Schopenhauer on the Futility of Suicide

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Abstract:

Schopenhauer repeatedly claims that suicide is both foolish and futile. But while many commentators express sympathy for his charge of foolishness, most regard his charge of futility as indefensible even within his own system. In this paper, I offer a defense of Schopenhauer's futility charge, based on metaphysical and psychological considerations. On the metaphysical front, Schopenhauer's view implies that psychological connections extend beyond individuals' death. Drawing on Parfit's discussion of personal identity, I argue that those connections have personal significance, such that suicide does not allow one, as Hamlet hopes, simply 'not to be.' On the psychological front, I argue that a distinction between agents' intentions and underlying desires makes room for Schopenhauer's claim that paradigmatic suicidal agents ultimately desire the opposite of what suicide accomplishes. I conclude by showing how this understanding of futility can buttress Schopenhauer's charge of foolishness. My interpretation still leaves Schopenhauer vulnerable to certain objections, but shows that his account is more defensible than previous commentators have realized.

Keywords:

Schopenhauer, suicide, personal identity, Parfit, palingenesis

A cornerstone of Schopenhauer's philosophy is the claim that life is overwhelmingly miserable. As Schopenhauer recognized, that fact might seem to justify suicide.[1] Quoting *Hamlet*, Schopenhauer writes:

> our condition is so miserable that complete non-being would be decidedly preferable. Now if suicide really offered this, so that the alternative 'to be or not to be' lay before us

[1] Schopenhauer's philosophical interest in suicide predates his mature philosophy, however, stemming from his father's death in 1805. See (D. E. Cartwright, 2010, pp. 88–94).

> in the full sense of the words, then it would be the clear choice, a highly desirable completion ('a consummation devoutly to be wish'd'). (WWR1 2:383)[2]

Schopenhauer concludes his main work concludes by endorsing ascetic resignation, which can involve 'a form of suicide' in which someone 'stops living simply because he has stopped willing altogether' (WWR1 2:474). This form of suicide is an exception, however. Any other form, Schopenhauer insists, is both 'futile and foolish [*vergebliche und thörichte*]' (WWR1 2:472).

Schopenhauer's stated opposition to non-ascetic suicide has two distinct prongs: futility and foolishness. Foolishness is a broadly deontic epistemological property: an agent who acts foolishly should have known better. Futility, however, need have no deontic epistemological dimension: sometimes, actions fail to achieve an agent's aims for reasons nobody could have foreseen. Many futile actions, therefore, are not foolish. That said, one way for an action to be foolish is for its futility to be knowable, and Schopenhauer sometimes suggests that suicide is foolish *because* it is futile: 'a futile and therefore [*darum*] foolish act' (WWR1 2:331). Even so, the independence of these properties suggests Schopenhauer's claims of foolishness and futility are worth evaluating separately.

Commentators generally agree that Schopenhauer's charge of foolishness is more important and more defensible than his charge of futility. Dale Jacquette suggests that the issue of futility is irrelevant to Schopenhauer's main objection to suicide (Jacquette, 2005, p. 134). Though Jacquette also questions the plausibility of the foolishness charge (Jacquette, 2005, p. 142), other commentators offer qualified defenses. For example, in (Masny, 2021), Michał Masny argues that, given Schopenhauer's broader views, suicide is indeed foolish. This is because, Masny argues, Schopenhauer believes that intense suffering can lead one to an ascetic denial of the will that provides the ultimate escape from suffering. Hence, committing suicide to end suffering is, to use an analogy Schopenhauer suggests, like a sick person prematurely ending a potentially curative surgery (WWR1 2:472).[3]

[2] References to Schopenhauer's work will use the following abbreviations: WWR1 = *World as Will and Representation*, Volume I; WWR2, *World as Will and Representation*, Volume II; OBM = 'Prize Essay on the Basis of Morals'; PP2 = *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Volume 2. All references are to the volume and page numbers of the Hübscher edition. Quotations are from the Cambridge translations.

[3] Other commentators have explored this line as well, though with less emphasis on the charge of foolishness. See, e.g., (Young, 2013, p. 128), (Stellino, 2020, pp. 108–110), and (Janaway, 2022b, p. 121).

Merely defending Schopenhauer's foolishness charge, however, leaves it open whether the futility charge is also defensible. Yet this prong of Schopenhauer's objection to suicide has generated more skepticism than the foolishness prong. To be sure, Schopenhauer claims that life in general is 'futile, in vain, and contradictory' (WWR2 3:732), which suggests that *all* actions, including suicide, are futile. But while Schopenhauer's views on the inevitability of suffering make it clear how, say, the pursuit of happiness through fame is futile, it is hard to see how that would apply to suicide. In the first extended Anglophone discussion of the topic, Michael Fox writes that, contra Schopenhauer, 'suicide is anything but futile, considering that the successful suicide accomplishes exactly what he intended, namely, to destroy his individual life, terminate his personal consciousness and his suffering' (Fox, 1980, p. 168). Three decades later, Paulo Stellino and Michael Cholbi both reconsider and concur with Fox's assessment.[4]

My aim in this paper is to respond to Fox's influential objection by explaining how the futility of suicide is implied by some of Schopenhauer's psychological and metaphysical doctrines. Of course, such an approach amounts to a *defense* of Schopenhauer's views only insofar as those other doctrines are plausible – a full defense of a view must address more than its internal coherence. While some of Schopenhauer's metaphysical views are, I concede, difficult to defend from a naturalistic contemporary perspective, his psychological views are not far from some widely accepted and broadly naturalistic contemporary views. Hence, Schopenhauer's futility claim ends up being more defensible than many readers have supposed, even if it remains vulnerable to certain objections.

