Striving as Suffering: Schopenhauer's A Priori Argument for Pessimism

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Abstract

This paper aims to clarify Schopenhauer's *a priori* argument for pessimism and, to an extent, rescue it from standard objections in secondary literature. I argue that if we separate out the various strands of Schopenhauer's pessimism, we hit upon problems and counterexamples stemming from psychology. For example, instances where striving (willing) does not appear to equate to suffering, which puts pressure on the Schopenhauerian claim that human life, qua instantiation of the will, is painful. Schopenhauer's sensitivity to the complexities of human psychology means that he may be able to stave off such concerns. However, this reveals that true force of Schopenhauer's argument lies in the manner in which he combines an *a priori* formulation with empirical observation. I conclude that, though not unproblematic, Schopenhauer's argument in its most refined forms offers a deep articulation of the human condition, and warrants serious consideration.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to critically assess one of Schopenhauer's major grounds for defending the following claims, together of which constitute (at least one aspect of) his pessimism:

> *Descriptive Thesis*: suffering is the fundamental component of human experience.
>
> *Evaluative Thesis*: non-existence is preferable to existence.[1]

Schopenhauer takes the evaluative thesis to depend upon the descriptive thesis: *because* A's experience is characterised by suffering, it is better *for A* not to exist. The argument that bridges the two claims can be reconstructed as follows:

> (P1) Suffering is the fundamental component of human experience;
> (P2) If suffering is the fundamental component of human experience, then existence contains, on balance, significantly more negative hedonic value than positive.
> (C1) Therefore, existence contains, on balance, significantly more negative hedonic value than positive [*modus ponens* from P1 and P2].
> (P4) But if existence contains, on balance, significantly more negative hedonic value than positive, then non-existence is preferable to existence.
> (C2) Therefore, non-existence is preferable to existence [*modus ponens* from C1 and P4].

A few details need unpacking here. Firstly, as is well documented (e.g. Soll, 1988, pp. 122-124; Janaway, 1999, p. 334; Came, 2005, p. 43; Young, 2005, p. 218), Schopenhauer did not always adequately distinguish the descriptive and evaluative components of pessimism. A tacit assumption in P2 is the truth of hedonism. I shall grant this assumption here for the sake of argument, for I will be addressing a distinct objection concerning Schopenhauer's argument for P1.[2] Secondly, while my focus will be restricted to Schopenhauer's claims about human life, he intends the scope of this argument to include *all* sentient life.[3] Lastly, by 'fundamental' I mean that suffering is not an *accidental* feature of life, but rather, "unavoidable" and "grounded in the essence of life" (*W1*, §59, p. 350), since, for Schopenhauer, its *cause* is the human essence itself. As Julian Young claims, pessimism takes suffering to be "inescapably connected with elemental features of the human predicament" (Young, 1987, p. 137). Yet, Young rightly claims, this is not synonymous with claiming suffering to be a *necessary* feature of human life (i.e. that it cannot be otherwise).

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[1] It would be a mistake to consider 'Schopenhauer's pessimism' to be a single position, rather than an umbrella term for a variety of distinct views. As well as the claim considered in this paper, 'pessimism' could also be understood—for example—as the metaphysical claim that (1) our world is the worst of all possible worlds (see *W2*, pp. 583-588); or the historical-philosophical claim that, contra Hegel, (2) there is no significant progress in human history (see *W2*, pp. 442-444). Schopenhauer himself only begins to use the term 'pessimism' in the second edition of *WWR* in 1844, yet these various views are clearly present in the first edition in 1818.

[2] It is an interesting question how far the argument can be plausibly endorsed using alternative conceptions of well-being. For an interpretation of Schopenhauer's pessimism which does not rely on the truth of hedonism, see Migotti (1995). For a denial that Schopenhauer is committed to hedonism, see Neill (2010).

[3] Much of what I shall present in this paper is applicable to animal life as well. While he believed there to be significant differences in the capacity for suffering between humans and animals (which I shall address later), Schopenhauer's attention to animal suffering, and the relatively wide scope of his moral community, was at the time innovative. This is partly a result of his thoughts on the common experiences of striving and satisfaction which make up the *a priori* argument I will focus upon here.

Schopenhauer cannot be committed to this claim, for he considers certain exceptional individuals to be able to attain 'salvation' [*Erlösung*] from an existence characterised by pessimism.[4]

While part of Schopenhauer's project is to *explain* what he takes to be the widespread endorsement of pessimism as a world view in the history of humanity,[5] it is his *defence* of pessimism which is the concern of this paper. John Atwell has argued that "Schopenhauer did not put forth a unified, coherent philosophy of pessimism; he did not have a standard set of arguments for establishing a pessimistic conclusion about conscious life" (Atwell, 1990, p. 173). There is truth to this claim, taking into account that 'pessimism' can refer to a number of independent views.[6] However, Schopenhauer does provide specific arguments—an approach "cold and philosophical" (*W1*, §59, p. 350)—in favour of the form of pessimism I am considering here.

Schopenhauer's method includes both empirical and *a priori* arguments. It is crucial to note, however, that he does *not* present these two forms of argument with equal force. He is aware that relying *purely* on empirical grounds to support his pessimism would only provide a relatively weak inductive argument: a "simple declamation over human misery" (*W1*, §59, p. 350). Instead, Schopenhauer takes what one observes in "hospitals, military wards, and surgical theatres…prisons, torture chambers and slave-stalls...battlefields...places of judgement"—all "dark dwellings of misery" (*W1*, §59, p. 351)—to function only as a *supplement* to his *a priori* argument; to reinforce belief in its conclusion and "arouse a much more vivid conviction" (*W1*, §59, p. 349). For Schopenhauer, an endorsement of pessimism is not reducible to some psychological disposition, temperament or "one sidedness" (*W1*, §59, p. 350). Rather, pessimism is philosophically *justifiable* when "starting out from the universal and demonstrating *a priori*" (*W1*, §59, p. 350) its premises.[7]

As my title suggests, it is the latter form of argument that concerns me in this paper. However, the *a priori* argument has been thought to include a number of undefended assumptions and implausibilities which have often resulted in Schopenhauer's pessimism being dismissed too promptly. I aim to address these implausibilities here with a view to extracting the subtleties of Schopenhauer's psychological insights concerning the link between suffering, desire, striving, and boredom.

