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# Children Of Genius: Affirmation Of Will In Schopenhauer's Aesthetics

Clare Mauney

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# CHILDREN OF GENIUS: AFFIRMATION OF WILL IN SCHOPENHAUER'S AESTHETICS

by

CLARE MAUNEY

Under the Direction of Jessica Berry, PhD

## ABSTRACT

While Schopenhauer is well-known for his pessimistic outlook on life, I argue that not all aspects of his philosophical project support this outlook. Specifically, I argue that Schopenhauer's aesthetic genius must *necessarily* affirm life through artistic creation. To show that this is the case, I contend that the aesthetic genius' engagement with the world of representation precludes him from engaging in the denial of the will-to-live, and that his desire to *communicate* his knowledge of the world entails an affirmation of the will-to-live. I furthermore outline and explore significant parallels between artistic creation and procreation, which I believe strengthen my reading of the aesthetic genius as one who affirms life. These claims lead me to conclude that the aesthetic genius affirms the will-to-live by seeking to create something that immortalizes his knowledge of the nature of things—that is, by giving birth to what Schopenhauer calls “immortal children.”

INDEX WORDS: Arthur Schopenhauer, Aesthetics, Genius, Sainthood, Affirmation, Procreation, Friedrich Nietzsche

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by

CLARE MAUNEY

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**DEDICATION**

For Laura

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 AESTHETIC CONTEMPLATION AND THE AESTHETIC GENIUS</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.1 The Pure Knowing of Aesthetic Contemplation</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.2 The Aesthetic Genius</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3 AESTHETIC GENIUS AS DENIAL</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3.1 The Ascetic Saint</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>3.2 The Impossibility of Representing of Ascetic Insights</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>4 AESTHETIC GENIUS AS AFFIRMATION</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>5 AESTHETIC GENIUS AND PROCREATION</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>5.1 Blind vs. Intentional Affirmation</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>6 CONCLUSION</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>39</b>



## 1 INTRODUCTION

If Schopenhauer is known for anything, it is his pessimistic outlook on life, especially the life of the human being. It is not unusual to find Schopenhauer musing on the shortcomings and vices of our existence or expounding reasons why life exacts a great toll from us while providing little benefit in return. While we may be the paragon of animals, we experience life as “a troubled dream,” and “[e]verything in life proclaims that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated, or recognized as an illusion” (*WWR*, II, 573). Just as we wake to sleep, and take our waking slow, we are born only to realize that we must die, but not until we have endured a life defined by suffering and strife. In that we are, in essence, beings who will that our lives continue despite this realization, our experience of life is a mosaic of ever-successive desires to maintain life, which, even when satisfied, provide inadequate recompense for the sea of troubles we must navigate before we finally meet with death. In Schopenhauer’s words: “Every breath we draw wards off death that constantly impinges on us. In this way, we struggle with it every second, and again at longer intervals through every meal we eat, every sleep we take, every time we warm ourselves, and so on,” and through it all it remains the case that “death must triumph, for by birth it has already become our lot, and it plays with its prey only for a while before swallowing it up” (*WWR*, I, 311). For Schopenhauer, the fact that human beings are creatures made to recognize their own mortality is proof enough that there is “a sentence of condemnation on the will-to-live which comes from the hands of nature herself” (*WWR*, II, 574).

But is Schopenhauer’s philosophy consistently pessimistic? This question may seem obtuse to some, especially in light of the fact that Schopenhauer maintains that his entire project successfully communicates “*a single thought*” of “the most perfect unity” (*WWR*, I, Pf. xii). This single thought serves as the title of his magnum opus, *The World as Will and*

*Representation*: the world is at once will and representation. But this is not the only formulation of it. Indeed, I would argue that Schopenhauer's pessimism is captured by a slightly different declaration that comes at the end of Book IV of *WWR*: "the world is the self-knowledge of the will" (*WWR*, I, 410). Here we find Schopenhauer combining the two titular revelations of the book into one, i.e., that the world is will that comes to know (or represent) itself. By this Schopenhauer means that the will, the aimless undercurrent of all things in nature that constantly strives for greater realization and prolongation of itself, reaches its highest form in the human being; in this form, the will finally is able to reflect upon its own essence and existence and thereby come to know itself. Of course, once the will, as human being, comes to truly know itself, it is forced to admit that its existence is futile, its suffering pointless, and its end a blessing. Hence the human being becomes the only willing creature that can *resign* her will-to-live—and, at least by Schopenhauer's lights, she would be well within her rights to do so.

Thus, when we take the parts of Schopenhauer's philosophy individually, we may find that the singularity of this "single thought" is not as homogenous as he claims it to be. Specifically, Schopenhauer's account of aesthetics in Book III of *WWR* does not expressly communicate the pessimism that we encounter elsewhere. Indeed, Schopenhauer sees aesthetics as having "bright and fair contents" when compared to other aspects of his greater project, although he insists that the conclusion of his aesthetic theory "points once more in the same direction," i.e., towards a pessimistic outlook on existence (*WWR*, II, 360). But does his aesthetic philosophy actually support his pessimistic leanings?

Readers of Schopenhauer seeking to gain a better understanding of his aesthetics often focus on his account of aesthetic contemplation in Book III of *WWR*. This is, at least on the surface, the best place to start. What is more, his discussion of aesthetic contemplation seems to

cohere with his pessimism, and specifically his discussion of ascetic insight in Book IV.

According to Schopenhauer, aesthetic contemplation provides a reprieve from suffering that is similar to, albeit more fleeting than the total annihilation of willing that we witness in the ascetic. In other words, when experiencing aesthetic contemplation, one gets a small taste of what it must feel like to have relinquished the will altogether. When lost in aesthetic contemplation, we are “delivered from the fierce pressure of the will,” and we “emerge, as it were, from the heavy atmosphere of the earth” (*WWR*, I, 390). From this “most blissful” experience, Schopenhauer writes, “we can infer how blessed must be the life of a man whose will is silenced not for a few moments, as in the enjoyment of the beautiful, but for ever, indeed completely extinguished, except for the last glimmering spark that maintains the body and is extinguished with it” (*WWR*, I, 390).

This connection between aesthetic contemplation and asceticism is important, but not one that give us the whole story. In order to reach a better understanding of how Schopenhauer’s aesthetic philosophy relates to his larger philosophical project, I propose we instead look to the exceptional, and exceptionally rare, figure that stands center-stage in Schopenhauer’s aesthetic theory—that is, the aesthetic genius, who not only is epistemically gifted in that he has perceptive knowledge of the inner nature of worldly objects but, assuming he has the technical skill to do so, is also able to communicate this knowledge to the rest of us through his artistic works.

Considering the aesthetic genius may assist us in gaining a greater understanding of how Schopenhauer’s aesthetics relates to his pessimism. In this paper, I will argue that, upon closer examination, Schopenhauer’s aesthetic genius proves to be more at odds with his pessimism than he may first seem. Indeed, I think that we find that Schopenhauer undermines his pessimistic

outlook on life once we recognize that, internal to his aesthetic philosophy, the aesthetic genius is someone who *necessarily* affirms the will-to-live; thus the aesthetic genius stands in diametrical opposition to Schopenhauer's ascetic saint, who steadfastly denies the will-to-live. To show that this is the case, I will contend that the aesthetic genius' desire to *communicate* his knowledge of the world entails an affirmation of the will-to-live; moreover, there are significant parallels between artistic creation and procreation that, when explored, strengthen the reading of the aesthetic genius as affirming the will-to-live. These claims lead me to conclude that, whereas the ascetic saint denies the will-to-live as a result of her knowledge of the world, the artistic genius affirms the will-to-live by seeking to create something that immortalizes his knowledge of the nature of things.<sup>1</sup>

After providing an overview of Schopenhauer's epistemology of art and the aesthetic genius in Section 2, in Section 3 I will consider and reject some scholars' assertions that Schopenhauer's aesthetic genius is one who denies of the will-to-live; specifically, I demonstrate that aesthetics cannot involve denial because of its reliance on the world of representation, a world that ultimately founders for someone who successfully denies the will-to-live. Then, in Section 4, I will explain why, when surveying the account of aesthetic genius given throughout Schopenhauer's works, we should conclude that the aesthetic genius affirms the will-to-live given his need to create and his desire to communicate. In Section 5, I will strengthen this claim by showing that there are strong parallels between the aesthetic genius' need to create works of art and human beings' more pervasive need to procreate. These parallels elucidate the ways in which works of art act as "immortal children" of the aesthetic genius, and thus are, if not actual

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will use masculine pronouns to refer to the aesthetic genius and feminine pronouns to refer to the ascetic saint. This is a purely stylistic decision, meant to aid the reader in distinguishing between the two figures. I do not believe that gender plays a part in one's aesthetic or ascetic understanding of the world.

instantiations of the affirmation of the will-to-live, the fruits of one who affirms life. I will end by addressing the deviancy of this conclusion from the rest of Schopenhauer's philosophy and arguing that we find seeds of an affirmative philosophy in Schopenhauer's aesthetics, seeds which Nietzsche goes on to cultivate.

