

Suicide and Freedom from Suffering in Schopenhauer's "Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung"

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Schopenhauer's stance on suicide focuses on the possibility of achieving freedom from suffering through the denial of the individual will-to-life. Ultimately, Schopenhauer argues that suicide fails to achieve this freedom, primarily because it is an act of will that confirms, rather than denies, the will-to-life. Suicide, he argues, is a kind of contradiction in that it involves the individual will's willfully seeking to exterminate itself as a way of escaping the wretchedness of willing. While Schopenhauer explicitly states that one possesses the individual right to commit suicide in order to attempt to obtain freedom from suffering, and even admits that he can understand why one would attempt to do so, he denies that there is any possibility that this freedom may be actualized. To take one's life indicates a lack of awareness (or an unwillingness to become aware) of the futility of the individual will and the experience of the wholeness and totality of will-in-itself. One has the freedom to destroy oneself, but one's freedom to free oneself from suffering is an illusion. If one concurs with Schopenhauer that suicide should be understood as a futile escape from the freedom of suffering, one cannot deny the brilliant insights of his argument. His is, on the one hand, a brilliant articulation of the function of suicide—placing the act squarely within what one would intuit as its primary purpose (freedom from suffering). On the other hand, given Schopenhauer's philosophical framework, it negates that possibility and precludes consideration of any others.

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Introduction

Schopenhauer's stance on suicide focuses on the possibility of achieving freedom from suffering through the denial of the individual will-to-life. Ultimately, Schopenhauer argues that suicide fails to achieve this freedom, primarily because it is an act of will that confirms, rather than denies, the will-to-life. Suicide is a kind of contradiction in that it involves the individual will's willfully seeking to exterminate itself as a way of escaping the wretchedness of willing.

Freedom from Suffering

His position seems paradoxical when placed within the context of his enlightened view of self-death. In fact, in a short essay entitled "On Suicide" ("Über den Selbstmord") first published in a volume of essays called *Parega and Paralipomena* (1851), he deplores the fact that suicide is often regarded as a crime, "whereas there is obviously nothing in the world over which every man has such an indisputable right as his own person and life" (Schopenhauer, 1851, 1974: p. 306). In principle, Schopenhauer finds nothing morally objectionable in suicide. He falls far short of Kant's repudiation of suicide as a violation of the categorical imperative¹. He reminds us that suicide was regarded by many Greeks and Romans as noble,

and explicitly commends David Hume's 1755 essay "On Suicide" (published posthumously in 1777) as the most thorough refutation of the feeble arguments put forth by religion against the act². He is particularly opposed to Christianity, which, he argues, has as its core the truth that the real purpose of life is suffering. Since suicide is an attempt to free oneself from suffering, Christianity rejects it. However, Schopenhauer argues that it is only natural to attempt to free oneself from suffering and that few, if any, persons would voluntarily choose to live their lives over again:

But perhaps at the end of his life, no man, if he be sincere and at the same time in possessions of his faculties, will ever wish to go through it again... Rather than this, he will much prefer to choose complete non-existence... Similarly, what has been said about the father of history (Herodotus) has not been refuted, namely that no person has existed who has not wished more than once that he had not to live through the following day. Accordingly, the shortness of life, so often lamented, may perhaps be the best thing about it (1818, 1844, 1969: Vol. 1, pp: 324-325).

Not surprisingly, Schopenhauer acknowledges that suicide would be worth carrying out if it were a means to achieving this goal. Dale Jacquette writes that "Schopenhauer maintains that suffering makes life so miserable that only the fear of death restrains the individual from self-destruction, while if life as a

¹Indeed, Schopenhauer writes in *On the Basis of Morality (Über die Grundlage der Moral)* of 1837 that "the... criticism of Kant's foundation of morals will be in particular the best preparation and guide—in fact the direct path—to my own foundation of morals, for opposites illustrate each other, and my foundation is, in essentials, diametrically opposed to Kant's" (Schopenhauer, 1837, 1965: p. 34).

²In the essay Hume puts forward a framework for conceptualizing suicide by arguing implicitly that individual freedom is the factor which justifies suicide and that all created beings have received the power, authorization, and freedom to change the natural course of things in order to guarantee their well-being.

whole were enjoyable, the idea of death as the culmination of life would be intolerable” (Jacquette, 2000: p. 301). Unfortunately, for reasons explained below, Schopenhauer believes that suicide does not release one from suffering. In order to understand why Schopenhauer believes this is so, one must first look more closely into the nature of suffering and its relationship to the will-to-life.

