

Individual vs. World in Schopenhauer's Pessimism

Introduction

This paper aims to draw attention to what I shall argue is a significant, yet currently under explored distinction in Schopenhauer's pessimism. From the appearance of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* in 1818, straight through to his later works, Schopenhauer offered both *a priori* and *a posteriori* arguments for the view that life for any sentient creature is one in which happiness [*Glück*—understood broadly as the lasting satisfaction [*Befriedigung*] of one's desires—is impossible. Instead, human and non-human animal lives alike (though the case of the former being more nuanced) are fundamentally characterised by suffering, and, on these grounds, are not worth living; that non-existence would be preferable to their existence.

In a number of passages, Schopenhauer makes parallel claims about the existence of the *world*. He claims that upon reflection of experience “we very soon look upon the world as something whose non-existence is not only conceivable, but even preferable to its existence” (*W2*: 171). In one passage, Schopenhauer clearly invokes both claims:

Before we state so confidently that life is desirable or merits our gratitude, let us for once calmly compare the sum of pleasures which are in any way possible, and which a man can enjoy in his life, with the sum of the sufferings which are in any way possible and can come to him in his life. I do not think it will be difficult to strike the balance. In the long run, however, it is quite superfluous to dispute whether there is more good or evil in the world...For that thousands had lived in happiness and joy would never do away with the anguish and death-agony of one individual; and just as little does my present well-being undo my previous sufferings. Therefore, were the evil in the world even a hundred times less than it is, its mere existence would still be sufficient to establish a truth that may be expressed in various ways, although always only somewhat indirectly, namely that we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; that it is something which at bottom ought not to be. (*W2*: 576)

This passage contains a number of distinct propositions. The relevant feature here is that Schopenhauer appears to slide hastily from the woeful nature of the individual life, to the woeful nature of the world in general. But the claim that (a) the non-existence of the *individual* is preferable to their existence (henceforth *individual-pessimism*), and the claim that (b) the non-existence of the *world* is preferable to its existence (henceforth *world-pessimism*), are distinct theses. One cannot, it would appear, straight-forwardly deduce one from the other.

The reasons for this will become apparent as the paper progresses. Inferring deductively that the world as a whole ought not to be *because* individual lives are not worth living first of all presupposes interpreting the world ‘as a whole’ in a particular way—namely: as merely a composite of lives—that, as we shall see, requires exegetical finesse to establish, and may not be the best way of understanding Schopenhauer's view. Furthermore, as it stands (and granting this presupposition) it would risk committing a straight forward compositional fallacy. If most or even all lives were not worth living, it would not immediately follow that the world ought not to exist (after all, it could be, if Leibniz is to be believed, that the complex and harmonious operations of the world's physical laws produce beauty, making the world *good-simpliciter*, even if those same laws are not *good-for* conscious agents within that world). Similarly, inferring deductively that *individual lives* ought not to be because the *world as a whole* ought not to be inherits the same defects.

Schopenhauer seems to recognise this in his account of the potential ‘salvation’ [*Erlösung*] from suffering available to exceptional individuals. I shall address this point in the final section, but the immediate problem is that, as it stands, the above passage is *prima facie* in danger of drawing precisely this kind of straight forward inference.

As we continue, we shall see that this problem is not unique to this passage alone. Part of the issue here is that the concept of ‘the world’ is deeply ambiguous in the present context. To make matters more complicated, Schopenhauer often uses a variety of phrases which, in some passages at least, could appear conceptually equivalent: he speaks of the state of “mankind as a whole” (*P2*, §150); of “life as a whole [*Leben im Ganzen*]” (*W1*, §16: 111; §67: 402); of “the world as a whole [*der ganzen Welt*]” (*W1*, §15: 108); of “the world and existence [*die Welt und das Daseyn*]” (*W2*: 170); the “suffering of the world” (*P2*, §156); of the suffering which is inseparable from the “essence of nature as a whole” [*Wesens der gesamten Natur*] (*W1*, §21: 134); of “the world in itself [*Welt an sich*]” (*W1*, ‘Critique of the Kantian Philosophy’: 447, 463); and “existence itself [*Das Daseyn selbst*]” (*W1*, §63: 378).

There are two current limitations of the relevant secondary literature. Firstly, while there are some exceptions which I shall mention, the majority of attention to Schopenhauer’s pessimism has so far concerned only whether *individual* lives are worth living (e.g. Cartwright, 1988; Migotti, 1995; Janaway, 1999; Fernández, 2006). The second limitation is that, of the commentators which do appear to recognise a form of world-pessimism to some extent, too little is said about how ‘the world’ is to be understood, or how it relates to individual-pessimism. For example, Julian Young attributes to Schopenhauer the view that “the world considered as a whole is a fearful, terrible place” (Young, 1987: 99), and that “the world as a whole has no point to its existence” (Young, 1987: 81). Similarly, Sophia Vasalou writes that pessimism involves the descriptive claim that life is pervaded by suffering, but also “a judgement openly evaluative in kind: non-existence – our own, the world’s – is preferable to existence” (Vasalou, 2013: 127). Young and Vasalou are correct that Schopenhauer makes these claims, but it is uncertain whether what they refer to as ‘the world as a whole’ is the composite totality of things that exist, or the world how it is ‘in-itself’, or something else. As will become clear, these are claims which require elaboration.

I have two exegetical aims. The first is to determine how the world/life ‘as a whole’ is to be best understood among competing interpretations, which will involve disentangling these initially ambiguous phrases presented above. The second is to elucidate how this understanding informs individual-pessimism. I shall argue that Schopenhauer’s claims about the world as a whole are properly understood as a function of his metaphysics of the *Wille*, which characterises the phenomenal world of experience as a “distortion” (*P2*, §156a): an inherently conflicted manifestation of a purposeless force at the essence of all things. Moreover, that once we understand his claims about the world in this way, this has two implications for pessimism at the level of the individual: (1) his arguments about the perpetual ‘push-pull’ of striving to attain one’s ends that is fundamental to human life can be understood as indicative of the cosmic *meaninglessness* and *arationality* of one’s toils, as opposed to offering a merely phenomenological story (albeit a bleak one) about the relative experiences of pleasure and pain; (2) while examples of individuals that achieve ‘salvation’ [*Erlösung*] from a life characterised by suffering may *potentially* **compromise** the case for individual-pessimism, it leaves world-pessimism in tact.

1. Pessimism About Existence, the World-as-a-Whole, Life-as-Such

It should be noted that the proposed distinction between individual-pessimism and world-pessimism might be met with hesitation at the outset on the grounds that Schopenhauer may just be sliding into

hyperbole with respect to the latter. Schopenhauer's real concern, it might be said, is individual-pessimism. The relevance of 'the world', according to this view, obtains only insofar as it is an *enabling condition*: the individual can only suffer because there is a world. If the world were not, the individual would not be, and there would be no suffering. The existence of the world is a *prerequisite* for the suffering of the individual.¹

In what follows, I seek to demonstrate that this type of view does not square well with the textual evidence—Schopenhauer does, very often, *argue* that the *world* ought not to be, not merely as a means of precluding individual misery, but as fundamentally catastrophic itself. Sometimes, for example, he explicitly expresses the direction of the relation between world and individual in this way: he defends the “conviction that the world and *therefore also mankind* is something that actually should not be” (*P2*, §156 - emphasis added). As a useful starting point, in a well known passage Schopenhauer states his criteria for establishing the fundamental differences between religions:

I cannot, as is generally done, put the *fundamental difference* of all religions in the question whether they are monotheistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, or atheistic, but only in the question whether they are optimistic or pessimistic, in other words, whether they present the existence of this world as justified by itself, and consequently praise and commend it, or consider it as something which can be conceived only as the consequence of our guilt, and thus really ought not to be... (*W2*: 170)

Schopenhauer then proceeds to determine which religions fit into these categories of optimistic (i.e. understand the world as “justified by itself”) or pessimistic (i.e. understand the world as something that “really ought not to be”).² In the former category, Schopenhauer places Greco-Roman pagan religions, Islam, and Judaism. In the latter category, he places Buddhism, Brahmanism, and the inner kernel of New Testament Christianity, which he takes to have since been warped into a version of shallow optimism.