## **2 AESTHETIC CONTEMPLATION AND THE AESTHETIC GENIUS**

### **2.1 The Pure Knowing of Aesthetic Contemplation**

For Schopenhauer, aesthetics is an exceptional kind of epistemic enterprise that grants us a more intimate understanding of the many objects we encounter in the world. Thus Schopenhauer's discussion of aesthetics, as seen in the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, is precipitated by some important epistemological observations borne of his larger metaphysical system. Specifically, Schopenhauer distinguishes between knowledge commonly so-called and what he calls "pure knowledge." We are, broadly speaking, a species of individual knowers, which means that we rarely seek, find, or use knowledge that does not somehow serve our individual wills, i.e., our specific wants and needs. This is because knowledge is originally a product of the will, brought into being to help the will in its pursuit to further realize itself; consequently, knowledge is indentured to the will and guided by the will's directives. As Schopenhauer writes, "as a rule, knowledge remains subordinate to the service of the will, as indeed it came into being for this service; in fact, it sprang from the will, so to speak, as the head from the trunk" (*WWR*, I, 177). In our everyday lives, we accumulate knowledge that allows us to make sense of how each of us stands in relation to other objects. We come to *know* the world around us insofar as we know what we can and cannot do in it and with it, learning how best to navigate it such that we survive and thrive. All the knowledge in the world, however, does not change the fact that we are, through and through, instantiations of will, i.e.,

the interminable desire for realization that drives all of life and that can never be satisfied. As such, we exist always in a state of deficiency and want, regardless of how much knowledge we accrue. We satisfy one desire only to have another rise to the fore, for all of life shares an “absence of any lasting final aim” (*WWR*, II, 354). In this way, the human condition is one of incessant lacking and longing, of one desire always ready to succeed another.

Yet, while Schopenhauer declares that it is the “sole endeavor of knowledge” to serve the will by making connections between ourselves and other objects so that we might better bear the weight of our mortal coils, he also believes that it is possible, although rare, for knowledge to momentarily break free from the tyranny of the will. In these rare moments, we no longer know objects as individual (willing) subjects, but as pure subjects, unburdened by the unrelenting demands of the will. It follows from this that, in such exceptional instances, instead of perceiving objects only insofar as they relate to us, we perceive them as pure objects—that is, we perceive objects as they are in themselves, entirely independent of us and of the surrounding world.

Raised up by the power of the mind, we relinquish the ordinary way of considering things, and cease to follow under the guidance of the forms of the principle of sufficient reason merely their relations to one another, whose final goal is always the relation to our own will. Thus we no longer consider the where, the when, the why, and the whither in things, but simply and solely the *what*. (*WWR*, I, 178)

This *what* Schopenhauer calls the Idea, drawing on the Platonic conception of an archetypal being “which is dependent on nothing, but which is in and by itself” (*WWR*, I, 172). When contemplating the Idea of an object, we perceive it as it is in-itself; we witness its eternal form, divorced from time, space, causality—that is, from the ways in which the object relates to ourselves and to other objects in nature. In so doing, we effectively become one with the object,

existing in such moments of contemplation for the Idea alone.<sup>2</sup> This access to pure knowledge, to the Idea, is what Schopenhauer calls aesthetic contemplation.

All aesthetics, according to Schopenhauer, is aimed solely at the communication of the Ideas (*WWR*, I, 185). Given this, what we call *beautiful* in aesthetics is what is true to the form of the object—that is to say, what is true to the Idea that an object represents. When an Idea is successfully communicated, we experience aesthetic pleasure. This is because during aesthetic contemplation, we are “delivered from the miserable self” in order to become “entirely one with those objects, and foreign as our want is to them, it is at such moments just as foreign to us” (*WWR*, I, 199). As pure subjects, we can engage with an aesthetic object such that “the world as representation alone remains [while] the world as will has disappeared” (*WWR*, I, 199). Left alone with the world as representation, we experience a “quieting” of our individual wills and of all the trouble and turmoil that accompanies it. We are released from the will’s hold over us, and its inherently tumultuous nature is temporarily silenced. Thus, while there is no real escape from the chronic nature of human suffering (since the human condition, and indeed all of nature, *is* chronic suffering),<sup>3</sup> Schopenhauer believes that, when the will is quieted, we are granted a temporary reprieve from this condition, attaining momentary relief from the otherwise constant demands of life. The Ideas, when perceived, quell and quiet the will, and we are freed momentarily both from the will itself and from the common knowledge that serves the will. We are all Sisyphus, laboring inexorably under the weight of the will that we were made to carry.

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<sup>2</sup> In Schopenhauer’s words: “When the Idea appears, subject and object can no longer be distinguished in it, because the Idea, the adequate objectivity of the will, the real world as representation, arises only when subject and object reciprocally fill and penetrate each other completely” (*WWR*, I, 180).

<sup>3</sup> The exception to this rule is the ascetic saint, whose insight into the inner nature of the world causes her will (and the suffering that defines it) to be extinguished altogether. See Section 3.1 for further discussion.

Yet the pure knowing of aesthetic contemplation suspends this state of being, granting us a respite from the distress of the everyday, if only for a short time.

## 2.2 The Aesthetic Genius

Schopenhauer believes that the ability to perceive Ideas by means of aesthetic contemplation is common to all human beings. That said, for most people, moments of aesthetic contemplation are few and far between. However, the genius is privileged in that he is able to perceive Ideas in the world around him more easily and at greater length. While “the common, ordinary man” is, for the most part, incapable of disinterestedly considering an object for a prolonged period of time before falling back into the grips of the will, the genius is able to maintain his gaze upon an object such that he becomes wholly engrossed in his perception of its Idea.

Only through the pure contemplation...[when one] becomes absorbed entirely in the object, are the Ideas comprehended; and the nature of *genius* consists precisely in the preeminent ability for such contemplation. Now as this demands a complete forgetting of our own person and of its relation and connexions, the *gift of genius* is nothing but the most complete *objectivity*, i.e., the objective tendency of the mind, as opposed to the subjective directed to our own person, i.e., to the will. Accordingly, genius is the capacity to remain in a state of pure perception, to lose oneself in perception, to remove from the service of the will the knowledge which originally existed only for this service. (*WWR*, I, 185)

The genius' heightened intellectual abilities make it such that he can readily enter a state of pure knowing, perceiving both the Ideas of objects he encounters in the natural world as well as the Ideas of aesthetic objects themselves. While most people “do not like to be alone with nature” since “their knowledge remains subject to the will,” the genius finds solace when alone with nature, for by himself he can contemplate natural beauty uninterrupted (*WWR*, I, 198). And whereas most people will pass from painting to painting in an art museum, observing, with no



little distraction, the different objects depicted, only occasionally lingering a minute or two more before a work that catches their interest, the genius can sit for hours before a single still life, seemingly lost in his perception of the Idea depicted. The genius sets aside the demands of his individuated will “in order to remain *pure knowing subject*, the clear eye of the world” (*WWR*, I, 186). For the *aesthetic* genius,<sup>4</sup> this ability comes with a desire—or, perhaps more appropriately, a need—not just to contemplate but also to *create* works of art.

While natural beauty has the power to induce aesthetic contemplation, works of art are the primary means by which we experience aesthetic contemplation. This is because art is, simply put, “the work of genius” (*WWR*, I, 184), and therefore has the added benefit of being an object created and informed by the aesthetic genius’ heightened perception. Because nature is everywhere scarred by the workings of the will, most of us cannot behold an object in nature and see its Idea. The aesthetic genius, however, is able to do precisely this; with the help of his imagination, he knows how to remove reminders of the phenomenal experience of the will, thus ensuring that his viewer can contemplate his work without being reminded of the various demands of the will. A still-life painter, as he studies the object he intends to represent, may add a missing petal of a flower or omit a gnarled bruise on an apple, for such blemishes and imperfections would remind his viewer of how flowers wilt and how fruits decay and become inedible. Were these flaws included in a work of art, the spectator attending to such details would experience an obstacle to her aesthetic contemplation; she would recall how flowers wither shortly after blooming, how fruits rot shortly after ripening, thus passing in and out of

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<sup>4</sup> While Schopenhauer’s discussions of genius often focus on the aesthetic genius, Schopenhauer makes multiple references to there being other types of genius as well. Some philosophers, for instance, might be geniuses in their own right (*WWR*, II, 376). And even saints, according to Schopenhauer, can be said to possess a certain kind of genius: “in an ethical respect [the saint] becomes inspired with genius” (*WWR*, I, 396). The primary focus here will be on the aesthetic genius, since, as I will show, this type of genius most clearly affirms the will-to-live through artistic creation.

phenomenal existence, just as all individual instances of the will must. Such reminders of the wounds suffered by the objects depicted would throw the spectator back into the world as will, and her will would resume its predominance over knowledge. In order to represent an Idea of an object, then, the aesthetic genius must aim to depict the pure form of said object, unadulterated by the influences and inflictions of other forms of the will. As Schopenhauer writes, “objectivity should be pure, complete, adequate objectivity of the will” (*WWR*, I, 180). The aesthetic genius intuitively recognizes the importance of this purity; he employs his imagination when observing an object and “see[s] in things not what nature has actually formed, but what she endeavored to form, yet did not bring about, because of the conflict of her forms with one another” (*WWR*, I, 186). The aesthetic genius, then, grasps what nature only gestures at, and holds on to it long enough to communicate it artistically.