Suffering and the Will-to-Life

The central concept of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics is that of will (*der Wille*). Will is the ultimate driving force and essence of the whole material world, including ourselves. It is not to be seen as the purposeful will of an individual person, but as the blind impulsion of each thing to realize its own nature. True understanding, then, consists in recognizing that, from a metaphysical standpoint, this is the way things are. In the same way that the world is the Will, the human body is an individual will and expresses itself within humanity as the will-to-life (*der Wille zum Leben*). However, this will-to-life and the physical body through which it is expressed is not merely part of the physical world which becomes “activated” or driven by some separate force which is Will. It is exceedingly difficult to explain the relationship between the Will and the will-to-life. Perhaps the simplest way to understand it is that the will-to-life is the force that expresses the Will at the level of the individual, i.e. it is an individual aspect of the greater Will. In this way, Schopenhauer seems to view the former as an instantiation of the latter. Still, Schopenhauer does not make this entirely clear. Instead, he writes that all of reality, including ourselves, is Will. Schopenhauer writes that once one truly understands this:

[it] become[s] the key to the knowledge of the innermost being of the whole of nature... He will recognize that same will not only in those phenomena that are quite similar to his own, in men and animals, but continued reflection will lead him to recognize the force that shoots and vegetates in the plant... by which the crystal is formed... that turns the magnet to the North Pole... all these he will recognize as different only in the phenomenon, but the same according to their inner nature (Schopenhauer, 1818, 1844, 1969: Vol. 1, p. 5).

Since an individual is essentially composed of this blind, relentless, striving (the will-to-life), he is destined—for reasons given below—to dissatisfaction, disappointment, and frustration. Indeed, Schopenhauer maintains that “in-eliminable” suffering is so great a part of our lives that it is essential to our existence: “suffering is essential to life, and therefore does not flow in upon us from outside, but everyone carries around within himself its perennial source” (Schopenhauer, 1818, 1844, 1969: Vol. 1, p. 318).

There are three major ways in which Schopenhauer believes the will-to-life is intertwined with suffering. First, he argues that as material, living creatures, our ordinary existence is such that we must strive towards ends. Schopenhauer points out that a being who strives and is conscious of whether his ends are fulfilled is a being who suffers. Each of us must strive in order to exist, and conflicts of ends will inevitably occur: “Awakened to the life out of the night of consciousness, the will finds itself as an individual in an endless and boundless world, among innumerable individuals, all striving, suffering, and erring” (1818, 1844: Vol. 2, p. 573).

Second, Schopenhauer argues that suffering is connected to the will-to-life, since the latter springs not from a state of contentment but from some sort of lack or deficiency; in other

words, the experience of a lack or deficiency is, in itself, a form of suffering. When one fails to achieve some of the ends for which one strives, the lack or deficiency is prolonged—“together with the consciousness of not achieving one’s end”—and this furthers suffering” (Janoway, 1989: p. 105). Moreover, he holds that even if one does achieve the end toward which one strives and experiences satisfaction, the latter state is only positive relative to the deficiency it removes. According to Schopenhauer, satisfaction is “negative” while pain is “positive,” since “pain is something which we feel, but satisfaction is an absence; to be satisfied is simply to return to neutral by wiping out a felt deficiency” (Janoway, 1989: p. 105). Therefore, having no deficiency and having nothing to strive for has, according to Schopenhauer, no value in its own terms. Schopenhauer makes this point nicely in *On the Basis of Morality*:

The reason for this is that pain, suffering that includes all want, privation, need, in fact every wish or desire, is that which is positive and directly felt or experienced. On the other hand, the nature of satisfaction, enjoyment, and happiness consists solely in the removal of a privation, the still of a pain; and so these have a negative effect. Therefore, need and desire are the condition of every pleasure or enjoyment. Plato recognized this... Voltaire also says: “There are no true pleasures without true needs. Thus pain is something positive that automatically makes itself known; satisfaction and pleasures are something negative, the mere elimination of the former (Schopenhauer, 1837, 1965: p. 146).

Schopenhauer also reflects on this point in more concrete terms using examples as wide-ranging as that of taking a sip of water to contemplating the Sistine Chapel. No matter the case, he holds that gratification (even mere satisfaction) occurs only because of a reduction or temporary suspension of willing; to be gratified or satisfied is merely to return to a “neutral” state, but returning to “neutral” (without deficiency) means having nothing to strive for and, according to Schopenhauer, this has no positive value on its own terms. Indeed, if such a state continues for any period of time, it wipes out one’s essential being (willing) and leads to what Schopenhauer calls “boredom” which he argues is a state of suffering itself.

