what does a philosophical analysis of Schopenhauer's pessimistic judgment reveal about that judgment? The interest of these questions becomes clear, I think, when we consider that many of us have a paradoxical reaction to pessimistic judgments such as Schopenhauer's. On the one hand, we might feel that we *agree* or *disagree* with the judgment—that is, feel that it has a truth-value and that we know what it is. On the other hand, however, we might also feel that in fact the truth-value of such judgments cannot be determined, and that, in the last analysis, it must be some quality of temperament rather than reason that explains why one accepts or rejects them. What

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<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World," in *The Pessimist's Handbook*, ed. Hazel E. Barnes, trans. T. Bailey Saunders (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 127–44, at 129. I use the following translations of Schopenhauer's works: *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969); *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, trans. David E. Cartwright and Edward E. Erdmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). I cite *The World as Will and Representation* as *WWR*, followed by volume number then page number, and Schopenhauer's "Prize Essay on the Basis of Morals" (included in *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*) as *BM*, followed by section number.



little has been written on pessimism in the philosophical literature tends to support the latter feeling. In his chapter on Schopenhauer in *The History of Western Philosophy*, for example, Bertrand Russell writes, “the belief in either pessimism or optimism is a matter of temperament, not of reason.”<sup>2</sup> George Simmel agrees: “[T]he stand for the value or for the lack of value of existence depends in resolute and principled natures on the specific reaction their innermost soul exhibits to happiness or suffering.”<sup>3</sup> In this sense, it would seem that perhaps *philosophies* are not pessimistic so much as *persons* are pessimists, and thus that pessimistic judgments say more about their proponents than about the world.

Pessimism is often taken to reveal something *objectionable* about its proponent—for example, a gloomy temperament that disposes one to ignore the good aspects of life or a pathetic attempt to impose the misery of one's own life on life itself. In fact, one of Schopenhauer's greatest admirers and ruthless critics interprets his pessimism in just this way. In section 370 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche tells us that Schopenhauer's pessimism is an expression of the “impoverishment of [his] life” and, at bottom, of his need for “redemption from [himself].” He elaborates, writing that Schopenhauer’s pessimism is the work of a “tyrannical will of one who suffers deeply, who struggles, is tormented, and would like to turn what is most personal, singular, and narrow, the real idiosyncrasy of his suffering, into a binding law and compulsion—one who, as it were, revenges himself on all things by forcing his own image, the image of his

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<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 759.

<sup>3</sup> George Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, trans. Helmet Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein, and Michael Weinstein (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 65. See also L.E. Loemker, “Pessimism and Optimism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. P. Edwards, vol. 6, 114–21, at 121: “although optimism and pessimism are terms that are useful in expressing fundamental attitudes towards the universe or towards aspects of the universe, they have an ambiguity that makes them useless for valid philosophical analysis.”

torture, on them, branding them with it” (*GS* 370).<sup>4</sup> Notice, though, that Nietzsche’s objection to Schopenhauer’s pessimism in this passage is *philosophical*—that is, what makes taking "revenge on all things" through pessimism *objectionable* is not just that it betrays some kind of weakness, but that it involves the intellectual error of basing a universal judgment about life solely on a fact about one's *own* life. If Nietzsche is right that Schopenhauer revenged himself on all things through pessimism, the reason is that the latter projected his own misery onto the essence of life itself, and of course if Schopenhauer's *argument* for pessimism suffers such an error it ought to be rejected. But this suggests that while pessimism might reveal something about its proponents, perhaps it can nevertheless be the subject of productive philosophical analysis. If it can be, we should like to know how far such an analysis can take us and what it reveals.

I will propose answers to the questions just raised on the basis of a close study of Schopenhauer's arguments for his judgment that it would have been better if life had never come into existence. My goals in this essay are, then, both interpretative and philosophical. I will offer an interpretation of Schopenhauer's arguments for pessimism, and, on the basis of an analysis of those arguments, I will argue for the following four conclusions:

- (A) The denial of Schopenhauer's judgment that it would have been better if life had not come into existence constitutes delusion in some possible worlds.
- But
- (B) Ours is not such a world.
  - (C) While some arguments for pessimistic judgments about life in our world betray an objectionable aspect of their proponent's temperament, not all of them do.

And, finally,

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974). I will henceforth cite this work as *GS*, followed by section number.

(D) Arguments for pessimistic judgments about life in our world can be the subject of productive philosophical analysis, at least insofar as we can separate plausible such arguments from implausible ones.

I will proceed as follows. In section one I provide an interpretation of Schopenhauer's pessimism according to which it consists of what I call his "main argument" for the judgment that it would have been better if life had not come into existence. Drawing out the consequences of Schopenhauer's thoroughly pessimistic *Weltanschauung*, in the second section I discuss his rejection of suicide and argue that, if the world really were as he says it is, his philosophy offers one no good reason *not* to kill himself. In the third section I evaluate Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism and find it wanting. I then argue in the fourth section that Schopenhauer has another, more plausible argument for his pessimistic judgment about life that hitherto has been neglected by scholars. I return to and answer the two questions raised at the outset in the fifth section. In the final section I discuss the relationship between pessimism and compassion, the latter of which, according to Schopenhauer, is the hallmark of moral action.

#### 1 SCHOPENHAUER'S MAIN ARGUMENT FOR PESSIMISM

Given the prominent conception of pessimism as essentially *unphilosophical*, it is no surprise that Schopenhauer's pessimism has been interpreted as non-essential to his philosophy. Bryan Magee, for example, illustrates his interpretation of Schopenhauer's pessimism with what is likely a familiar anecdote: "Two men who are drinking together shoot simultaneous glances at the bottle they are sharing, and one thinks to himself: 'Ah good, it's still half full', while at the same moment the other thinks: 'Oh dear, it's half empty already'."<sup>5</sup> The two men do not disagree about the facts, but in their evaluations of the facts, and either is warranted. Magee concludes that, since pessimism is always as warranted as optimism, "Schopenhauer's philosophy is

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<sup>5</sup> Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 14.

logically independent of his pessimism" and therefore "non-pessimism is equally compatible with his philosophy."<sup>6</sup> What is more, he claims that "all of [Schopenhauer's philosophy] except for some of those parts that deal with ethics and aesthetics could be formulated with equal accuracy in a vocabulary of optimism."<sup>7</sup>

But consider the following argument for Schopenhauer's pessimism, which I shall call his "main argument" for pessimism. I hasten to add that the argument does not appear in this form anywhere in Schopenhauer's texts; however, its premises do appear in his texts, and, as I shall show, he clearly regarded them as jointly supportive of his pessimistic judgment that life's nonexistence is preferable to its existence. The main argument for pessimism:

- (1) The world is essentially an eternally active will.
- (2) Willing always involves suffering.
- (3) As an objectification of will, unless one attains salvation, life is necessarily always and everywhere suffering.
- (4) But salvation does not redeem life.

Therefore,

- (5) It would have been better if life had not come into existence.

In the rest of this section I will discuss each premise of Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism in detail. But, assuming for now that the main argument is Schopenhauer's own, we can already see that Magee's interpretation of Schopenhauer's pessimism as a negative evaluation of facts that could just as well be evaluated positively must be rejected. Consider again Magee's bottle of wine anecdote. The optimist and pessimist agree with respect to the relevant fact about their situation (i.e., how much wine is left in the bottle). Where they disagree is in their respective evaluations of that fact; in the end, however, the pessimist has as much reason to be upset about the situation as the optimist has to regard it happily. *This* situation, then, justifies

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<sup>6</sup> Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 14.

both evaluations equally. But surely some situations do *not* warrant both pessimistic and optimistic evaluation—e.g., situations that are *so bad* that to evaluate them positively constitutes delusion. Consider a tragic example: if a man were to regard the torture of his own innocent and beloved child positively, claiming to be "looking on the bright side of things," the bewilderment of his friends would be entirely warranted. In this situation there just is no bright side to look on, and the individual who claims that there is, as any clear-headed person will attest, does not see things as they are. Such situations do not merely warrant negative evaluation, then, but call for it.<sup>8</sup> Thus we arrive at the support for my first claim,

(A) The denial of Schopenhauer's judgment that it would have been better if life had not come into existence constitutes delusion in some possible worlds.

If I am right that some situations warrant only negative evaluation, then there are also possible *worlds* in which the denial of Schopenhauer's pessimistic judgment constitutes delusion. As premises (2) and (3) of his main argument for pessimism make clear, according to Schopenhauer ours is just such a world. Although we shall see later that Schopenhauer's description of our world is false, (A) requires only that one accept the following conditional: *if* our world were as Schopenhauer says it is, then his pessimistic judgment would be true. And since, if Schopenhauer were correct that life is always and everywhere suffering, there would be no aspect of life that could even *potentially* redeem it, the foregoing conditional can hardly be

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<sup>8</sup> It is true that people not uncommonly *do* evaluate tragedies such as the loss of a child positively, in most cases either (i) by seeing the tragedy as part of a divine plan orchestrated by an omnibenevolent God or (ii) by coming to see it as a means to a good end in this world (e.g., one who loses his child to a drunk driver might save lives through activism against drink driving). With respect to (i), it is at the very least questionable whether an omnibenevolent deity *would* orchestrate a plan that features such events as the death of children; on (ii), I think in most cases the good for which a tragic event becomes a means clearly could have been achieved by other (non-tragic) means, in which case the positive evaluation of the tragedy rests on the false belief that it was *necessary* for the good. Of course, probably *in some cases* a tragedy really is necessary for a greater good. But this fact counts for nothing against my claim that there are *also* unequivocally bad events.

denied. Thus we must agree with Frederick Copleston when he writes, "if [Schopenhauer's] metaphysic were actually true or if it were only held to be true, then from the logical standpoint, the one possible attitude towards life would be a pessimistic attitude."<sup>9</sup> Contra Magee, Schopenhauer's pessimism is not a negative evaluation of a world that could just as well be evaluated positively, but an appropriately negative evaluation of a *truly terrible* world. Indeed, although we must wait to make sense of this claim, Schopenhauer defends himself against the objection of "one-sidedness," as he calls it, by claiming to have demonstrated his pessimism "a-priori" (*WWR* I: 323–24). We will return to this claim and Magee's claims below. First we must answer the obvious question: why does Schopenhauer think life is so terrible?

### 1.1 Willing and Suffering

We begin with Schopenhauer's metaphysical claim that the world is essentially an eternally active will. Schopenhauer accepts Kant's distinction between phenomena, the experience of which is made possible by the categories space, time, and causality, and noumena, or things as they are "in themselves." Unlike Kant, however, he claims that, as self-conscious objectifications of the thing-in-itself, we actually have direct access to this "inner-world" through our own subjective experience. Through this "subterranean passage," we experience reality from the inside, as it were, and it reveals itself to us as *will* (*WWR* II: 195–96).