Importantly, Schopenhauer believes that only the aesthetic genius is capable of communicating the Ideas to the rest of us. The genius has the acute ability to behold for a longer period of time the Idea of an object that presents itself in the phenomenal realm, which enables him “to retain that thoughtful contemplation necessary for him to repeat what is thus known in a voluntary and intentional work, such repetition being a work of art” (*WWR*, I, 195). The genius as artist “lets us peer into the world through his eyes” by creating works of art that translate phenomenal objects into Ideas (*WWR*, I, 195). The aesthetic genius has both the power to purely perceive an Idea and the raw talent—which becomes refined by technique—to aesthetically communicate it.<sup>5</sup> An integral part of the aesthetic genius that distinguishes him from others is that these powers *compel* him to make use of them. We will return to this point in Section 4.

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<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein later expresses this point nicely when he writes that there is “no more light in a genius than in any other honest man—but he has a particular kind of lens to concentrate this light into a burning point” (*CV* 35e).

### 3 AESTHETIC GENIUS AS DENIAL

Schopenhauer's characterization of aesthetic contemplation and the aesthetic genius has led some to conclude that aesthetic experience, for Schopenhauer, involves a denial of the will. Specifically, some have argued that the creative process, i.e., the experience of the aesthetic genius, is a process that requires the denial of the will. Dennis Vanden Auweele, for instance, argues that the aesthetic genius must deny the will in order to create a work of art. To this end Vanden Auweele writes that "the genius makes an 'abnormal use of the intellect' by not enlisting the intellect in the affirmation of the will, but in its denial" (Vanden Auweele 155). In a similar vein, Lucian Krukowski argues that the artist's experience is divided between "antithetical worlds," for while "art is created in the world of action, the world of will," art's imperative is to "deny that world's adequacy for the human psyche"; thus the creative process is "a self-denial, for the artist knows the reasons—they are there in the work—that speak against continuing to [will]" (Krukowski 71, 67). This interpretation of Schopenhauer is certainly nothing new. Nietzsche, Schopenhauer's most notable intellectual inheritor, also read Schopenhauer's aesthetics as demanding that the will be denied. Hence Nietzsche claims that Schopenhauer "interpreted *art*, heroism, genius, beauty, great sympathy, knowledge, the will to truth, and tragedy, in turn, as consequences of 'negation' or of the 'will's' need to negate" (*TI*, "Skirmishes," 21).

The merits of this reading of Schopenhauer are clear, for by characterizing aesthetic contemplation and creation as denial of the will, we are able more easily to connect Schopenhauer's aesthetics to his pessimism, and specifically, his asceticism. This connection, moreover, seems coherent; for whereas the aesthetic contemplator's will is quieted and silenced, temporarily disappearing such that he becomes pure subject, the ascetic is one who wholly

denies the will such that her will is totally annihilated. The difference between aesthetic contemplation and asceticism thus appears to be one of degree, where both experiences have the same end of escaping or negating the world as will. But whereas someone engaged in aesthetic contemplation achieves this end only for a brief period of time before being thrown back into the world as will, the successful ascetic wholly detaches herself from the willing world. If we accept this reading, then Nietzsche would be right in saying that Schopenhauer “sees in [beauty] a bridge on which one will go farther, or develop a thirst to go farther. Beauty is for [Schopenhauer] a momentary redemption from the ‘will’—a lure to eternal redemption” (*TI*, “Skirmishes,” 22). Art would be, in essence, a stepping stone to salvation—that is, to true and absolute emancipation from the will.

But just because this reading allows us to easily connect Schopenhauer’s aesthetic and ethical theories does not necessarily mean we should accept it; and just because the aesthetic genius is delivered from the will for a time during aesthetic contemplation does not necessarily mean that he “negates” or “denies” the will. To understand why we cannot draw these conclusions, we must turn our attention to the other pivotal figure of Schopenhauer’s philosophy: the ascetic saint.

### **3.1 The Ascetic Saint**

The life of a human being is fraught with failed attempts to avoid its only certainty: death. Human existence is “a continual rushing of the present into the dead past, a constant dying” (*WWR*, I, 311). That we know our deaths to be inevitable does not stop us from seeking to preserve and extend our lives for as long as possible. In this regard, we act in accordance with, and indeed as the highest form of the will, which, as discussed above, makes our existence one of inexorable suffering and great hardship:

All *willing* springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering. Fulfilment brings this to an end; yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied. Further, desiring lasts a long time, demands and requests go on to infinity; fulfilment is short and meted out sparingly.... No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines; but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow. (*WWR*, I, 196)

With death always looming in front of us, we nonetheless hopelessly will our lives to continue—we by necessity<sup>6</sup> continue to will in vain, even with the knowledge of our finitude in hand. This compulsion to will, despite the futility of all willing, is the bedrock of the human condition. We exist as the “objectified will-to-live,” bowing low to the rule of nature, even though nature is always ready to “let the individual fall” and expose her “to destruction in a thousand ways from the most insignificant accidents” (*WWR*, I, 276). Such is the case for all things in nature, regardless of the forms they take. The insults and injuries suffered by humanity—the breaking of bones, the breaking of hearts—are the same as, and thus ultimately of no more significance than, the petal plucked from the flower or the unsightly bruise on the apple. The only difference between us and lower objectifications of the will is that we are able to reflect on the nature of our striving and recognize the inanity of our sorrows; and this ability, Schopenhauer believes, makes our plight all the more painful.

But given the human being’s capacity to come to know the world as will, it is possible for her to gain a deeper insight into the unrelenting suffering that plagues all fragile and fleeting manifestations of the will. An individual with such insight understands all too well that suffering is the essence of all of nature; she gains “complete knowledge of [her] own inner being”—that is, she comes to comprehend the will’s “inner nature, and [to find] it involved in a constant passing

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<sup>6</sup> While Schopenhauer believes this necessity to hold for all willing beings, he also insists that the saint, having ascetic insight into the true nature of things, is someone who wrests free of the necessity of the will. This leads Schopenhauer to conclude that the saint is a “*real* contradiction” (*WWR*, I, 404). This claim is further discussed in Section 4.

away, a vain striving, an inward conflict, and a continual suffering” (*WWR*, I, 383, 379). Like the aesthetic genius, this individual enters a state of *pure knowing*; in her case, however, her knowledge is not of mere objectifications of the will, but of the truth of all willing. And this truth amounts to—*nothing*. Nothing that the will does, no form that the will takes, holds any real significance, any lasting value. And there is nothing that justifies the suffering that every willing being endures as a consequence of its mere existence. All of nature is the will embodied, but the will’s embodiment accomplishes nothing save the transitory individuation of hopeless and directionless striving, striving which has neither aim nor end. After comprehending the true nature of all existence—and, furthermore, recognizing the unfortunate lot of human beings to experience pain and suffering to the highest degree—this individual, according to Schopenhauer, has no choice but to confirm “the reprehensibility of the world” and acknowledge that the negation or denial of the will is “the way to redemption from it” (*PP*, II, 283). Consequently, she will thenceforth forego making a distinction between herself and the rest of the world. Instead of attempting to merely alleviate her personal suffering or to momentarily quiet the will-to-live through aesthetic contemplation, she will become entirely detached from the cycle of suffering (*WWR*, I, 378). Rather than strive to prolong her individual life (and her individual will), she will begin to deny the will-to-live, to renounce the struggle that defines her, the struggle of the will, and become an ascetic. In this denial, she “attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete willessness” (*WWR*, I, 379). The abnegation of the will—the recantation of the suffering that accompanies all desires in life—becomes her life’s activity.<sup>7</sup> Schopenhauer likens such a person to a saint, a “great soul” who attains true freedom

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<sup>7</sup> It is somewhat of a misnomer to call this total negation of willing a “life’s activity,” since all activity, for Schopenhauer, is driven by motives, and all motives are the workings of the will. However, our ability to characterize the “life” of the ascetic should be forgiven for its insufficiency. Language continually tempts error whenever we take up the topic of asceticism, since language is the “effect” of

from the mandates of the will by ascetically effacing her individual connection to the phenomenal world (*WWR*, I, 383).

When comparing the personages of the aesthetic genius and the ascetic saint, we find a number of similarities that support the argument that the aesthetic genius, like the saint, is also someone who denies the will. Both experience some kind of cessation of individual, phenomenal willing, and both are epistemically gifted, having privileged access to knowledge that has broken free from the confines of the world as will, knowledge that can be grasped only when one is able to see through the principle of sufficient reason and into the inner nature of things. What is more, the heightened epistemic abilities of the aesthetic genius seem similar to the saint's in that both are more or less bestowed upon them as opposed to being cultivated by them. As Schopenhauer argues, a person's genius "is not in [his] power at all," but rather is the consequence of an inborn excess of intellect (*PP*, II, 77). The saint's insight, in turn, "is not to be forcibly arrived at by intention or design," but "comes suddenly, as if flying in from without" (*WWR*, I, 404). This leads Vanden Auweele to conclude that the genius' exceptional intellectual abilities are "similar to gifts of grace in the sense that the genius is 'blessed' with these in a way that the commoner is not" (Auweele 150).