From here we can begin to determine what Schopenhauer means by ‘the world’ or ‘existence’ in this context. Only then can we understand how *value judgements* concerning it might be grounded. There are at least two possible interpretations of this world-pessimism which might be extracted from Schopenhauer's texts. Let us consider each in turn.

1.1. The Summative View

One natural way of understanding the claim that the non-existence of the world is preferable to its existence might be in summative terms of whether the total positive value in the world outweighs the bad. On this view, the value of the world could be determined by establishing the relative proportion of good and bad experience by humans and other sentient creatures within it.

Schopenhauer very often appears to think explicitly in these terms, employing a hedonistic standard to measure such value. For example, when attempting to determine the desirability of life, he invites readers to “calmly compare the sum of pleasures which are in any way possible” with “the sum of the sufferings which are in any way possible”, claiming it would not be hard to “strike the balance” between them (*W2*: 576). Elsewhere in the same text, Schopenhauer suggests how, from each human's perspective, the woeful nature of “the world and life” requires it to be “fully compensated by the pleasures and well-being in it” (*W2*: 577). This apparently summative approach continues into Schopenhauer's later period, where he writes that if one

¹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this particular reservation.

² Although the ideas are clearly present in his earlier work, this passage is Schopenhauer's first published use of the term ‘pessimism [*Pessimismus*]’. It is necessary to acknowledge that ‘pessimism’ is best understood as an umbrella term encompassing a number of interrelated yet distinct theses. For instance, that our world is the ‘worst of all possible worlds’ (see *W2*: 583-588); that there is no significant progress in human history (see *W2*: 442-444); that happiness is impossible (e.g. *W1*, §38: 57; *W2*: 574); and, as this paper understands it, that the non-existence of the world as a whole is preferable to its existence.

“imagines the sum of distress, pain and suffering of every kind, as far as approximately possible” then, he continues, “one will have to grant that it would be much better if the sun had not been able to produce the phenomenon of life any better on earth than on the moon” (*P2*, §156: 269). Further still, he offers an anecdotal ‘proof’ of his pessimism in which to “briefly test the assertion that pleasure outweighs pain in the world”, one “should compare the feelings of the animal that devours another with those of the one being devoured. (*P2*, §149).

Earlier I noted that part of what makes Schopenhauer’s world-pessimism ambiguous, at least initially, is his use of a wide range of phrases—the ‘world as a whole’; ‘existence in-itself’; and so forth—that look like they could be conceptually equivalent. But here we can begin to disentangle them, thereby clarifying the Summative View. The Summative View understands the value of ‘the world’ as simply a *composite* whole of hedonic experiences: if the sum total of suffering outweighs that of the sum total of happiness, then the world ought not to be. This should be distinguished from how Schopenhauer sometimes talks of the “general fate” of sentient beings, that is: how each individual life experienced is *generally characterised* by misery. Schopenhauer’s use of ‘life’ and ‘existence’ then, can be read in at least two ways:

- (a) as the sum total of hedonic experiences across all sentient beings;
- (b) as an expression of the general condition of sentient lives.

Whether claim (a) or (b) is meant by ‘life’ and ‘existence’ is not consistent across Schopenhauer’s usage of them; this can only be determined by attention to the context of the passage. Claim (b), I believe, is what Schopenhauer means by “mankind as a whole” in *P2*, §150, for example. In this passage he writes how history shows “the life of peoples finds nothing to report but wars and uprisings”, with the peaceful periods as “brief pauses”, and that “in just this manner the life of the individual is a continuous struggle” (*P2*, §150; cf. his use of “life as a whole” in *WI*, §16). But, claim (b) is clearly not what is in mind in the above passages which refer to a collective negative hedonic balance. Therefore, it cannot be the case that whenever Schopenhauer talks of ‘life’, ‘existence’, and especially ‘*the world*’, he is always referring to (b). The negative hedonic balance of (a), then, is one viable option for understanding world-pessimism.

Schopenhauer offers abundant empirical evidence as inductive support for the claim that a negative hedonic balance is inevitable. He vividly describes miserable states of affairs, such as “the dungeon of Ugolino where prisoners starved to death” (*WI*, §59: 325). Schopenhauer’s strategy here is that in drawing attention to “hospitals, infirmaries, operating theatres...prisons and slave-hovels...battlefields...places of execution”—in short, all “dark abodes of misery” (*WI*, §59: 325)—he will portray a world which none who honestly reflect on its nature would doubt that there is more suffering in the world than happiness.

The Summative view that we have been considering so far has been recognised in Schopenhauer’s texts to various degrees by his commentators. One such commentator is Georg Simmel in his classic *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* from 1907. Simmel straight-forwardly asserts that “Pessimism holds that the world’s existence is a greater evil than its nonexistence would be, because suffering, the negative value, outweighs happiness, the positive value” (Simmel, 1991: 60). Simmel’s objections to the Summative view are enlightening. One in particular worth considering here. While we often approximately compare gains in happiness with the pains endured for it in everyday life using past experiences, Simmel offers an argument for why this “does not allow for any conclusion about a *basic existential* weighing of happiness and suffering” (Simmel, 1991: 61 - emphasis mine).

Simmel asks what the objective measure could be for determining whether a particular quantity of suffering is ‘worth’ a certain quantity of happiness—something he claims the pessimist presupposes. The answer he offers is that it would need to be possible to firstly “compare the totality of the world’s

experiences of suffering with the totality of the experiences of happiness”, and then to “show mathematically how much of each reached the feeling individual” (Simmel, 1991: 61). This would provide a hedonic average from which we could in principle determine who has ‘paid too much’ by falling short of it. However, Simmel claims that while this mechanism would have the capacity to determine whether each *individual* life is worth living, it would not provide a measure for the world *as a whole*. Why not? Because it would require comparing different averages, a different measure for which there is no basis:

Unless we know about other humans on other planets we cannot compare averages. Similarly, it is not possible to ascertain that the human being as such has more suffering than happiness, that he pays too high a price for happiness, or that there is no just proportion between positive and negative values. All such fundamental assertions of eudaemonistic pessimism presuppose the methodological error of trying to measure the measure and of applying a quantitative comparison to the general fate; such a comparison is justified only for the individual’s hedonistic fate, insofar as in that case we have an empirical or instinctive representation of the general fate (Simmel, 1991: 62)

The claim here is that any value judgement about the world in general cannot be ascertained by the balance of happiness and suffering within it, as there is no standard against which the world could be measured. Note that Simmel’s claim is *not* the typical objection levelled against utilitarianism that happiness and suffering cannot be measured, but rather that *whatever* the total sum of suffering in the world, it cannot in principle tell us anything about whether that world’s existence is preferable or not. Yet, as Simmel is aware, Schopenhauer seems to anticipate this problem (Simmel, 1991: 63).

Despite Schopenhauer’s propensity towards the practice of balancing and measuring pains and pleasures, he at times suggests that it is in the end “quite superfluous” (*W2*: 576) to do so. The reason he provides is *prima facie* puzzling: “the mere existence of evil decides the matter, since evil can never be wiped off, and consequently can never be balanced, by the good that exists along with it or after it” (*W2*: 576). Why might it be that the *mere existence* of evil lends itself to a pessimistic conclusion? The answer depends on Schopenhauer’s asymmetrical conception of the relationship between suffering and happiness.

As I have already mentioned, Schopenhauer defines happiness [*Glück*] in terms of the satisfaction [*Befriedigung*] of a pre-existing desire. In other words, happiness is a feeling of *relief* from want, an absence of desire:

All satisfaction, or what is commonly called happiness, is really and essentially always *negative* only, and never positive. It is not a gratification which comes to us originally and of itself, but it must always be the satisfaction of a wish (*W1*, §58: 319)

Suffering [*Leiden*], by contrast, is necessitated by desire, which is the experience of a (perceived) lack [*Mangel*] or need [*Bedürftigkeit*].³ Put another way, in willing we desire, and in desiring—more precisely, *striving* [*streben*]—we suffer in some degree. Happiness is when the pain of desiring is extinguished through satisfaction. On this model then, only suffering is positively felt:

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*: 575)

³ This is one of Schopenhauer’s most controversial theses, for it seems *prima facie* implausible that dissatisfaction is *equivalent* to suffering, unless the latter is understood in a highly stipulative sense. This objection, and others, have been articulated by Young (1987): 145-152; Cartwright, (1988): 59; Migotti, (1995): 648-650; Vasalou, (2013): 138-140. For charitable interpretations, see Janaway (1999): 329; cf. Woods, (2014): 56-57.