Four preliminary points. First, though moral questions about suicide mattered to Schopenhauer, I set those questions aside.[5] Second, I also generally set aside Schopenhauer's views on asceticism and ascetic suicide, which raise their own difficulties. Hence, 'suicide' in what follows refers only to non-ascetic suicide. Third, it is not clear in Schopenhauer's discussions whether he holds that *every* instance of non-ascetic suicide is both futile and foolish, or whether he holds that *paradigmatic* instances of non-ascetic suicide are both futile and foolish – instances where someone decides 'not to be' in order to escape what Hamlet describes as the

[4] (Stellino, 2020, p. 103), (Cholbi, 2021, p. 153). See also (van der Lugt, 2021, p. 381). Fox, Stellino, and Cholbi all assume that futility should be evaluated relative to the agent's actual aims. Julian Young, however, suggests that its futility holds relative to 'the problem of cosmic suffering,' whether or not the suicidal agent cares about that cosmic problem (Young, 2013, p. 129). I set aside Young's suggestion, though it is compatible with what I offer below.

[5] The main presentation of Schopenhauer's view is PP2 6:325-30. See (Stellino, 2020, pp. 78–90) for discussion.

'heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.'[6] To simplify my discussion, I take the latter reading, leaving open that some instances of suicide might lack either futility or foolishness.[7] Finally, though Schopenhauer's charge of futility is separable from his charge of foolishness, I return to the latter issue at the end, where I explain how my defense of Schopenhauer can complement defenses of the foolishness charge like Masny's.

My discussion has two parts. I begin by discussing Schopenhauer's views on the metaphysics of survival and death. I then turn to his views on the psychology of suicide.

1. The Metaphysics of Survival and Death

Fox's objection hinges on a necessary condition for futility: an act is futile only if it fails to achieve what an agent's aims at or desires.[8] The objection therefore can be broken into two parts: first, the claim that suicidal agents aim at or desire the destruction of their individual life, consciousness, and suffering; and second, the claim that suicide results in exactly that destruction.

In this section, I set aside the question of what suicidal agents hope to accomplish, and consider what, on Schopenhauer's view, the result of suicide is. I argue that the destruction of the individual that results from suicide is less *personally significant*, given Schopenhauer's metaphysics, than it is on most other views. Personal significance can be understood as those relations that are most relevant to the prudential question, 'how does that bear on me?', leaving open whether those same relations stretch beyond the limits of individual persons. If suicidal death is of less personal significance than we ordinarily assume, then suicide may result in less than a paradigmatic suicidal agent ultimately desires – though whether that is so will depend on what those desires are.

1.1.Fox's Objection and Parfit on Psychological Connections

[6] Act 3, Scene 1, 70.
[7] After all, Schopenhauer does not condemn heroic self-sacrifice (see, e.g., WWR 1:402, 545).
[8] This condition is not sufficient, however. As a referee for *Mind* points out, a futile action must also be one that was *bound* to fail, as opposed to just happening to fail. The parts of Schopenhauer's doctrine I appeal to below do, I believe, satisfy this condition, since they are meant to be modally robust.

Fox is right that, on Schopenhauer's view, suicide results in the end of an individual's life, consciousness, and suffering. Schopenhauer ties our individual conscious lives to our living bodies (see, e.g., WWR1 2:23-24, 118, 123), so the destruction of the latter entails the destruction of the former. Hence, Schopenhauer claims that the person who commits suicide 'negates… the individual' (WWR1 2:472). Nonetheless, Schopenhauer claims, suicide does not destroy our inner essence, our nature in ourselves. It leaves 'the thing in itself untouched' (WWR1 2:472). This inner essence is the will, or will to life, which 'is the sole metaphysical entity or thing in itself', which is such that 'no violence can break it' (WWR1 2:474). For those who value life, he claims, this fact can provide consolation in the face of death:

> since human beings are nature itself… anyone who has grasped and retained this perspective can… rightly console himself over his own death and that of his friends by looking at the immortal life of nature that he himself is. (WWR1 2:325-36)[9]

On Schopenhauer's view, however, this same metaphysical fact implies the futility of suicide.