In light of such similarities, it seems possible (and, one might argue, probable) that the aesthetic genius and the ascetic saint would be similar persons, similarly situated epistemically;

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conceptual consciousness, or of what Schopenhauer calls "reason speaking to reason," and the saint's experience can be neither captured nor comprehended by reason (*WWR*, I, 39-40). As Schopenhauer goes on to say: "language, like every other phenomenon that we ascribe to reason, and like everything that distinguishes man from the animal, is to be explained by this one simple thing as its source, namely concepts, representations that are abstract and not perceptive" (*WWR*, I, 40). As we shall see, we are wholly incapable of adequately capturing the ascetic's experience, for the ascetic is not only removed from the world as will, but also from the world as representation.

one could even venture to suggest that they could be the same person in some instances.<sup>8</sup> As Schopenhauer notes, we only come to understand the exceptional aspects of the two figures through experience, and the genius and the saint both stand noticeably apart from the rest of humanity in appearance and in deed (*WWR*, I, 188, 383). Schopenhauer also says that both the saint and the genius are easily mistaken as victims of madness. The genius, who “uses his intellect contrary to its destiny,” that is, “for comprehending the objective nature of things,” is disconnected from, and therefore largely unconcerned with, everyday willing; indeed, Schopenhauer goes so far as to say that the genius’ excess of intellect “often leaves the will very inopportune in the lurch; and accordingly, the individual so gifted becomes more or less useless for life; in fact, by his conduct we are sometimes reminded of madness” (*WWR*, II, 388-389). The will of the saint is equally if not more forsaken by her ascetic insight, for she has learned the tragic truth of all existence—i.e., 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, 605). Lacking the motivation to continue living, her will having totally withdrawn itself from her being, the saint no longer interacts with the world as a willing individual. This results in a disposition wholly at odds with the world of willing that entralls the rest of humanity.

Given these similarities, it may seem as though the aesthetic genius and the saint are cut from the same cloth. But, despite their commonalities, an important question still lingers: why does the aesthetic genius create, while the saint does not? Or, to put it another way: if it is case that the aesthetic genius and the saint both have a deeper insight into the nature of the world, why do they respond to this knowledge in different ways? For while we find the saint completely

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Schopenhauer suggests this very possibility when he writes, at the end of Book III of *WWR*, that the genius may finally “become tired of the spectacle” of life and “[seize] upon the serious side of things,” i.e. ascetic insights (*WWR*, I, 267). However, this suggestion does not preclude the possibility that the aesthetic genius who does not become tired of life’s spectacle is in fact affirming the will-to-live through artistic creation.



withdrawing from the world she inhabits, we find aesthetic genius still engaging with the surrounding world, at least to some extent, when he takes up the brush.

### 3.2 The Impossibility of Representing of Ascetic Insights

Considering this question, Julian Young suggests a way to combine Schopenhauer's accounts in Books III and IV of *WWR* such that the two domains, aestheticism and asceticism, facilitate one another. Given what at first seem to be very similar accounts of aesthetic genius and ascetic sainthood, Young admits that we may be inclined to think that "the object of ascetic vision ought to be the same as the object of the (serendipitously same-sounding in both English and German) aesthetic vision" (Young 204). But upon closer inspection, this suggestion does not seem viable; for whereas "the object of aesthetic vision is the *whatness* of the phenomenal world, the ascetic sees through the 'veil of Maya' to an ecstatic vision of transcendent holiness. So," asks Young, "why on earth should the two will-free mirrors reflect such different things?" (Young 204).

Schopenhauer does not provide an answer to this question, although the most obvious answer threatens to reveal an inconsistency between Schopenhauer's accounts of *pure knowing* in his discussions of the aesthetic genius and the ascetic saint. Attempting to address this problem, Young argues that "the two accounts of the state of pure-mirroring are not actually *incompatible* with each other, [and] they can in fact be combined in an unexpected and fascinating way" (Young 204). As an example of this combination, Young considers Cezanne's studies of Mont Sainte-Victoire:

The brushstrokes allow the mountain to become partially translucent so that one sees through the object to the infinite blue depths beyond. In Schopenhauerian terms, the 'veil of Maya' becomes transparent allowing one to see through to the holiness of the (non-'empty') 'nothing' beyond. (Young 204)

A work of art, according to Young, has the power to represent nothingness—that is to say, a representation can express the absence of all representation. Yet this example, I would argue, is fundamentally flawed, as it implies that it is possible to *represent* ascetic insights. To suggest that Cezanne’s brushstrokes somehow allow one to see through the “the veil of Maya” and witness the “nothing” beyond is to suggest that the saint’s insight into the nature of the world—i.e., its nothingness—can be communicated through a pictorial work of art. This claim seems not only implausible, but also contradictory to Schopenhauer’s characterization of the Ideas, which the aesthetic genius works to represent. More specifically, Young’s suggestion runs counter to Schopenhauer’s discussion of the relationship between the will as thing-in-itself and the Ideas. As Schopenhauer writes, “Idea and thing-in-itself are not for us absolutely one and the same. On the contrary, for us the Idea *is only the immediate, and therefore adequate, objectivity of the thing-in-itself, which itself, however, is the will*” (*WWR*, I, 174, emphasis mine). The Idea is “the most *adequate objectivity* possible of the will or of the thing-in-itself”—“most *adequate*” because the Idea is a “definite and fixed *grade of the will’s objectification*” (*WWR*, I, 175; 130). While Schopenhauer believes the will is the thing-in-itself and thus the essence of all existence, he also insists that the will has many grades of objectification. This explains the existence of multiple Ideas, the different grades of objectification of the will, which range from the lowest grade (i.e., inorganic substances such as earth, water, wind, etc.) to the highest grade (i.e., the human being).

An Idea is *objective* insofar as it captures what is essential to an object at that particular grade; it is an object divested of its particular phenomenal characteristics such that only the *idea* of it remains—that is, its most objective and pure form, or the “persistent form of the whole species” (*WWR*, I, 195). Schopenhauer describes the nature of the Idea in the following way:

When clouds move, the figures they form are not essential, but indifferent to them. But that as elastic vapour they are pressed together, driven off, spread out, and torn apart by the force of the wind, this is their nature, this is the essence of the forces that are objectified in them, this is the Idea. (*WWR*, I, 182)

It is because Ideas are the most adequate *objectifications* of the will that they can be represented at all, and thus can be represented in artistic works. This means that in aesthetic contemplation, there is still *something* there—specifically, the *representation* of the adequate objectification of the will, or what Schopenhauer calls “representation in general.” Just because the object is represented in its purest form does not mean that it is the same as the *nothing* that defines the insight of the saint. The will as thing-in-itself as the saint knows it, as a *nothingness*, cannot be represented because the world as will presupposes the will’s objectification, its representation, and therefore “is something entirely different from the representation” (*WWR*, I, 128). The aesthetic genius’ knowledge of the world is still objective and thus, to some extent, still related to the world as representation. The saint, in contrast, no longer engages with the world as will *or* the world as representation. Once she comes to understand that everything, herself included, is merely hopeless, meaningless striving, she begins to perceive, and indeed becomes, the only alternative to the world as will and representation: nothingness.

The impossibility of representing the ascetic’s insight—and the fact that objectification is a crucial part of the genius’ ability to represent the Ideas—points us to the main issue with Young’s claim. Young asks whether the object of aesthetic vision is or can be the same as the *object* of ascetic’s vision, but when the ascetic perceives the inner nature of the world, she does not behold an object at all. The veil of Maya is fully lifted for her; all representation falls away as she comes to know the true essence of existence. Hence Schopenhauer writes of ascetics that “to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is—nothing” (*WWR*, I, 412). To further understand what this means, it is

helpful to look at another instance of the denial of the will that occurs in those human beings who resign themselves to nonexistence in their last moments of life. The hour before death is crucial, for it is during this time that one is given a final chance to affirm or deny the will: but whereas one who affirms the will in his hour of death “falls back into the womb of nature,” one who (in Schopenhauer’s opinion, rightly) denies it

no longer belongs to [nature], but—: we lack image, concept, and word for this opposite, *just because all these are taken from the objectification of the will, and therefore belong to that objectification*; consequently, they cannot in any way express its absolute opposite; accordingly, this remains for us *a mere negation*. (WWR, II, 609, emphasis mine).

Like the dying person, the saint experiences the “absolute opposite” of objectification; in perceiving nothingness, she experiences the negation of the “whole nature” of the world, which is “through and through *will*, and at the same time through and through *representation*” (WWR, I, 162). Thus we find that one who denies the will-to-live must deny not only the will, but representation as well. Wittgenstein’s final words of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* nod to this truth: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (§7).

#### 4 AESTHETIC GENIUS AS AFFIRMATION

That ascetic insights cannot be expressed aesthetically reveals an important element of the relationship between aesthetics and asceticism, which is that *the ascetic, qua ascetic, is cut off from the world of representation, the world that defines aesthetics*.