Schopenhauer clarifies this relationship between happiness and suffering using the metaphor of debt and credit:

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*: 580)

If happiness and suffering are causally asymmetric, then determining the balance in the world cannot simply be a matter of totalling up each phenomenon independently from one another. Rather, any instance of happiness necessarily implies an instance of suffering that cannot be ‘compensated’ for: “For that thousands had lived in happiness and joy would never do away with the anguish and death-agony of one individual; and just as little does my present well-being undo my previous sufferings” (*W2*: 576). David Woods helpfully elucidates the claim using the following analogy:

Given this asymmetry, then, the model of weighing scales is rendered inappropriate. If there is any appropriate analogy along these lines, it is where the will permanently has a thumb on the scales. The odds are permanently stacked against happiness. Attempting to weigh suffering and happiness is, therefore, *a priori* superfluous (Woods, 2014: 71)

We are now in a better position to understand Schopenhauer’s claim that the mere existence of suffering “decides the matter” in favour of world-pessimism. Because he endorses the asymmetry thesis about happiness and suffering, he is able to say that:

...were the evil in the world even a hundred times less than it is, its mere existence would still be sufficient to establish...that we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; that it is something which at bottom ought not to be. (*W2*: 576)

Endorsing this asymmetry thesis is a crucial dialectical move in Schopenhauer’s defence of this claim, if ‘the world’ is to be understood in a summative fashion. As Schopenhauer is well aware, merely presenting a host of empirical evidence of suffering has two limitations. Firstly, it would only provide a mild inductive argument—a “mere declamation on human misery” (*W1*, §59: 323)—for the thesis that non-existence is preferable to existence. Secondly, if he is successful in showing that there is more suffering than happiness in the world up to now, this does not entail that things could not *improve* in the future, to the extent that the balance of suffering and happiness could be shifted in favour of the latter with, for example, future enhancements in medicine. The asymmetry thesis blocks this possibility, yet still retains the Summative approach to the question of justifying the world’s existence: the hedonic balance is *a priori* perpetually tipped in favour of suffering.

But does the asymmetry thesis block the possibility of *some* improvement? Recently, Sandra Shapshay (2019) has argued that a number of passages indicate Schopenhauer to acknowledge a degree of historical progress in alleviating individual suffering. He applauds the British for taking steps to prevent cruelty to animals (*BM*, §19: 230), and he clearly thinks the abolition of slavery is something to be commended on the grounds that it improves the well-being of the previously enslaved (*BM*, §18: 218). This much appears to me entirely sensible. There are many respects in which human and non-human animal suffering has decreased with advances in medical science and socio-economic reform. A committed pessimist can consistently allow degrees of such improvement in wellbeing.

However, Shapshay offers arguments for the more controversial thesis that the later Schopenhauer endorses a significantly weaker pessimism in which “things could be improved to such an extent that life could be a *good* thing, not just a less bad thing” (Shapshay, 2019: 20). The strongest argument Shapshay deploys in support of this thesis is to draw attention to how Schopenhauer acknowledges a “myriad possibilities...for human beings not to be slaves to the will-to-life” (Shapshay, 2019: 88). Here she has in mind Schopenhauer’s remarks about the efficacy of aesthetic contemplation, ascetic resignation, and compassionate actions as means of escaping a life of endless striving, with the latter even prompting an existence of “peaceful, confident cheerfulness” (*WI*, §66: 400–401).

For reasons that I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Hassan, 2019), and which shall resurface towards the end of this paper, I do not think that Shapshay’s strong view of progress can ultimately be maintained as representative of Schopenhauer’s considered view. While some degree of improvement can be consistently maintained by the pessimist, the asymmetry thesis precludes the possibility of lasting happiness which would be required for a life worth living.

Nevertheless, there is still a lingering issue here stemming from Simmel’s concern about the availability of an appropriate measure for the world as a whole. By defining happiness as only negative, Schopenhauer avoids the concern about relative *averages*. However, a related version of the objection is still pertinent: what sense, if any, does it make to describe the world as a whole as having a value, if there is no other world to which it could be *more* or *less* valuable? This version of the objection was given years earlier than Simmel by the likes of Rudolf Haym (Haym, 1873: 258-260), and Hans Vaihinger (Vaihinger, 1876: 126; 177). We can also find it in Nietzsche’s published writings.

Nietzsche claims that evaluating life ‘as a whole’ would require an exceptionally privileged epistemic position, yet no human is in such a position:

One would have to be situated *outside* life, and on the other hand to know it as thoroughly as any, as many, as all who have experienced it, to be permitted to touch on the problem of the *value* of life at all: sufficient reason for understanding that this problem is for us an inaccessible problem (*TI*, ‘Anti-Nature’: §5)

Nietzsche doubts the capacity of human judges to *know*, *estimate*, or *understand* the value of life, given our position *within* it. In similar passage, he writes:

one belongs to the whole, one *is* in the whole — there exists nothing which could judge, measure, compare, condemn our being, for that would be to judge, measure, compare, condemn the whole...*but nothing exists apart from the whole!* (*TI*, ‘Four Great Errors’: §8)

This error, Nietzsche explicitly claims, is a mistake that is “ultimately formulated by Schopenhauer as ‘denial of the will to life’” (*TI*, ‘Anti-Nature’: §5), and hence writes in the *Nachlass* that “*the total value of the world cannot be evaluated*: consequently philosophical pessimism belongs among comical things” (*WP*, §708).⁴

Nietzsche’s argument here appears to take the following steps. Firstly, attempting to evaluate life ‘as a whole’ is incoherent because (1) the concept of ‘value’ loses all meaning when attached to something *sui generis*. Schopenhauer himself explicitly endorses this thesis about the comparative nature of value: “Every *worth* is a comparative quantity, and it stands moreover in a double relation: first, it is *relative*, in that it is *for* someone, and secondly, it is *comparative*, in that it is in comparison with something else according to which

⁴ Given the context, and his familiarity with common objections to pessimism at the time, in these passages I am taking Nietzsche to be using ‘life’ synonymously with ‘the world’ (i.e. *existence in general*).

it is evaluated. Displaced from these two relations, the concept *worth* loses all sense and meaning” (*BM*, §8: 161). The second step is to claim that (2) there is no world other than our own, let alone a preferable one (e.g. the Christian notion of heaven). If value can only be understood comparatively—that is, as *X* being either ‘more’ or ‘less’ valuable than *Y*—and there is no other world to which we *could* compare our own, then it cannot be evaluated, either negatively or positively: “value judgements concerning life, for or against, can in the last resort never be true” (*TI*, ‘Socrates’: §2).

But a reasonable question is why there would need to be another *actual* world to serve as the necessary contrast to the value of our own (*W*), instead of a *possible* world (*W*¹, *W*², *W*³...). This distinction is one that Schopenhauer in fact makes elsewhere when he offers an argument for the distinct thesis that this is “the *worst* of all possible worlds” (*W2*: 583).⁵ Since we are able to imagine another, better possible world than ours, the onus is on the proponent of the Simmel-Nietzsche style objection to say why this is not sufficient for comparison. Without an answer, the summative view remains intact on this front.

So far I have considered one possible interpretation of the claim that the non-existence of the world as a whole is preferable to existence; that the world falls short of ‘justification’; or that the world ‘ought not to be’. This has been in terms of a hedonic summation of the individual experiences within the world, which Schopenhauer provides empirical and *a priori* means for establishing as essentially negative. I have considered important objections that the world ‘as a whole’ either cannot have a measure of value, or that we lack epistemic access to it. I then suggested that a defender of Schopenhauer could appeal to ‘possible worlds’ to establish such a measure.⁶ But the hedonic/summative view is not the only possible interpretation of Schopenhauer’s claims. I shall now consider a second; one which does not depend upon a controversial theory of value.