Finally, the attainment of ends never makes striving—and suffering—cease altogether. Even when our striving is successful, we will soon strive for other ends and suffer further. Every satisfied desire gives birth to a new one and “no possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its craving, set a final goal to its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart” (Schopenhauer, 1818, 1844, 1969: Vol. 2, p. 573). Whenever our striving is successful, it is not long before we continue to strive for something else, and to suffer further. The will-to-life is like an unquenchable thirst: we can have momentary satisfaction and relief, but there is quite literally nothing that we can do that will stop us from willing or suffering. Schopenhauer captures all three of these points succinctly:

Awakened to life out of the night of consciousness, the will finds itself as an individual in an endless and boundless world, among innumerable individuals, all striving, suffering, and erring; and, as if through a troubled dream, it hurries back to the old unconsciousness. Yet till then its desires are unlimited, its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire gives birth to a new one. No possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its craving, set a final goal to its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart (Schopenhauer, 1818, 1844, 1969: Vol. 2, p. 573).

Indeed, suffering arising from the striving of the will-to-life makes life so miserable that only the fear of death stops from self-destruction. For many, this fear is greater than one's desire to eliminate suffering:

If life itself were a precious blessing, and decidedly preferable to non-existence, the exit from it would not need to be guarded by such fearful watchmen as death and its terrors. But who would go on living life as it is, if death were less terrible? And who could bear even the mere thought of death, if life were pleasure? But the former still always has the good point of being the end of life, and we console ourselves with death in regard to the sufferings of life, and with the sufferings of life in regard to death (Schopenhauer, 1818/1844/1969: Vol. 2, pp. 578-579).

While this fear of death is virtually universal, Schopenhauer holds that there are no rational reasons for it. He explores several familiar arguments for the fear of death—all of which he believes are irrational. First, we might fear dying if dying involved pain, but then the object of fear would be pain, rather than death itself. Second, he argues that we did not exist for an infinite time before birth and that this is a matter of indifference to us, so we should rationally regard our not existing in the future with the same indifference. Third, he reiterates Epicurus's argument that since death is non-existence, it should not be feared. To something or someone that does not exist, it should not (and cannot) matter. Therefore, it would seem that *if* living necessarily entails suffering, and *if* we need not fear death, we may as well destroy ourselves in order to escape the suffering caused by the will-to-life. However, he maintains that this is impossible.

Essentially, there are two reasons why suicide fails to free us from suffering. The first reason does not focus on suicide in particular, but on death in general. Schopenhauer's position lies in between those who maintain that death either leads to absolute annihilation or immortality—both of which he regards as "equally false" (Schopenhauer, 1818, 1844, 1969: Vol. 2, p. 464). In order to understand his "higher standpoint" on death, he utilizes the Kantian distinction between the thing-in-itself and the phenomenon. Each individual exists as part of the world of phenomena that occupies space and time in the physical world and then, at some point, ceases to exist. From this point of view, death is certain and absolute annihilation. However, Schopenhauer makes it clear that the self is much more than this. The individual is also something in itself outside of time and space, beyond change, not susceptible to death³. Schopenhauer writes that my phenomenal self is actually an infinitesimal part of who I truly am:

the greatest equivocation really lies in the word "I"... According as I understand this word, I can say: "Death is my entire end"; or else: "This my personal phenomenal appearance is just as infinitely small a part of my true inner self as I am of the world (Schopenhauer, 1818, 1844, 1969: Vol. 2, p. 491).

One exists partly in the phenomenal world, but more fully in the world *itself*—a world beyond space and time, unsusceptible to individuation. In fact, Schopenhauer claims that individuality

³A detailed explanation of Schopenhauer's complex treatment of the self exceeds the bounds of this article. In short, he sees the self in at least four ways which seem, at first, to struggle for dominance: as a subject of experience and knowledge, a subject of will and action, a bodily manifestation of the will to life, and a pure mirror of timeless reality. The first three might best describe the phenomenal self, while the last seems closest to the true self.

is not only a source of torment, but a kind of illusion. Since this is the case, one's death cannot be true annihilation.

What Schopenhauer means by "my true inner nature" is the same thing as the world in itself (Will) which is not subject to individuation. With regard to Schopenhauer's distinction between true reality and our individual, ephemeral existence in the phenomenal world, Christopher Janoway writes that "reality in itself is eternal in the sense of timelessness. I have my "now", and every other phenomenon that was or will be has its time, which for it is equally a "now" (Janoway, 1989: pp. 107-108). Reality *in itself*, of which I am, is something permanent, not subject to annihilation. The idea is that the world manifests itself as the phenomenal "me" (in the here and now), but that once that "me" ceases to exist, the same world will manifest itself in other individuals who will each refer to themselves as "I" just as I have, pursue their ends, experience suffering, etc. Therefore, death does not afford freedom from suffering. It is merely a phenomenal episode in the world of appearance that has no bearing on the Will or the will-to-life; that individuals die is not a fact about reality itself. Bryan Magee expresses this point nicely:

what is phenomenal about him would have died anyway, and what is noumenal about him cannot cease to exist. To adapt one of Schopenhauer's earlier metaphors, he is like a man who tries to remove the rainbow from a waterfall by scooping out the water with a bucket (Magee, 1983: p. 223).