What does this tell us, then, about how the aesthetic genius and the ascetic saint differ? At this point in our discussion, we see that the aesthetic genius is someone who engages the world of representation while the saint does not (or, perhaps more appropriately, *cannot*). This is no small point to make. In this, we see that the reactions of the two knowers are not just different, but greatly at odds with one another. While the saint *retreats* from the world she

perceives, the aesthetic genius *repeats* the world he perceives. Schopenhauer characterizes both persons as “clear mirrors of the world,” but *what* they reflect are absolute opposite aspects of the world. The artist reflects the pure objectivity of the world in his aesthetic vision, i.e. *perfected instantiations of will*, which can be represented. The saint, in contrast, reflects the emptiness of the world, the inanity of the objects in it, and the fact that there is nothing that justifies, or even makes sense of, life’s many trials and tribulations. We see this clearly when Schopenhauer writes that “[d]enial, abolition, turning in of the will are *also abolition and disappearance of the world, of its mirror*. If we no longer perceive the will in this mirror...we complain that it is lost in nothingness” (*WWR*, 1, 410, emphasis mine). This explains why the saint is the perfected incarnation of the *denial* of the will. Beholding nothing, she can represent nothing, reflect nothing; the world as will begins to fall away, and with it the world as representation, so that she perceives nothing; and thus she finds nothing to motivate her to prolong her existence. Having no connection to the world, she can only passively withdraw from it.

This gets us closer to understanding why the aesthetic genius and the ascetic saint differ as much as they do—why these two figures react so differently to their insights into the true nature of things. While the saint’s will turns away from the world after she perceives its true nature,<sup>9</sup> the will of the aesthetic genius takes up a certain artistic medium—a material means of representing—in order to communicate the knowledge he has perceived. As a pure representation, his artwork serves as an ideal reflection<sup>10</sup> of his experience of pure knowing, an

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<sup>9</sup> To be sure, there is no, nor can there be, any intentionality behind the saint’s turning away from the world, for “denial of willing, that entrance into freedom, is not to be forcibly arrived at by intention or design,” but “comes suddenly, as if flying in from without” (*WWR*, I, 404). This event Schopenhauer calls “the *effect of grace*,” and should not be confused with the “spiritual peace” experienced by the artist during aesthetic contemplation (*WWR*, I, 197). The spiritual peace, experienced by the artist, is merely the resting of the will; the effect of grace, on the other hand, is the will’s total abolition.

<sup>10</sup> It is because human beings have reflection as a faculty of representation that they are able to engage in aesthetic contemplation. In them we see that “an entirely new consciousness has arisen, which with very

experience that necessarily involves perceiving one or more of the adequate objectifications of the will (the Ideas).

Given the aesthetic genius' engagement with the world of representation, it does not appear as if he is someone who, like the ascetic saint, denies the will-to-live. In fact, that the aesthetic genius is *engaged* with the world at all seems to entail that he does not deny it. Art is, simply put, "the *work* of genius" (*WWR*, I, 184, emphasis mine). Works of art communicate knowledge by "repeat[ing] the eternal ideas apprehended through pure contemplation, the essential and abiding element in all the phenomena of the world" (*WWR*, I, 184). The aesthetic genius, then, is one who strives to repeat the Ideas by means of representation, who creates a work of art that communicates his knowledge of things to the beholder. In a work of art, a true artist "set[s] up a lasting monument of [his] objectivity and spiritual peace" (*WWR*, I, 197). In order to create this lasting monument of objectivity of the will, the aesthetic genius must *will* his artwork into the world of representation. He is *motivated to express* the knowledge he perceives, to represent the true content that underlies the objects of the world. In so doing, he implicitly affirms the world he has perceived; he believes it to be *worth communicating*, and furthermore *worth suffering for*. As Schopenhauer describes it:

He is captivated by a consideration of the spectacle of the will's objectification. He sticks to this, and does not get tired of contemplating it, and of repeating it in his descriptions...in other words, *he himself is the will objectifying itself and remaining in constant suffering*. (*WWR*, I, 267, emphasis mine)

In light of this, it should come as no surprise that geniuses suffer more than others. As Dale Jacquette explains, "To live is to will, and hence to suffer, and no one more so for Schopenhauer than the aesthetic genius...because genius experiences the greatest frustrations of creative

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appropriate and significant accuracy is called *reflection*. For it is in fact a reflected appearance, a thing derived from this knowledge of perception" (*WWR*, I, 36). The power of reflection is what distinguishes us from the animal: "The animal feels and perceives; man, in addition, *thinks* and *knows*" (*WWR*, I, 37). From this follows the artist's ability to access knowledge of the will outside phenomena.

activity in its compulsion to represent” (Jacquette 10). The suffering of the aesthetic genius is vastly different from the experience of the ascetic saint, who arguably does not suffer at all. In her denial of the will-to-live, the ascetic saint loses all motivation—her individual will is not merely quieted, but disappears altogether. Having been freed by the “flying in” of divine grace, she exemplifies what Schopenhauer calls the “*self-suppression of the will*” (WWR, I, 404). This claim, to be sure, is somewhat problematic, and Schopenhauer acknowledges as much. The idea that the will can suppress itself contradicts his assertion that “the will’s determinations through motives of character” are a matter of necessity (WWR, I, 403). That said, Schopenhauer thinks the saint’s case is an exceptional one, one which requires that we tolerate contradiction in its expression in order to be even remotely understood. This is because the saint is an instance of “*real contradiction*” in the world “that arises from the direct encroachment of the freedom of the will-in-itself, knowing no necessity, on the necessity of its phenomenon” (WWR, I, 404). Human beings necessarily will, but in the case of the saint her will is eliminated. And since the *truth* of the world is that it is will, and that all things in it act as and according to will, the saint, as a not-willing individual, embodies something *other than truth*, or at least truth as we know it. The saint, as an *embodied* negation of will, amounts to a walking contradiction. The will is, as thing-in-itself, the will-to-live, the constant struggle for phenomenal existence that we see in all of nature. One who wholly denies the will-to-live goes against nature, against philosophy, against *everything* by willing *nothing*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth emphasizing that Schopenhauer, in his multiple attempts to characterize the metaphysical idea of the denial of willing, always insists that sainthood is possible while also conceding that we cannot understand how such a person exists. It is “a priori,” he writes, “that that which now produces the phenomenon of the world must also be capable of not doing this...or, in other words, that there must also be a *systole* to the present *diastole*” (PP, II, 281). But this a priori truth can be taken no further: “Since we know this being, the *will*, as thing in itself merely in and through the act of *willing*, we are incapable of saying or grasping what else it is or does after it has given up this act; this is why negation *for us*, who are the appearance of the will, is a transition to nothingness” (PP, II, 281).

The aesthetic genius is arguably a contradiction as well, but one of a different kind. In that he is *motivated* to create works of art, he remains attached to the world as will *despite* having perceived the true nature of this world—or rather, *because* he has perceived its true nature. Given that creativity requires activity, it seems wrong to say that, in the case of the aesthetic genius, knowledge of the will *wholly* quiets the will; rather, pure knowledge *stirs* his will, arousing in him an instinct to use his intellect to create, to perfect a representation that is able to express the pure knowledge he has perceived. This instinct is, to be sure, not one that is characteristic of all willing individuals; according to Schopenhauer, the aesthetic genius “uses his intellect contrary to its destiny” by creating works of art (*WWR*, II, 388). Schopenhauer aptly describes the intensity of this phenomenon in the following passage:

And again, when that entire, abnormally enhanced power of knowledge occasionally directs itself suddenly with all its energy to the affairs and miseries of the will, it will readily apprehend these too vividly, will view everything in too glaring colors, in too bright a light, and in a monstrously exaggerated form; and in this way the individual falls into mere extremes.... All great theoretical achievements, be they of what kind they may, are brought about by their author directing all the forces of his mind to one point. (*WWR*, II, 388)

The aesthetic genius is moved, just like the rest of us; but, unlike most of us, the genius is able to “direct all the forces of his mind” to a single, objective end. His knowledge and his intellectual energy, together with his imaginative capacities, inspire and inform his need to communicate and thus to create. Given that all the intellectual powers of the aesthetic genius compel him to find ways of communicating the Ideas, it seems unlikely that the genius, as *creator*, is engaged in denial of the will. In fact, it seems that the genius is doing just the opposite: for even after he gains pure knowledge of the nature of the world, he still wants and works to objectify this pure knowledge, specifically by communicating this knowledge in the representational world. In so



doing, he produces a “lasting monument” of his own perception, a monument to the eternal forms of the different grades of objectification of the will.