This paper consists of three sections. In section one, I present the *a priori* argument for the descriptive component of pessimism (P1), noting and responding to interpretative controversies in the existing literature. In section two, I review a familiar objection to the argument—that it relies upon the untenable principle that

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[4] I will not have time here to explain this point in detail, but Schopenhauer considers this possible for exceptional individuals via aesthetic contemplation (*W1*, §57), or a saintly ascetic resignation from life (*W1*, §68)—both of which amount in some way, according to Schopenhauer, to a *distancing* of the agent from their essence.

[5] Schopenhauer points to various ascetic practices common to Hinduism, Buddhism, and early Christianity as evidence for this (e.g. *W2*, p. 169-170).

[6] See footnote 1. It is worth noting that Schopenhauer does in one place talk in these broader terms, describing a particular empirical observation in animal behaviour as "an argument for *pessimism*" (*W2*, p. 356).

[7] It is useful to acknowledge Schopenhauer's understanding of "*a priori*" as referring to arguments drawn from his metaphysics which state universal features of human life. But metaphysics itself, for Schopenhauer, has its "origin" in "empirical sources of knowledge" (W2, p. 181). He held that "once a correct system of metaphysics has been found… then the unchangeable nature of an *a priori* known science will indeed belong to it, since its foundation is only *experience in general*, not particular individual experiences." (W2, p.182). This differs from the *a priori* arguments of rationalists, which Schopenhauer, like Kant, considered "necessarily vain and fruitless" (W2, p. 182).

desire implies pain—and assess its strength. In section three, I consider various empirical qualifications Schopenhauer might make to what the previous section identifies as the argument's most problematic component. I contend that while these qualifications improve certain premises, they deprive the argument as a whole of its intended force when considered in isolation. I conclude that the empirical and *a priori* arguments are therefore best interpreted as interlaced, and hence less independent of each other than Schopenhauer contended. Although not unproblematic, I claim that Schopenhauer's reformed argument warrants serious consideration.

1. The Argument

In what follows I shall assume a basic familiarity with Schopenhauer's metaphysics. For my purposes here, it is necessary only that I make explicit that his argument is launched with a minimalistic understanding of human nature in mind: the human being is an essentially embodied organism which, in inhabiting a physical world, is prone to needs and wants. It is fundamental to human nature to posit goals, and to strive to attain these goals. Crucially, Schopenhauer takes *striving* [*streben*] to satisfy needs and wants as the essence of human (and all organic) life, and not any *particular* or *final* need or want (*W1*, §56, p. 335).[8]

Schopenhauer's argument consists of two parts. The first part of the argument—which shall be the focus of this paper—centres on the claim that happiness is, by its very nature, elusive: we constantly strive to attain our wants and desires, and on the rare occasion we do satisfy these desires, they quickly lose their charm, and we begin striving after something else. Much of the intuitive force of the argument stems from how it sets up the relations between satisfaction, happiness, and suffering. Schopenhauer explicitly conceives of happiness [*Glück*] in terms of satisfaction [*Befriedigung*], and suffering [*Leiden*] in terms of resistance to satisfaction:

> When an obstacle is placed between [the will] and its temporary goal, we call this inhibition *suffering*; on the other hand, the achievement of its goal is *satisfaction*, contentment, happiness. (*W1*, §56, p. 336)

What follows from this is Schopenhauer's thesis of *the negativity of happiness*. Because happiness is defined in terms of satisfaction, the attainment of happiness is only ever the elimination of a previous desire or want; it is never a 'positive' experience:

> All satisfaction, or what is generally called happiness, is actually and essentially only ever *negative* and absolutely never positive. It is not something primordial that comes to us from out of itself, it must always be the satisfaction of some desire. (*W1*, §58, p. 345)

In other words, a logical precondition of happiness is want or desire, but attainment (happiness) is then more appropriately described as *relief* rather than gratifying *in-itself*: "we never gain anything more than *liberation*" from desire (*W1*, §58, pp. 345-346 - emphasis mine). As Schopenhauer later claims in the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*:

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[8] This essence, which constitutes a blind and arational striving force, he labels the *Wille Zum Leben*.

> We feel pain, but not painlessness; care, but not freedom from care; fear, but not safety and security. We feel the desire as we feel hunger and thirst; but as soon as it has been satisfied, it is like the mouthful of food which has been swallowed...For only pain and want can be felt positively; and therefore they proclaim themselves; well-being, on the contrary, is merely negative (*W2*, p. 575)

A second major claim is that there is no *ultimate* or *final* satisfaction (*W1*, §56). All satisfaction brings a fresh episode of willing and desire, hence 'happiness' never reflects its anticipated significance: it "lies always in the future, or else in the past, and the present may be compared to a small dark cloud driven by the wind over a sunny plain; in front of and behind the cloud everything is bright, only it itself always casts a shadow" (*W2*, p. 573).

The thought here is clear enough: happiness is much easier *remembered* or *anticipated* than it is experienced in the present. Often one looks back to episodes in one's past and realises how happy one was relative to current circumstances. But, Schopenhauer claims, this comes too late in the day, for that time has passed and we have new desires to deal with. Imagining a future state of happiness is similarly easier to conceive of than the present; that future events will *this time* allow for a feeling of persisting fulfilment. This, he claims, is a deception or illusion to which humans are particularly susceptible. For when we attain a particular goal, its allure quickly fades, fresh willing arises in the present, and the cycle begins anew: "the enchantment of distance shows us paradises that vanish like optical illusions, when we have allowed ourselves to be fooled by them" (*W2*, p. 573). The precision of which Schopenhauer anticipated this phenomenon—now familiar to modern psychology as the *Law of Hedonic Asymmetr*y—is striking.[9]

For Schopenhauer then, happiness is, by its very nature, elusive. Because 'the will' is insatiable and happiness is understood in terms of satisfaction, final and lasting happiness is impossible: "the present is always inadequate, but the future is uncertain, and the past irrecoverable" (*W2*, p. 573). However, this insatiability—I claim—is not in-itself what underpins Schopenhauer's pessimism.[10] Rather, the most important part of this picture concerns the connection between dissatisfaction—or resistance to one's desire—with suffering. We must look at this claim in detail, for it is not obvious that unsatisfied desire constitutes suffering.