1.2. The Transcendental View

The search for an alternative interpretation of Schopenhauer’s world-pessimism may stem from a dissatisfaction with the Summative View just considered. For example, Sebastian Gardner writes that “in so far as its aim is to establish something about the metaphysical quality of the world, this argument fails to convince”, claiming that at least one problem is its reliance on “a phenomenologically strained reduction of the objects of desire and valuation to hedonic states” (Gardner, 2015: 114). Even if the hedonism which Schopenhauer presupposes is a defensible account of wellbeing, his phenomenology of striving and attaining is controversial.⁷

But for Gardner, the perceived failure of the Summative View does not spell disaster, for he takes Schopenhauer’s arguments from the predominance of suffering to be best interpreted “merely as an auxiliary element” (Gardner, 2015: 114) in his case for world-pessimism. I shall argue—broadly with Gardner, but seeking to expand upon his view—that the alternative consists in Schopenhauer’s claim that what we experience is a conflicted distortion of how things are in-themselves. Comprehending this view requires an exposition of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, elucidating his own brand of transcendental idealism.

Schopenhauer claims that it was Kant’s “greatest merit” to discover the “distinction of the phenomenon from the thing-in-itself, based on the proof that between things and us there always stands the intellect, and

⁵ By “possible”, Schopenhauer means what could viably exist and last. His argument for the thesis that the actual world is the worst possible looks, at first glance, weak. However, for a sympathetic discussion and plausible reconstruction, see Woods (2014): 90-99.

⁶ The pre-modern sense of a ‘possible world’ as concerned with contingency and necessity is, of course, to be distinguished from the contemporary semantic sense in the modal logic popularised by David Lewis.

⁷ See fn.4.

that on this account they cannot be known according to what they may be in themselves” (*W1*, ‘Critique of the Kantian Philosophy’: 417-8). Instead of holding that the mind simply perceives the world around it as it really is—as a passive observer of reality—Kant held that our experiences are mediated in various ways by the mind. Our experiences of the world are made possible by forms of intuition—space and time—and the category of causality, which our minds *a priori* impose onto objects of experience. Consequently, we are left with the world how it *appears* or is *represented* to us—the world of *phenomena*—on the one hand, and the world how it is *in-itself*, unmediated, on the other.⁸

Armed with this distinction, Schopenhauer endorses, with Kant, the thesis that cognitively meaningful debate is restricted to that concerning the realm of experience (e.g. *W2*: 195). In other words, if *X* isn’t a necessary condition for the possibility of experience, and it is not analytic or *a posteriori*, then *X* is unknowable. And, like Kant, Schopenhauer holds that metaphysics is an investigation into what is *beyond* experience:

By *metaphysics* I understand all so-called knowledge that goes beyond the possibility of experience, and so beyond nature or the given phenomenal appearance of things, in order to give information about that by which, in one sense or other, this experience or nature is conditioned, or in popular language, about that which is hidden behind nature, and renders nature possible (*W2*: 164)

The result of the combination of these claims—(1) that our experience of the world is ideal or phenomenal; (2) that cognitively meaningful debate can only occur with respect to what we have experiential access to; (3) metaphysics concerns what is beyond the realm of experience—would appear to be that metaphysical speculation is never epistemically warranted. This is, very briefly, Kant’s argument against metaphysical knowledge.

Schopenhauer often expresses his broad allegiance to Kant in this respect. For instance, he proclaims that “I am myself a Kantian” precisely on the grounds that “we cannot know [*wissen*] anything beyond experience and its possibility” (*PI*, §3: 41). He elsewhere confirms this commitment, writing that:

...on the path of *objective knowledge*, thus starting from the *representation*, we shall never get beyond the representation, i.e., the phenomenon. We shall therefore remain at the outside of things; we shall never be able to penetrate into their inner nature, and investigate what they are in themselves, in other words, what they may be by themselves. So far I agree with Kant (*W2*: 195)

However, as the passage continues, Schopenhauer argues that *some* metaphysical knowledge is salvageable with an appropriate method and scope. He explains how humans have a unique and quasi-mystical means of coming to an awareness of the thing in-itself:

...as the counterpoise to this truth, I have stressed that other truth that we are not merely the *knowing subject*, but that *we ourselves* are also among those realities or entities we require to know, that *we ourselves are the thing in itself*. Consequently, a way *from within* stands open to us to that real inner nature of things to which we cannot penetrate *from without*. It is, so to speak, a subterranean passage, a secret alliance, which, as if by treachery, places us all at once in the fortress that could not be taken by attack from without. Precisely as such, the *thing in itself* can come into consciousness only quite directly, namely by *it itself being conscious of itself*; to try to know it objectively is to desire something contradictory. Everything objective is representation, consequently appearance, in fact mere phenomenon of the brain (*W2*: 195)

⁸ Schopenhauer endorses Kant’s argument from the synthetic *a priori* to the distinction between representation and thing-in-itself. However, he also offers an additional and independent *biological* argument. I am unable to expound these arguments here, but for a comprehensive overview, see Young (1987): 3-13.

Schopenhauer here claims that we have a certain kind of access to—that is: non-representational knowledge of—the thing-in-itself via consciousness of our own volitions. We are not *just* knowing subjects whose knowledge is restricted to that of the world of appearance, but we are also conscious *experiencers*. This experience, Schopenhauer claims, gives us ‘immediate’ acquaintance with *our own willing*. For Schopenhauer, my subjective experience allows me to determine that what I am in essence is an embodied being prone to wants and needs; a constant striving, ultimately to ensure the perpetuation of life, and the survival of the material manifestation of the will (*WI*, §60: 327).

Schopenhauer is, however, cautious to distinguish himself from the (in his eyes) unfortunate post-Kantian tendency—embodied by the likes of Fichte, Hegel, and to a lesser extent, Schelling—of unrestrained metaphysical speculation: of “undertaking to go beyond [experience] by means of its mere forms, which Kant indeed had demonstrated to be inadmissible” (*PI*, §3: 41); a point to which I shall soon return. Shortly after explaining how we can have some acquaintance of the thing-in-itself (i.e. *Wille*), he emphasises the restrictive nature of this knowledge. Earlier in *WI*, he notes how “the cognition I have of my will, although it is immediate, cannot be separated from that of my body. I do not have cognition of my will as a whole, in its unity, in perfect accordance with its essence”, but rather “I cognize it only in its individual acts, which is to say in time, time being the form in which my body (like every other object) appears: this is why the body is the condition of cognition of my will.” (*WI*, §18: 126). Thus, “immediate” knowledge is to be understood in a highly qualified sense. It is “to be carefully noted”, he writes, that this consciousness of the will “does not by any means furnish an exhaustive and adequate knowledge of the thing-in-itself” (*W2*: 196). The reason being that this inner experience of willing, while being free from the *a priori* forms of space and causality, is still subject to the form of *time*. In being bound up to the intellect, the self-consciousness which allows for experience of willing is “tied to the form of representation; it is perception or observation”, and hence “still remains phenomenon” (*W2*: 196-197).

For Schopenhauer then, this “subterranean passage” (*W2*: 195) of inner experience gives us “only the nearest and clearest *phenomenon* of the thing-in-itself” (*W2*: 197). Consequently, he positions himself in-between what he understands to be two extreme ends of the epistemic spectrum: “my path lies midway between the doctrine of omniscience of the earlier dogmatism [rationalist metaphysics] and the despair of the Kantian Critique” (*WI*, ‘Critique of the Kantian Philosophy’: 428).

After stating that I am able to understand my essence as will, Schopenhauer comes to make the claim he is most known for, and the subject of Book Two of *WI*: that the *world* is *Wille*. In stark opposition to (what Schopenhauer interprets as) Kant’s claim that there are a *plurality* of things-in-themselves—a metaphysical speculation forbidden by Kant’s own framework, according to Schopenhauer—he defends an ontological *monism* in which *Wille zum Leben*, or ‘will to life’, is the essence of everything in the phenomenal world. The claim is made most explicit in *P2*:

Thing in itself expresses that which exists independently of perception through any of our senses, and so that which really and truly is. For Democritus, this was formed matter, it was the same for Locke, for Kant it was an X; for me it is *will*” (*P2*, §61: 84)

The world ‘in-itself’ is a blind, arational, and ultimately meaningless striving force. This *Wille* “which is objectified in human life as it is every appearance, is a striving without aim or end [*ein Streben ohne Ziel und ohne Ende*]”. (*WI*, §58: 347). What we experience are merely manifestations of this purposeless *Wille*.