Schopenhauer nowhere provides a full account of how our subjective experience of willing differs from our other subjective experiences, so his account of the will can seem obscure. Furthermore, because Schopenhauer sometimes claims that we have "immediate knowledge" of the will (*WWR* I: 110), without a more explicit account of what the will is, it can seem as if he depends on the idea that we simply "all know what he is talking about." However,

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Copleston, *Arthur Schopenhauer: Philosopher of Pessimism* (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1946), 74.

once we consider Schopenhauer's insistence that we know what will is within the context of his claim that will is the *thing-in-itself*, he is cleared of the charge of obscurity. For if the thing-in-itself *were* will, then, since in that case *everything* would be an objectification of will, *all* of our subjective experience would, in one way or another, be experience of will. In this case, our expectation of an account of what distinguishes the subjective experience of willing from other subjective experiences is misguided; what we ought to expect instead is an account of subjective experience *in general* in terms of willing. And this is precisely what Schopenhauer attempts:

Not only willing and deciding in the narrowest sense, but also all striving, wishing, shunning, hoping, fearing, loving, hating, in short all that directly constitutes our own weal and woe, desire and disinclination, is obviously only affection of the will, is a stirring, a modification, of willing and not-willing, is just that which, when it operates outwards, exhibits itself as an act of will proper. (*WWR* II: 202)

What Schopenhauer means by "an act of will proper" is clear: he means movement towards an end as a result of a decision to pursue that end. But acts of will proper are not, according to him, the only acts of will. The conscious, intentional aspect of "acts of will proper" is only a contingent feature of willing, and even non-deliberative subjective experiences—"shunning, wishing, fearing, loving, hating, desire and inclination"—share the one essential feature of willing: *striving* (*Streben*) towards some end. Furthermore, Schopenhauer claims that the essence of our other predominant subjective experiences is accurately characterized, negatively, as an effect of the *absence* of striving (e.g., boredom and relaxation). Whether subjective experience really can be explained in terms of willing in this way is of course controversial, and we shall return to this question in section three below. For now, we must ask why, *even if* we assume that subjective experience can be explained in terms of willing, Schopenhauer takes himself to be justified in claiming that *everything* is an objectification of will. The answer, according to Schopenhauer, is that if we are aware of the world only as will and representation, we are

justified in assuming that everything we experience solely as representation has the same inner nature as we do, i.e., will. After all, he asks, "what other kind of existence or reality could we attribute to the rest of the material world? (*WWR* I: 105)<sup>10</sup>

So much for premise (1). We shall now consider premises (2) and (3), according to which, respectively, willing is always suffering, and the life of each sentient creature, qua objectification of will, is always and everywhere suffering unless one attains salvation. For convenience's sake, I will put off a discussion of the qualification in (3) concerning salvation until the next subsection. Here, I will discuss (2) and the rest of (3). Schopenhauer reasons, broadly, along the following lines: As objectifications of will, we are at every instant either striving or not striving. But striving is essentially painful, because a precondition of striving is dissatisfaction with one's current state, and not striving begets an oppressive boredom. Hence, we are always suffering in one of these two ways.

Schopenhauer claims, "all striving springs from want or deficiency, from dissatisfaction with one's state or condition, and is therefore suffering" (*WWR* I: 309). If one is striving for something, he does not have it. And since one only strives for something if he sees it as improving his condition, it follows that a precondition of striving is dissatisfaction with one's state insofar as an object is lacking from it. Dissatisfaction is painful, and hence a precondition of striving is pain. The intensity of the pain involved in striving varies, of course, with the intensity

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<sup>10</sup> One possible objection to Schopenhauer's line of reasoning here is that there might be some other thing apart from will and representation of which we are unaware, and since *this* thing rather than will might constitute the inner nature of reality, we are not justified in believing that will does. But Schopenhauer either did not think of this objection or, what is more likely, he saw it as beneath his concern. If the latter, we can see why. The objection amounts to the claim that we cannot *really* know that will constitutes the inner nature of the world because it *could be* something else of which we are unaware. But Schopenhauer could reply that we must proceed on the basis of the evidence as it presents itself to us. And if our only glimpse into the inner nature of the world suggests that it *is* will, then we are justified, at least, in accepting that it actually is so until contrary evidence is discovered.



of the lack that instigates it—e.g., a starving person is in much more pain than a person who is merely hungry—but every state of striving is accompanied by at least some degree of pain.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Schopenhauer thinks that the only time we are *not* striving is immediately after we have attained an object of our striving. But whatever momentary satisfaction this achievement brings, it is never long before "a fearful emptiness and boredom" come over us for *lack* of something to strive for (i.e., for lack of "something to do") (*WWR* I: 312). Thus our "existence becomes an intolerable burden for [us]," and we set about trying to "'kill time', in other words, to escape from boredom," so as to alleviate the pain (*WWR* I: 313)—hence the popularity of activities such as cards and shopping (*WWR* I: 313–14). As Julian Young has pointed out, we can understand Schopenhauer's claim here to be that it is *natural* for us to be striving, that "the human essence is 'doing' rather than 'being'," and that therefore we are dissatisfied when we are not striving.<sup>12</sup> Schopenhauer concludes that life "swings like a pendulum" between striving-suffering and boredom-suffering (*WWR* I: 311).

## 1.2 Affirmation and Denial of the Will: The Possibility of Salvation

We turn now to the rest of premise (3), according to which salvation offers some respite from suffering, and to premise (4), which states that salvation does not redeem life. The realization that the world is will and that willing is suffering invites what Schopenhauer calls the "the great question": should we affirm or deny the will? (*WWR* I: 308) The "greatness" of the question lies in the scope of its object and the consequences of each answer. If the world is

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<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to Christopher Janaway for his clear exposition of this point in his, "Schopenhauer's Pessimism," in *German Philosophy Since Kant*, ed. Anthony O'Hear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 47–63, at 51–53. See the same for Janaway's refutation of David Cartwright's objections to Schopenhauer on this point in Cartwright, "Schopenhauer on Suffering, Death, Guilt and the Consolation of Metaphysics," in *Schopenhauer: New Essays in Honor of his 200<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. E. von der Luft (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 51–56.

<sup>12</sup> Julian Young, *Schopenhauer* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 211–12.

essentially will, the question of whether to affirm or deny the will is identical to the question of whether to affirm or deny the world itself. Each potential answer, furthermore, has radically different ethical implications. Because each of us is a particular objectification of will among a world of others, affirmation and denial of the will each entails a particular attitude towards one's body and towards other people and creatures. Affirmation of the will entails an endorsement of one's bodily needs and desires as worthy of indulgence and satisfaction. Denial of the will, by contrast, entails repulsion at the will as it objectifies itself in one's body and the world outside oneself, and demands an ethics of asceticism and compassion. Denial of the will, furthermore, is the only path to salvation.

"*The affirmation of the will*," he writes, "is the persistent willing itself, undisturbed by any knowledge, as it fills the life of man in general" (*WWR* I: 326). Schopenhauer's conception of affirmation of the will can be summed up as follows. As objectifications of will, our capacities are naturally subservient to the will, and hence most people expend most of their energy in the service of will for most of their lives. More particularly, since Schopenhauer directly identifies the will in its human objectification with the *body* (*WWR* I: 326–27), his claim is that human beings are naturally disposed to spend their lives in the service of their bodily needs and desires. "From the first appearance of consciousness," he writes, "man finds himself as a willing being" (*WWR* I: 327). That is, as is most obvious in infants and young children, human beings are "concretion[s] of a thousand wants and needs," and are satisfied or dissatisfied, respectively, according to whether or not these needs are met (*WWR* I: 312). As we grow older, our needs and desires become more complicated—e.g., rather than desiring just a lollipop as he did when he was a child, the adult desires money so that he can purchase *whatever he wants*—but we remain essentially willing beings. The "most decided affirmation of the will," Schopenhauer claims, is

procreation (*WWR* I: 327). Engaging in sexual activity with the twofold aim of pleasure and propagation, one not only affirms the will as objectified in one's body, but also "affirms life (i.e., the will) for an indefinite time beyond the death of the individual" (*WWR* I: 328). By bringing into existence *another* conscious objectification of the will, propagation provides occasion for the *progeny* to propagate, and so on.

*Denial of the will* is the repudiation of one's bodily needs and desires and the spring from which they flow—i.e., denial of the will is asceticism motivated by repulsion at its nature. We can understand denial of the will in terms of why Schopenhauer thinks it is the correct answer to the "great question." He provides two principal reasons. First, once an individual has realized that reality is will, willing is suffering, and that the will is *insatiable*, he sees through the false promise of every desire to quiet the will and bring an end to the suffering willing causes. That is, he recognizes the foolishness of attempting to satisfy an insatiable will in the hope of attaining peace, that "of its nature wish is pain; attainment quickly begets satiety. The goal is only apparent; possession takes away its charm. The wish, the need, appears again on the scene under a new form; if it does not, then dreariness, emptiness, and boredom follow, the struggle against which is just as painful as that against want" (*WWR* I: 314). Thus denial of the will is the appropriate answer to the great question, first, because *indulgence* of the will never brings peace, but only either boredom or more willing—i.e., suffering. Only by denying the will can one *stop willing*, and only one who does not will enjoys peace on earth.

The second reason is that once one has recognized that will is the cause of not only one's own suffering, but of all suffering, affirmation of the will seems even *morally repugnant*. The individual who knows that the world is will, as Schopenhauer puts it, "knows the whole, comprehends [the world's] inner nature, and finds it involved in a constant passing away, a vain

striving, an inward conflict, and a continual suffering. Wherever he looks, he sees suffering humanity and the suffering animal world [...]. Now how could he, with such knowledge of the world, affirm this very life through constant acts of will, and precisely in this way bind himself more and more firmly to it, press himself to it more and more closely?" (*WWR* I: 379) Knowledge of what reality is and the suffering it causes yields, or should yield, Schopenhauer thinks, repulsion at the will and a denial of life: "The will now turns away from life; it shudders at the pleasures in which it recognizes the affirmation of life. Man attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete willessness" (*WWR* I: 379). Indeed, in the ideal state of "salvation," or complete denial of the will, one no longer participates in life *as a willing being*, but, at least insofar as one can without perishing (and in some cases even beyond this point<sup>13</sup>), lives as what Schopenhauer describes, mystically, as a "*pure, will-less subject of knowledge*" apart from one's body (*WWR* I: 195<sup>14</sup>). Schopenhauer quotes Madam Guyon's description of her own experience as representative of the salvific state: "Everything is indifferent to me; I *cannot* will anything more; often I do not know whether I exist or not" (*WWR* I: 391). Of course, Madam Guyon's description of her own state must seem strange, perhaps even frightening, to the non-saint; but Schopenhauer insists that salvation is better than affirmation of the will. Indeed, he claims that one who has attained salvation no longer suffers the "restless and turbulent pressure of life," but instead lives in the only state of "unshakeable peace" in a world that is will (*WWR* I: 389).

Salvation is in this sense the highest state a human being can attain. Even still, salvation does *not* redeem life as something whose existence is preferable to its nonexistence.

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<sup>13</sup> See discussion in section 2.

<sup>14</sup> In this passage Schopenhauer is describing the contemplative state into which one enters when confronted by a great work of art, but, for Schopenhauer, this experience is the same experience of the saint, only briefer, lasting only as long as one remains engaged by the work of art (*WWR* I: 267).

