

Is Schopenhauer's metaphysics compatible with optimism?

Leo Franchi

The conclusions that Schopenhauer draws from his philosophy are undoubtedly some of the most pessimistic that he can express. From the beginning, where he explains the thing-in-itself and the will, through his aesthetics and morality, his ultimate decision regarding the fate of human suffering is a dire one. Put simply, for Schopenhauer, human existence is suffering. To exist, he would say, is to suffer. Furthermore, his discussion of freedom allows for little of what can be considered "free will", for he questions the very notion that human beings are free at all. In order to answer the question of whether it is possible for Schopenhauer's metaphysics to be compatible with optimism, we first elaborate on his pessimism.

Suffering is a constant refrain throughout Schopenhauer's account of the human being. However, his argument for the unending suffering that each person is subject to is quite simple. To begin with, Schopenhauer once again starts at the will, the thing-in-itself. The will "always strives, because striving is its sole nature, to which no attained goal can put an end." (Schopenhauer 308) There can be no end to this striving, no conclusion. As soon as the will has achieved its current target, it immediately begins striving towards the next one. Striving itself, Schopenhauer claims, "is called will." (309) Next he states that anything placed between the striving and its target causes suffering, and the achievement of the target itself to be satisfaction. Striving is forced to be striving from a lack of something, for otherwise there would be nothing to strive for. It is this lack which causes the suffering, just as "We see striving everywhere impeded in many ways, everywhere struggling and fighting, and hence always as suffering." (309) Conversely, anything that is achieved is only temporary, for as soon as it is achieved the will moves on to another goal. So any happiness or satisfaction that a person could gain from this would be immediately erased as he began suffering once more. Life, then, is nothing more than forced suffering, and Schopenhauer puts it clearly when he says "essentially all life is suffering." (310)

Schopenhauer moves on to discuss his idea of death, and anything but optimism is to be found there. When it comes to time, he explains that as the human being exists for himself in space and time, he finds himself constantly moving away from the present and towards the future. The present is constantly lost to the past. This, he is convinced, is the same as death, and so a person's existence, "a continuous rushing of the present into the dead past, [is] a constant dying." (311) He further elaborates how in physical terms, human life is merely the postponing of physical death, the physical aspect of existence mirroring the formal one.

Finally, Schopenhauer's views on freedom serve to underline his pessimistic view of the self. Free will, as it is conventionally meant, does not exist. The will, or the thing-in-itself, is of course fundamentally free, as due to the Principle of Sufficient Reason it cannot have anything imposed on it. However, the freedom of the will does not extend to the phenomenon, and therefore even man, as the ultimate animal in which the will is expressed, is not free. Everyone considers himself

to be free *a priori*, for it appears that he could make any choice at a given point in time. However, Schopenhauer states, when looking back *a posteriori*, he will notice that his conduct “follows with the absolute necessity from the coincidence of the character with the motives.” (290) Furthermore, since a person is aware of his actions only *a posteriori*, as he must first perceive the action of his body, can a person really be empirically free at all?

The only way, according to Schopenhauer, to affect the will is through motives. However, they cannot actually change the will itself “for they have power over it only on the presupposition that it is precisely such as it is.” (294) This does not mean that motives cannot do anything, however—it is simply that they are only able to change the *direction* of the will’s effort, or to “make it possible for it to seek what it invariably seeks by a path different from the one it previously followed.” (294)

His outline of suffering as he presents it is open to some criticism. In his view of the striving of the will, there is no ability for the person to feel anything good, or satisfactory, while he is in the process of striving. However, it is not clear at all why this should be the case (Janaway). There are plenty of examples to counter Schopenhauer here, and Janaway uses the case of the mountaineer, for whom the process of attaining the goal is as important as the goal itself. Any sort of trip will do to counter Schopenhauer’s assertion—merely going for a walk to enjoy the scenery would violate the same principles.

Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, as just described, is fundamentally incompatible with optimism. It is impossible to convert his pessimistic conclusions into more optimistic counterparts without altering basic tenets of his philosophy. In the first place, an optimistic view of things cannot maintain that the final state of living is suffering. It is impossible to create an optimistic view of the world while holding that suffering is human existence. But in order to replace the depressing role suffering plays in Schopenhauer’s philosophy, one would need to alter the way Schopenhauer describes the will. This optimistic view must contain some will that does *not* continually strive, without fail, for the next task. It must not, as Schopenhauer claims, feel pain and suffering as its task is made harder. The other alternative is that suffering must not be tied to the will’s striving. But both of these play essential roles for Schopenhauer—it is impossible to see how the rest of his philosophy concerning the thing-in-itself, especially in its less-developed forms, could survive a severance with these two ideas.

Furthermore, any optimistic take of Schopenhauer must deal with his views on personal freedom. An optimistic view cannot assume that the practical human being cannot have any free will. The idea condemning the human being to merely learning its own actions, and deciphering its own will, must be altered in some form to make it more palatable to the optimist. But if a person were to be able to make different decisions, in such a way that he could *control the decisions of the will*, then this person would violate another of the essential foundations of Schopenhauer’s philosophy. For the will, as the thing-in-itself, lies outside space and time. This requires that the will decide the same way to a given set of causal events at any point in time—for, if it were to react differently, it would require it to have some sense of time itself—which throws it into the realm of space and

time. Anything of this sort would completely undermine the basis of Schopenhauer's philosophy, and hence does not allow an optimistic reading of Schopenhauer's account of freedom.

It is clear that pessimism is firmly rooted in Schopenhauer's philosophy. Removing it would consist of retooling his philosophy to such an extent that it would lose all aspects of the original, would require so much modification that little of the original would still be present. His account of human suffering is so interlinked with his concept of the will that to remove the suffering from human life would be equivalent to removing the role of the will as the thing-in-itself that mirrors the representational world. His description of the lack of true human freedom would need massive modifications, so much so that the very place of the will as outside space and time would be placed in jeopardy. Finally, Schopenhauer sees as impossible the idea that human beings can achieve happiness. An optimistic view would require at least that happiness be possible, if not easy to achieve. To completely bar happiness as a final and absolute state of mind rejects optimism, and to change this stance of Schopenhauer would require modifying his idea, again, of the will—if it is ever to be content with what it has and no more it is no longer a Schopenhauerian will. So attempting to remove the depressing qualities of Schopenhauer's work while retaining the philosophical foundations, we have seen, is impossible. We are left to content ourselves with both halves of the same ideas—solid grounding in philosophical analysis, and unbridled pessimism in the very fabric of human reality.

References

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