In Books Two and Four of *WI*—and continued in the 1838 *On the Will in Nature*—Schopenhauer sets out to elucidate the nature of these various manifestations in an attempt to reveal what the *Wille* is, as best can be done. This method is in keeping with Schopenhauer’s prescriptions about how metaphysics *proper* ought to

proceed. Since a priori knowledge governs only the world of phenomena, it must be grounded in experience, and accord with experience.⁹ Metaphysics must “make use of abstraction, and think everything individual in the universal, and its differences also in the universal” (*W1*, §15: 82). Hence, coming to a metaphysical understanding of the world requires knowledge of particular experiences and universal claims “to be closely bound up” (*W1*, §15: 82). Schopenhauer explains this point by way of analogy:

The whole of experience is like cryptograph, and philosophy is like the deciphering of it, and the correctness of this is confirmed by the continuity and connexion that appear everywhere. If only this whole is grasped in sufficient depth, and inner experience is connected to outer, it must be capable of being *interpreted*, *explained* from itself (*W2*: 182; cf. *P1*, §3: 41)

For this reason, metaphysics “never tears itself entirely from experience, but remains the mere interpretation and explanation thereof, as it never speaks of the thing-in-itself otherwise than in its relation to the phenomenon” (*W2*: 183). In this way, Schopenhauer sees himself as remaining a true Kantian, presenting a decidedly *immanent* philosophy, restricting his philosophical aspirations to the world of experience.

The nature of the various manifestations of the *Wille* then, are essential to understanding the nature of ‘the world’ as *Wille*. While the *Wille* itself is a purposeless striving, Schopenhauer describes how its phenomenal manifestations each have goals, and in virtue of this, embody *conflict*—within themselves, and with other competing manifestations of the *Wille* (often violently). Let us consider just two symptoms Schopenhauer offers of this inner conflict. Firstly, he claims that reflection upon the natural world—from humans all the way down through plants, and to inorganic fields such as chemistry and magnetism—brings the knowledge that “everywhere in nature we see contest, struggle, and the fluctuation of victory” (*W1*, §27: 146).

In strikingly Darwinian-sounding passages, Schopenhauer explains how the conflicted nature of the *Wille* is most clearly observed at the grade of objectification in the animal kingdom, where each individual animal is either the prey or rival of some other (e.g. *W1*, §27: 146). He recalls the “scene of horror” in Java reported by botanist Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn in which, year by year, hundreds of giant turtles which come to a particular field to lay their eggs are pounced upon by wild dogs and “devoured alive”, only for the dogs themselves often to be attacked by tigers (*W2*: 354). Insects too portray this vicious conflict, and we are given examples of various flies which lay their eggs in the larvae of other insects, whose “slow destruction is the first task of the newly hatched brood” (*W1*, §27: 147). In Schopenhauer’s fashion, he gives a vivid example which best encapsulates his metaphysical claim:

But the most glaring example of this kind is afforded by the Bull-dog ant of Australia, for when it is cut in two, a battle begins between the head and tail. The head attacks the tail with its teeth, and the tail defends itself bravely by stinging the head. The contest usually last for half an hour, until they die or are dragged away by other ants. This takes place every time (*W1*, §27: 147)

This universal strife is necessarily how the *Wille* manifests itself: “the will to life *must devour its own flesh* because in the world of appearance nothing at all exists besides it, and it is a hungry will; hence the hierarchy of its appearances, each of which lives at the expense of the other” (*P2*, §173). The contradiction of the phenomenal world is then, partly grounded in the reality that the phenomena which are in vicious competition with each other to survive are manifestations of the *same Wille* (*W2*: 581).

A second way in which the phenomenal manifestation of the *Wille* is riven by an internal tension or contradiction, Schopenhauer argues, is in the subordination of the individual will-to-life to that of the

⁹ As we shall see, for Schopenhauer this demand that metaphysical insights correlate with empirical experience is one in which Leibnizian optimism spectacularly fails to meet (*W2*: 184).

species. The metaphysics of sexual impulses betrays how nature seeks a surplus of ‘life’—ever more manifestations of the *Wille*—and attains this via “implanting in the individual a certain *delusion*...that which in truth is merely a good thing for the species seems to him to be a good thing for himself, so that he serves the species”, all while “under the delusion that he is serving himself” (*W2*: 538).¹⁰ The idea is that humans and animals exist with particularly dominant sexual instincts, yet while these appear to the individual as prudentially driven, they are simply a deceptive means of propagating these species as a whole, effecting a greater manifestation of the *Wille*; a point which Darwin explicitly approved of, citing Schopenhauer in chapter 20 of *The Descent of Man* in 1871.

After reconstructing Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the *Wille*, we are now in a position to ask how a second conception of world-pessimism is to be derived from it. It might be tempting to ground world-pessimism in the first step taken in this story: the Kantian distinction between how the world *appears* to us and how it really is *in-itself*. Because the world we experience is our representation, and that it is ontologically subordinate to the world in it-self as purposeless *Wille*, it is imbued with a sense of emptiness or vanity [*Nichtigkeit*] and illusoriness [*Scheinbarkeit*], characteristic of an “insubstantial dream” or “ghostly phantasm [*luftgebilde*]” (*W1*, §17: 123).

However, while illusoriness or ontological dependence *may* be a necessary condition for world-pessimism, it is not immediately clear how it could be a sufficient condition. That, it seems, would require additional and robust epistemic-axiological premises which Schopenhauer does not explicitly defend. As Gardner notes: “life’s dream-likeness does not of itself make life a *bad* dream or a dream that *ought not* to be dreamt” (Gardner, 2015: 114).¹¹ Rather, world-pessimism is more plausibly to be derived from Schopenhauer’s metaphysics in the following two-stage manner.

The first is negative in nature: as a result of his Kantian commitments which entail that the *a priori* forms of time, space, causality, are necessary to structure our experience, Schopenhauer holds that their employment beyond the world of experience for the purposes of knowledge is rendered hopeless. This means that the *Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR)*—i.e. the principle that there is no fact or truth that lacks a sufficient reason why it should be so, and not otherwise—is restricted to the phenomenal world of experience. The *PSR*, Schopenhauer constantly states, is ubiquitous in application to the relational structure of the world of experience, but not to the world as it is in-itself. The significance of this restriction is that it blocks traditional attempts to endow the various evils within the world a cosmic meaning or justification:

The principle of sufficient reason explains the connections between appearances, but not the appearances themselves. So philosophy cannot use these principles to search for either an efficient cause or a final cause of the world as a whole [*der ganzen Welt*] (*W1*, §15: 108)

Since the *PSR* cannot in principle extend beyond the world of experience, any kind of traditional Christian theodicy, which requires positing a God as efficient cause of the world, is blocked. Likewise, any Hegelian story about the evils of the world being justified as part of a necessary *Weltprozess* of ever-realising perfection is blocked, since it posits final causes beyond experience. The *Wille* as thing-in-itself cannot be subject to the *PSR*, and hence cannot be justified:

...if anyone ventures to raise the question why there is not nothing rather than this world, when the world cannot be justified from itself; no ground, no final cause of its existence can be found in itself; it cannot be demonstrated that

¹⁰ See *W2*, Ch. 42; Ch. 44.