Fox compares Schopenhauer's doctrine with the modern physicalist view that, since 'matter and energy are interchangeable and whatever exists is ultimately made of the same 'stuff', everyone is, in some abiding sense, one with the cosmos' (Fox, 1980, p. 157).[10] This comparison reinforces Fox's objection to Schopenhauer. For few people hoping for immortality would be encouraged by learning that they are constituted by the same stuff as the rest of the cosmos. Similarly, few people attempting to end their individual existence would take this modern view as a reason to abandon their attempts. To put it in my terms: the fact that their constituent stuff is of the same type as the rest of the cosmos, and that this stuff will persist beyond their death, is of negligible personal significance. If Schopenhauer's view is indeed comparable to this physicalist view, then his charge of futility would be implausible by his own lights, as Fox claims.

However, Fox's comparison is misleading, both philosophically and interpretively. Setting aside interpretive questions for now, consider the philosophical question: is the end of one's individual life necessarily the end of everything personally significant? There is a case to

[9] For a general discussion of why Schopenhauer takes these facts to be consoling, see (Janaway, 2022b).
[10] But cf. (Janaway, 2022b, p. 125) and WWR2 3:549.

be made for a negative answer, based on a view that is several steps removed from Schopenhauer's: that of Derek Parfit.[11] Parfit describes hypothetical cases of personal fission and fusion (Parfit, 1986, pp. 254–255, 1986, p. 298). In fission, one person's brain is divided and put in two bodies, resulting in two people. In fusion, two people merge their brains and bodies. Appealing to some broadly naturalistic assumptions, Parfit argues that the original individuals (the 'ancestors') do not survive in either case. However, he argues, in both cases, the ancestors can be *psychologically connected* to the 'descendent' people, and this connection has the same sort of value that ordinary survival has to us – hence, in my terms, that having connected descendants shares the same type of personal significance as ordinary individual survival.[12] Memory (or memory-like) connections are the most obvious candidates for significant psychological connections between ancestors and descendants, but Parfit grants that other types of connection may be significant and so allow for survival in, e.g., cases of amnesia (Parfit, 1986, p. 208). Hence, on Parfit's view, there are ways in which an individual can be destroyed that are, with respect to personal significance, closer to ordinary survival than to complete annihilation.

Consider what Parfit's conclusions could mean for the futility of suicide. Say that a suicidal person is offered an opportunity to end their individual existence and undergo Parfitian fission, yielding two psychologically connected descendants, both of whose lives would be miserable. Though this act might result in the end of the suicidal person's *individual* conscious suffering, the suicidal person might be reasonably convinced that the act of fission would be futile. They might be so convinced even if they could ensure that both descendants would be amnesic, lacking any memories of their ancestor.

With that philosophical point in place, we can return to interpretive issues. Schopenhauer would reject most of Parfit's naturalistic framework, but his view of death is closer to Parfit's fission and fusion cases than to the physicalist view Fox invokes. This is because, for Parfit, what matters most in survival are psychological connections, regardless of whether these hold between stages of a single individual. By contrast, on the physicalist view Fox invokes, an

[11] Parfit's metaphysics of persons differs from Schopenhauer's in many respects, but it is noteworthy that both find affinities with certain Buddhist doctrines (see (Parfit, 1986, p. 273)). I am indebted here to (Persson, 2021) for demonstrating the fruitfulness of putting Parfit and Schopenhauer in conversation.

[12] 'The value to me of my relation to a resulting person depends both (1) on my degree of connectedness to this person, and (2) on the value, in my view, of this person's physical and psychological features.' (Parfit, 1986, p. 299).

individual who dies would have no psychological connections to any succeeding being. Now, Schopenhauer denies that any memory connections extend beyond an individual's death: 'just as the individual has no memory of his existence before birth, neither will he be able to remember his present existence after death' (WWR2 3:561). However, Schopenhauer does hold there are other psychological connections, which I turn to next.

1.2.Psychological Connections Beyond Death

What types of psychological connections does Schopenhauer think stretch beyond the death of individual? There are at least two: one that holds between individuals, and another that holds between individuals and something deeper than individuals.

First, on psychological connections between individuals: Schopenhauer thinks that idealism and our shared essence of will make possible some interpersonal psychological relations that other metaphysical views cannot allow for. One of these connections happens in compassion, in which someone *literally* feels another's token states of suffering (see, e.g., OBM 4:211-12) – something possible only because, Schopenhauer claims, 'all plurality is apparent' and 'in all the individuals of this world… only one and the same truly existing essence really manifests itself' (OBM 4:268).[13] Tellingly, Schopenhauer also takes the compassionate person to view others as 'I once more,' aligning psychological links with personal significance (see OBM 4:271). Though compassionate actions are rare, in Schopenhauer's view, some amount of compassion is present in all humans (OBM 4:252-53), implying that everyone is directly psychologically connected to at least one other individual.[14]

In addition to connections through compassion, Schopenhauer invokes his metaphysics to explain a rarer sort of psychological connection: paranormal events. Schopenhauer takes some parapsychological reports at face value:

[13] For more discussion, see, e.g., (D. Cartwright, 2012) and (Marshall, 2021).