Schopenhauer does not make this claim explicitly, but it is implicit in his definitive judgment that it would have been better if life had not come into existence. He writes that "nothing else can be stated as the aim of our existence except the knowledge that it would be better for us not to exist" (*WWR* II: 695). Elsewhere he puts it comically: "it is well said that life should be, from one end to the other, only a lesson [i.e., the lesson that it would have been better not to exist], to which, however, anyone could reply: 'For this reason, I wish I had been left in the peace of the all-sufficient nothing, where I should have had no need either of lessons or of anything else'" (*WWR* II: 580).<sup>15</sup> Quite obviously, none of these passages can be reconciled with the claim that salvation redeems life. And although *Schopenhauer* does not explain why salvation fails to redeem life, there is an explanation. On Schopenhauer's account, salvation has only negative value, i.e., it is only valuable because it frees one—for extended periods of time, anyway—from the suffering of willing; but it offers nothing positive beyond this freedom from suffering. Schopenhauer explains that, in the state of salvation, "only knowledge remains; the will has vanished," but the knowledge of salvation is knowledge of "nothingness" (*WWR* I: 411). We can understand this apparently strange claim as follows. The phenomenal world of space and time is a phenomenon *of will*. Experience of this objectification of will, according to Schopenhauer, actually depends on the will's *affirmation*—that is, on attention to the body, its needs and desires, and the this-worldly objects that stimulate it. But when an individual turns his attention completely *away* from his body and the phenomenal realm—that is, when he successfully abolishes the will and attains salvation—his conscious states are no longer filled by this-worldly contents: "the whole phenomenon of the will [...], the universal forms of this phenomenon, time and space, and also the last fundamental form of these, subject and object; all these are abolished

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<sup>15</sup> See also, "On the Sufferings of the World," 129 (the passage with which this essay began).

with the will. No will: no representation, no world" (*WWR* I: 411).<sup>16</sup> But, to return to the original point, if the highest state a human being can attain is one in which he is merely free from suffering, secure in "nothingness," then there is nothing positive—not even in salvation—to redeem life as worth the suffering it causes. Indeed, it would be quite strange to say that life is redeemed just because it affords us the opportunity to escape it.<sup>17</sup>

We can summarize Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism as follows. According to Schopenhauer, the world is essentially an eternally striving will. Because all striving presupposes the painful lack of an object, all striving involves suffering; furthermore, since attaining an object of striving only brings either oppressive boredom or more striving, life is, with the exception of salvation, always and everywhere suffering. Salvation, or pure willlessness, is attained by denial of the will, or the renunciation and abolition of the will through asceticism, and is occasioned by repulsion at the nature of the will as the cause of all suffering. Because salvation offers merely an escape from suffering in "nothingness," though, it does not redeem life as worth its own existence. Therefore, Schopenhauer claims, no aspect of life redeems it, and it would have been better had it never come into existence. Before evaluating Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism in section 3, in the next section I draw out the consequences of Schopenhauer's thoroughly pessimistic *Weltanschauung*, particularly with regard to the question of whether, if the world is as bad as he says it is, one has any good reason not to kill himself.

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<sup>16</sup> Schopenhauer does at times describe the salvific state as only a "relative nothingness" (e.g., *WWR* I: 408)—i.e., as nothingness relative to the phenomenal world of space and time. In this way he distances his view from the absurd one that the saint actually *experiences nothing*, which is impossible for obvious reasons. But as for the question of *what* the saint experiences, the answer, as the religious mystics tell us, is that the experience is of its nature indescribable.

<sup>17</sup> And yet, strangely, this seems to be precisely the view John Atwell attributes to Schopenhauer in his *Schopenhauer: The Human Character* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990, 178).

## 2 SUICIDE, DEATH AND SALVATION

If life is as bad as Schopenhauer says, the question arises whether it is not best to commit suicide. After all, if salvation requires an ascetic lifestyle, surely it is difficult to attain and maintain. Is not suicide, then, the surest and quickest way to attain peace, or at least to escape the pain of living as an objectification of will? Schopenhauer claims that suicide is a foolish mistake. In this section, I will argue that Schopenhauer's objection to suicide is unsuccessful, and that, if the world really were as he says it is, it is difficult to see why one would *not* kill himself.

According to Schopenhauer, there is a fundamental difference between suicide and denial of the will. The difference concerns the motives behind them. The suicide, he claims, is motivated by the desire for relief from *his* suffering. Thus it is not *life itself* that repels the suicide; rather, he is "dissatisfied merely with the conditions on which it has come to him" (*WWR* I: 398). An individual might commit suicide, for example, because his wife has died, or because his business has gone bankrupt. But in these cases what motivates the suicide is merely a contingent feature of his own life, meaning that if that feature were absent or replaced with a more satisfying feature—if the man's wife did not die or his business did not fail—the suicide would choose to continue living. What this shows, according to Schopenhauer, is that suicide represents the "will's strong affirmation" rather than its denial (*WWR* I: 398). Denial of the will, remember, is motivated by repulsion at the nature of *life itself* as an objectification of will. The suicide "wills life," but dislikes *his* life (*WWR* I: 398).

Is Schopenhauer constraining the motives for suicide too narrowly? After all, is it not possible for someone to be motivated *by repulsion at the nature of the will* to kill himself? Can one not be so disgusted with the nature of the world that he simply chooses not to participate in it any longer? For Schopenhauer, the answer is no. First, consider that a precondition of repulsion

at the nature of will is the knowledge that will constitutes the inner essence of all things. As we have seen, one becomes repulsed by the will precisely because he recognizes it as the cause of not just his own suffering, but of all suffering, a precondition of which is that he knows that will underlies all things. The true saint, according to Schopenhauer, even begins to identify the suffering of others as his own, since the underlying cause of both is their shared nature as objectifications of the will. Since we are all at bottom *one*, we must recognize the suffering of others as our own, and do as much to alleviate their suffering as we do our own; that is, as Jesus puts it—and Schopenhauer approves (*BM* 18)—we must “love our neighbors as we love ourselves.” But, as we have seen, compassion for others is not enough for the saint: “it is no longer enough for him to love others like himself, and to do as much for them as for himself, but there arises in him a strong aversion to the inner nature whose expression is his own phenomenon, to the will [...], the kernel and essence of that world recognized as full of misery” (*WWR* I: 380). What motivates the saint to deny the will, then, is *not* dissatisfaction with his own suffering, but repulsion at the will as the cause of *all* suffering.

By contrast, as Julian Young has pointed out, suicide betrays a kind of *egoism*.<sup>18</sup> The suicide is so immersed in his own situation that he fails to realize that suffering is not only *his* problem, but *the world's* problem as an objectification of will. And here is the crucial point: If the suicide realized that suffering is essential to will and therefore a universal problem, he would also realize that suicide is foolish, for the simple reason that one cannot solve a universal problem by eliminating a particular instantiation of it. Suffering will persist beyond the suicide's life, “just as the rainbow remains unmoved, however rapidly the drops may change which sustain it for the moment” (*WWR* I: 399). In short, if the suicide is repulsed by the nature of a world that

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<sup>18</sup> Young, *Schopenhauer*, 194–95.



is will, then he knows that suffering is essential to will. But if he grasps this latter point, he also recognizes the foolishness of suicide, and hence will not be motivated to do it.

Still, we might wonder why suicide is a *bad idea*. Even if one cannot solve the universal problem of suffering by killing himself, one might retort that a universal problem is by definition unsolvable, and that therefore the fact that suicide does not solve the universal problem of suffering fails as a reason not to do it. But Schopenhauer offers another reason not to commit suicide—namely, it prevents one from attaining salvation. If an individual is experiencing suffering to the point that she is considering killing herself, then she is certainly not guilty of the naive optimism that prevents most people from taking the first step towards salvation. The suicide is thus close to recognizing the *world's* suffering, if only she overcomes the egoism that engrosses her in, so to speak, her own world. Were she to hold on to life, she might, in the midst of her misery, identify with the misery of others, and thereby recognize that the root of her suffering is not her *particular* life, but *life itself* as an objectification of will. This recognition would prompt her to deny the will, and through asceticism attain the only peaceful state on earth. "[I]n this respect," Schopenhauer claims, "the suicide is like a sick man who, after the beginning of a painful operation that could completely cure him, will not allow it to be completed, but prefers to retain his illness" (*WWR* I: 399).

Still, we might wonder why Schopenhauer is convinced that attaining salvation is better than death. After all, the fact that death prevents one from attaining salvation is a good reason not to kill oneself only if salvation is somehow qualitatively better than death by suicide. But while there is a clear difference between the after-life of a suicide and that of a saint according to some religious-metaphysical traditions, it is difficult to see what difference there could be according to *Schopenhauer's* philosophy. In Christianity, for example, it is better to be a saint

than a suicide (partly) because of postmortem differences between these two states: the suicide goes to hell, while the saint unifies with God. But Schopenhauer does not believe in a transcendent world in which desserts are doled out postmortem; indeed, in both volumes of *WWR* he claims that subjective experience depends for its existence on a functioning brain, and that the only aspect of any person—both the suicide and the saint, then—that continues to exist after death is the universal reality of which the person is an objectification, i.e., will (*WWR* I: 282; II: 199). But if Schopenhauer is right here, then death is the end of suffering, and it is unclear that salvation is qualitatively better than death, since it is difficult to attain and a negative freedom at best. So why is salvation worth living for?

Unfortunately, there are no resources within Schopenhauer's texts for a clear answer to this question. Indeed, further consideration of the question reveals an ambiguity in Schopenhauer's thoughts about the relationship between death and salvation. Consider that one (plausibly Schopenhauerian) answer to the question is that salvation is qualitatively better than death because the will is a repulsive thing, and hence it is better to *live* in denial of the will than to persist as will in a form incapable of denying itself—i.e., in the noumenal (and therefore non-human) form. After all, the reason the saint denies the will in the first place is that it is *utterly repugnant*. In this way, we could take Schopenhauer's view to be that salvation is qualitatively better than death (and hence worth not killing oneself for), but that it (and therefore also its qualitative superiority) is restricted to *life*.

But this view is inconsistent with one of Schopenhauer's recurring claims about salvation, namely that the saint is not only unafraid of death, but *welcomes* it. Indeed, he claims that the "principal end" of philosophy is to provide an "antidote" to the natural fear of death, and he clearly thinks his own philosophy achieves this end (*WWR* II: 463). If one accepts that ultimate

reality is will, he claims, one will see that although death is the destruction of one's ego, it is not the end of *will*, which constitutes one's true nature. In other words, if one identifies his "true self" as will, then, since it is universal, he will not regard death as *his* utter destruction: "[E]xcretion, the constant exhalation and throwing off of matter, is the same as what at a higher power is death [...]. Now, if here we are always content to retain the form without lamenting the discarded matter, we must behave in the same way when in death the same thing happens at a higher potential and to the whole, as occurs every day and hour in a partial way with excretion. Just as we are indifferent to the one, so we should not recoil at the other" (*WWR* I: 277). The saint, having successfully abolished the will in himself, is no longer tempted by the enticements of the world to identify his true self with his ego. Thus: "to die willingly, to die gladly, to die cheerfully, is the prerogative of the resigned [...]. [He] needs and desires no continuance of his person (*WWR* II: 508)."

But here lies the inconsistency in Schopenhauer's ideas about the relationship between death and salvation. If, as we saw above, what leads the saint to deny the will in the first place is that it is *utterly repulsive*, how could the fact that she will continue to exist *as will* after death be comforting to her? Young puts the question here well: "But if *that* [i.e., a wicked will] is what our true self is then, far from receiving 'consolation' in the face of death, to realise the character of one's true self is to descend into a realm of cosmic self-disgust."<sup>19</sup> If the will is so repugnant, and the only time one can achieve any degree of separateness from the will is when one *lives* as a saint, then, far from being a matter of comfort or indifference to a saint, death drags her from salvation back to hell.

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<sup>19</sup> Julian Young, "Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Death and Salvation," *European Journal of Philosophy* 16.2 (2008): 311–24, at 317.