Given Schopenhauer’s account of aesthetic genius, then, it would be wrong to conclude that he denies the will-to-live through artistic creation. We can further recognize this to be an ill-informed interpretation if we continue to consider the different relationships that the ascetic saint and the aesthetic genius have with knowledge and willing. Distinguishing between the forms of freedom entailed by aesthetic contemplation and sainthood, John Atwell notes that the saint’s denial of the will, in that it involves the elimination of both character and will, must also entail the elimination of knowledge itself. The aesthetic genius and the aesthetic spectator, on the contrary, both enter “states” of knowing, states in which, it would seem, the will is still somehow present. Although aesthetic contemplation and creation involve knowledge wresting itself free of the will, the “state of mind” that this freedom involves “seems to be precluded by Schopenhauer’s contention that the intellect (or knowledge) is originated by the will for the sole purpose of furthering the will’s aims and ends” (Atwell 83). And, if we again consider “the single thought” that Schopenhauer drives at—i.e., that “the world is the self-knowledge of the will” (*WWR*, I, 410)—then we must conclude that “[a]s long as there is knowledge, there is will” (Atwell 88). It therefore cannot be the case that the will is totally absent from aesthetic contemplation, as Schopenhauer claims. Instead, Atwell argues, the freedom involved in aesthetic contemplation is “freedom from the individual will” (Atwell 90). This kind of freedom can be contrasted to the resigned freedom experienced by the saint, that is to say “freedom from the will altogether” (Atwell 90). Atwell draws an important distinction between knowledge’s relationship to aesthetic contemplator and ascetic saint to make this point:

...from the standpoint of knowledge, the “state” of the aesthetic contemplator differs in kind, and not just in time, from the “state” of the saint: in the former, the

will knows the will; whereas in the latter, the will has vanished, along with all knowledge. (Atwell 91)

Because knowledge is borne of the will, the saint's denial of the will must likewise involve the denial or absence of knowledge. Indeed, Schopenhauer acknowledges as much when characterizing the saint's experience: "such a state cannot really be called knowledge, since it no longer has the form of subject and object" (*WWR*, I, 410). Being devoid of representation, the saint's experience must likewise be devoid of the subject and object distinction required by the world of representation. Thus it follows that the saint's experience is one "that cannot be further communicated," since anything that can be communicated must be able to be represented (*WWR*, I, 410).

In contrast, since both aesthetic contemplation and creation involve knowledge on an objective level, it would seem as if the will does not fully disappear in aesthetic creation and contemplation. Because knowledge is still at work in aesthetic contemplation, and knowledge presupposes the will as its origin, it cannot be the case that we experience "the self-elimination of the will" when engaged in aesthetic contemplation (Atwell 90). To be sure, Schopenhauer insists that we exist in a "will-less" state when engaged in aesthetic contemplation. When we are "apprehending the objective, indigenous essence of things," the will "must stay out of the game entirely" (*PP*, II, 377). However, existing in a will-less state during aesthetic contemplation does not entail the negation or denial of the will. Instead, our state of knowing can be more appropriately characterized as one in which we are *disassociated* from the will; the will is not *suppressed*, but rather is *suspended* such that we are able to cognize objects in a way that is "totally separate and independent of the will" (*PP*, II, 377). The will, as it were, is set aside for a time, allowing knowledge to assume full reign over the spectator's experience. The intellect is preeminent in this experience, and in a way becomes "unfaithful to its origin, the will";

Schopenhauer describes this as “an abusive activity” and “decidedly abnormal,” but does not equate it to the saint’s experience, in which the intellect “turn[s] against the will”—an act which ultimately results in the elimination of will and knowledge alike (*PP*, II, 378).

But, unlike in aesthetic contemplation, in which the will is more or less upstaged, in artistic creation the will proves to be a necessary player. While the aesthetic genius, during moments of contemplation, exists in a state of “*pure cognition*,” temporarily divorced from his will, during moments of creation the will must reenter the scene; it “must be active again,” since “the purpose” of aesthetic creation “is the communication and representation of what is thus cognized” (*PP*, II, 377). So while Schopenhauer is often found characterizing aesthetic contemplation as a passive enterprise, we find that the aesthetic genius is someone who turns this contemplation into willful activity—specifically, the activity of artistic creation.

Now, that the aesthetic genius does not deny the will does not necessarily mean that he affirms it. Indeed, at no point in his discussion of the affirmation of the will-to-live does Schopenhauer mention the aesthetic genius. Yet when we look to Schopenhauer’s discussion of affirmation of the will-to-live we find that it is consonant with Schopenhauer’s discussion of the aesthetic genius. Those who affirm the will-to-live, according to Schopenhauer, have gained “philosophical knowledge of the nature of the world” and use their “faculty of reason” to “overcome influences adverse to [this knowledge]” (*WWR*, I, 283). The aesthetic genius uses his intellectual faculties in a similar fashion. By finding means to represent his aesthetic insights, the aesthetic genius *wills* that his knowledge be realized in the world. In the process of communicating an adequate objectification of the will (an Idea) in an artistic work, then, the aesthetic genius creates an object that affirms his knowledge of an object’s true form. And by affirming his insight, he also affirms his own life, i.e., the life that has allowed him to glean this

knowledge. So it seems that, like one who affirms the will-to-live, the aesthetic genius “desire[s], in spite of calm deliberation, that the course of his life as he had hitherto experienced *it should be of endless duration or of constant recurrence*” (WWR, I, 283-284, emphasis mine). For the aesthetic genius, this recurrence occurs in his work; he creates an aesthetic object that will outlast his own mortality while also serving as a remembrance of it. In one who affirms the will-to-live, his will “affirms itself; this means that while in its objectivity, that is to say, in the world and in life, its own inner nature is completely and distinctly given to it as representation, *this knowledge does not in any way impede its willing*” (WWR, I, 285, emphasis mine). In the case of the aesthetic genius, the intellect is “above the ratio demanded by the aims of the will” and therefore is able to “abuse” the will in the artistic process; so it is not only the case that his knowledge of the inner nature of things is unimpeded by the will, but his knowledge furthermore *impels* the will to work for it (PP, II, 378). His aesthetic insights do not halt or hinder the creative process, but catalyze it and gives it urgency. And his ultimate end—a work of art that expresses his insight—justifies the suffering he must endure in order to produce his work. But his frustrations are far outweighed by the rewards he reaps. Indeed, Schopenhauer believes that “[g]enius is its own reward; for the best that one is, one must necessarily be for oneself” (WWR, II, 386).<sup>12</sup> The aesthetic genius’ satisfaction in life, and his ability to affirm his own existence, ultimately rests on the immense satisfaction he finds in his work. And, as Schopenhauer writes, his satisfaction in his work does not stem from any fame or fortune he attains as a result of it; rather, his happiness depends only on the work itself—that is, on his ability to create something that facilitates a “*constant recurrence*” of his and others’ contemplation of an Idea: “Not in fame,

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<sup>12</sup> Schopenhauer supplements this thought with a helpful and elegant quote from Goethe: ““Whoever is born *with* a talent, *to* a talent, finds his fairest existence therein”” (WWR, II, 386).

but in that by which it is attained, lies the value” for the genius, “and *in the production of immortal children lies the pleasure*” (*WWR*, II, 386, emphasis mine).

## 5 AESTHETIC GENIUS AND PROCREATION

As mentioned above,<sup>13</sup> Schopenhauer’s discussion of the insights of the dying resonates with his discussion of the ascetic insights that prompt the saint to deny the will. In contrast, the genius’ creative impulse, as Schopenhauer describes it, is strikingly similar to his description of the human beings’ impulse to procreate. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find Schopenhauer using metaphors of progenitor and progeny when discussing the relationship the aesthetic genius has to his work. Insofar as the procreative impulse is the ultimate (albeit blind) affirmation of the will-to-live, we thus find another aspect of Schopenhauer’s philosophy that further supports the idea that the aesthetic genius is one who affirms the will-to-live; that is, we can see how the artist affirms the will-to-live by considering how the creative aspect of artistic endeavors is analogous to procreation.

To understand the significance of this analogy, let us start by turning our attention to Schopenhauer’s discussion of love. According to Schopenhauer, the most intense love between two people is “a desire that exceeds in intensity every other; hence it makes a person ready for any sacrifice, and, if its fulfilment remains for ever denied, can lead to madness or suicide” (*WWR*, II, 549). But a person’s readiness to sacrifice everything for the sake of her beloved is, Schopenhauer believes, often overly romanticized. As Simon May notes, Schopenhauer’s account of love was radical for its time, for in it he shifted “the entire debate about the real goal of love’s desires from intimacy with one who embodies goodness, truth and beauty...to the search for a mate with an optimal biological psychological make-up” (May 181). Love is not,

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<sup>13</sup> See 3.2.

for Schopenhauer, some sort of intellectual bond between two people; this characterization of love is but a common misconception. The human idea of love is merely a sentimental semblance, a saccharine show of weal and woe which belies the real purpose of all unions between lovers: the preservation and continuation of the species. In truth, love is not a matter of two persons communing due to some intimate, spiritual connection; rather, it is the byproduct of instinct—specifically, the strongest of the instincts of any willing creature, the instinct to continue the species. Thus Schopenhauer declares that “instinct, directed absolutely to what is to be produced, underlies all sexual love” as well as all the social customs and institutions that encourage it: “What is looked for in marriage is not intellectual entertainment but the procreation of children; it is an alliance of hearts, not of heads” (*WWR*, II, 542; 545).