[14] Similarly, Schopenhauer invokes his idealist metaphysical monism to support the doctrine of eternal justice, according to which, 'tormenter and the tormented are one. The former is mistaken in thinking he does not share the torment, the latter in thinking he does not share the guilt' (WWR1 2:418-19). The implication of shared torment suggests some kind of psychological connection.

> the vegetative life… is a life shared by all, in virtue of which they can even communicate under exceptional circumstances, for instance, in the direct communication of dreams, or when the thoughts of the magnetist go directly into the somnambulist, or finally in the magnetic or even magical influences that come from intentional willing. Such a thing… is wholly different in kind from every other physical influence in being a true action at a distance in which the will… performs its actions in its metaphysical capacity as the omnipresent substrate of the whole of nature. (WWR2 3:371-72)

Many contemporary readers will think that Schopenhauer is wrong to give credence to parapsychology. Even so, the fact that he does so shows that he allows for direct psychological connections beyond the boundaries of individuals.

At first pass, the psychological connections Schopenhauer posits in compassion and paranormal events might seem to be restricted to simultaneously-existing people, and so not carry over to the case of suicide. However, Schopenhauer follows Kant in claiming that time is ideal, not pertaining to things in themselves: 'The most thorough response to the question of the continued existence of the individual after death lies in Kant's great doctrine of the ideality of time… The concepts of ceasing to be and continuing on can be applied only to appearances' (WWR2 3:564). Hence, whatever psychological connections support compassion or paranormal events in virtue of idealism and the shared essence of will could also extend beyond the present, and so, it would seem, beyond death.

Next, on psychological connections between individuals and something deeper than individuals: even though Schopenhauer states that 'consciousness presupposes individuality' (WWR2 3:370), he also claims that some sort of psychological state is present even after the death of the individual – a state similar to one sometimes ascribed to the divine intellect:

> when we forfeit the intellect through death, we are thereby only transferred [*versetzt*] to the primal state without cognition, which however is not therefore simply unconscious; instead it will be a state elevated beyond that form, one where the contrast between subject and object disappears… see the formulation of Giordano Bruno… 'The divine mind, and the absolute unity, without any difference is itself that which knows and that which is known.' (PP2 6:292)

Note the word 'transferred,' which indicates a connection of some sort to a new psychological (or quasi-psychological) state. This resulting 'not… simply unconscious' state does not count as ordinary individual consciousness, by Schopenhauer's lights, but *our being transferred* to it would seem to have personal significance. In fact, Schopenhauer's invocation of Bruno suggests it would have the significance of acquiring or merging with a super-human mind (though, in Schopenhauer's view, this mind would not be blissful).[15]

The transfer to this not-unconscious state would presumably involve a loss of memory. That would seem to make the loss of our individual intellect, on Schopenhauer's view, similar to a case of Parfitian fusion plus amnesia, and so of at least some personal significance.[16] Given that 'the in-itself of life, the will, existence itself, is a constant suffering, partly miserable, partly horrible' (WWR1 2:315), however, this would seem to mean that suicide does not provide an escape from all suffering – something of personal significance to the suicidal agent survives, and continues to suffer. All this assumes, of course, that Parfit is right in taking direct psychological connections to have personal significance, and though that view has been widely accepted since 'the justly world-famous work of Locke' (WWR2 3:668), it could be rejected.[17] Yet given that assumption and Schopenhauer's larger metaphysics, there would indeed be grounds for holding that suicide was futile.

1.3. Palingenesis and Individual Continuity

It may be possible to go further, however. For Schopenhauer appears to favorably entertain (if not direclty endorse) the possibility of *palingenesis*, in which particular humans'

[15] Hence, it would be too strong to say, as Dale Jacquette does, that this state 'is not like anything at all' (Jacquette, 2005, p. 125).

[16] Schopenhauer rejects the Cartesian view that the intellect is our proper self (see (Zöller, 1999)). In addition, there are passages that suggest that the conscious 'I' itself transcends individuality. For instance, Schopenhauer writes that 'the subject… does not lie in either space or time because it is present complete and undivided in each representing being' (WWR1 2:60). See also WWR2 3:557, 580.