There is a way to resolve this inconsistency. In the second volume of *WWR*, written twenty-one years after the first, Schopenhauer recognizes a serious problem with his claim to know that what Kant calls the thing-in-itself is will. As we have seen, he claims in the earlier work that we have "direct" experience of the thing-in-itself through our own subjective experience, and that we can thus know that the thing-in-itself *is* will (*WWR* I: 100, 282). In the later work, however, we find the following passage:

[...] [T]he act of will is indeed only the nearest and clearest *phenomenon* of the thing-in-itself; yet it follows from this that, if all the other phenomena could be known by us just as immediately and intimately, we should be obliged to regard them precisely as that which the will is in us. Therefore in this sense I teach that the inner nature of everything is *will*, and I call the will the thing-in-itself. In this way, Kant's doctrine of the inability to know the thing-in-itself is modified to the extent that the thing-in-itself is merely not absolutely and completely knowable; that nevertheless by far the most immediate of its phenomena, distinguished *toto genera* from all the rest by this immediateness, is its representative for us. Accordingly we have to refer to the whole world of phenomena to that one in which the thing-in-itself is manifested under the lightest of all veils, and still remains phenomenon only in so far as my intellect, the only thing capable of knowledge, still always remains distinguished from me as the one who wills, and does not cast off the knowledge form of *time*, even with *inner* perception. (*WWR* II: 197–98)

Strangely enough, Schopenhauer never once acknowledges that this passage reflects a *change* in his views. But it does. Schopenhauer now recognizes that although we do experience willing in our subjective experience without the form of *space*, we still experience it *in time* and hence only as phenomenon. But if so, although we experience subjectively the will under a "thinner veil," experience does not provide us with knowledge of the will (or world) in-itself. In the paragraph after the above passage, Schopenhauer explicitly connects the recognition that we cannot know what the thing-in-itself *really* is to his conception of salvation, suggesting a resolution to the inconsistency with which we are concerned presently:

Accordingly, [...] the question may still be raised what the will, which manifests itself in the world and as the world, is ultimately and absolutely in itself; in other

words, what it is, quite apart from the fact that it manifests itself as *will*, or in general *appears*, that is to say, *is known* in general. This question can *never* be answered [...]. But the possibility of this question shows that the thing-in-itself, which we know most immediately in the will, may have, entirely outside all possible phenomena, determinate qualities, and modes of existence which for us are absolutely unknowable and incomprehensible, and which then remain as the inner nature of the thing-in-itself, when this, as explained in the the fourth book, has freely abolished itself as *will*, has thus stepped out of the phenomenon entirely, and as regards our knowledge, that is to say as regards the world of phenomena, has passed over into empty nothingness. (*WWR* II: 199)

Although experience tells us that the *will* is a wicked thing, the cause of mass suffering, we cannot infer from this that the *thing-in-itself* is wicked; indeed, the nature of the thing-in-itself cannot be known through experience at all. Or at least not through the experience of *non-saints*. In the last sentence of the above passage, Schopenhauer suggests that an individual who has successfully abolished the will in himself can experience the thing-in-itself directly. I am not sure what to make of this claim, however. An experience must take place *in time*, and hence even the experience of a saint must be characterized by at least that category of cognition, which places it on the phenomenal side of the phenomenal and noumenal divide. Leaving this problem aside, however, the fact that Schopenhauer recognizes that we—or at least we non-saints—cannot know what the thing-in-itself *really* is does free him from the inconsistency under consideration: if we cannot infer from the wickedness of the will that the *thing-in-itself* is wicked, the latter might for all we know be something with which it is good to be unified in death; if so, perhaps the saint *can* be comforted in the face of death by the thought that his "true self" is indestructible.

But although, as Young writes, this resolution of the inconsistency "makes genuine room for [Schopenhauer's] doctrine of salvation,"<sup>20</sup> it generates once again the question of why suicide is a bad idea, even if it prevents one from attaining salvation. Above we saw that one possible

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<sup>20</sup> Young, "Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Death, and Salvation," 318.

answer to this question is that the will is both the thing-in-itself and utterly reprehensible; if this were true, *living* as a saint would be the only way to attain some degree of separateness from the will, if only for a brief time. But if the will is *not* the thing-in-itself, and hence we cannot infer from the wickedness of the world that the *thing-in-itself* is wicked, then, if one is convinced that the will is so repugnant, why choose a life *as will* over death, existence as the thing-in-itself? Indeed, it would seem that the most decided denial of the will would be deliberate and total renunciation of the will through suicide, the refusal to *be* an objectification of *the will* at all, even a saintly one. I see no resources in Schopenhauer's philosophy for denying this conclusion.

### 3 EVALUATING SCHOPENHAUER'S PESSIMISM

For convenience's sake, I reproduce here Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism:

- (1) The world is essentially an eternally active will.
- (2) Willing always involves suffering.
- (3) As an objectification of will, unless one attains salvation, life is necessarily always and everywhere suffering.
- (4) But salvation does not redeem life.

Therefore,

- (5) It would have been better if life had not come into existence

The argument suffers devastating objections. In this section, I will consider objections to premise (3) in particular, which are sufficient to refute the argument. That premise can be broken down into the following three claims: (a) Willing (i.e., striving) is a form of suffering; (b) Satiety always gives rise to boredom; and (c) With the exception of the saint, life is always in flux between striving and boredom. As others have argued, there are sound objections to each of these three claims. I will rehearse and develop some of those objections here. In the next section, however, I will argue that Schopenhauer has another, more plausible argument for pessimism.

Consider first Schopenhauer's claim that willing is always suffering. Recall that his reason for this claim is that "all striving springs from want or deficiency, from dissatisfaction with one's own state or condition, and is therefore suffering so long as it is not satisfied" (*WWR* I: 309). Now the idea that striving for  $x$  presupposes that one lacks  $x$  and experiences this lack as dissatisfying is certainly true; if one is wholly satisfied with the state wherein  $x$  is lacking, one will not take measures to acquire  $x$ . But, as George Simmel first pointed out and others have noted after him, it is a mistake to exaggerate the amount of suffering involved in dissatisfaction with one's lack of  $x$  in every case, no matter what  $x$  is. And in some cases striving can even be mixed with pleasure.<sup>21</sup> There is a remarkable difference, after all, between the suffering involved in striving to, say, find drinking water after a day with none, and the suffering involved in the attempt to write a novel. Some novelists, even great ones, may indeed experience writing as an utterly torturous process. But surely not *every* writer experiences his art this way. And here is the crucial point: even if striving for  $x$  always implies some dissatisfaction with one's lack of  $x$ , the pain of striving for  $x$  may well be mixed with pleasure to the extent that one views it as mostly enjoyable and on the whole worthwhile. It is, after all, easy to imagine that a novelist who grows too weak in old age to finish her last and greatest novel may not regard her efforts in its service as wasted suffering; she may instead regard the many days spent writing it as days of worthwhile and enjoyable striving.

Next consider Schopenhauer's claim that satiety is always followed by boredom. As we saw above, he claims that when we have attained an object of striving, either we find something else to strive for or a "fearful emptiness and boredom come over [us]" and our own existence

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<sup>21</sup> George Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, trans. Helmet Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein, and Michael Weinstein (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 55–56. See also Janaway, "Schopenhauer's Pessimism," 56–57; Young, *Schopenhauer*, 217–18; Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 41–42.

"become[s] an intolerable burden for [us]" (*WWR* I: 312). The feeling is familiar enough. Upon completing a task that has required most of our time for a long while, our excitement at our new freedom may shortly give way to frustration over "what to do now." But Schopenhauer seems to overlook that there are ways to avoid boredom in one's leisure that do not simply amount to more striving, such that there is actually an enjoyable middle-ground, as it were, between the two. Indeed, the distinguishing mark of *good entertainment* is that it satisfies throughout its duration. A good film, for example, or a conversation with a friend on a mutually agreeable topic, can provide immediate entertainment that lasts throughout its duration. But then there *is* an enjoyable middle-ground, as it were, between striving and boredom.

Schopenhauer has a response here, however, namely that satisfaction is really only "negative" in character: "All satisfaction, or what is commonly called happiness, is really and essentially always *negative* only, and never positive. [...] [T]he satisfaction or gratification can never be more than a deliverance from a pain, from a want [...]. Nothing can ever be gained but deliverance from suffering or desire; consequently, we are only in the same position as we were before this suffering or desire appeared" (*WWR* I: 319). The claim is that there is no positively felt joy or satisfaction in life, but only a neutral feeling of relief. Following others, I will call this the "negativity of joy thesis."<sup>22</sup> If this thesis is true, the "enjoyment" of entertainment, or indeed of anything else, has neutral value at best. Thus it counts neither for the value of life nor against it. And if it really were the only state apart from salvation that was not characterized solely by suffering, life would be miserable indeed.

Fortunately, there is no reason to accept the negativity of joy thesis. Schopenhauer supports it as follows: "[D]esire, that is to say, want, is the precedent condition of every pleasure;

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<sup>22</sup> Christopher Janaway calls it the "thesis of the negativity-of-satisfaction" ("Schopenhauer's Pessimism," 55); Julian Young calls it the "negativity-of-happiness thesis" (*Schopenhauer*, 214).



but with the satisfaction, the desire and therefore the pleasure cease; and so satisfaction and gratification can never be more than deliverance from a pain, from a want" (*WWR* I: 319). There are two assumptions here: first, that lacking an objection is a precondition for *desiring* it; second, that desiring an object is a precondition for deriving pleasure from it. While the first of these assumptions is clearly true, the second seems perfectly false. First, why assume that one cannot derive pleasure from things one *does* possess? I do not want to overstate the objection here. The satisfaction of a desire often does yield only a neutral feeling of relief (e.g., Magee mentions the neutral-satisfaction of an addicted smoker "getting his fix"<sup>23</sup>). But surely it is not true that the satisfaction of *every* desire leads only to a neutral feeling. Consider, for example, enjoying dinner with one's best friends, or a walk on a nice day with a loved one. Is it not *obvious* that enjoyment of these activities is more than the neutral feeling of being satisfied that one is not deprived of good company, that one actually *feels* such joy? I see no good reason for a negative answer to this question. Indeed, it seems that a relatively enduring positive feeling of joy is precisely the characteristic of time spent in good company that distinguishes a particular such occasion as a "great time" rather than one to be summed up as "okay" or "so-so." Second, why think one cannot derive pleasure from something without desiring it beforehand? Clearly we often do derive pleasure from something not only without desiring it beforehand (as when we unexpectedly run into an old friend), but even when we expect nothing but misery on its occasion. Leading up to a conference, for example, one may experience nothing but dread at its approach, but on its occasion find himself thoroughly pleased to be in attendance. Indeed, he might accurately describe his unexpected reaction to the conference as—*pleasantly surprised*.

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<sup>23</sup> Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 241.

Consider, finally, Schopenhauer's claim that, with the exception of salvation, "life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain [i.e., the pain of striving] and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents" (*WWR* I: 312). First we must address a potential confusion. Is Schopenhauer claiming that suffering and boredom are the mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive mental states of human life? He is not. Surely he is well aware of the fact that some human mental states cannot be described accurately in terms of striving or boredom (the stupor one experiences just after awakening from a deep sleep, for example). This is why, in the above passage, he says only that suffering and boredom are life's "*ultimate* constituents" rather than its *only* constituents. However, Schopenhauer obviously *does* think that whatever mental states there are other than striving and boredom are negligible with respect to the value of life. The reason is that the only thing that *could* make life worthwhile is genuine happiness or joy. But since these are unattainable in this world, suffering and boredom are the only human mental states pertinent to the question of the value of life, a grim picture indeed.

However, we can reject Schopenhauer's claim that suffering and boredom are life's ultimate constituents on familiar grounds. We have seen that striving can be pleasurable, boredom can be avoided without resorting to more striving, and positive joy is real. Of course, given that the conditions in which humans live vary greatly, it would be mistaken to infer from the fact that there is joy in life that life is joyous. The latter claim would be a gross generalization, insensitive to the many people whose lives truly are mostly suffering. More accurate would be to say that there is at least some joy in most people's lives, and a lot of joy in the lives of some. Indeed, for the lucky ones, joy may actually be one of life's ultimate constituents. We shall return to the question of whether joy and suffering can be measured below. But for now notice that so long as *some* lives are joyous, the optimist may legitimately

deny Schopenhauer's pessimism. Premise (3) of Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism must be denied, and hence the universal evaluative judgments underlying the conclusion of that argument no longer seem warranted. That is, some aspects of life in our world appear to warrant optimistic evaluation, and thus it no longer seems true that only the delusional would deny Schopenhauer's pessimistic evaluation of life in our world.