Schopenhauer calls this instinct to procreate “the *genius* of the species” (*WWR*, II, 550, emphasis mine). This is because we witness the true nature of the will in the procreative process. The desire to procreate, the desire to bring forth into existence something that contains a part of oneself, is the “metaphysical desire of the will-in-itself” for realization; in this sense, then, the act of procreation is the clearest mirror of the world as will. For the will, the thing-in-itself that underlies all existence, is endless striving, unrelenting desire, defined by an “absence of all aim, of all limits” (*WWR*, I, 164). Nothing that the will accomplishes or attains can satisfy it. Its essential nature is one of “[e]ternal becoming, endless flux,” and thus “[e]very attained end is at the same time the beginning of a new course, and so on *ad infinitum*” (*WWR*, I, 164). What the will strives for, what it desires, has no object or end. For what the will really longs for, what it ultimately wants, *is to continue—that is, to be immortal*. In Schopenhauer’s words, “the will wills life *absolutely and for all time*” (*WWR*, II, 568, emphasis mine). Procreation, then, and the

love that motivates it, is the best, and indeed the only means the will has to satisfy its desire for immortality.

Why, then, does the man in love hang with complete abandon on the eyes of his chosen one, is ready to make every sacrifice for her? Because it is his *immortal part* that longs for her; it is always the mortal part alone that longs for everything else. That eager or even ardent longing...is therefore *an immediate pledge of the indestructibility of the kernel of our true nature*, and of its continued existence in the species. (*WWR*, II, 559, emphasis mine)

As individual instantiations of the will-to-live, we play only a small and short-lived role on the world's stage in prolonging the existence of our species. However, in our experience of life, we instinctually possess the will's desire for immortality, despite knowing mortality to be inescapable. We come closest to actualizing this desire for immortality in the act of procreation, for it is only in this act that we contribute to our species' survival; thus the truth of our being, i.e., that we are manifestations of the will-to-live, has "as its kernel, as its greatest concentration...the act of generation" (*PP*, II, 284). As May writes, "the Will itself, which we experience above all in our sexual desire, does not die. The true source of our being is indestructible and immortal" (May 185). The "genius" of the species, then, is the instinct that all human beings have to bring a new individual into phenomenal existence and, in so doing, secure for the species its immortal seat in the world. This pursuit of immortality *is*, for Schopenhauer, the affirmation of the will-to-live; to this end Schopenhauer writes that "the reciprocal longing glances of two lovers" that precipitates procreation is "the purest expression of the will-to-live in its affirmation" (*WWR*, II, 569).

Similarly, the genius works to create something that immortalizes his insight, i.e., something that faithfully depicts the Ideas he has perceived. But whereas human beings, when acting on their procreative instinct, are destined to fail in their pursuit, being able to bear only mortal children, Schopenhauer believes that the genius is one who succeeds in securing some

degree of immortality in his artwork. This is because he conceives his artistic ideas from the standpoint of eternity, that is, as a “pure will-less, painless, *timeless* subject of knowledge” (WWR, I, 179, emphasis mine). The Idea he perceives in the object that inspires his work is itself immortal and unchanging: “A *perceptive* apprehension has always been the process of generation in which every genuine work of art, every immortal idea, received the spark of life” (WWR, II, 378).

The goal of achieving immortality is not the only way in which artistic creation mirrors procreation. Both acts of creation also involve the generation of an Idea. In the case of human procreation, the ushering in of a new individual is also the creation of a new Idea: “this new individual is a new (Platonic) Idea; and, just as all the Ideas strive to enter into the phenomenon with the greatest vehemence...so does this particular Idea of a human individuality strive with the greatest eagerness and vehemence for its realization in the phenomenon” (WWR, II, 536-537). In this way, the genius of the species shows itself to be similar to the aesthetic genius’ creation of works of art, both being forms of production: while human procreation is the production of a new Idea, artistic creation is the production of a new object that reveals or repeats the Idea the artist perceives the world. Indeed, Schopenhauer goes so far as to claim that “the creations of the genuine genius...are equal in truth to real persons” (WWR, I, 193). And just as parents give birth with the knowledge that their child will outlive them, the genius, says Schopenhauer, creates his work knowing it is very improbable that said work will be appreciated in his lifetime; given this, he “is urged to think more of posterity than of the contemporary world by which he would merely be led astray” (PP, II, 87). In a way, his work is *his* posterity, “the real fruit of his existence” (PP, II, 87). Thus the genius’ concern for his work looks much like the insect’s concern for its eggs:



His efforts are just as decidedly concentrated on the completion and security of his work as are those of the insect in its final form on the security of its eggs and the provision for the brood it will never live to see. (*PP*, II, 87)

While the animal is ready to sacrifice life and limb to protect its offspring, the genius is ready to forsake all other aspects of his existence in order to see his work to completion. The work of genius is not influenced by the popularity, fame, or fortune that are normally thought to accompany (and thus motivate) great works of art. In fact, Schopenhauer asserts, a genius shuns all of these rewards, knowing they would only divert and pervert his insight into the true nature of the world and distract him from his creative instinct, his desire to make something representative of his insight. The genius can find his meaning and purpose only in “the production of immortal children,” in the creation of lasting representations that facilitate knowledge of the Ideas. Thus, much as the species does in the sexual process, in the creative process, we find the genius seeking an immortality—but in the case of the genius, his is not an immortality for his species, but an immortality for himself.

### **5.1 Blind vs. Intentional Affirmation**

The difference between the immortality sought in the act of procreation and that sought in artistic creation brings out an important distinction that Schopenhauer makes between the blind affirmation of the will-to-live of the procreator, which Schopenhauer has little respect for, and what seems to be the intentional, conscious affirmation of the will-to-live of the aesthetic genius, which Schopenhauer seems to hold in high regard. As with human procreation, instinct plays an important role in artistic creation. We often find Schopenhauer likening the artist’s desire to communicate his perception of the ideas to instinct: genius is “an instinct of quite a peculiar kind whereby the genius is urged to express in works that will endure that which he perceives and feels” (*PP*, II, 86). But whereas human procreation is driven only by instinct, in the case of the

artist, instinct alone cannot account for the fruition of artistic works. While human beings, in seeking to propagate the species, bear their offspring in and according to the world as will, thus affirming the will-to-live blindly (that is, without being influenced by *pure* knowledge), the aesthetic genius' desire to create is not guided by the will—or, at least, not by the will alone.<sup>14</sup> What, then, moves the aesthetic genius to create? Schopenhauer's answer to this question, we find, is somewhat splintered, as the creative process seems to involve an interplay of the great intellect of the genius and the peculiar instinct that guides it. But even granting that instinct instructs the creative process, I would argue that the aesthetic genius should still be understood as acting *intentionally*.

It is true that even in the aesthetic genius, who has an excess of intellect, the will (and, in turn, instinct) predominates, and the true power of his knowledge is witnessed only in moments of inspiration. As discussed above, knowledge is, in most instances, the servant of the will; thus most knowledge is tainted by the individuality (i.e., the individual will) of its subject: “through the subject's disposition that is given once for all, we now have that infection that arises directly from the will and its mood of the moment and thus from the interests, passions, and emotions of the knower” (*PP*, II, 65). More often than not, the whims of the will guide our knowledge of something, since our intellect is “poisoned by the will” (*PP*, II, 66). And just as often our knowledge serves the will in such a way that it turns a blind eye to pure knowledge, or knowledge that is “*purely objective*” (*PP*, II, 65). This is especially true of the knowledge underlying love, since love is an illusion that allows the will of the species to ensure its survival. While lovers “imagine they are advancing their own happiness” in their union with one another,

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<sup>14</sup> As discussed in Section 4, the will does appear to play some part in artistic creation. Therefore, we cannot discount the will's presence when considering what moves the aesthetic genius to create. That said, Schopenhauer emphasizes the predominance of the intellect over the will in the creative process; this suggests that even if the will has a hand in artistic creation, it is a hand largely guided by the knowledge of the aesthetic genius.

“their actual aim is one that is foreign to themselves,” and thus their love turns out to be an “instinctive delusion” (*WWR*, II, 557).

But the most perfect intellect, Schopenhauer claims, is one that is able to take on a purely objective perspective. Such a perfect intellect “exceeds the necessary amount” demanded by the will; given this excess, “knowledge become[s] more or less an end in itself” for the individual who possesses it (*PP*, II, 68). So, while it is the case that the aesthetic genius “works, as people say, from mere feeling and unconsciously, indeed instinctively,” his work is also guided by his intellect’s insight into the inner nature of things (*WWR*, I, 235). Having apprehended the Idea of an object, he makes knowledge an end in itself and *harnesses* his intellect in such a way that it surpasses its position, its subjugation to the will; in so doing, the intellect of the aesthetic genius moves beyond the mere relations of things “in order to occupy itself in a purely objective way” (*PP*, II, 68). His knowledge thus becomes detached from its intended purpose and assumes a new purpose—that is, it redirects itself away from the concerns of the will and towards the apprehension and representation of the will’s adequate objectifications.