If existence means constant and unrelenting striving, then life will include many unsatisfied desires. This is because Schopenhauer defends the following claim:

> All striving comes from lack, from a dissatisfaction with one's condition (*W1*, §56, p. 336).

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[9] See, for example, Paul Rozin, (1999), p. 129.

[10] On this point I agree with David Woods (Woods, 2014). Cf. Soll (1998; 2012).

The idea is that any instance of striving involves (or the agent believes it to involve) a need [*Bedürftigkeit*] or lack/want [*Mangel*]: "all willing as such comes from want" (*W1*, §65 p. 390). As a result, striving, by nature, implies an unsatisfied desire.[11]

From here, Schopenhauer quickly makes a second (and crucial) claim: that striving, in involving an unsatisfied desire, "is thus suffering so long as it is not satisfied" (*W1*, §56, p. 336). This claim is much more controversial, for it is not the case that an awareness of one's unsatisfied desires alone necessarily constitutes a sufficient condition for one to suffer. Schopenhauer must also endorse the principle that this lack, or unsatisfied desire that one strives to attain, is a painful experience. I shall call this the *Striving Implies Pain* principle (*SP*).

In interpreting this principle, my formulation differs from, for example, Jordi Fernández (Fernández, 2006, p. 649), in that I choose to express it in terms of *striving* rather merely *desiring*. Schopenhauer himself does not always distinguish carefully between "desire [*begehren*]" or "wish [*wünschen*]", and "striving [*streben*]", and often uses them in the same passage to defend *SP* (e.g. *W1,* §29; §38; §58). This is unfortunate, because the distinction makes a material difference to his argument concerning the relation between willing and suffering.[12] The relevant difference between desiring and striving is that one can consistently have a desire (e.g. for England to win the world cup) and have no intention (or indeed ability) to pursue it, or know if it is ever realised, whereas this is incoherent in the case of *striving* towards a goal, which *intrinsically* implies commitment to activity. As it will become clear as this paper progresses, pain is more closely associated with the latter.

Nevertheless, I claim that for the purposes of his *a priori* argument, Schopenhauer is best read as describing willing [*wollen*] primarily in terms of striving, understood as a species of desiring: "All *striving* comes from lack" (*W1*, §56, p. 336 - emphasis mine). Striving—which "constitutes the kernel and in-itself of everything" (*W1*, §56, p. 336)—is, for Schopenhauer, a distinctive concept which captures the phenomenal nature of willing. It is a 'push-pull' force (*W2*, p. 360),[13] chiefly characterised not merely by producing objects of desire, but by the subject "struggling everywhere [*überall kämpfend*]" (*W1*, §56, p. 336).

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[11] It has been objected by David Cartwright (Cartwright, 1988, pp. 51-66), Ivan Soll (Soll, 1998, pp. 84-85; 2012, p. 302), and Noël Carroll (Carroll, 2003, p. 36) that some desires do not require a lack, rather, they depend upon having something already, where there is a wish to retain it (e.g. retaining one's health, or place of residence). However, I shall not address this worry here, for I contend that plausible refutations have been offered. Firstly, that Schopenhauer is really interested in active *striving* and not merely desiring (as I shortly explicate further), and only the former intrinsically commits one to a goal of changing some state of affairs (Atwell, 1990, p. 162; Janaway, 1999, p. 329; David Woods, 2014, p. 54). Secondly, desiring to retain something *does* involve a lack, namely: security or assurance of stability in maintaining the desired end. This is especially pertinent in the case of health, where one has to strive more and more to retain it with age and circumstance (Young, 2005, p. 209). The latter claim is a key point made by Socrates to Agathon in the *Symposium*: "he desires that what he has at present may be preserved to him in the future, which is equivalent to saying that he desires something which is non-existent to him, and which as yet he has not got" (Plato, 1989, pp. 40-45).

[12] As I explain in the next section, this conflation of concepts is likely a source for the objection of equivocation that is traditionally levelled at the *a priori* argument. E.F.J Payne translates both "Begehren" and "Wunsch" as "desire" in some passages. However in others he translates "Wunsch" more accurately as "wish". This difference sometimes occurs on the very same page: e.g. see Payne (1966, *W1,* §55, p. 300; §58, p. 319).

[13] For detailed attention to this 'push-pull' image of willing, see Migotti (1995), p. 647.

Henceforth, I shall interpret the term ‘desire’ to refer to the strict conception of goal-committed telic activity more commonly captured by the term ‘striving’.

Schopenhauer explicitly holds *SP*: “the basis of all willing is need, lack, and thus pain…” (*W1*, §57, p. 338). In the same passage, he writes that “the nature of every desire is pain” (*W1*, §57, p. 340). Further still, he claims that the “great violence of willing is already immediately and in and of itself a constant source of suffering. First, because all willing as such comes from want, and thus from suffering” (*W1*, §65, p. 390; cf. §38).

At present there is an important ambiguity in *SP* which must be made explicit. On the one hand, it may denote the fact that striving is *caused* by pain: all strivings aim at the elimination of pain. On the other hand, it may denote the fact that the striving *itself* is painful, or a cause of pain. Schopenhauer clearly intends the former as the basis of his account of willing. But he also endorses the latter in holding that the *frustration* of one’s striving to achieve one’s goal is suffering. This is most plainly stated in his claim that suffering [*Leiden*] is when “an obstacle is placed between [the will] and its temporary goal (*W1*, §56, p. 336). Indeed, Schopenhauer *must* claim this as part of his argument for pessimism, since pain simply serving as a mere stimulant to striving is not sufficient to establish P1; the striving that pain initially provokes us into may otherwise be, on the whole, pleasurable.

SP thus embodies a more nuanced claim which is implicit in Schopenhauer’s texts. A (perceived) lack is a painful dissatisfaction by nature, and this *causes* us to strive to alleviate it; a process which is *itself* painful insofar as we are frustrated by resistance to our goal. Schopenhauer does not clearly distinguish between these two forms of displeasure inherent to *SP*, perhaps because he takes all striving to aim at expunging one’s displeasure *in toto*. This point has been acutely identified in the secondary literature by Bernard Reginster, who considers the example that “I could suffer both from the pain of a burn *and* from the frustration of my desire to get rid of it” (Reginster, 2006, p. 113). This distinction will later resurface as significant to the traditional objections to *SP* which this paper seeks to address.