Recall Schopenhauer's claim to have demonstrated the truth of pessimism "a priori" (*WWR* I: 323–24). We can now make sense of this claim, as well as see why it is false. Schopenhauer claims to have demonstrated pessimism "a-priori" because he thinks we can derive the fact that life is always and everywhere suffering from the concept of what ultimate reality is: *will*. If reality is an eternally active will, and in turn willing is painful and insatiable striving, then it follows from the fact that reality is will that life is suffering through and through and hence something whose nonexistence would have been better than its existence. But now we can see that the foundation of Schopenhauer's pessimism is actually an a posteriori claim based on our *experience* of willing, an experience Schopenhauer seems to have grossly mischaracterized.<sup>24</sup> If, as Schopenhauer claims, our subjective experience of willing provides the "secret passage" to reality in itself, then, *contra* Schopenhauer, reality in itself seems to be a will whose striving sometimes causes pain, sometimes a mix of pain and pleasure, and that sometimes even admits—sometimes lasting—joy. But if *this* is the concept from which we are to characterize life, then obviously it does not follow from the fact that reality is will that life is so hellish. For some, life is actually quite good, and Schopenhauer has no grounds for claiming that

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<sup>24</sup> I owe the point that Schopenhauer's metaphysics rests on an a posteriori foundation to Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 106–7: "Many of the observations [Schopenhauer] invokes to support his metaphysical speculations are of a very general nature: for example, the observation that happiness is, by and large, unattainable in this life. This is the sort of observation that requires more than mere acquaintance with objects in space and time, or with my own body as a kind of willing."

a person with such a life who evaluates it optimistically is delusional. Indeed, it seems that *Schopenhauer* is the one that suffers a delusion, at least if he really believed, as he surely seems to have believed, that the honest introspection of every competent person would reveal to her that the core of reality is a wicked will that any sane and morally upright person must repudiate.

Contra Magee, *this* is where Schopenhauer's gloomy temperament seems to have had decisive influence on his philosophy. We saw above that, according to Magee, Schopenhauer's pessimism is merely a temperamental negative evaluation of the world as he saw it, a world that, for Magee, is "equally compatible" with "non-pessimism."<sup>25</sup> We have also seen that Magee's claim is mistaken. I am not denying that Schopenhauer's temperament played an important role in the development of his philosophy; but it did not play the role Magee claims. Schopenhauer's temperament seems to have led him to ignore the genuinely good aspects of life (e.g., positive joy). Rather than influencing the way Schopenhauer *evaluated* the world, then, his temperament seems to have influenced how he *saw* the world, i.e., what he considered to be the *facts* of the world. And the facts of the world according to Schopenhauer—he is at least right about this—warrant only pessimistic evaluation.

We now have the beginnings of a justification for (B). We have seen that

(A) Denial of Schopenhauer's pessimistic judgment that it would have been better if life had not come into existence constitutes delusion in some possible worlds.

is true, and now we can now begin to see that

(B) Ours is not such a world.

is also true. If Schopenhauer were right that life in our world is always and everywhere suffering, then his judgment that it would have been better had life never come into existence in our world

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<sup>25</sup> Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 13.

would be correct. However, life in our world is *not* always and everywhere suffering, and indeed some aspects of life leave open the possibility of warranted optimism. This alone is not enough to establish (B), however, since the bad aspects of life in our world might clearly outweigh the good. I will discuss this possibility in the next section. I shall show that Schopenhauer has another argument for his pessimistic judgment about life, which I call the "simple argument" for pessimism. I will argue that although the simple argument is plausible, its crucial premise admits of reasonable disagreement. This means that one can disagree with that premise and reject the argument's conclusion in favor of the optimistic judgment that it is a good thing that life exists in our world despite the immense suffering it involves—in other words, it means that the question of optimism or pessimism *about life in our world* cannot be definitively answered.

#### 4 ANOTHER ARGUMENT FOR SCHOPENHAUER'S PESSIMISM

So far we have seen that although Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism is valid, it suffers devastating objections and therefore fails to establish his pessimistic judgment that it would have been better if life had not come into existence. In this section, I will argue that scholars have been too quick to reject Schopenhauer's pessimism on the grounds that his main argument for pessimism is unsound. Schopenhauer has another, more plausible argument for his pessimistic judgment about life that has been neglected. That argument, the "simple argument" for pessimism, runs as follows:

- (1) If the value of the existence of a thing  $x$  is not worth a consequence of  $x$ 's existence, then it would be better for  $x$  not to exist than for  $x$  to exist.
- (2) The value of life is not worth a consequence of its existence, the unmitigated suffering of as many living creatures as have endured such suffering in its course.

Therefore,

- (3) It would have been better if life had not come into existence.

The simple argument is formally valid. Its major premise, furthermore, seems to me uncontroversial. Consider an example. Imagine that someone is deliberating about whether to use new technology to create the most advanced robot to date. Also imagine that he knows the robot will torture and kill many innocent people. I think most will agree that the production of an advanced robot is not worth the cost of innocent people being tortured and killed, and that for this reason it would be better for the robot *not* to exist than for it to exist. So much for (1). The minor premise, however, is not only contentious, it is also quite unclear how to settle its truth-value. After all, doing so appears to require “measuring” the “value of life” and “weighing” it against the “cost of unmitigated suffering,” and what this means and whether it can be done is difficult to know. Which aspects of life count in favor of its “value”? What “unmitigated suffering” does the premise refer to? What do the phrases “the value of life” and “the cost of unmitigated suffering” even mean? I will return to these difficult questions below. I want to show now that the simple argument is one of *Schopenhauer's* arguments for pessimism. I hasten to add that the simple argument is not Schopenhauer’s *central* argument for pessimism; he clearly believed that his main argument was sufficient to establish pessimism. However, it is an argument he makes for a conclusion he accepts, and in this sense it is his argument for pessimism. After showing that this is so, I will defend the simple argument against an objection scholars have made against Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism that might wrongly be taken to apply to the former also. Then I will turn to motivating premise (2) of the simple argument.

I begin with an uncontroversial point: Schopenhauer is deeply moved by the immense suffering in the world, and in part this is what motivates his pessimism. We have seen already that suffering plays an essential role in Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism, although

in that argument he claims, wildly, that life is *always* and *everywhere* suffering. What remains to be seen, then, is that Schopenhauer has an argument for pessimism that rests on *plausible* claims about suffering. The simple argument is one. Indeed, the only claims about suffering the simple argument relies on are that *suffering exists* and that *suffering is a consequence of the existence of life*. I hope it is enough to say about the first claim that no one of integrity and sound wits would deny it. The claim that suffering is a consequence of the existence of life is, once clarified, just as uncontroversial. I intend by "life" sentient biological creatures such we see in our world, i.e., fragile, needy, mortal and morally imperfect creatures in this world of limited resources, natural disaster and disease. It is uncontroversial, I think, that a consequence of the existence of creatures like us in a world like this one is that all of them will undergo some suffering and many of them will endure extreme suffering. Thus, the simple argument rests on descriptive claims about suffering we can all accept. But are they *Schopenhauer's* claims?

They are. Many of Schopenhauer's descriptions of suffering are sober and simple reflections on the ails of sentient creatures living in a naturally imperfect world. Thus he laments the immense suffering of millions caused by natural disasters such as "the earthquake of Lisbon, of Haiti, [and] the destruction of Pompeii" as "only small, playful hints" of the potential of the world to torture its inhabitants (*WWR* II: 581). He bemoans the misfortune of those who suffer "sickness, poverty, mutilation, loss of sight or reason" and of those for whom "*work, worry, labor, and trouble, form the lot [...] their whole life long.*"<sup>26</sup> And he repeatedly reminds us, since we are prone to forget it, of the misery of non-human animal life, characterized as it is by "momentary gratification, fleeting pleasure conditioned by wants, much and long suffering,

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<sup>26</sup> Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World," 128–29.

constant struggle, *bellum omnium*, everything a hunter and everything hunted, pressure, want, need, and anxiety, shrieking and howling [...]" (*WWR* II: 354).

So the descriptive claims about suffering implied by the simple argument are Schopenhauer's own, but the same remains to be seen of the evaluative claim in (2). The following passages suggest that it, too, is Schopenhauer's. Recall the passage from, "On the Sufferings of the World": "If you try to imagine, as nearly as you can, what an amount of misery, pain and suffering of every kind the sun shines upon in its course, you will admit that it would be much better if, on the earth as little as on the moon, the sun were able to call forth the phenomena of life; and if, here as there, the surface were still in a crystalline state."<sup>27</sup> Here we find Schopenhauer drawing his pessimistic conclusion from a more plausible claim about the *amount* of suffering in the world rather than from the claim that life is *always* and *everywhere* suffering. In *WWR* II, he makes the even stronger claim that the existence of suffering *in-itself*—i.e., whatever the amount—is sufficient to establish pessimism:

[...] it 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, and consequently can never be balanced, by the good that exists along with or after it.

*Mille piacer' non vagliono un tormento.*<sup>28</sup>

For that thousands had lived in happiness and joy would never do away with the anguish and death-agony of one individual [...]. 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 [...], namely that we would have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; that it is something which at bottom ought not to be, and so on. (*WWR* II: 576)<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World," 129

<sup>28</sup> A quote from Petrarch, translated as: *A thousand pleasures do not compensate for one pain.*

<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that in this passage Schopenhauer concludes from the existence of suffering that it would have been better if *the world* (not just life) did not exist. But this need not cast doubt on Schopenhauer's commitment to the simple argument, for it is clear that the reason Schopenhauer



It might at first seem as if the claim here is that the presence of *any* suffering—e.g., even the minor pain of a paper-cut—has a negative value nothing could possibly outweigh. And of course this is implausible. If paper-cuts were the worst affliction facing sentient creatures, surely some of us should be very glad to be alive. Moreover, worse pains than paper-cuts (e.g., the pain that sets in after an hour of running) are often accepted as worth a gain for which they are necessary (e.g., the health benefits of running). Fortunately, the passage suggests that Schopenhauer's claim is not that the presence of *any* suffering, however trivial, is enough to support his pessimistic conclusion, but that the presence of *profound* suffering, what he characterizes as "evil," "anguish" and "death-agony" is sufficient.<sup>30</sup> But it is worth asking what distinguishes "death-agony" from the kind of suffering that does not threaten the value of life. I hesitate to give a definitive answer to this question, but I think one distinguishing characteristic of suffering that can appropriately be characterized as "death-agony" and that poses a potential problem for the value of life is that it is unmitigated—that is, it is the kind of suffering from which there is no redemption, that leaves one hopeless to the extent that even thoughts of bygone pleasures fail to provide comfort and instead serve only to remind one what is lost. Of course, the claim that unmitigated suffering poses a threat to the value of life is also controversial; but surely

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concludes that it would have been better if the world did not exist is that the world *supports life*, the non-existence of which is better than its existence because of the suffering it involves.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Janaway misses this point when he writes of the above passage, "This is the most extreme statement of pessimism: any suffering at all invalidates the whole world," and dismisses it as "perversely one-sided" ("Schopenhauer's Pessimism," 55). For Janaway, Schopenhauer's claim in this passage "depends crucially on the thesis of the negativity-of-satisfaction" (i.e., what I have called the 'negativity-of-joy thesis'). The reason is that, if Schopenhauer is claiming that any suffering threatens the value of existence because it cannot be expunged by any joy, then one could retort that happiness redeems existence, because no suffering can expunge it either. Thus the only way out for Schopenhauer is to deny that joy is possible, and this is precisely what the negativity-of-joy thesis does. But if I am right that Schopenhauer does not think that *any* suffering poses a potential threat to the value of existence, but rather that only what he characterizes as "death-agony," i.e., profound unmitigated suffering, does, then we can see that his claim is not so easily dismissed.

it is more plausible than the whiney claim that the pain of a mere paper-cut undermines life's goodness. In any case, my task so far has been to show that the simple argument for pessimism is Schopenhauer's own. I will return to the question of whether we ought to *accept* the simple argument below.