¹¹ As I argue shortly in section 2.2, I do think this illusoriness *does* have implications for individual-pessimism insofar as it robs the goals we set for ourselves of significance.

it exists for its own sake, in other words, for its own advantage. In pursuance of my teaching, this can, of course, be explained by the fact that the principle of the world's existence is expressly a groundless one, namely a blind will-to-live, which, as *thing-in-itself*, cannot be subject to the principle of sufficient reason or ground; for this principle is merely the form of phenomena, and through it alone every why is justified. But this is also in keeping with the nature and constitution of the world, for only a blind, not a seeing, will could put itself in the position in which we find ourselves (*W2*: 579)

Up to this point, it seems like all we are left with is the value-*indifference* of the world. In other words, that the restriction of the *PSR* to the world of experience deprives the world of a justification. But world-pessimism is the stronger claim, as Schopenhauer repeats, that the world 'ought not to be'; that its non-existence is *preferable* to its existence. The "position in which we find ourselves" constitutes the second step in Schopenhauer's attempt to establish this conception of world-pessimism.

For Schopenhauer, the relation between the world as it is in-itself and the world of experience is not causal, but both are sides of the same coin: they are the same reality, considered from different perspectives. But as manifestations of the *Wille* in the world we experience, every being is *individuated*: the *PSR* governs a phenomenal reality structured by the forms of space, time and causality in which there *appear* to be a plurality of wills. It is this individuation (*principium individuationis*) that, as discussed in the ways above, leads to the strife and vicious conflict amongst egoistic manifestations of the *Wille*, itself giving expression to the "contradiction" and "inner antagonism of the will-to-live with itself" (*W1*, §61: 331-333). In turn, this explains Schopenhauer's description of "every individuality" as a "special error, a false step" (*W2*: 491).¹²

It is this understanding of the world as a reflection of *contradiction*—a "burlesque distortion" and "irreconcilable dissonance" (*P2*, §156a: 271)—that best characterises world-pessimism, and not a crude balancing of aggregate pleasures and pains. That "[t]he character of things of this world, namely the human world, is not so much *imperfection*, as is often claimed, but rather *distortion* in things moral, intellectual, physical, in everything (*P2*, §156a: 274). The immense suffering in the world is not itself what grounds world-pessimism, but what it is indicative of: the essential irrationality of existence as a distortion of how things are in themselves. What we end up with is a radical redeployment of the *PSR* as contrasted with the likes of Leibniz or Hegel, who would use it to endow suffering and conflict with a higher meaning. Instead, Schopenhauer harnesses the *PSR* as the *source* of such suffering and conflict—it structures and orders the nightmare of existence by governing the relations between its individual manifestations.¹³ A metaphor offered by Julian Young is illuminating with respect to this reversed use of the *PSR*. World-pessimism—or as Young calls it: "nature-pessimism" (Young, 1987: 74)—is not grounded in the view that the world "is, as it were, a turbulent madhouse presided over by a ruler who is himself insane, a crazed willer of contradictory goals", but rather by viewing the world analogous to "a concentration camp whose inmates, in order to survive, are compelled to destroy each other by a sadistic, 'devilish', yet coldly consistent governor" (Young, 1987: 75-76).

Schopenhauer's world-pessimism, on the Transcendental View, is thus constituted by two claims:

- (1) the phenomenal world of experience is a manifestation of a reality which is intrinsically purposeless.
- (2) the phenomenal world of experience to which this reality gives rise is characterised by dissonance, contradiction, and defectiveness.

¹² Schopenhauer gives further expression to this conception of individuation as itself a fault or error in his positive appraisal of the Christian doctrine of original sin, and his articulation of 'eternal justice [*ewige Gerechtigkeit*]' (*W1*, §63, §64; *W2*: 580).

¹³ Here I concur with Gardner, (2015): 115.

Before exploring how world-pessimism relates to individual-pessimism, it is worth flagging a potential issue with the cogency of the Transcendental View. Schopenhauer describes the state of the world in-itself using the language of ‘error’ and ‘mistake’, ‘contradiction’ and ‘distortion’, marking a stark contrast to the Summative View. However, it is hard not to hear the usage of these terms in a *normative* sense. The problem is that Schopenhauer’s avowedly Kantian framework seems to generate an internal obstacle for drawing normative assessments of the world in-itself. By restricting the application of the *PSR* to the world of experience, Schopenhauer would appear to eliminate the possibility of rationally evaluating the world, since *nothing* can be said about what is beyond experience. There is a potential tension then, between Schopenhauer’s assertion that the world ‘ought not to be’ with his restriction on metaphysics.

In committing himself to world-pessimism, the problem is expressed in the following dilemma: either Schopenhauer affirms the negative evaluation of the world as *rationally* grounded (at the expense of his restriction of the *PSR*), or he gives up the assessment as rational, instead positing world-pessimism as a stipulative, non-cognitive claim. Either of these options are difficult to reconcile with Schopenhauer’s texts. As we have seen, Schopenhauer lampoons the likes of Fichte and Hegel, precisely insofar as they help themselves to metaphysical claims about what is beyond experience, freely employing the *PSR*. Condemning the world as a whole seems to position Schopenhauer in the same camp. The alternative is just as difficult to reconcile with the textual evidence. A popular mode of attacking pessimism in the mid to late nineteenth century was to claim that it cannot be *rationally* established, but is instead reducible to the disposition or mood of the author. Schopenhauer, however, is adamant that what he offers is a *true* description of the world (*WI*, Preface). Pessimism, he claims, is a result of “perfectly cold and philosophical demonstration” (*WI*, §59: 323). Either disjunct one affirms then, will create exegetical obstacles to surmount.

2. The Relation Between Individual and World

I have so far argued that Schopenhauer’s claim that non-existence is preferable to existence at the level of the world is best interpreted as grounded in his metaphysics of the *Wille*: the world ‘in-itself’ is a blind, irrational, and meaningless striving, with the phenomenal world of experience constituting its conflicted manifestation. But how, if at all, does this understanding of existence generally bear upon Schopenhauer’s individual-pessimism, and *vice versa*?

2.1. Individual to World: The Impulse to Metaphysics

The first relation concerns how the individual is prompted by suffering—both experienced and witnessed—to speculate about the world as a whole. Schopenhauer echoes Plato and Aristotle in holding that philosophy, and metaphysics in particular, begins in wonder, and is peculiar to humankind alone as the “*animal metaphysicum*” (*W2*: 160). But for Schopenhauer, this wonder is more precisely a kind of *horror*:

...undoubtedly it is the knowledge of death, and therewith the consideration of the suffering and misery of life, that give the strongest impulse to philosophical reflection and metaphysical explanations of the world (*W2*: 161)

Later in the same passage, Schopenhauer writes that “philosophical astonishment is at bottom one that is dismayed and distressed; philosophy, like the overture to *Don Juan*, starts with a minor chord” (*W2*: 171). Without an existence characterised by significant suffering, Schopenhauer finds it unlikely that there would be any speculation about why and what the world is.

While suffering is something which affects everyone, and everyone shares the corresponding need for metaphysics, not all are prepared or able to do metaphysics. The role that religion plays, in Schopenhauer's view, is essential to communicating metaphysical truths in allegorical form to the masses: "for the great majority unable to devote themselves to thinking, religions fill very well the place of metaphysics in general" (*W2*: 167). He takes the tremendous power of various religious traditions to be indicative of his view that the individual's suffering provokes metaphysical speculation: "Temples and churches, pagodas and mosques, in all countries and ages, in their splendour and spaciousness, testify to man's need for metaphysics" (*W2*: 162).

As I mentioned earlier, Schopenhauer understands the fundamental criterion by which to categorise religions is whether they are optimistic or pessimistic (i.e. whether they take the world to be justified by itself, or not). He is clear that "the value of a religion will depend on the greater or lesser content of truth which it has in itself under the veil of allegory" (*W2*: 169). For Schopenhauer, the religions which score poorly in this respect are Judaism, Islam, and Greco-Roman polytheism, which he takes to be essentially optimistic in nature. In contrast, it is Buddhism and New Testament Christianity—with their respective doctrines of asceticism and salvation via a form of other-worldly and/or supra-human existence—that in essence capture the metaphysical truth that *the world ought not to be*. So while striking the modern (European) reader as a radical thesis, he holds that in fact "it is nevertheless the most universally recognised fundamental truth in the whole of non-Mohammedan Asia, today as much as three thousand years ago" (*W2*: 605).

While philosophy aims to express this pessimistic insight rationally and literally, and religions by means of allegory, both are in the business of accounting for "man's need for metaphysics" (*W2*: 162): an explanation of how the world is as a whole, prompted by our individual experiences. In the end however, the explanation the world gives us is, unfortunately, one of meaningless turmoil.