One would imagine that Schopenhauer's position on death would suffice as an argument against the possibility of achieving freedom from suffering, but he takes it a step further by focusing specifically on suicide. Aside from the fact that death in general fails to achieve freedom from suffering for the reasons described above, suicide possess a further characteristic which makes it, more than death in general, especially powerless to bring about freedom from suffering.

For Schopenhauer, suicide is an instance of the will-to-life acting against itself. It is an outright contradiction, successful only at destroying the individual phenomenon rather than the Will itself. Individual consciousness is indeed destroyed through suicide, but man's inner nature, identical with the Will and entailing the experience of suffering, can never be destroyed. Schopenhauer describes suicide as:

... the arbitrary doing away with the individual phenomenon, [which] differs from the denial of the will-to-life, which is the only act of its freedom to appear in the phenomenon... Far from being a denial of the will, suicide is a phenomenon of the will's strong affirmation. For denial has its essential nature in the fact that the sorrows of life, not its sorrows, are shunned. The suicide wills life, and is dissatisfied merely with the conditions on which it has come to him. Therefore he gives up by no means the will-to-life, but merely life, since he destroys the individual phenomenon (Schopenhauer, 1818, 1844, 1969: Vol. 1, p. 398).

The individual simply cannot willfully exterminate himself as a way of escaping the suffering resulting from willing. Suicide ends life, but as the result of a willful decision in the service of the individual will-to-live, it cannot by its very nature transcend willing⁴. As Jacquette notes, freedom *from* suffering—

⁴Janoway writes: "The question whether Schopenhauer's higher view of death would be consoling is a difficult one. He tries to inculcate the thought that one's own death has no great significance in the order of things. But if one accepted his reasons for taking this attitude, ought one not to think that one's life has just as little significance? And is that a consoling thought? Schopenhauer appears to think so..." (Janoway, 1996: p. 89).

the denial of the will-to-life through an act of will against oneself—lacks logical coherence within Schopenhauer’s system:

The only logically coherent freedom to be sought from the sufferings of the will is not to will death and willfully destroy the self, but to continue to live while quieting the will, in an ultra-ascetic submissive attitude of sublime indifference to both life and death (Jacquette, 2000: p. 307)⁵.

Herein lies the problem of freedom as it relates to Schopenhauer’s position on suicide: while he states explicitly in “On Suicide” that one possesses the individual right to commit suicide in order to attempt to obtain freedom from suffering, and even admits that he can understand why one would attempt to do so, he then denies that there is any possibility that this freedom may be actualized. To take one’s life indicates a lack of awareness (or an unwillingness to become aware) of the futility of the individual will and the experience of the wholeness and totality of will-in-itself. One has the freedom to destroy oneself, but one’s freedom to free oneself from suffering is an illusion.

... whoever is oppressed by the burdens of life, whoever loves life and affirms it, but abhors its torments, and in particular can no longer endure the hard lot that has fallen to just him, cannot hope from deliverance from death, and cannot save himself through suicide. Only by a false illusion does the cool shade of Orcus allure him as a haven of rest. The earth rolls on from day into night; the individual dies; but the sun itself burns without intermission, an eternal noon. Life is certain to the will-to-live; the form of life is the endless present; it matters not how individuals, the phenomena of the idea, arise and pass away in time, like fleeting dreams. Therefore, suicide already appears to us a vain and therefore foolish action (Schopen-

hauer, 1818, 1844, 1969: p. 491).

If one concurs with Schopenhauer that suicide should be understood as a futile escape from the freedom of suffering, i.e. as an (admittedly futile) means to a (failed) end—one cannot deny the insightfulness of his argument. However, this may be too reductive a view of suicide. It is possible, for example, that suicide may be an *end in itself*, perhaps—among other things—a spontaneous expression of individual freedom. Yet, Schopenhauer’s philosophical system does not allow for such a possibility. His is, on the one hand, a brilliant articulation of suicide—placing the act squarely within what one would intuit as its primary purpose (freedom from suffering). On the other hand, given Schopenhauer’s philosophical framework, it negates that possibility and precludes consideration of any others.

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⁵Schopenhauer makes one very interesting exception to his position on suicide and its failure to achieve freedom from suffering. It is the case of the ascetic who commits suicide by starvation. Far from being a manifestation of the will-to-life, the ascetic ceases to live because he ceases to will. Only this exceptional type of suicide has the capacity to free one from suicide: “Thus [the ascetic] resorts to fasting, and even to self-castigation and self-torture, in order that, by constant privation and suffering, he may more and more break down and kill the will that he recognizes and abhors as the source of his own suffering and of the world’s” (Schopenhauer, 1818, 1844, 1969: Vol. 1, p. 382).