For now, I want to free the simple argument from an objection scholars have made against Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism that might wrongly be taken to apply to the former also. The objection runs as follows. Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism clearly relies on a "hedonic calculus"—i.e., he determines the value of life by weighing only the amount of felt pleasure and felt pain within it. And since for Schopenhauer life is always and everywhere pain, the pain in life obviously outweighs the pleasure. But (setting aside the problematic claim that life is always and everywhere pain) are there not aspects of life other than felt pleasure that count in its favor? What about knowledge, beauty, and love? Surely Schopenhauer is wrong to exclude these as irrelevant to an estimation of life's value, and since it is possible that such aspects redeem life as worth the pain it involves, the main argument fails.

Both Janaway and Young advance this objection, claiming that Schopenhauer's main argument betrays a "stark form of hedonism" we must reject.<sup>31</sup> Thus Janaway: "Are felt pleasures and pains the sole bearers or contributors of value? Why do outcomes of our actions other than pleasures and pains count for nothing?"<sup>32</sup> And Young: "A great difficulty with Schopenhauer's evaluative pessimism, however, is the hedonistic assumption that the *only* thing we value is pleasure. For there might be other things which we not only value but value more highly than pleasure."<sup>33</sup> We must agree with Janaway and Young. Schopenhauer's evaluation of life must

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<sup>31</sup> Young, *Schopenhauer*, 218. Janaway, "Schopenhauer's Pessimism," 56. Both use this same phrase.

<sup>32</sup> Janaway, "Schopenhauer's Pessimism," 57.

<sup>33</sup> Young, *Schopenhauer*, 219.

account for the aspects of life, such as those mentioned above, that arguably are *the* sources of its value. And since his main argument for pessimism relies on a hedonic calculus that ignores those aspects, we have yet another reason to reject it.

Notice, though, that the *simple argument* implies no objectionable hedonism. Premise (2) does indeed state that the value of life is not worth its suffering, but this may well be true *even if* we consider the perhaps high value of things like love, beauty and knowledge. For all those aspects of life are worth, they may in the end *not* be worth the price of countless creatures experiencing "anguish" and "death-agony." So although Schopenhauer's crude hedonism *is* a reason to reject his main argument for pessimism, it counts for nothing against the simple argument. However, up to now no reason to accept the controversial second premise of the simple argument has been advanced. I turn to this now.

To ask whether we should accept premise (2) of the simple argument is equivalent to asking whether we should give a negative answer to the following question: "*Is life worth the suffering it involves?*" I will refer to this question as "the question of pessimism." We need to clarify the question of pessimism, since it is apt to be confused with a related but importantly different question: "*Is my life worth the suffering I have endured?*" At first it may seem that one can answer the question of pessimism by examining his own life, but in fact self-examination cannot answer it, for even if an individual were to consider both the good and bad aspects of *his* life and conclude that *it* is well worth the suffering it involves, the question of whether *the phenomenon of life itself* is worth the suffering of many living creatures remains open. Neither does this question about an individual's life *entail* any answer to the question of pessimism. One may affirm the worthiness of his own life—or the life of someone else, for that matter—and yet consistently answer the question of pessimism in the negative. To see this clearly, imagine a

world in which one individual lives a joyous life while literally every other living creature endures perpetual unmitigated suffering. The joyous individual may affirm the worthiness of his own life, and yet consistently deny (as it seems he should) that the phenomenon of life itself is worth the unmitigated suffering of everyone but him. There is, after all, nothing inconsistent about the two propositions, 'My life is worth the suffering it involves', and, 'The phenomenon of life as a whole involves so much suffering that, on balance, the former is not worth the latter'.<sup>34</sup>

The term 'life' in the question of pessimism refers not to an *individual* human life, then, but to *the phenomenon of sentient living creatures*. But the question requires still further clarification, for when we ask whether the phenomenon of sentient living creatures is worth the suffering life involves, it is left unstated what about those creatures even might be worth the suffering. Surely the *mere existence* of sentient living creatures is not what we think potentially makes life worth its suffering; rather, it is something (or a variety of things) sentient creatures can *do* or *experience* that potentially makes life worth its suffering. To see this, imagine a world in which sentient living creatures exist, but do not have the capacities for joy, knowledge, love, art, or, in short, for anything that might make life worthwhile. Such a world seems irrelevant to the question of pessimism, which we ask about *our* world, such as it is, one aspect of which is that it contains sentient living creatures with capacities for worthwhile actions and experiences. Thus the question of pessimism asks: *Is anything sentient living creatures (such as those with which we are acquainted and to which category we belong) do or experience worth the suffering life involves?* This way of putting it focuses the question on our own world, and makes clear that we are asking whether anything that seems to make life worth the suffering it involves actually does.

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<sup>34</sup> I return to this point in section 5 below.

But how could we possibly give a compelling answer to the question of pessimism? Indeed, here we seem to face the difficulties mentioned above. Answering the question of pessimism seems to require first, (a) assigning positive quantitative value to worthwhile actions and experiences and negative quantitative value to the suffering of living creatures and, (b) calculating how many of each there has been, is, and will be in the world. Only once (a) and (b) are accomplished will we be able to tell whether there is enough value in the worthwhile actions and experiences in life to outweigh its suffering. I must admit, however, that I see no intelligible way to accomplish (a) and (b). For one thing, (a) would involve answering incredibly elusive questions such as the following: Are certain *kinds* of actions and experiences worth more than others? For example, is a moral action “worth” more or less than the experience of love? How does duration and intensity factor into these evaluations? For example, how does a brief but intense positive experience compare to a mild but long-lasting one? Does the same apply to suffering? How do mental and physical pleasures and pains compare with one another? Is the experience of appreciating the *Pieta* or the theory of relativity worth more or less than the experience of a great massage? Does regretting having undergone a pleasurable experience detract from its quantitative value? And by what standard do we measure what counts as a “positive” or a “negative” experience anyway? Such questions as these are bound to leave us bewildered. And, for another thing, when we consider that (b) requires assigning a quantitative value to *every* action, positive experience and experience of suffering that *has occurred, is occurring, and will occur*, we see clearly that, barring a drastic change in our capacities, human beings cannot accomplish it either. This appears to devastate the simple argument. If (a) and (b) really are required to answer the question of pessimism, perhaps there is no reasonable way to

answer it. And if the question of pessimism cannot be answered, then neither can we affirm premise (2) of the simple argument for pessimism. But then pessimism appears to be groundless.

However, there is a route to answering the question of pessimism that does not require assigning quantitative value to every action and experience and then weighing the positive and negative according to a thoroughly impracticable calculus. Consider the following claim:

(P) No good action or experience or set thereof is worth the unmitigated suffering of as many living creatures as have endured such suffering in this world.

Claim (P) entails a negative answer to the question of pessimism, and it does not rest on a quantitative evaluation of every action and experience or an impracticable calculus. Rather, it expresses that the unmitigated suffering of many living creatures has infinite negative value when compared to worthwhile actions and experiences, such that the latter could *never* be worth the former. If (P) is true, clearly the good actions and experiences that obtain in this world are *not* worth the actual unmitigated suffering of many living creatures, the answer to the question of pessimism is thus *no*, premise (2) of the simple argument is true, and pessimism is established.

It is difficult to know how to assess the truth status of (P). What it means to assign infinite negative value to a thing  $x$  when compared to another thing  $y$  is, upon reflection, perfectly clear: it means that no matter what value assignment  $y$  receives, and no matter how many  $y$ 's there are or how much of  $y$  there is,  $y$  is never worth  $x$ . What is unclear is how one decides whether anything actually has infinite value when compared to another thing, and, if so, which things have it when compared to what others. This is a complex and difficult question, and I will not attempt to settle it here. Rather, I would simply point out that (P) is obviously not irrational, and no known facts about the world obviously contradict it. Furthermore, as I shall show now, there is reason to think that (P) is an evaluative intuition shared by many.

Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* furnishes a thought experiment with which we can test our own intuition about (P).<sup>35</sup> In the chapter entitled, "Rebellion," Ivan describes to Alyosha several documented instances of evil, each of which involves the torture of innocent people. One such instance of evil involves a five-year-old girl whose parents hate her and are annoyed by her childish habits (e.g., wetting the bed). The girl's parents "'beat her, flogged her, kicked her [...] until her whole body was nothing but bruises.'" "'Finally,'" Ivan says, "'they attained the height of finesse: in the freezing cold, they locked her all night in the outhouse, because she wouldn't ask to get up and go in the middle of the night [...]—for that they smeared her face with her excrement and made her eat the excrement [...].'" Ivan describes vividly the child in the midst of her anguish: the "small creature, who cannot even comprehend what is being done to her, in a vile place, in the dark and the cold, beat[ing] herself on her strained little chest with her tiny fist and weep[ing] with her anguished, gentle, meek tears for 'dear God' to protect her."<sup>36</sup> Ivan then poses Alyosha two questions, which we might ask ourselves:

*Ivan:* Tell me straight out, I call on you—answer me: imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the object of making people happy in the finale, of giving them peace and rest at last, but for that you must inevitably and unavoidably torture just one tiny creature, that same child who was beating her chest with her little fist, and raise your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears—would you agree to be the architect on such conditions? Tell me the truth.

*Alyosha:* No, I would not agree.

*Ivan:* And can you admit the idea that the people for whom you are building would agree to accept their happiness on the unjustified blood of a tortured child, and having accepted it, to remain forever happy?

*Alyosha:* No, I cannot admit it.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Quotations are from Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990).

<sup>36</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 236.

<sup>37</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 245–46

To strip Ivan's first question of all embellishment: would you create a world in which (almost) everyone eventually enjoys perfect happiness on the condition that one child endures constant and unmitigated suffering until her death? I am confident that many people will answer "No" to this question (as is Alyosha, as evidenced by his answer to Ivan's second question). But then these people will also accept (P), or so it seems. For if they do not think that securing many blissful lives is worth the unmitigated suffering of just one child, they will agree that securing many blissful lives is not worth the unmitigated suffering of as many living creatures as have endured it in this world. But accepting (P) entails a negative answer to the question of pessimism and therewith an acceptance of premise (2) of the simple argument. And since the simple argument is valid and its first premise is uncontroversial, accepting premise (2) amounts to accepting the pessimistic conclusion that it would have been better if life had not come into existence.

Of course, I do not take myself to have shown that the simple argument is sound. I am sure some would answer "Yes" to Ivan's question and to the question of pessimism, and it is difficult to see how one could demonstrate conclusively that such people have answered these questions incorrectly. Thus we can begin to see why it is true that:

(B) Denial of Schopenhauer's pessimism about life *in our world* does not constitute delusion.