But it is not *just* that the individual's experience of life *prompts* them to start thinking about the world as a whole. Schopenhauer also thinks, as we have already seen in the previous section, that metaphysics more broadly proceeds properly when it begins with individual experiences, from which universal claims can be established to account for them. The idea that the case of individual suffering is a necessary first step in coming to understanding world-pessimism is made explicit in a telling passage from 1851:

As I have said, each *human life*, surveyed as a whole, displays the qualities of a tragedy and we see that life as a rule is nothing more than a series of dashed hopes, thwarted plans and errors recognised too late... This accords entirely with my world view, which regards existence itself as something that should not be, as a kind of going astray from which our knowledge of the same is supposed to bring us back. Mankind, *ho anthrōpos*, is in the wrong already generally speaking, inasmuch as he exists and is human, consequently it is wholly in keeping with this that also each individual human being, *tis anthrōpos*, surveying his life, finds himself throughly in the wrong. That he realises this generally is his redemption, and for this he must begin to recognise it in the individual case, i.e., in his individual course of life. For everything that applies to the genus applies also to the species (*P2*, §172a)

Elsewhere Schopenhauer is equally explicit about how this epistemic direction of fit from individual to world works, and thus how individual-pessimism would 'inform' world-pessimism. He writes that "each of us knows *what* the world is without any further instruction because each of us is that very cognitive subject whose representation the world is" (*W1*, §15: 108). Similarly, at the very end of *W2*, Schopenhauer says the following:

From the most ancient times, man has been called the microcosm. I have reversed the proposition, and have shown the world as macanthropos, in so far as will and representation exhaust the true nature of the world as

well as that of man. But obviously it is more correct to learn to understand the *world from man than man from the world*, for we have to explain what is indirectly given, and thus external perception, from what is directly given, self-conscious, not *vice versa*. (*W2*: 642 - first emphasis mine)

Given Schopenhauer's broadly Kantian epistemological framework combined with his quasi-Cartesian view of self-consciousness as the ground from which we then explain external perception (which we may then—and only then—offer universal explanations), it would seem we get the following view. If human beings ought not to be, then neither should the cosmos; for in essence the latter is just a spatiotemporal magnification of the former.¹⁴

2.2. World to Individual: Futility and the Anti-Cosmic Tendency

The second relation I wish to consider goes in the other direction: how world-pessimism is pertinent to individual-pessimism. Earlier I noted that one of the arguments Schopenhauer gives for why each individual life is not worth living is that sentient beings perpetually strive to satisfy (perceived) needs, and that this striving is intrinsically painful. On the occasion that we satisfy these needs, the resulting happiness is (a) negatively felt as *relief* from the pain of striving; (b) short-lived, for to escape the pain of boredom, we strive once more. I also noted that this argument has controversies, not least that the phenomenology potentially ignores certain *pleasures* in forms of striving, and that 'dissatisfaction' and 'suffering' may be employed in a highly stipulative sense.

However, considering the fate of the individual as a perpetually striving agent in light of world-pessimism offers an alternative to the (potentially) problematic hedonic account above. Instead of holding that each episode of striving is painful, and that because we perpetually strive we are constantly accumulating negative hedonic value which determines our life as a whole, Schopenhauer can instead say that it is the *arbitrary nature* of the push-pull dynamic which characterises human life—its ceaseless flux of desiring and attaining, all for the sake of nothing—that makes it a tragic mistake. The restriction of the *PSR* to the world of phenomena deprives the struggles experienced in life of potential significance: life in itself is purposeless, meaningless *Wille*.

The way in which world-pessimism relates to individual-pessimism is therefore in the *perspective* that the former provides to the latter. Not only is the life one experiences predominantly miserable and contradictory in nature, but it is also *all for nothing*. An awareness of this perspective is a double-edged sword. Firstly, there may be a demoralisation of sorts at the knowledge of the nothingness or vanity [*Nichtigkeit*] of existence as a whole; a resulting malaise at the realisation that one's efforts in life are robbed of any cosmic significance or purpose.¹⁵

However, this interpretation has found some resistance in the secondary literature. Jordi Fernández denies that the *Wille*'s "aimlessness" bears upon Schopenhauer's case for pessimism, which, in his view, only requires that an individual's specific desires cannot be permanently satisfied (Fernández, 2006: 659).

¹⁴ This identity thesis is also explicit in Schopenhauer's discussion of eternal justice: "The world in all the multiplicity of its parts and forms is the appearance, the objecthood of the one will to life. Existence itself as well as the mode of existence, in the whole and in each of the parts, all comes from the will alone... The world is only the mirror of this willing: and all finitude, all suffering, all the misery the world contains belongs to the expression of what it wills; it is so because the will wills it so... And everything that happens to the individual... is always right. Because the will is his, and as the will is, so is the world" (*W1*, §63: 378).

¹⁵ Note that this "nothingness" in realising the world in-itself is *aimless* and without justification is of a different kind to the "insignificance [*Unbedeutsamkeit*]" of the individual as a "vanishing nothing [*ein verschwindendes Nichts*]" (*W1*, §39)—i.e. a humbling sense of 'feeling small' in relation to that which is greater—which Schopenhauer holds to be partly constitutive of the feeling of the sublime. Hence, any attempt to connect the sublime to perspectival knowledge of the world (e.g. Vasalou, 2013) will not on its own succeed as means of weakening *world-pessimism*.

Christopher Janaway has recently argued—rightly, in my view—that this position is mistaken in an important sense, namely: it overlooks the way in which the purposelessness of the *Wille* is “transferred to its empirical manifestations” (Janaway, 2018: 339). As we have seen, Schopenhauer insists that every empirical manifestation of will has the same essence [*Wesen*] as *Wille*. So if *Wille* by its essence lacks any overall purpose—which Schopenhauer repeats again and again—then so do *I*, or so does my willing ‘as a whole’. Or, as Janaway puts it: “the essence of every individual empirical being that manifests will is endless striving that has no final aim” (Janaway, 2018: 339).

Janaway’s claim broadly coheres with the position defended in this paper: that understanding the world as it is in-itself or as whole bears upon how we understanding the individual. But I think we can extend Janaway’s claim in a way that lends further support to the thesis that world-pessimism informs individual-pessimism. Schopenhauer does not make this explicit, but the Transcendental View in particular undermines any antecedent *anthropocentric* belief in the privileged normative status of human beings relative to non-human animals. This is a belief which has a long history in (especially Western) thought, but Schopenhauer thinks it is paradigmatically expressed in Judeo-Christian religion:

European clerics, who, in their profanity, did not believe that they could go far enough in denying and blaspheming the eternal essence [*des ewigen Wesens*] that lives in all animals; whereby they had laid the basis for the customary hardness and cruelty to animals in Europe (*FE*, §19: 240)

The metaphysics of the Transcendental View undermines any significant normative distinction in *kind* between humans and other creatures: the human is in *essence* the same as the fly. It is true that Schopenhauer does think that human beings have an additional faculty which non-human animals lack, that is: abstract or conceptual knowledge [*Wissen*] afforded by the faculty of reason [*Vernunft*]. However, Schopenhauer departs radically from his contemporaries in the German Idealist tradition by claiming that this fact only offers *practical* advantages,¹⁶ and is strictly irrelevant to determining moral status.

Hence, on my view, world-pessimism can induce existential dread insofar as it robs the individual of cosmic significance *twice over*: we realise our struggles are pointless and without ultimate aim, but also that there is *nothing special* about us. Being a member of the group ‘human being’ counts for nothing, cosmically speaking; the realisation of this is the experience of a *loss*.¹⁷

I mentioned earlier that the world-pessimistic perspective is a double-edged sword. As well as the above, Schopenhauer nevertheless claims that a glimpse into how the world as it is in-itself is a first step for a rare few to be able to achieve what he calls ‘Salvation [*Erlösung*]’. For Schopenhauer, salvation consists in negation of the will; an ascetic resignation from life in an attempt to escape its torment. He even describes this defiant act as an “*anti-cosmic tendency*” (*W2*: 615). That is, that with the collapse of any significance that the world as a whole could have given a person’s life comes an ethical response constituted by comprehensive rejection of of life itself.