[17] Within the European tradition, the main alternative would be to link personal significance to an immaterial soul whose identity did not require psychological connections. Both Parfit and Schopenhauer reject this view (see (Parfit, 1986, pp. 224–228) and WWR1 2:345).

wills (not just the single will, as thing in itself[18]) survive death, taking on new intellects in rebirth.[19] Without abandoning his claim that individuality pertains only to the level of spatiotemporal phenomena,[20] Schopenhauer writes:

> death separates a person's will, in itself individual, from the intellect… and now according to its modified constitution receives a new intellect through a new act of procreation. (WWR2 3:575-76)

> Every newborn being['s]… fresh existence is paid for by the age and death of some deceased person who has perished, but who contained the indestructible seed from which this new existence has arisen: they are a single being. (WWR2 3:577)

> Death openly proclaims itself as the end of the individual, but in this individual lies the seed to a new being. Accordingly, then, nothing of all that dies does so forever… What dies perishes, but a seed is left over from which a new being proceeds which now enters existence without knowing whence it comes from. (PP2 6:293)

Schopenhauer claims that there are empirical grounds for accepting palingenesis: 'the great fertility of the human race that arises as the result of devastating epidemics' (WWR2 3:576). He cites the prominent pathologist Johann Ludwig Casper as demonstrating that, 'at all times and

[18] Stellino rightly considers palingenesis as a test case for the futility of suicide, but (a) assumes the doctrine concerns the will in itself, not individual wills (i.e., intelligible characters – see PP2 6:242) and (b) follows (Janaway, 2022b) in holding that Schopenhauer cannot accept palingenesis at face value (Stellino, 2020, p. 106). WWR2 3:575-76 shows that (a) is incorrect, however, and (b) is questionable, for reasons noted below. On the two uses of 'will', see (Shapshay, 2008).

[19] Schopenhauer contrasts the doctrine of palingenesis with that of metempsychosis, in which individual *intellects* survive death. While Schopenhauer thinks metempsychosis serves as one of the 'mythological cloaks for truths that are inaccessible to the untutored human senses' (WWR1 2:420), he insists it cannot be literally true. Hence, despite his sympathy for parapsychology, Schopenhauer would reject most contemporary parapsychological work on surviving death, which focuses on memory (e.g. (Matlock & Mishlove, 2019)).

[20] For some discussion of how to make sense of non-spatiotemporal particulars for Schopenhauer, see (Marshall, 2021, p. 788). It is likely that Schopenhauer himself would remind us here that '[a]nswering transcendent questions in the language created for immanent cognition can indeed lead to contradictions' (PP2 6:297).

places, the number of deaths and births increases or diminishes in the same proportion' (WWR2 3:577).[21]

Schopenhauer asserts that the doctrine of palingenesis 'accords greatly with my doctrine of the metaphysical permanence of the will' (PP2 6:294), and provides no explicit reason for rejecting it. If he really is open to this doctrine, then death would not merely involve some level of direct interpersonal connection or psychological fusion, but would also, as Fox notes, be a non-religious version of Judeo-Christian doctrines of personal immortality.[22] Of course, many contemporary readers will, like Fox, reject palingenesis as 'pure fancy.'[23] In addition, charitable interpreters of Schopenhauer might worry that palingenesis contradicts other, more central aspects of his views, such as his restriction of individuation to the realm of space and time. I myself am unsure how seriously Schopenhauer took the possibility of palingenesis. There is also ample textual evidence that his opposition to suicide long predated his understanding of palingenesis – his claim about the futility of suicide appeared already in the 1818 edition of *World as Will and Representation*, whereas his explicit discussions of palingenesis begin only in the 1850's.[24] Hence, his reasons for the futility charge cannot be limited to the doctrine of palingenesis.

Regardless of what we make of Schopenhauer's attitude towards palingenesis, however, there is ample textual evidence that Schopenhauer believes that death is not the limit of personal significance. Instead, he posits psychological connections between individual consciousness and subsequent (or timeless) beings, and these connections, like those that would exist in Parfitian fission, carry at least some personal significance. Of course, some contemporary readers will find those metaphysical doctrines implausible, but, at a minimum, they show that Schopenhauer's charge of futility cannot be dismissed without engaging in broader metaphysical questions.

[21] This idea suggests that each suicide paves the way for a new birth, and thus *supports* procreation. If so, then suicide would be an affirmation of the will in perhaps the strongest sense, since '[t]he affirmation of the will to life… is… centered around the act of generation' (WWR2 3:655)). Schopenhauer does not draw this connection when he claims that suicide is an act of affirming the will (WWR1 2:471), but it would seem to follow from the doctrine of palingenesis, and would fit well with his suggestion that lovers' attraction to each other 'is in fact already the life-will of the new individual who they want to conceive' (WWR2 3:613).

[22] (Fox, 1980, p. 167). (Langone, Forthcoming) argues that Schopenhauer's eventually acceptance of palingenesis, understood as the ultimate reality of individual wills, conflicted with some of his monist and idealist commitments.

[23] (Fox, 1980, p. 153). But see (Ketcham, 2018) on similarities between palingenesis, as Schopenhauer understands it, and Buddhist views.

[24] See (Langone, 2022, p. 87).

2. The Psychology of Suicide

In the previous section, I argued that Schopenhauer's metaphysical views imply that suicide has less personal significance than people often assume. Even so, Fox's objection to the futility charge might still hold, if the paradigmatic suicidal agent really desired *nothing more* than the destruction of themselves qua individual. In this section, I argue that, on Schopenhauer's broader psychological views, paradigmatic suicidal agents *desire* more than that, though they may not always have that desire at the front of their minds. Moreover, while the metaphysical views described in the last paragraph may be hard for many contemporary readers to accept, Schopenhauer's psychological views, I suggest, partly align with some contemporary views.