If I am right that many people would answer "No" to Ivan's question and the question of pessimism, then, at least if a valid syllogism whose first premise is uncontroversial and whose second premise rests on an evaluative intuition many people accept is a plausible one, I have shown that Schopenhauer provides us with a plausible argument for pessimism. However, whether one accepts premise (2) of the simple argument seems to come down to whether one has



the evaluative intuition (P), which appears to admit of reasonable disagreement. I will discuss the precise sense in which (P) admits of reasonable disagreement in the next section. But, assuming this discussion for now, notice that insofar as (P) does admit of reasonable disagreement, premise (2) of the simple argument can be rejected legitimately by someone who thinks that the good actions or experiences of living creatures actually *are* worth the unmitigated suffering of as many creatures as have endured it in this world. Such a person would reject Schopenhauer's pessimistic judgment about life in favor of the optimistic judgment that it is a *good thing* that life came into existence. Hence although Schopenhauer's pessimism can be established beyond question about *some possible worlds*, ours appears not to be among them.

## 5 PESSIMISM AND PHILOSOPHY

We can now return to the questions regarding the relationship between pessimism and philosophy with which this essay began and answer them in light of the foregoing discussion. To begin with, recall the question of whether his negative evaluation of life necessarily betrays something objectionable about the pessimist. I gave the following answer:

(C) While some arguments for pessimistic judgments about life in our world betray an objectionable aspect of their proponent's temperament, not all of them do.

Now we can see why (C) is true. Consider again Nietzsche's claim that Schopenhauer's pessimism is the work of a “tyrannical will of one who suffers deeply, who struggles, is tormented, and would like to turn what is most personal, singular, and narrow, the real idiosyncrasy of his suffering, into a binding law and compulsion—one who, as it were, revenges himself on all things by forcing his own image, the image of his torture, on them, branding them with it” (*GS* 370). For Nietzsche, Schopenhauer's pessimism is ultimately the product of the latter's gloomy temperament. His temperament led him to ignore the genuinely good aspects of

life—such as positive joy—and to generalize from the misery of *his* life to the misery of *life itself*. It is easy to see why Nietzsche thinks pessimism was Schopenhauer's way to gain redemption from his "impoverished life": believing that perpetual suffering is an essential aspect of life itself, rather than a contingent aspect of some lives to which group one's own life unfortunately belongs, surely makes one's personal misery more tolerable (indeed, it makes it *impersonal*). In this way, Nietzsche views Schopenhauer's pessimism as both symptomatic of and a remedy for the latter's own misery.

As a partial explanation of Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism Nietzsche's is perfectly plausible. Schopenhauer's temperament and personal suffering surely contributed to his distorted worldview, and one plausible explanation for why he arrived at this particular worldview is that it made his own life easier to endure. And it *is* an objectionable aspect of his character that Schopenhauer condemned life *simpliciter* to make his own life easier to endure, if he did. But at this point we must ask if pessimism about life is *necessarily* symptomatic of either an objectionable temperament or a miserable life or both. And if we consider pessimism as the conclusion of the simple argument, we see that the answer is that it is not.

Note first that the primary reason we consider psychological explanations of Schopenhauer's pessimism such as Nietzsche's plausible is that the former's main argument for pessimism contains an obviously false premise, and we should like to know why he believes it is true. The premise in question, of course, is (3) that life is always and everywhere suffering. And since intellectual grounds for assent to (3) are lacking, we demand an alternative explanation for Schopenhauer's pessimism, and Nietzsche's explanation in terms of Schopenhauer's need to "revenge himself on all things" so as to make his own life more tolerable is a good candidate. But where is the false premise in the *simple argument* that one cannot believe without distorting

the facts? Indeed, where is there *any* intellectual error in the simple argument? As we have seen, premise (2) is the only questionable premise, but what facts about the world must be distorted for one to believe it? The most obvious fact that Schopenhauer ignored in order to accept premise (3) of his main argument is that life has genuine goods to offer (to some of us, at least). But clearly no proponent of the simple argument must deny this. One can acknowledge the genuinely good aspects of life and yet consistently claim that these goods are not worth the unmitigated suffering of as many living creatures as have endured it in this world. Furthermore, if it turns out that—as may very well be the case—all evaluative judgments are ultimately explicable only in terms of temperament rather than reason, the temperament underlying the acceptance of premise (2) of the simple argument seems wholly unobjectionable. As I have said already, it is a temperament inclined neither to distort the facts nor to ignore the good aspects of life. Rather, it is a temperament that is deeply moved by and sensitive to the immense amount of suffering so clearly evident in this world, and it is difficult to see what is objectionable about that.

That one can endorse pessimism without betraying something pathetic about his own life becomes especially clear when we consider that endorsing pessimism is even compatible with a kind of life-affirming optimism. If one of the less fortunate aspects of Schopenhauer's main argument is that it ignores the existence of the genuinely good aspects of life and therewith the possibility of *genuinely happy people*, the advantage of the simple argument is that not only is it consistent with the acknowledgement of life's good qualities, its proponent can actually *be* a genuinely happy person—i.e., one who finds *his life* on balance joyful and affirms it as wholly worth living. For consider again that there is nothing inconsistent about the following two propositions:

(X) The value of the good qualities of *my* life renders it worth the suffering I have endured in its course.

(Y) Nothing (including the good qualities of any life) is worth the unmitigated suffering of as many living creatures as have endured it in this world.

To see that (X) and (Y) are compatible we must get clear on what each is about. (X) is about the relationship between the good qualities of a particular individual *S*'s life and the suffering that *S* has endured throughout *S*'s life. The proposition expresses that the good qualities of *S*'s life are sufficiently good to outweigh whatever suffering *S* has endured in *S*'s life. (Y), by contrast, is about the relationship between the value of *anything* (including the good qualities of *any* life) and the negative value of the unmitigated suffering of *as many living creatures as have endured it in this world*. It expresses that nothing is worth the unmitigated suffering of as many living creatures as have endured it in this world. (Y) entails absolutely nothing about the relationship between the good qualities of any individual's life and the suffering *that individual* has endured in its course, but only that the good qualities of any individual's life are not worth the unmitigated suffering of as many living creatures as have endured it in this world. But this means that a proponent of the simple argument can consistently affirm his own life as one worth living. So the fact that one endorses pessimism on the basis of the simple argument ought not be taken to betray his misery.

The second question I raised above is whether pessimistic judgments about life such as Schopenhauer's can be the subject of productive philosophical analysis. I gave this answer:

(D) The arguments for pessimistic judgments about life in our world can be the subject of productive philosophical analysis, at least insofar as we can separate the arguments for such judgments that establish them as plausible from those that do not.

Once I clarify the terms 'productive philosophical analysis' and 'plausible', we can see that (D) is true on the basis of the foregoing discussion. Since the subjects of philosophical analysis include such different things as phrases, concepts, terms, and arguments, I should clarify that I am

concerned only to define 'productive philosophical analysis' *with respect to arguments*. So by 'productive philosophical analysis' I mean the following:

*Productive philosophical analysis*: analysis of an argument for a position that ultimately results in the demonstration that the argument is sound or unsound or, at the very least, that its conclusion is plausible or implausible.

The vague term in this definition is 'plausible'. As I intend the term, an argument is plausible when it is valid and all of its premises at least admit of reasonable disagreement. A premise admits of reasonable disagreement, I claim, when honest, diligent and rational people disagree about its truth-value even when presented with the total body of relevant evidence and facts. We see the need for the concept in this context when we consider that even if philosophy is incapable of showing that some arguments are *sound*, precisely because one or more of their premises admits of reasonable disagreement, surely there is a difference between a valid argument whose premises admit of reasonable disagreement and one that contains premises that no reasonable person could believe are true. The difference between these two arguments, I claim, is one of plausibility.

The concept is most useful, I think, when considering arguments that contain *evaluative judgments*, since such judgments often admit of reasonable disagreement in precisely the sense I have just described. Consider the simple argument. We have seen that the argument is valid and that only its second premise is questionable. Its second premise *is* questionable, I claim, precisely because honest, diligent, and reasonable people can disagree about whether or not it is true. And they seem to. The pessimist looks out at the world, with all of its suffering and its goodness, and claims that the former is not worth the latter. The optimist, on the other hand, claims that the goodness in the world is indeed worth the suffering it involves. And each wonders how the other could deny his claim. Even if philosophy cannot settle the debate between the optimist and the

pessimist, I think it is productive with respect to the question that separates them if it allows them to determine which arguments for their conclusions are plausible and which are not. And we have seen already that it *can* do this: while we have seen that Schopenhauer's main argument for pessimism is not even plausible because one of its premises is simply false—as we saw, premise 3—the simple argument *is* plausible because it is valid and its only questionable premise at least admits of reasonable disagreement.

Perhaps philosophy is capable of showing more than this. More specifically, perhaps philosophy *is* capable of showing that the simple argument is sound. This is a complex and difficult issue, and it deserves more space than I have here. I will, however, permit myself the following observations.

There is evidence of psychological mechanisms that inhibit individuals from acknowledging certain terrible facts about themselves and the world. Some of these mechanisms appear to distort an individual's perceptions about his own happiness and suffering, making him exaggerate the former and understate the latter. Examples of these mechanisms include the tendency to have an unrealistically positive view of oneself, to believe one has an unrealistic degree of control over one's own life, and to believe that one's chances of having a good life in the future are unrealistically high.<sup>38</sup> Other of these mechanisms appear to distort an individual's perceptions about the suffering of others, rendering him incapable of grasping the full extent of unmitigated suffering in this world. Examples include the tendency to become desensitized to the suffering of persons beyond those with whom one has conscious solidarity (e.g., one's friends, one's neighborhood, one's nation) and to believe that those undergoing profound suffering have

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<sup>38</sup> See Jonathon D. Brown and Shelley E. Taylor, "Illusion and Well-Being: A Psychological Perspective on Mental Health," in *Psychological Bulletin* 103.2 (1988): 193–210. See their, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fact from Fiction," in *Psychological Bulletin* 116.1 (1994): 21–27 for a reply to their critics.

done something to deserve it (part of the “just-world hypothesis,” as it has come to be known).<sup>39</sup> Add to these mechanisms the shocking degree of historical and global ignorance among the majority of people and there is a strong case for the conclusion that many do not have an accurate conception of the terrors involved with life in this world.

I call attention to these psychological mechanisms because they may well bias people towards optimism by distorting their conception of what life in our world is actually like. If such mechanisms really do inhibit people from acknowledging the full extent of unmitigated suffering in this world, then perhaps those who deny premise two of the simple argument do so only because they have a distorted conception of reality. But if so, premise two of the simple argument does not admit of reasonable disagreement after all. The cockeyed optimist would deny it, but only because he is incapable of confronting the total body of relevant evidence and facts. It would therefore not be true of that premise that rational, diligent, and honest people disagree about it even when presented with the total body of relevant evidence and facts. In this case, the pessimist would be justified in his belief that the simple argument is sound: For the pessimist, the evaluative judgment in the argument’s second premise is self-evident. And if the optimist denies that premise only because he is incapable of confronting reality, then the pessimist has no reason to doubt that his evaluative judgment *is* self-evident. After all, what is self-evident appears as such only to those whose truth-tracking faculties are functioning properly, and in the scenario we are considering the optimist’s faculties are *not* functioning properly; they are inhibited by reality-

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<sup>39</sup> See Stanley Cohen’s *States of Denial* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001) on blindness to the suffering of persons beyond those with whom one has conscious solidarity. On the just-world hypothesis, Melvin J. Lerner’s, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980) is the groundbreaking work. More recent experimental research on the issue is discussed in *Responses to Victimization and Belief in a Just World*, ed. Melvin J. Lerner and Leo Montada (New York: Plenum Press, 1998).

distorting psychological mechanisms. At the very least, then, here we would have a coherent and compelling case for pessimism.<sup>40</sup>

Although the evidence just described does suggest that *many* optimists have a distorted conception of reality, however, it would be unreasonable to conclude on the basis of this evidence alone that there is no such thing as a competent and honest optimist about life in our world. Indeed, likely there are honest individuals who would, even upon acknowledging the full scope of the terrors of life in this world, claim that the good actions and experiences of some living creatures are worth these terrors. If so, premise two of the simple argument admits of reasonable disagreement.