The model examples Schopenhauer himself gives in support of *SP* are of that of nutrition and reproduction, that is: hunger, thirst and sex. When one is hungry, for instance, one is in need of sustenance. The organism is made aware of this lack of sustenance via the signal of a corresponding pain: dehydration, headaches, stomach pain, and so forth. The hope for absence of this pain serves as a means to motivate the required action to satisfy the need. In this example, the degree of pain experienced is inseparable from the degree of hunger experienced. These desires—being most basic to human survival—are uncontroversially thought to be regenerative, and only a short distance to pain and suffering if frustrated. But Schopenhauer is aware that in order to motivate his pessimism, he must account for the numerous forms of artificial need, for example: those generated by social relations and convention. Wealth, prestige, friendship, influence and power, are all things humans living in significant social groups tend to desire, yet they are inessential to

survival. Schopenhauer is in agreement with the Epicurean tradition that these desires produce a painful dissatisfaction, for there is no intrinsic limit to them (*P1*, pp. 352-359; 367-370).[14]

Consequently, to claim that suffering is only suitably applicable in striving to satisfy 'natural needs' will not do. As Dale Jacquette observes, those "superficially well off, who are healthy and wealthy" will be prone to painful frustration too.[15] Schopenhauer claims that:

> whatever nature or good fortune might have done, whoever you are and whatever you possess, you cannot ward off the pain that is essential to life…*Jovis quidem filius eram Saturnii; verum aerumnam Habebam infinitam* [I was the son of Zeus, of Kronos, and nonetheless endured unspeakable misery] (*W1*, §57, p. 341)

However, the strength of Schopenhauer's application of *SP* to artificial desires is precisely what commentators have taken to be a fundamental vulnerability in his position. I shall elucidate and and assess this concern in detail in the next section of the paper.

We now have the first part of the argument: our nature as human beings is such that we constantly strive to satisfy an unending stream of desires. This striving is triggered by a perceived lack, and this lack is inherently painful.[16] Lasting happiness (conceived in terms of satisfaction) is always a future (false) hope, or a diminishing memory, and thus intrinsically beyond our means:

> as long as our consciousness is filled by our will, as long as we are given over to the pressure [*Drange*] of desires with their constant hopes and fears, as long as we are the subject of willing, we will never have lasting happiness or peace. (*W1,* §38, p. 220)

The second component of Schopenhauer's argument for pessimism is his endorsement of what I shall call the *Boredom Implies Pain Principle (BP)*: if one lacks object of willing to strive towards—for example, if desires are satisfied too easily, or few objects stir one's sustained interest—then this is a *painful* state.

Schopenhauer provides a rich and detailed analysis of boredom and its relation to pain (e.g. *W1*, §57, pp. 339-340; *P2*, §152, §153). Since my focus here will be on the plausibility of *SP*, I shall grant *BP* to be true. But both principles taken together complete the proposed argument for pessimism. The nature of willing and striving that Schopenhauer presents intends to show that suffering is not merely an accidental feature of life which one might eradicate, but a fundamental feature of what it means to exist as a human being. The *a priori* argument seeks to demonstrate this by placing human experience between inevitable diametric

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[14] These kinds of desire are also arguably far more prevalent in the 21st century than they were in Schopenhauer's day (or, indeed, Montaigne's and Rousseau's day, from which discussion of boundless desire for prestige is also familiar). Not only has global capitalism reached a stage where there is a seemingly endless stream of products available for purchase—products that persistent advertising would have most of us believe we *need*—but the world today is significantly more interconnected. The artificial need for prestige in particular, and its accompanying anxiety, is, Schopenhauer would have surely observed, amplified exponentially by the phenomenon of social media. See *P1,* 368-369.

[15] Dale Jacquette, (2005), p. 117.

[16] The Buddhist view that desire or craving (Taṇhā) is suffering most closely resembles Schopenhauer's own view that I consider in this paper. He explicitly recognises this, and in fact uses the large adherence to Buddhism as further evidence to support his position (*W2*, p. 169).

episodes of painful striving and boredom: that "life swings back and forth like a pendulum between pain and boredom; in fact, these are the ingredients out of which it is ultimately composed" (*W1*, §57, p. 338). The human predicament is tragic, for our psycho-physiology is such that we are not equipped with the means to attain the constituents of our own wellbeing. Schopenhauer makes these points explicit in the following passage:

> If suffering is not the closest and most immediate goal of our life, then our existence is the most inexpedient thing in the world. For it is absurd to assume that endless pain, which springs from the distress that is essential to life and of which the world is everywhere full, should be pointless and purely accidental. Our sensitivity for pain is almost infinite, while that for pleasure has narrow limits. Each individual misfortune appears to be an exception, to be sure, but misfortune generally is the rule. (*P2*, §148, p. 309)

It is crucial, though, not to exaggerate the reach of the argument and thereby dismiss Schopenhauer's pessimism as fanciful or shallow. Although Schopenhauer does sometimes make all-encompassing claims such as "existence itself, is constant suffering" (*W1*, §52, p. 295), he does not endorse the erroneous view that pleasures do not occur. Rather, the argument purports to reveal that when they do, they are *exceptions* to an existence which we have reason to believe *a priori* contains *on balance* far more suffering (*W2*, p. 576).[17] In characteristically mercantile terms, he continues:

> Far from bearing the character of a *gift*, human existence has entirely the character of a contracted *debt*. The calling in of this debt appears in the shape of the urgent needs, tormenting desires, and endless misery brought about through that existence. As a rule, the whole lifetime is used for paying off this debt, yet in this way only the interest is cleared off. Repayment of capital takes place through death. And when was this debt contracted? At the begetting. (*W2*, p. 580)

Life, as Schopenhauer famously claims, is "a business that does not cover the costs" (*W2*, p. 574).[18] I shall return to this important point concerning the measurement of hedonic value in the sections to come. However, I shall now call the strength of the argument into question by examining a pervasive objection in the secondary literature: doubting the *Striving Implies Pain* principle (*SP*).

2. Questioning the Relation Between Striving and Suffering

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[17] Schopenhauer similarly sometimes claims that a happy life is "impossible" (*P2*, §172a), instead of simply an exception. This may on the surface appear as imprecise, or at worst a clumsy error, given that Schopenhauer *does* allow that some modes of life can invite escape from suffering. But it is important to distinguish between freedom from suffering—what Schopenhauer calls 'salvation' [*Erlösung*]—and 'happiness', which, as we have seen, Schopenhauer conceives of in terms of the lasting satisfaction [*Befriedigung*] of the empirical individual. Understood in these technical terms, Schopenhauer can claim that 'happiness' is unattainable or fleeting at best, while still maintaining that some exceptional individuals (i.e. the ascetic, artist, or saint) can avoid suffering through some form of self-denial or resignation.