2.1.The Intentions and Desires of the Suicidal Agent

Before turning to textual questions, a distinction will be useful. Say that an agent's *intention* is the motivational state that immediately guides their action, directed at a specific state of affairs, whereas their *underlying desire* is the motivational state that ultimately fuels that intention. These most obviously come apart when the agent takes their underlying desire to not be fully realizable. For example, say that my underlying desire is to get a snack that is both filling and enjoyable, yet none of the foods I can purchase are enjoyable. In such a case, I might give up on the enjoyable and form the intention of buying a merely tolerable filling snack. If it turned out that all the available items were merely tolerable and not at all filling, I would regard my purchase as futile. In terms of my intention, the action was not entirely futile: I took myself to be buying something that was merely tolerable, and that was the result. But the real question of futility rests on my underlying desire, which, it turns out, could not be even partly satisfied. In that case, I might recognize my underlying desire through reflection. In other cases, however, we get so wrapped up in realizing our intentions that we lose sight of our underlying desires, such as becoming so involved in winning a game that we forget we're playing it to have fun.

With that distinction in place, we can start untangling Schopenhauer's views on the motivations behind paradigmatic suicide. Consider the immediate context for his futility charge:

> We have already found that for the will to life, life is always a certainty, and suffering is essential to life, so it follows that suicide, the wilful destruction of one single appearance that leaves the thing in itself untouched, just as the rainbow remains stable however rapidly the drops that support it at any given moment might change, is a futile… act. (WWR1 2:472)

This passage might be read as showing that Schopenhauer believes that the suicidal agent's underlying desire is the destruction of the thing in itself, the will that is the essence of all things. Michael Cholbi interprets Schopenhauer this way, and registers his disagreement. Cholbi takes Schopenhauer's complaint to be that 'suicide does nothing to annihilate will itself,' and objects that Schopenhauer is thereby 'imputing to the suicidal individual a motivation she almost certainly does not have' (Cholbi, 2021, p. 153). Similarly, Paolo Stellino conjectures that Schopenhauer is 'projecting his metaphysical worldview' onto the suicidal agent (Stellino, 2020, p. 104).

However, while Schopenhauer does think that suffering can *lead to* the desire to negate the will itself, he does not impute that (ascetic) desire to the suicidal person. Instead, he writes,

> The person who commits suicide wills life, and is only unsatisfied with the conditions under which life has been given to him. Thus, when he destroys the individual appearance he is relinquishing only life, not the will to life. He wills life, wills the unimpeded existence and affirmation of his body, but the tangle of circumstances does not allow him this and he undergoes great suffering. (WWR1 2:471)

A suicidal agent's underlying desire, then, is simultaneously for (a) the continued existence of their individual body and (b) an escape from suffering, where suffering is 'the conditions under which life has been given to him.'[25] The agent takes the joint realization of (a) and (b) to be out of reach, and so forms an intention to bring about (b) without (a).

[25] Of course, *non-paradigmatic* suicidal agents might have different underlying desires. Someone could (e.g.) fundamentally desire to acquire the God-like, 'not unconscious' state described in §1.2, even if that came with novel forms of suffering. Such an agent's actions would not, by Schopenhauer's lights, be futile (though Schopenhauer would probably deny such an agent was metaphysically possible).

If the suicidal person's underlying desire is for both (a) and (b), is the action of suicide then entirely futile? Suicide, of course, does not secure (a), but promises to secure (b). However, in light of the previous section, we can see that, on Schopenhauer's view, suicide leaves personally significant connections to future beings.[26] Add to this Schopenhauer's view that suffering is essential to life (e.g., WWR1 2:366, 374-5), and the result is that suicide does not provide an escape from suffering.

That conclusion leaves open the possibility that suicide could lead to a *reduction* in suffering, however. For Schopenhauer recognizes that suffering came in degrees, and that not all lives are equally miserable (see (Shapshay, 2008, pp. 16–20)). Assuming the truth of palingenesis, for example, suicide could lead to an individual will transitioning to a new life in which they experienced significantly less suffering than in their previous life. To be sure, the result could also be negative, resulting in a life involving significantly more suffering, and individuals might not be able to predict which way things would go. Even so, the possibility of a reduction in suffering undermine the unqualified claim that all acts of suicide are futile.

In light of that, I suggest that, in order for Schopenhauer to coherently hold that *any* act of suicide is futile relative to the agent's underlying desire, he must understand that desire in *absolutist* terms: as desire for an escape from absolutely all suffering. Such an absolutist desire would be structurally similar to Kant's infamously inflexible attitude towards lying, as well as to certain religious attitudes according to which all sins are absolutely prohibited.[27] Schopenhauer takes the ascetic to adopt such an attitude towards the will, as an unqualified 'loathing for… the will to life' (WWR1 2:449). Similarly, in the *Aphorisms,* Schopenhauer describes a tendency to suicide as arising from a general 'weariness of life' (PP1 5:348).[28] So there are some grounds for thinking that he ascribes an absolutist aversion to suffering to the suicidal person. Given such absolutism, the underlying desire would remain unfulfilled if *any* suffering remains – as it inevitably does, given Schopenhauer's broader views.