## 6 THE POINT OF PESSIMISM

One may wonder if there is any *point* to pessimism. In one sense the question is misguided. There is no point to pessimism in the sense of a pragmatic reason for being a pessimist. As I have been discussing pessimism, one is not a pessimist for pragmatic reasons, but because, quite simply, he thinks it is true that it would have been better if life had never come into existence. In another sense, however, the question is perfectly valid, for one may wonder if pessimism has any practical consequences, and this question may reasonably be said to be about the point of pessimism. In this section I will discuss Schopenhauer's recurring claim that pessimism encourages compassion, for him the hallmark of moral action.

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<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting that Schopenhauer himself seems to have thought that the optimist might be capable of overcoming the psychological inhibitions to affirming (what is for Schopenhauer) the self-evident fact of pessimism. He writes:

If we were to conduct the most hardened and callous optimist through hospitals, infirmaries, operating theatres, through prisons, torture-chambers, and slave-hotels, over battlefields and to places of execution; if we were to open to him all the dark abodes of misery, where it shuns the gaze of cold curiosity, and finally were to allow him to glance into the dungeon of Ugolino where prisoners starved to death, he too would certainly see in the end what kind a world is this *meilleur des mondes possibles* [best of all possible worlds]. (*WWR* I: 325)



First we must remind ourselves more precisely why one becomes a pessimist. We have seen that, according to Schopenhauer, one becomes a pessimist in virtue of acknowledging a particular fact about this world and of responding to that fact in a certain way. I agree. The pessimist recognizes that a vast amount of suffering is essential to life in this world, and, confronted with such a world, he draws (what is to him) the obvious conclusion: it ought never to have been. In several passages Schopenhauer claims that cognizance of the misery in this world, when combined with the deeply sympathetic reaction to suffering from which pessimism is born, can affect in a positive way how one comports oneself towards the world and its inhabitants.

The following passage from “On the Suffering of the World” is representative:

[T]he conviction that the world and man is something that had better not have been, is of a kind to fill us with indulgence towards one another. Nay, from this point of view, we might well consider the proper form of address to be, not *Monsieur, Sir, mein Herr*, but *my fellow-sufferer, Soci malorum, capgnon de misères!* This may perhaps sound strange, but it is in keeping with the facts; it puts others in a right light; and it reminds us of that which is after all the most necessary thing in life—the tolerance, patience, regard, and love of neighbor, of which everyone stands in need, and which, therefore, every man owes to his fellow.<sup>41</sup>

The key to understanding this passage is Schopenhauer’s claim in its first sentence. But we must clarify that claim for, on its face, it is implausible. After all, is he really claiming that assent to the proposition, ‘This world ought never to have been’, is sufficient to fill us with compassion for others? This is implausible, I say, since one may assent to that proposition for all sorts of selfish reasons—e.g., “This world has not favored me. So curse it!”—or thoughtlessly, that is, for no *reason* at all. But of course this is not pessimism as Schopenhauer intends it. Pessimism is born of a sympathetic reaction to the vast amounts of suffering essential to life in this world. *This reaction to suffering*, and not merely the assent to a proposition, is the source of the “indulgence towards others” Schopenhauer claims pessimism encourages. Or, more precisely: compassion is

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<sup>41</sup> Schopenhauer, “On the Suffering of the World,” 144. Cf. *BM* 18 as well as part 4 of *WWR* I.

essential to pessimism, since one assents to the latter in virtue of the same sentiment that engenders the former.<sup>42</sup>

We must remove one more barrier to understanding this passage. We have seen already that, in one sense, at least, Schopenhauer's claim that suffering is essential to life must be rejected. It is not true that we are all of us always suffering. Again, there is joy in life. But we have also seen that suffering *is* essential to life in the sense that it is an inevitable feature of the lives of creatures like us in a world like this one. Indeed, this world is not fitted for our well-being; it threatens us with thousandfold evils at every moment, and inevitably some of them will befall each of us—for example, death, disease, decay, war, betrayal, and so on. Schopenhauer's claim, then, is that one for whom the fact that suffering is essential to life is a living conviction, at least if he has the sympathetic response to suffering that leads to pessimism, will see others “in a right light” and treat them with compassion.

What is the “right light” in which to see others? This brings us to the heart of Schopenhauer's ethics. In a quite moving passage from “On the Basis of Morality,” Schopenhauer explains that we see others aright when,

I have identified with the other to a certain extent, and as a result for the moment the barrier between I and Not-I has been suspended: only then will there be the opportunity immediately to take on as my own another's need, his distress, his suffering; then I no longer perceive him as he is given in empirical intuition, as completely distinct from me, as a stranger about whom I am indifferent; rather, I suffer *in him* even though his skin does not enclose my nerves. Only through this can *his* woe, *his* distress, become a motive *for me*; otherwise, it can only be my own.

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<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche seems to have been well aware of this essential connection between *Mitleid* and pessimism; indeed, he seems to have rejected *Mitleid* in part *because* of its connection with pessimism (see, e.g., section 5 of “What I Owe the Ancients” in his *Twilight of the Idols*). Also worth noting is that the *Mitleid*-pessimism duo is one of the common elements of Buddhism, Christianity, and Schopenhauer's philosophy, all of which elicited the mature Nietzsche's scorn.

From the moral standpoint, Schopenhauer claims, the suffering of “the other” is felt as one’s own suffering, and this motivates one to “compassion” (*Mitleid*), or “human-kindness” (*Menschenliebe*), as he sometimes calls it. For an individual who responds sympathetically to others’ suffering, the recognition that suffering is essential to *all* lives—and not just *his* life and the lives of those he loves—will expand the horizons of his sympathy to include all living creatures, a standpoint from which the proper form of address indeed becomes, “my fellow-sufferers.” From this standpoint, one understands fully that “*everyone* stands in need” of “tolerance,” “patience,” and “love of neighbor” (my emphasis).

No doubt there are questions here—as Nietzsche never tires of reminding us—questions not only about whether we can know that genuine compassion ever occurs (of which Schopenhauer was well aware<sup>43</sup>), but also about its *value*. (It is at least unclear whether compassion decreases or increases the suffering in the world.) These are questions that, unfortunately, I lack the space to explore here. But that compassion is both the essence of moral action and a good thing is surely not implausible. Nor is it implausible that the recognition that suffering is essential to life, when combined with the sympathy from which pessimism is born, encourages an all-encompassing compassion.

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<sup>43</sup> See *BM* 15: “Now the first thing would be to settle the empirical question of whether actions of voluntary justice and disinterested loving-kindness, which may then rise to noble-mindedness and magnanimity, are to be found in experience. Unfortunately this question still does not admit of being decided absolutely empirically because the *deed* is always only given in experience, but the *impulses* are not obvious, so the possibility always remains that an egoistic motive had influence on a just or good action.”

## CONCLUSION

Recall Simmel's claim that "the stand for the value or the lack of value of existence depends in resolute and principled natures on the specific reaction their innermost soul exhibits to happiness or suffering." Now we can see that, suitably qualified, this claim is exactly right. Simmel supports his claim as follows:

That the decision for optimism or pessimism is based...on a specific reaction of the soul...is shown by the peculiar fact that individuals who have been treated severely by fate often do not hesitate in taking an optimistic approach to life. One might speculate that if someone were inclined to be sensitive to happiness, he would react with bitterness and gloom to the sufferings that fate brought to him. But, in fact, natures that are disposed to happiness seem to experience their rare and humble joys as transcendent, and to discharge their potential for happiness so fully and with such brilliance that they see life illuminated and not in the shadows of everyday experience. Where a positive reaction to the causes of happiness is stronger than its contrary and where the soul is readily permeable to sensations of happiness, the more vivid and repeated stimulation of even distant provinces of consciousness by these creates in the soul a broad basis for optimism (or for pessimism in the opposite case) out of minimal opportunities that could not have been developed by a plenitude of sensation in natures of the contrary type.<sup>44</sup>

While Simmel is correct that, in the final analysis, whether one affirms or denies life depends on one's evaluative intuitions with respect to happiness and suffering, the above passage fails to support his claim. He references only the fact that individuals evaluate *their own* lives differently, even when their shares of happiness and suffering are roughly equal. But we have seen that the question of whether it would have been better if *life* never came into existence is logically independent of the same question about *one's own* life. The same individual can affirm the one and deny the other coherently. However, even if Simmel fails to support his claim adequately, it is true that individuals answer the question of pessimism about life *simpliciter* differently depending on how they evaluate happiness and suffering. We can express this clearly in terms of the simple argument: individuals more sensitive to the mass amounts of unmitigated

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<sup>44</sup> Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, 65–66.

suffering in this world than to its joys will be inclined to accept premise (2) of the simple argument and therewith its pessimistic conclusion, whereas those with the opposite reaction will be more inclined to reject them both.

This reveals an interesting relationship between the question of pessimism and a contingent feature of the world we ask it about. We ask the question about *our world*, such as it is. And one contingent feature of our world is that it contains both profound happiness and profound suffering. Individuals are divided with respect to the value of one relative to the other, and they are therefore also divided in their final judgment as to the preferability of existence or nonexistence. This would not be true in some possible worlds—for example, either in Schopenhauer’s world, wherein there is no good aspect of life to redeem it, or in the opposite world, wherein no profound misery exists to cast doubt on the preferability of existence. In such worlds, the question of pessimism would be decided by the facts. But when we ask it about *our world*, in which profound happiness and profound suffering both exist, the question of pessimism can be decided only by each individual—and here is the crucial point—*perhaps even if a so-called “optimistic” philosophy turns out true.*

Consider Frederick Copleston’s claim that if certain metaphysical systems were true, an attitude of optimism would follow logically therefrom. He elaborates: “If, for instance, a man is a convinced Hegelian, he should logically view the process of history as a rational, self-justified process, and if he adheres to the nineteenth century doctrine of Progress, based, whether justifiably or not, on the scientific theory of evolution among other factors, he should logically expect the human race to pursue a continuous upward path from darkness into light.”<sup>45</sup> Perhaps Copleston is correct about what a convinced Hegelian or believer in the central tenets of the

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<sup>45</sup> Copleston, *Arthur Schopenhauer*, 74.

Enlightenment should *expect*, but with respect to an individual's judgment regarding the preferability of existence or nonexistence, it is not at all obvious that the truth of Hegelianism or Enlightenment thinking—or Marxism, for that matter—will entail his answer for him. The reason is that none of these philosophies deny the existence of both profound happiness and profound suffering—and they could not be true if they did deny this—and therefore no matter what blissful state might await humankind in its destiny, the question of whether this state and the bliss it will involve is worth the suffering required for its occasion appears to remain open, to be decided by each individual, according to, as Simmel puts it, “the specific reaction [his] innermost soul exhibits to happiness or suffering.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, although I hope to have shown, with Schopenhauer’s help, that pessimism about life can be the object of productive philosophical analysis, it must be admitted that, in the end, by accepting pessimism or optimism one discovers more about himself than about the world.

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<sup>46</sup> It is tempting to add Christianity to the list above, since it is unclear whether the bliss of heaven would be worth the suffering required for its occasion. But Christianity is a special case, since if *it* is true—unlike if Hegelianism or Marxism is true—the world is created by an omnibenevolent God. Since such a God would not create a world with as much evil as this one without good reason, if Christianity is true, the question of pessimism does *not* admit of reasonable disagreement. In this case, optimism would be true and pessimism false.

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