[18] It is worth noting that in this paper I have focused on pessimism at the level of each *agent*. However, Schopenhauer also often uses 'pessimism' and 'optimism' as terms pertaining to judgements of the existence of the *world as a whole* (See *W2*, p. 576, pp. 357-359; *P2*, §150, p. 263, §156, p. 269). Whether understood summatively or not, pessimism about the world 'as a whole' may be left unscathed even if pessimism at the level of the individual is put into doubt. See Hassan, (forthcoming) for a sustained discussion of the distinction.

Let us briefly recapitulate both components of the *a priori* argument and how they work in tandem to support the broader case for pessimism. While Schopenhauer himself does not present the argument formally, it is helpful do so here given the number of distinct claims in play.

(SP1): The human condition is such that we perpetually strive to satisfy our desires.
(SP2): The dissatisfaction inherent to striving is painful (*SP*)
(SP3): When desires *are* satisfied, the pleasure is fleeting and we become susceptible to boredom.
(SP4): The dissatisfaction inherent to boredom is painful (*BP*).
(SP5): We overcome boredom only through new episodes of striving.
(P1): Suffering is the fundamental feature of human experience.

On this picture, happiness—which is defined by Schopenhauer in terms of fulfilment—is elusive by nature. Existence is chiefly characterised by a painful want; either for particular goals, or for goals in general which are a stimulus for agency.

One premise in this argument that has traditionally thought to be highly problematic is SP2. That the dissatisfaction inherent to striving should equate to suffering, the objection goes, seems an implausibly strong view. It is claimed that the connotations of painful frustration which commonly accompany 'dissatisfaction' are being smuggled into a purely technical meaning of the term in Schopenhauer's framework where they wouldn't normally be thought to apply. A dominant view in the secondary literature is that this ambiguity is fatal, or potentially fatal, for Schopenhauer's argument.[19] There are two particular counter-examples which offer a strong *prima facie* case for this view.

Firstly, the *Striving Implies Pain* principle seems to ignore cases of achievement in which it is *in virtue of* the process of attaining a goal that the activity is pleasurable. A number of activities human beings routinely take part in—sports, crossword puzzles, video games, mountaineering, and so forth—are designed specifically to draw out a struggle; to prolong attaining the goal. The reason for this is that pleasures are not simply experienced in terms of attainment, but often also in the activity leading to attainment. For example, the difficulty and pain endured in running a marathon, if alleviated by getting a taxi from the start to the finish line, would deprive the activity of precisely the pleasure that people often choose to engage in it for.

This is the classic objection to Schopenhauer's argument identified by Eugen Dühring in the 19th century,[20] and Georg Simmel in the early 20th century,[21] among others. More recently, Mark Migotti has similarly claimed that while running a marathon may be difficult to complete, the pressure of the as yet unachieved goal one strives towards (crossing the finish line) does not seem to be appropriately described as *suffering* "in any widely recognised sense of the term" (Migotti, 1995, p. 649). Noel Carroll has likewise

[19] For a representative sample, see: Young (1987), pp. 145-152; Cartwright, (1988), p. 59; Soll, (1988), pp. 111-112; Migotti, (1995), pp. 648-650; Janaway, (1999), p. 333; Carroll, (2003), p. 36; Vasalou, (2013), pp. 138-140.

[20] Eugen Dühring, (1865), p. 94; 95.

[21] Georg Simmel, (1991), pp. 55-56; 64.

claimed, due to examples of this nature, that Schopenhauer's definition of suffering here is "merely stipulative" (Carroll, 2003, p. 36).

This objection is made more puzzling in light of the fact that Schopenhauer seems to accept that this type of pleasure occurs. He writes that "there is really no other pleasure than the use and feeling of our own powers" (*W1*, §55, p. 332), and further clarifies this claim later in 1851:

> *making*, producing something, be it a basket or a book; seeing a work of our own hands grow daily and finally reach its completion makes us immediately happy…To labour and fight against resistance is a human need, as digging is for moles. The stagnation produced by the contentment of a lasting pleasure would be unbearable to us. Overcoming obstacles means the full enjoyment of our existence…struggling with them and winning makes us happy (*P1*, p. 468)

The claim here appears to be that a pleasurable feeling is produced via the awareness of one's own causal efficacy or successful agency. When one competently gets to the summit of the mountain, completes a marathon, or finishes writing a novel, there is a pleasurable feeling in knowing that one has achieved this after a struggle.

The ambiguity in *SP* that I flagged earlier—whether striving is *caused* by pain, or whether striving is *itself* painful—is relevant to further elucidating the nature of this objection in the following sense. One might think that when, for example, one runs a marathon, one is not motivated to do so out of a painful lack, and that therefore this objection presupposes that some striving is not motivated by pain. Because, as we have seen, Schopenhauer explicitly *rejects* this presupposition—"the basis of all willing is need, lack, and thus pain…" (*W1*, §57, p. 338)—the integrity of his position requires showing that even the striving of the marathon runner is ultimately motivated by pain, and is therefore permeated by the concern attendant to the preoccupation of escaping that pain.

But Schopenhauer's claims above concerning the experience of one's power or causal efficacy offer a possibility to do this, since the need to express one's power, or to develop one's physical capacities, is rooted in experiences of a lack or dissatisfaction. What provokes the marathon runner, on this view, is a need to *increase* their feeling of effective agency, or their strength, endurance, or stamina.[22] This tells us that the objection really concerns the phenomenal quality of the process of striving *itself*—the feeling of resistance to one's goal—rather than the pain of what causes this striving.