[26] Cf. Hamlet again: 'To die, to sleep— to sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause' (Act 3, Scene 1, 72-76). For Hamlet, then, the possibility of psychological continuity beyond death counts against suicide.

[27] See, e.g., https://pastorunlikely.com/there-are-no-such-things-as-little-sins.

[28] The *Aphorisms* are not a reliable report of Schopenhauer's considered views, since he states up front that his discussion there 'retains the ordinary, empirical standpoint and adheres to its error' (PP1 5:333-34). That is probably why he seems to allow suicide 'committed by the healthy and cheerful person entirely for objective reasons,' namely, when 'the magnitude of the sufferings or of the inevitably approaching disaster vanquishes the fear of death' (PP1 5:348).

If Schopenhauer does ascribe such an absolutist underlying desire to the suicidal person, that would help explain why he singles out suicide as being futile, even while holding that *all* striving is futile (WWR2 3:732).[29] The explanation would be that the suicidal agent's underlying desire gives their action *absolute* futility, whereas most other actions have only partial futility. Many of our actions, whether egoistic or compassionate, can realize our underlying desires to some degree – we can postpone death for a while, and can at least refrain from harming certain other people. Provided that the agent has some non-absolute underlying desires, those achievements can imply that their actions are not entirely futile. By contrast, the absolute nature of the suicidal person's underlying desire means their action is entirely futile.

So given the absolutist characterization of the suicidal agent's underlying desire, suicide achieves neither component of the agent's underlying desire, and so is futile. What the agent really *wants* is continued individual bodily existence that is entirely free from suffering, yet what they *get* is a discontinuation of that individual existence combined with continued (and perhaps lesser, perhaps greater) suffering.

2.2.A Rejoinder: An Implausible Psychology?

The previous subsection does not provide a full answer to Fox, though. For we might still worry that Schopenhauer attributes to paradigmatic suicidal individuals a underlying desire that they clearly do not have, even if it's not the particular desire that Cholbi and Stellino describe.

That worry could be reinforced with two potential arguments:

(1) Insofar as some of us have had paradigmatic suicidal urges at points in our lives, we might find the ascription introspectively implausible – perhaps we really desired to end our suffering *as the individuals we were*. Moreover, perhaps we would have introspectively found a preference for (e.g.) some combination of amnesia and psychological fusion as a change of pace, even if that change of pace came with greater overall suffering. If so, introspection might give us reason to deny that paradigmatic suicidal agents have the underlying desire that Schopenhauer posits.

[29] In addition, as a referee for *Mind* points out, it's plausible that Schopenhauer also focuses on this case because it provides an opportunity to address possible misunderstandings of some core doctrines.

(2) Other things being equal, we should be charitable in interpreting others' actions, and charity calls for attributing desires to agents that *made sense of* their actions. In light of that, we should ascribe to suicidal individuals underlying desires on which their actions would make sense, instead of being futile.[30]

I think it is possible to respond to both of these arguments on Schopenhauer's behalf. The responses will not be enough to show that Schopenhauer's view is correct, but they would show that his view is not easily refuted.

Against the first, introspective argument, Schopenhauer follows some of his predecessors (such as Hume and Kant) in claiming that the motivational aspects of our psychology are often not easily accessible through introspection. With an eye towards self-flattering moral corruption, he writes that 'we are often quite mistaken even about the real motive we have for doing or forgoing something' (WWR2 3:235). Similarly, he holds that

> [m]any a person would be amazed if he saw what his conscience, which presents itself to him in such stately fashion, is genuinely composed of: 1/5 fear of human beings, 1/5 fear of the gods, 1/5 prejudice, 1/5 vanity and 1/5 habit. (OBM 4:192)

Broadly speaking, then, Schopenhauer puts little stock in introspective reports of our motivations, so the first argument has limited dialectical force against him.

Against the second argument, it's noteworthy that Schopenhauer accepts a version of the principle of interpretive charity. However, his principle applies not so much at the level of individuals as at the level of the agent's inner essence, the (non-individual) will. He writes that

> The will to life as such finds itself so totally constrained in this particular appearance that it cannot develop its striving. So it reaches a decision in accordance with its intrinsic essence… the will affirms itself here through the very abolition of its appearance, because it can no longer affirm itself in any other way. (WWR1 2:471-72)

[30] An objection along these lines is expressed in (Stellino, 2020, p. 110). Stellino offers cases in which agents' underlying desires would seem to be quite different from the one Schopenhauer ascribes to them.