But the question of salvation raises a familiar tension in Schopenhauer’s individual-pessimism. Schopenhauer’s *a priori* arguments—with the support of swathes of empirical evidence—intend to demonstrate that suffering is not merely accidental, but structurally built in to the fabric of the phenomenal world, to the extent that is fundamental and essential to what it means live a human (or indeed an animal)

¹⁶ As well as a host of *disadvantages*, such as the pain of anxiety, and of comprehending world-pessimism. Animals, in only having the cognitive capacity to focus on the *particular* and the *present*, do not experience these forms of suffering (see *P2*, §153).

¹⁷ For focused attention on the limits of Schopenhauer’s critique of anthropocentrism, and his affinities with Freud in this respect, see Altman & Coe, (2017).

life. In light of this, he claims that “a happy life [*ein glückliches Leben*] is impossible” (P2, 172a). However, Schopenhauer explicitly acknowledges ways of escaping the inevitability of suffering from the striving *Wille*.

Briefly, they are: (1) *aesthetic contemplation*, in which the appreciation of an object of beauty lifts us “out of real existence, and transforms us into disinterested spectators of it”, making the activity “foreign to all willing” (WI, §57: 314); (2) *morally virtuous activity*, in which an agent recognises the common essence to all things, and acts out of sympathy and compassion [*Mitleid*], thus avoiding the error, and the abundant source of suffering, that is individuated egoism (see WI, §61; BM, §14: 202-208); (3) *asceticism*, in which the individual sees through the distinction between the world as it is in itself and the world of experience, and reaches a level of disinterestedness such that they cease to will anything at all (see WI, §68: 378-398).

It may on the surface appear inconsistent or an oversight that Schopenhauer allows for some modes of life can invite escape from suffering, while at the same time claiming that lasting happiness is “impossible”, and endorsing individual-pessimism. As we saw in the first section of this paper, Shapshay argues that for precisely this reason Schopenhauer is best read as later allowing that significant improvements in wellbeing can be made, to the extent that lives can even be worth living. Nevertheless, this objection can be effectively dismissed for three reasons.

Firstly, it is important to distinguish between freedom from suffering as a result of a denial of the *Wille*—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. While the latter logically presupposes a desire to be satisfied, the former is a freedom from having desires *at all*; an experience Schopenhauer tends to describe in more passive terms than ‘happiness’ [*Glück*] and ‘satisfaction’ [*Befriedigung*] suggest, e.g.: Contentment [*Zufriedenheit*], peace [*Friede*], rest or calm [*Ruhe*], tranquility or composure [*Gelassenheit*], and elevation [*Erhabenheit*].¹⁸ Understood in this technical sense, Schopenhauer can consistently claim that ‘happiness’ is unattainable or fleeting at best, while still maintaining that some exceptional individuals (i.e. the artist, virtuous agent, or ascetic) can surmount suffering through some form of self-denial or resignation.¹⁹

Secondly, recall that individual-pessimism is the claim that suffering is a fundamental and essential feature of *the human condition*. Schopenhauer can consistently hold this claim and at the same time acknowledge the three forms of escape from suffering insofar as each are a *distancing* from this condition (Young, 1987: 137). In coming to aesthetically appreciate, for example, a work of art or beautiful landscape, the agent experiences a tranquil and will-less contemplation; a brief transcendence to the supra-human. Similarly, the morally virtuous and the ascetic, in seeing through the *principium individuationis*, are able to drastically detach themselves from the egoistic concern which Schopenhauer holds is “essential to everything in nature” (WI, §61: 358) and the “chief and fundamental incentive in a human being, as in an animal” (BM, §14: 190). Hence, the forms of escape from suffering Schopenhauer acknowledges do not immediately threaten the claims of individual-pessimism.

A third response to the purported tension which has not yet been discussed in the secondary literature requires exploiting our distinction between individual-pessimism and world-pessimism. While Schopenhauer allows for the three forms of escape from suffering mentioned, he is explicit that that they are only available to an exceptional minority. For instance, concerning aesthetic experience at a deep enough level to reach will-lessness, he writes that “because this requires rare talents, it is granted only to extremely few, and even to those only as a fleeting dream” (WI, §57: 314). The significance of this is that if it is granted that

¹⁸ On this distinction I agree with Janaway, (2016):

¹⁹ In Hassan (2019) I argue in detail that this distinction is overlooked in Shapshay (2019).

individual-pessimism is undermined by the concession that suffering is escapable for at least some, it would still leave world-pessimism—on both the Summative and Transcendental readings—intact. This is one of the many Schopenhauerian inversions of a Leibnizian thesis. Specifically, that while the majority of humans may be damned, this evil may be offset by the blessedness of the saved minority (Leibniz, 1952: 379).

It might be claimed that the success of the first two responses renders this new third response superfluous. However, its significance resides in how it can be extended to deflect some traditional challenges to pessimistic theses. One might, for example, find Schopenhauer's arguments for individual-pessimism exaggerated; that more people are able to live *happy* lives than proposed. This thesis might be provoked by vulnerabilities in Schopenhauer's *a priori* argument for the impossibility of lasting satisfaction. Alternatively, it might be provoked by Schopenhauer's own apparent admission of possible modes of salvation (Shapshay, 2019, 88-89), or the feeling of the sublime in taking up "a cosmic viewpoint, a viewpoint *sub specie aeternitatis*" (Vasalou, 2013: 78)—or to use Nagel's phrase, a 'view from nowhere'. However, by exploiting the distinction this paper has considered, the pessimist can allow that this would undermine individual-pessimism to a theoretically large extent, while preserving the thesis that *as a whole*, the world ought not to be. In other words, deploying the world/individual distinction is a dialectical manoeuvre that opens up a conceptual space whereby one can preserve the integrity of world-pessimism while conceding a more limited version of individual-pessimism. If this is the case, advocating a two-level approach is significant insofar as Schopenhauer's opponents would have to do more than traditionally has been considered to evade his pessimistic conclusions.

Conclusion

Let us recapitulate the guiding thread in the arguments discussed. This paper has sought to clarify (a) how Schopenhauer understands pessimism about the 'the world as a whole'; (b) how this understanding relates to pessimism at the level of the individual.

Concerning (a), I firstly considered two competing interpretations of the 'world as a whole' which have yet to be adequately distinguished in the secondary literature: the Summative View and the Transcendental View. I argued that the latter harnesses the uncontroversial view that Schopenhauer considers the world 'in-itself' as *Wille* into the more interesting thesis that the only estimation of the world is its degree of defectiveness as a contradiction in relation to the thing in-itself, and not (as the Summative View would have it) the amount of pain and suffering that may result from it. However, I argued that each interpretation of world-pessimism has significant—but not necessarily insurmountable—problematic features. Most importantly is the tension between Schopenhauer's commitment to a restriction of the *PSR* to the world of experience, and his insistence on world-pessimism as opposed to a value-*indifference* about the world.

Concerning (b), I argued that elucidating the distinction between individual and world pessimism provides the conceptual tools to add further nuance to current conceptions of pessimism in the secondary literature; nuance that may be able to stave off now well know criticisms relating to the phenomenology of striving and satisfaction. The relation between both forms of pessimism, it was argued, is significant in either direction. Understanding individual-pessimism is a crucial step in formulating a view about the world as a whole, given Schopenhauer's prescription on how metaphysics ought to proceed. Furthermore, the proposed relation of world-pessimism to individual-pessimism as one of perspectival meaninglessness or vanity is particularly relevant to (under-explored) views of Schopenhauer as an important precursor to strands of existentialist thought in the following century.

List of Abbreviations

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

W1 = *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, trans. C. Janaway, J. Norman, A. Welchman (Cambridge, 2010).

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

BM = *On the Basis of Morals*, trans. C. Janaway (Cambridge, 2009).

P1 = *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol. 1, trans. S. Roehr and C. Janaway (Cambridge, 2014).

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

For the original German, I have relied upon: *Schopenhauer: Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Arthur Hübscher, 7 vols. (3rd edn.; Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1972; 4th edn.; 1988).

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