Here, then, we see the difference between love’s blind affirmation of the will-to-live and the aesthetic genius’ more intentional affirmation of the will-to-live. In that all works of art stem from the aesthetic genius’ ability to engage in perceptual knowledge for prolonged periods of time, the aesthetic genius is able temporarily to leave the world as will behind and engage instead with pure representation. As Schopenhauer puts it, a genius is “a man in whose head the *world as representation* has attained a degree of more clearness and stands out with the stamp of greater distinctness” (*PP*, II, 76). The world as representation is the world of knowledge; hence the heightened intellect’s intimate engagement with this world. In light of his exclusive intimacy with the representational world and his appreciation of the same, the aesthetic genius desires to

give form, color, and content to his knowledge in the normal world of willing via works of art. In this desire, the genius consciously affirms the will-to-live, knowingly and intentionally working to represent the “immortal idea” he has perceived. Unlike the blind striving that motivates sexual love and procreation, which does not recognize its own aim, the creative process is clearly a deliberate one. The aesthetic genius, having gained knowledge of the true nature of the world surrounding him, reenters the world as will in order to create an object that secures immortality for his immortal insight.

### 2.1 *Children of Genius*

If it is the case that the aesthetic genius affirms the will-to-live by bringing forth a work of art that is meant to secure his immortality, what, then, should we make of his children? Do works of art act, in and of themselves, as affirmations of the will-to-live?

Nietzsche would be the first to answer this question with a blunt and definitive “no.” As he notes in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Schopenhauer interpreted tragedy as a kind of “resignation” (*BT*, “Self-Criticism,” 6). And Schopenhauer explicitly says as much, writing that “the tendency and ultimate intention of *tragedy* [is] a turning towards resignation, to the denial of the will-to-live” (*WWR*, II, 437). Hence we find, in the case of tragedy, an obvious instance in which Schopenhauer believes that art facilitates the denial of the will-to-live. What is more, Schopenhauer hails tragedy as “the summit of poetic art, both as regards the greatness of the effect and the difficulty of the achievement,” and further argues that it is “very significant and worth noting that the purpose of this highest poetical achievement is the description of the terrible side of life” (*WWR*, I, 252). Thus it seems, at first blush, that even if the aesthetic genius affirms the will-to-live through artistic creation, his children may very well betray him.

But tragedy, though favored, is not the only child borne by the aesthetic genius, and Schopenhauer readily admits that other art forms have dramatically different effects. For instance, while Schopenhauer believes that painting can, at least in some instances, foster the denial of the will-to-live, sculpture cannot. This is because “[i]n sculpture beauty and grace are the main thing; but in painting expression, passion, and character predominate; therefore just so much of the claims of beauty must be given up” (*WWR*, II, 419). In that ugliness is sometimes a “suitable subject for painting,” but is never a suitable subject for sculpture, Schopenhauer concludes that “[f]rom this point of view, sculpture appears to be suitable for the affirmation of the will-to-live, painting for its denial” (*WWR*, II, 419). From this we can glean that in aesthetic works in which beauty and grace predominate, works in which little ugliness and sorrow can be found, affirmation of the will-to-live is a likely effect.

But an even more striking example of art acting as affirmation of the will-to-live is found, I would argue, in the case of music. Schopenhauer holds this art form in the highest regard, for “music is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but [is] a *copy of the will itself*” (*WWR*, I, 257). For this reason we cannot help but “attribute to music a far more serious and profound significance that refers to the innermost being of the world and of our own self” (*WWR*, I, 256). Music, in its harmonic alternations between consonance and dissonance, captures the essence of the many movements of the will, both as we live it and as we perceive it in the world around us. The interplay of the major and minor keys communicate the “two universal and fundamental moods of the mind, serenity, or at any rate vigour, and sadness, or even anguish” (*WWR*, II, 456). But even when we recognize an intonation of pain and sorrow in music, we find it “neither physically painful nor even convention,” but “at once pleasing and unmistakable” (*WWR*, II, 456). Thus, in its ability to make melancholy and grief not only

profound, but even pleasurable to the listener, music imparts that there are virtues to all aspects of lived existence. This leads Schopenhauer to conclude that music “flatters only the will-to-live, since it depicts the true nature of the will, gives it a glowing account of its success, and at the end expresses its satisfaction and contentment” (*WWR*, II, 457). By flattering the will-to-live, music gives its listeners the sense that pain has as much beauty as pleasure; that sadness inevitably will be succeeded by serenity; and that life, the amalgamation of all that is good and bad and in-between, is ultimately worth living.

In that the meaning and effects of art vary according to the art form being considered, it cannot be wholly or finally determined whether art itself is supposed to serve as an affirmation or a denial of the will-to-live. Some art seeks to find and celebrate beauty where it lies; other art challenges us to contemplate the ugliness we prefer to avoid. But what can be said about all of art is that its purpose is to comprehend the true nature of the lives we lead and the objects we encounter. In Schopenhauer’s words:

We have to regard art as the greater enhancement, the more perfect development, of [life]; for essentially it achieves just the same thing as is achieved by the visible world itself, only with greater concentration, perfection, intention, and intelligence; and therefore, in the fullest sense of the word, it may be called the flower of life. If the whole world as representation is only the visibility of the will, then art is the elucidation of this visibility, the *camera obscura* which shows the objects more purely, and enables us to survey and comprehend them better. (*WWR*, I, 266-267)

All of art, regardless of the form it takes, allows us to gain knowledge of ourselves as willing beings and to better understand the willing world. Only with this knowledge in hand can we begin to consider whether life is worth affirming or denying. While the aesthetic genius affirms his own life by creating works of art that immortalize his insight, he cannot dictate that his insights have the same effects on the aesthetic contemplator. Instead, it is up to each individual to decide how to react to pure knowledge when

confronted by it; for only once we come to know ourselves and the world as will—that is, once we gain real self-knowledge—can we begin to weigh the value of life against its shortcomings. As Schopenhauer says, “The will alone is; it is the thing-in-itself, the source of all those phenomena. Its self-knowledge and its affirmation or denial that is then decided on, is the only event-in-itself” (*WWR*, I, 184).

## 6 CONCLUSION

If my reading is correct, we may be tempted to conclude that the aesthetic genius somehow occupies a position below the saint, at least in Schopenhauer’s estimation. As Schopenhauer says, someone who affirms the will-to-live lacks “a deeper insight” of the world, i.e., that “constant suffering is essential to all life” (*WWR*, I, 283). If the aesthetic genius is someone who affirms the will-to-live, then he does not achieve, by Schopenhauer’s own telling, the same insight into the world as the ascetic saint. Were he to have the same insight, the aesthetic genius would no longer want to communicate the Ideas. His own will, and his will to create, would be extinguished, and he would inevitably transition into sainthood. Thus it seems as if the aesthetic genius, as one who affirms the will-to-live, stands inferior to the saint. The aesthetic genius has a greater power of perception compared to others, and therefore is able to engage in aesthetic contemplation long enough to create a work of art. But as someone who affirms the will-to-live, he, like the rest of us, lacks the insight into the nature of the world that the saint possesses, the insight that allows her to openly contradict the necessity of the will. “*Necessity is the kingdom of nature; freedom is the kingdom of grace*” (*WWR*, I, 404). The ascetic saint flies to grace while aesthetic genius remains tied to nature; but, given that he alone

can communicate the truth of nature to the rest of us, the aesthetic genius shows unparalleled mastery over this kingdom.

Yet while we can infer from this an important difference in standing of the two figures according to Schopenhauer's pessimistic leanings, we can also see, lingering in Schopenhauer's aesthetics, the kernel of an affirmative philosophy, one that presupposes and precipitates the kind of philosophy we will later see in Nietzsche. Nietzsche, of course, sees Schopenhauer's rankings of the aesthetic genius and the ascetic saint as being woefully misguided by his pessimism; what is more, Nietzsche identifies art as the crucial counterpoint to Schopenhauer's claim that nothing that makes our existence worthwhile. Indeed, Nietzsche argues that "the existence of the world is *justified* only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (*BT*, "Self-Criticism," 5). But perhaps it is in Schopenhauer's aesthetics that we find an enemy hiding among the ranks. As Nietzsche slyly points out, it is what Schopenhauer railed against so fervently that proved most necessary for his philosophy:

Above all, we should not underestimate the fact that Schopenhauer...*needed* enemies in order to keep in good spirits...he would have become ill, become a *pessimist* (for he was not one, however much he desired it), if deprived of his enemies, of Hegel, of woman, of sensuality and the whole will to existence, to persistence. (*GM*, III, 7)

In that I have shown that, internal to Schopenhauer's aesthetic philosophy, the aesthetic genius affirms the will to existence, that he acts in the interests of his own persistence, it seems that Nietzsche is not wrong here.

"Art," Nietzsche writes, "is the great stimulus to life," for in art we encounter "[t]he will to *immortalize*" (*TI*, "Skirmishes," 24; *GS*, V, 370). For Nietzsche, we are right to try to seize this immortality, to embrace eternal recurrence, regardless of the suffering we endure. So it is, I think, for Schopenhauer's aesthetic genius, for the artist. We may experience life as a troubled



dream, just as Schopenhauer claims, and we cannot know what dreams may come in the sleep of death that awaits us. Yet that needn't stop us from finding beauty and worth in the dreams we know; we can affirm the lives we lead, and choose to take our waking slow.

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