Given the goal of developing its striving, it makes sense for the will to dispose of certain individuals. As Schopenhauer writes elsewhere, individuals as such are insignificant in nature:

> What nature says is: the life or death of the individual does not matter at all. Nature expresses this by abandoning the life of every animal and even of the human being to the most insignificant of accidents without stepping in to help. (WWR2 3:541)

To be sure, the voice of nature Schopenhauer articulates is not a full expression of the will (nature, as Schopenhauer construes her, sometimes sounds kind and caring, e.g., WWR2 3:542). Nature is, however, connected to the deep motivations that drive each being, which includes self-sacrifice for one's offspring (see, e.g., WWR1 2:326-27).[31] Strife and struggle issue from the will itself (e.g., WWR1 2:366), so insofar as suicide expresses this strife and struggle in an especially strong form, perhaps especially insofar as it involves a foolish and futile act, it makes sense from the perspective of the will.

What we find, then, are three levels of drive or motivation. Within an individual agent, there is the distinction between intentions and underlying desires. When we go deeper than the individual, though, there are the goals, drives, or aims of the species, nature, or the will itself.[32] For an individual, an action's futility is evaluated relative to their underlying desire, but that same action can be anything but futile relative to the aims of nature or the will.

It may be because of the deep, sub-individual aims that Schopenhauer frames his discussion as a description of *why* suicide is futile, not as an attempt to talk someone out of committing suicide. He never suggests that his account could dissuade someone from ending their life, perhaps because he thinks the driving forces are beyond the reach of an individual's deliberation.

I'll close this section by noting that, while Schopenhauer's views on introspection and deep motivation are not obviously correct, they do fit well with some contemporary views. First, even outside of depth psychology, many psychologists today believe we often fail to identify our

[31] Schopenhauer claims that '[a]ll instances of being in love, however ethereal they might pretend to be… are in fact nothing but more precisely determined… individualized instances of sex drive' (WWR2 3:610), so that the 'final goal of all love affairs' is 'the composition of the next generation' (WWR2 3:611). As Christopher Janaway summarizes Schopenhauer's view: 'sexual love is: sex drive + delusion' (Janaway, 2022a, p. 107).

[32] There, of course, a challenge in making sense of the goals or drives of the will, given that it is intrinsically 'blind' (WWR1 2:178).

genuine motivations, making us, at times, 'strangers to ourselves.'[33] Second, and relatedly, though depression and suicide are prima facie puzzling from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, some explanations of them have been offered – for example, that suicide can benefit surviving kin.[34] None of that would entail that Schopenhauer's view is correct (not least because evolutionary pressures need not manifest as any entity's motivations), but it makes it harder to claim that Schopenhauer is simply wrong about the motivations behind paradigmatic suicide.

2.3.Foolishness Reconsidered

Before closing this section, recall the other part of Schopenhauer's charge against suicide: its foolishness. As I noted in the introduction, one plausibly sufficient condition for an action being foolish is if the agent could recognize its futility on reflection. That condition is at least partly met here: Schopenhauer thinks that all sentient beings are to some degree aware of the indestructability of their essence:

> an innermost consciousness of their imperishable nature gives rise to the security and peace of mind that every animal, and even the human individual, possesses as it wanders carelessly through a sea of accidents that could annihilate it at any moment. (WWR2 3:552-53)

This innermost consciousness is not always prominent in our minds – that is why Schopenhauer thinks we often fail to recognize both our motivations and our own cognitive states. To the degree that it is accessible in principle, though, this would support the charge of foolishness.

This explanation can complement the defensive of foolishness offered by commentators like Masny. Masny claims that, for Schopenhauer, suicide is foolish because it takes us off the path towards a greater good, namely, ascetic renunciation. Masny rests his reading largely on Schopenhauer's analogy of a sick person who prematurely leaves the operating table. Someone might think that Schopenhauer's analogy is misleading, however, since a sick person leaving the operating table must then contend with their illness, whereas someone who commits suicide no

[33] This phrase is from (Wilson, 2002), who distances himself from Freudian views.
[34] For a critical overview of the relevant literature, see (Chatterjee & Rai, 2021).

longer has to contend with suffering. By contrast, on the reading I have offered, the person who commits suicide does not escape all suffering, even if they may cease existing as an individual. That means they both fail to realize their underlying desire and (for the reasons Masny identifies) cut themselves off from a greater good that they might not yet desire. Hence, the account of futility I have offered can show a further dimension along which their act was foolish: its in-principle-knowable futility.

3. Conclusion

I have argued that, in response to Fox's objection, Schopenhauer takes suicide to have less personal significance than we ordinarily assume, and that suicidal agents therefore fail to satisfy their underlying desires. Hence, Schopenhauer's claim that suicide is futile is defensible within his broader system. Moreover, I have suggested that some of the relevant aspects of that system align, at least in part, with some contemporary views. That is not enough to show that his views on suicide are defensible overall, or that they fully cohere with either his broader pessimism or his doctrine of ascetic suicide. It does suggest, though, that his views on suicide may be worthy of greater attention than many previous commentators have thought.[35]

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