There is a second and more subtle claim in the example of achievement which would *prima facie* undermine the *SP* principle which Schopenhauer endorses, namely: that there is pleasure not only in successful agency through struggle, but in the auxiliary state of *anticipation* of one's desired goal. The mountaineer, marathon runner, novel-writer, all can experience pleasure—and may relish—in awaiting their triumph. Again, Schopenhauer himself explicitly recognises this type of pleasure when he asserts that

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[22] On some plausible interpretations, this was to be influential for Nietzsche's theory of agency as 'will to power'. See Reginster (2006).

achieving a long awaited desire usually leaves one without much of an improvement in how we feel; that possessing something long sought after, while perhaps providing momentary pleasure, deprives the object of its initial charm (*W1*, §57). Schopenhauer takes sex to be paradigmatic of this psychological tendency: “Everyone who is in love will experience an extraordinary disillusionment after the pleasure he finally attains" (*W2*, p. 540).

In light of these objections, it seems that striving will only plausibly be understood as suffering in the usual sense of the term when striving *persists for too long*. Consider again the examples of mountaineering, marathon running, and novel-writing. While such activities, if too easy for the agent, make no demand on the agent’s skill—or perhaps even sustained attention—if they are *too difficult* for a particular agent, and therefore take a very long time to complete (or worse still: cause the agent to get stuck), they often become exasperating, and are more appropriately described as a state of suffering. Schopenhauer might best be interpreted to take striving to be analogous to this type of case. We can call this the *Prolonged Striving Implies Pain* Principle (*PSP*).

While endorsing the weaker *PSP* may provide a more plausible and insightful account of the nature of suffering, this characterisation of willing loses much of the power that Schopenhauer intends it to have. If we accept the claim that striving necessarily involves pain, and the additional claim that the nature of the will is such that we perpetually strive, then we can see how one might arrive at the descriptive component of pessimism: we are perpetually in pain as a consequence of our own essence (the will), and as such, *a priori* our lives are filled with suffering. However, if Schopenhauer has to concede that only a *particular kind* of unsatisfied desire—one that persists for too long—is what constitutes a *painful* lack, then the argument loses much of its force.

It is for this reason that Schopenhauer has been accused of committing a fallacy of equivocation. In other words, Schopenhauer appears to be using the term 'dissatisfaction' as a verbal slider. Some cases of dissatisfaction will no doubt be appropriately described as a state of suffering. However, as we have seen, in other cases this ‘dissatisfaction’ will not carry the significant negative weight he intends it to. As Cartwright puts it, such cases of dissatisfaction lack “the vital tone which is associated with misery” (Cartwright, 1988, p. 59).

This equivocation has been taken to be fatal for the argument by, for instance, Migotti, who writes that “there is a gap between the technical sense of ‘suffering’ required in order to make metaphysical pessimism appear plausible, and its ordinary-language homonym” (Migotti, 1995, p. 649). Carroll states, more reservedly, that “Schopenhauer’s argument may not be as conclusive as he presumes”, but nonetheless takes it to “ride on an equivocation” (Carroll, 2003, p. 36). Sophia Vasalou has similarly claimed that Schopenhauer’s seeming blind eye to pleasurable instances of striving demonstrates “the serious shortcomings attaching to his conception of the relationship between activity and suffering” (Vasalou, 2013, p. 139).

I agree with the critics of the *a priori* argument that this seeming equivocation between suffering and dissatisfaction is highly problematic if the argument aims to establish the truth of pessimism by itself. However, I will now consider one route Schopenhauer could take to respond to the objections.

3. Qualifications and Empirical Data

There are two ways of defending against the objection raised. Firstly, one can qualify various components of the phenomenological claims about willing given so far in such a way that: (1) shows suffering to still be a fundamental component of striving in some *degree*; (2) shows suffering to be *qualitatively* greater than experiences of pleasure. The second defence is to integrate empirical observation with *a priori* formulation, by bolstering the claim that such instances of suffering are typically *quantitively* greater than those of pleasure.

I will argue that while conceiving of the *a priori* and empirical arguments Schopenhauer gives as interlaced in these ways does not amount to a philosophical proof of pessimism as he seems to have thought to have provided, it may succeed in shifting the burden of proof onto the optimist to show why life contains more happiness than suffering (and, assuming for now that the other premises are sound, that therefore life is worth living). This is because the counter examples to the *a priori* argument (given above) can be outweighed when supplementary empirical observations are given on behalf of the pessimist. Thus, combined with *a priori* formulation, the scales of data to compare and balance may be tipped in favour of pessimism. At the very least, the empirical qualifications I discuss below offer a means of destabilising the optimist's confidence in the *typical* responses discussed in the previous section.[23]

We might first respond to the objection that striving involves the pleasure of anticipation, and that this is ignored or undersold by Schopenhauer. As I recognise above, Schopenhauer *does* acknowledge this phenomenon, but he likely does not take it to undermine the premise that striving is suffering for three reasons. Firstly, while anticipation is a certain type of 'charm', this pleasure is squandered by the painful realization—or "extraordinary disillusionment" (*W2*, p. 540)—of the fleeting nature of attainment (on the rare occasion the goal is attained, that is). This psychological insight does not dispute that pleasure (sometimes) occurs in anticipation, but rather that this pleasure quickly fades in attainment, which brings an outweighing pain of *demoralisation* in understanding the reality of the will in hindsight.

The second reason is that, in characteristically Schopenhauerian fashion, he emphasises the fact that the anticipation found in human experience, while often pleasurable, also comes at a price: it is also often a source of suffering in the form of *anxiety*. He makes this point by drawing a comparison with animals, who he claims because lack concepts, live only "in the present" (*P2,* §153, p. 265), and are not subject to the distinctively human predicament of anxiety about past or future events. This empirical observation hits back at the optimist by bolstering the depth of the human condition in its capacity for suffering, turning the phenomenon of anticipation into an additional potential resource for pessimism. It will be an empirical

[23] I use 'optimism' here not necessarily in its traditional sense to reflect the view that this is the *best* of all possible worlds, but the broader view that life is worth living.

matter how often this anticipation is of a negative character rather than positive, but Schopenhauer is on firm ground in adopting a weaker position that simply appealing to the phenomenon of anticipation in-itself will not necessarily be enough to undermine the argument.

The third reason Schopenhauer might not understand the pleasure of anticipation to seriously undermine the relation between striving and suffering is that even if one accepts the more plausible *Prolonged Striving Implies Pain* Principle (*PSP*), then it is likely that pleasurable anticipation will occur relatively rarely. The reason is that human desires are *volatile*: anticipation has to be delicately placed in-between an activity that is too *easy* for an agent on the one hand, and too *difficult* on the other, if it is to be plausibly understood as a source of pleasure.

To elucidate this claim, imagine Nick is striving to attain a Ferrari he as longed after. He works extra shifts and does what he can in order to raise the money. If Nick had the money straight away, he would not have to strive, and thus would be susceptible to boredom; have a lack of goals to pursue and express effective agency. Now, Nick's striving for a Ferrari may get to the stage where the excitement at the prospect of attaining the car is alluring and pleasurable. But this psychological state is fragile; if Nick's striving persists long enough, this anticipation (Schopenhauer could claim) dissipates and he instead experiences a painful frustration.[24] Schopenhauer then needs to claim that this happens more often than not; that pleasure in anticipation is an *exception* to the rule (or at least that the optimist has to justify their appeal to anticipation on further grounds than merely it being a possibility).

PSP is also explicable in terms of 'natural' desires such as hunger and thirst. Indeed, these types of cases perhaps more clearly demonstrate the link between suffering and striving than artificial desires such as Nick's, for the distance between 'anticipation' and 'frustration' is plausibly much shorter. When hungry, for example, the desire to eat can be increased by the anticipation of the meal to come. The smell of the ingredients being prepared, instead of causing a painful awareness of a lack, may be a source of pleasure. Nevertheless, if this anticipation goes on for just too long and the desire remains unsatisfied, one can become frustrated. Waiting further still, it seems more plausible to regard this hunger as suffering.

So far I have only responded to the objection that striving can involve the pleasure of anticipation. A second objection was that some activities designed to draw out a struggle can be a pleasurable experience in-themselves, not due to simply anticipating the goal, but because of an awareness of one's causal efficacy in the *process* of trying to achieve it. While recognising that this type of pleasure will also be vulnerable to temporal constraints (for if our striving persists for too long, we can slide into frustration),[25] there are two points to be made which may rescue the argument.

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[24] Note that this point is best understood taking into account an earlier distinction: in terms of *striving* for a goal, rather than merely *desiring* a goal. It is plausible that a simple desire can act as a pleasurable ambition/anticipation for a number of years, for one may never even decide to try and achieve it (something similar to a 'pipe-dream'). But if one *strives* for that goal—i.e. is already by definition committed to actively seeking it out—this pleasurable anticipation likely has a shorter life-span.

[25] It is worth noting that perhaps the optimist is on stronger grounds in one respect here, for one can presumably still derive pleasure from an awareness of one's causal efficacy even in (some) cases of failure. For instance: a sports team that has put in tremendous effort against a superior opponent yet still loses. It is plausible to suppose the team could still find joy in their struggle, even if there might also be frustration or disappointment in losing. I suspect, however, that this joy might be explained in terms of the satisfaction of other goals subordinate to that of winning (e.g. giving a stronger team a run for their money).

Firstly, it is surely the case that some people do enjoy the process of striving towards a goal, but these forms of striving will be limited. Many goods will have a greater feeling of *satisfaction* after a struggle to attain them, but this does not necessarily entail that such a struggle itself was anything other than a mere means of attainment. In other words, while the process of striving will no doubt be constitutive of the pleasure to be found in achievements some of the time, the pleasure of other achievements is generated solely by the product. David Benatar asks—in defence of an argument for pessimism very similar to Schopenhauer's—the following question in this respect: "One wants to be cured of cancer but who actually wants to fight the battle, enduring the treatment and side-effects, and not knowing, along the way, whether it will be successful?" (Benatar, 2006, p. 79). As well as medical cases, we might similarly conceive of striving in this way concerning political freedom, day to day chores, and (far less controversially) striving to satisfy intrinsically regenerative basic needs such as hunger, thirst, sex, that one cannot *choose* to engage in or not.

A further response to the charge of equivocation is that the suffering should not be understood here as always abject agony, but rather a painful feeling that comes in *degrees* depending on the stage of dissatisfaction. This strategy is pursued by Janaway, who claims that for this reason the objection of equivocation misses the point of Schopenhauer's argument. He writes:

> Schopenhauer does not hold that each episode of willing involves the subject in misery; rather that, as a presupposition of there occurring an episode of willing, dissatisfaction or a painfully felt lack must be present in some degree (Janaway, 1999, p. 329; cf. Woods, 2014, pp. 56-57)

This seems plausible. In order to be motivated to strive towards a goal at all, there might have to be a *degree* of pain, rather than writhing agony. The point of the argument, on this view, is a more modest one: that because each state of striving presupposes a degree of pain for the one who strives, the scale is already weighted against them at the outset.

A move of this nature would be successful in so far as it appears to rescue Schopenhauer from committing himself to either an equivocation, or, on the other hand, an implausibly strong view about the correlation between suffering and dissatisfaction. However, this qualification may only result in a Pyrrhic victory. That is to say: weakening the connection between dissatisfaction and suffering in this way might be so heavy a concession as to take the sting out of an argument intended to establish a position as ambitious as pessimism. If the state of willing necessarily amounts only to a *grade* of pain, then the image of the human predicament as caught between painful striving and painful boredom is somewhat less powerful.

At this point, we are left with a conception of willing which reflects the metaphor of paying off 'debt' (the degree of pain intrinsic to striving) which Schopenhauer describes (*W2*, p. 580). Nevertheless, this 'debt', it may seem, now looks far easier to pay off than Schopenhauer allows for. By itself, the *a priori* argument Schopenhauer offers therefore looks to be vulnerable, even with the qualifications considered.

More recently, David Woods has sought to strengthen this interpretation of Schopenhauer's argument by insisting that "the experience of the willing-being as a whole is kept in mind" (Woods, 2014, p. 56). Woods' claim here is that if we consider each episode of striving in isolation, it is, as commentators have pointed out,

difficult to comprehend 'suffering' as a fundamental component of the human condition: "I feel thirsty, I locate some available water, I drink—where is the suffering?" (Woods, 2014, p. 56). But considering the agent as a whole—as one with vast legions of desires—it is likely that not all goals will be achieved. As Schopenhauer writes: "For every wish that is fulfilled, at least ten are left denied" (*W1*, §38, p. 219). Combined with the above claim that it doesn't take much for circumstance to exacerbate small dissatisfactions into significant painful frustration, one can now begin to see how Schopenhauer arrives at a pessimistic conclusion. It is not that *every* episode of striving is agony, but even the episodes of initial slight pain intrinsic to striving are significant when amalgamated. Of all one's desires, Woods writes:

> Amongst these there will be desires of greater intensity; perhaps there will even be two or more that require mutually contradictory conditions for their fulfilment. Certainly, there are many simultaneous claims made upon the willing-being at once, and a string of consecutive ones to follow. Willing is painful and manifold, satisfactions are transitory and few. Therefore, without embarrassment, it may be admitted that while any willing involves some suffering, not every instance of suffering is significant or overwhelming. This is because the human being suffers less from particular episodes of willing—necessarily painful though they are—than she does from being the will (Woods, 2014, pp. 56-57).

Schopenhauer makes a further claim—now concerning the *qualitative* difference between pain and pleasure—that provides support to this interpretation of willing in establishing a pessimistic conclusion. Although Schopenhauer frequently measures and balances pleasures and pains, he endorses the plausible view that they are not typically experienced with equal potency. For example, he writes that "as a rule, we find pleasures far below, but pains far beyond, our expectations", and offers an anecdotal 'proof' of such a claim:

> Whoever would like to briefly test the assertion that pleasure outweighs pain in the world, or that they are at least in equilibrium, should compare the feelings of the animal that devours another with those of the one being devoured. (*P2*, §149, p. 263)

Suffering, in Schopenhauer's view, affects us more profoundly than pleasure. I shall call this the *Asymmetry Thesis* (*AT*).[26]

AT is a significant supplement to the qualified case for pessimism, because it would alleviate total reliance upon the *quantitive* component of the argument (i.e. the need to establish the required amount of cases that painful striving occurs more frequently than pleasurable striving). The qualifications consider above do much to avoid the charge of equivocation that a significant number of commentators in the secondary literature have taken to be fatal for Schopenhauer's argument. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the crucial place of empirical observation in what was intended by Schopenhauer to be demonstrable *a priori*. This is so in two ways: firstly, in various qualifications about the human psychology of willing (i.e. concerning anxiety; the *AT*; grades of suffering needed for motivation); secondly, in plentiful empirical evidence of the *amount* of this painful striving in the world.

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[26] Schopenhauer elsewhere defends a stronger asymmetry thesis: that the *mere presence* of suffering is sufficient to outweigh any amount of happiness, since happiness—being a negation—cannot be expected to affect, either positively or negatively, that of which it is a negation (see *W2*, p. 576). For close analysis of this argument, see Woods, (2014), p. 71.

If *AT* is plausible, then the quantitive empirical evidence of painful striving in the world is strategically vital in further tipping the balance in favour of pessimism. This is because that as well as suffering counting for more by nature, the sum of these painful dissatisfactions would supposedly collectively outweigh the rare occasions of pleasurable striving or anticipation. Fortunately for his argument, Schopenhauer excels in both providing and harnessing the impact of such empirical evidence. Throughout *The World as Will and Representation*, and *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer cites swathes of evidence of human (and animal) suffering from biology journals, anthropological reports, and historical accounts.[27]

I must further specify what I mean by 'interlaced' or 'interlocked' with respect to the empirical and *a priori*. Schopenhauer claimed to be able to demonstrate the truth of pessimism deductively via the *a priori* argument from the will to life. However, this argument, considered in isolation, fails because it is vulnerable to various counter examples concerning the relation between striving and suffering. Schopenhauer thought that his empirical arguments for suffering at best only acted as *further evidence* of what the *a priori* argument independently establishes (*W1*, §59, pp. 349-350). But it turns out that the empirical arguments are needed in order maintain its plausibility. Young claims that the strategy is to employ a "Shotgun principle", in order to "overwhelm with quantity" (Young, 2005, p. 207) of arguments. On the use of *a priori* and a posteriori arguments, Schopenhauer himself says in the preface to the first edition of *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics* that his philosophy "is like Thebes with a hundred gates: one can enter from all sides and reach the centre point on a straight path through all of them" (*FE*, 'Preface', p. 6). While I agree that Schopenhauer has multiple arguments for his brand of pessimism, their success is not *just* a matter of quantity. My proposal is that the *a priori* argument must not be considered as independent among others if it is to withstand scrutiny. It turns out that empirical observation is necessary to deflect the force of intuitive counterexamples to its fundamental components (i.e. *SP*, or *PSP*).

Whether Schopenhauer succeeds in providing enough evidence to be certain of the truth of pessimism is uncertain, but re-interpreting his strategy in this way at the very least should prompt the optimist to reconsider the strength of the typical objections raised, and, at most, shift the burden of proof onto the optimist to show why life *is* worth living.

Conclusion

I have attempted to reconstruct and assess one of Schopenhauer's arguments for the view that life is predominantly suffering. I conclude that this argument requires significant qualifications in order to sustain its plausibility. These qualifications require empirical premises. This suggests that Schopenhauer's *a priori* argument is strongest when *interlaced* with the various empirical observations he offers, and not as a stand alone argument. This approach, while not unproblematic, revives the credibility of the argument which has often been discarded or dismissed too easily in the secondary literature.

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[27] See *W1*, Bk. 4, especially §59; *W2*, Ch. 46; *P2*, Ch. 11, 12. For contemporary empirical evidence of this nature, see David Benatar,(2006), pp. 89-92.

While Schopenhauer's argument is not always watertight, its qualified form warrants serious consideration. If the argument does not reach its aim of establishing the truth of pessimism—at least at the level of the individual—when combined with empirical support, it should at least shake confidence in views which otherwise take the worth of existence to be self-evidently positive; a position which characterised the optimistic era of Enlightenment thought in which Schopenhauer lived and reacted against.

List of Abbreviations

Works by Schopenhauer are cited by section using the following abbreviations and translations:

W1 = *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume One, J. Norman & A. Welchman & C. Janaway (eds./trans.), Cambridge University Press, 2010.

W2 = *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 2, trans. E.F.J. Payne, Dover Publications, 1966.

WN = *On the Will in Nature*,

P1 = *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol. 1, trans. C. Janaway and A. Del Caro, (Cambridge, 2014).
P2 = *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol. 2, trans. C. Janaway and A. Del Caro, (Cambridge, 2015).

FE = *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, C. Janaway (eds./trans), Cambridge University Press, 2009.

For the original German:

Schopenhauer: Sämtliche Werke, ed. Arthur Hübscher, 7 vols. (3rd edn.; Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1972; 4th edn.; 1988).

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