

# Schopenhauer's Pessimism

My purpose in this essay is to clarify and evaluate Arthur Schopenhauer's grounds for the view that happiness is impossible. I shall distinguish two of his arguments for that view, and argue that both of them are unsound. Both arguments involve premises grounded on a problematic view, namely, that desires have no objects. What makes this view problematic is that, for each of the two arguments, it conflicts with Schopenhauer's grounds for other premises in the argument. I shall then propose a way of fixing both arguments. The solution involves substituting the view that desires have no objects with the view that we have a desire to have desires. The latter view, I shall argue, can do the grounding work that the former does in Schopenhauer's arguments but, unlike it, the view that we desire to desire is consistent with Schopenhauer's grounds for the rest of premises in those arguments.

## 1. Introduction

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My purpose in this essay is to clarify Arthur Schopenhauer's grounds for the view that happiness is impossible. I shall distinguish two of his arguments for that view, I will highlight a problem that is common to both of them and propose a solution to it that is consistent with several of Schopenhauer's views.

In section two, I shall spell out the view contained in Schopenhauer's claim that happiness is impossible. I shall call this view 'conditional pessimism'. In section three, I shall discuss Schopenhauer's reasons for a different view, that is, the view that desiring is painful. Schopenhauer's reasons for it are basically two, namely, that desires originate in needs and that those needs are painful. In section four, I shall discuss an argument for Schopenhauer's conditional pessimism that combines the view that desiring is painful with the view that satisfying all of our desires is impossible, which I will call 'the argument from the lack of satisfaction'. In section five, I will discuss a different argument for Schopenhauer's conditional pessimism, which I shall call 'the argument from boredom'. The argument from boredom also involves the view that desiring is painful, but it combines it with the view that satisfying any of our desires leads us to boredom. In section six, I shall argue that a single view underlies both the view that satisfying

all of our desires is impossible and the view that satisfying our desires leads us to boredom, namely, the view that desire is aimless. I will then point out that, as a result, the premises of each of the two arguments are based on conflicting assumptions. For, I shall argue, the most reasonable reading of the claim that desires originate in needs entails that desire is not at all aimless.<sup>1</sup>

In sections seven, I shall consider a possible way of fixing both arguments, which I shall eventually reject. This potential solution involves a distinction between the will in itself and specific desires. In sections eight and nine, I shall propose an alternative way of dissolving the tension between the premises in both arguments. The proposed solution will involve the view that we have a desire to have desires. My suggestion is that this view can help Schopenhauer to account for boredom as well as it can help him account for our being incapable of satisfying all of our desires. So Schopenhauer's appeal to the view that desire is aimless becomes unnecessary. The bottom line is that, although Schopenhauer took a step in the wrong direction, there is an open path that leads from his view that desires are generated by needs to his conditional pessimism. In order to pursue it, one needs to endorse the view that we have a desire to desire and drop the view that desire is aimless. For the view that we have a desire to desire provides Schopenhauer with grounds for key premises in both of his arguments for pessimism. And, unlike the view that desire is aimless, the view that we have a desire to desire does not conflict with his view that desires are caused by needs.

## 2. Schopenhauer's pessimism

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One of the views that Schopenhauer is best known for having defended is the view that has come to be known as 'Schopenhauer's pessimism' in the philosophical literature. This is basically the view that happiness is impossible:

Everything in life proclaims that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated or recognized as an illusion. The grounds for this lie deep in the very nature of things.<sup>2</sup>

What exactly is ‘happiness is destined to be frustrated’ supposed to mean? By ‘happiness’, Schopenhauer means ‘an imperishable satisfaction’ or ‘that contentment which cannot again be disturbed’, that is, a state of permanent pleasure.<sup>3</sup> Apparently, then, Schopenhauer’s claim that happiness is destined to be frustrated should be construed as the view that a state of permanent pleasure is impossible to achieve. However, Schopenhauer qualifies this position about permanent pleasure. After pointing out that ‘such a thing cannot be conceived’, he appends the following proviso:

However, if we wish to give an honorary, or so to speak an emeritus, position to an old expression that from custom we do not like entirely to discard, we may, metaphorically and figuratively, call the complete self-effacement and denial of the will, true willlessness, which alone stills and silences for ever the craving of the will; which alone gives that contentment that cannot again be disturbed; which alone is world-redeeming; and which we shall now consider at the conclusion of our whole discussion; the absolute good, the *summum bonum*; and we may regard it as the only radical cure for the disease against which all other good things, such as all fulfilled wishes and all attained happiness, are only palliatives, anodynes.<sup>4</sup>

It therefore seems more accurate to attribute to Schopenhauer the view that, as long as desires arise in us, permanent pleasure is impossible. To appreciate what this view involves exactly, it is also necessary to note that Schopenhauer construes pleasure as the absence of pain:

We feel pain, but not painlessness; worry, but not freedom from worry; 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 taken, and which ceases to exist for our feelings the moment it is swallowed. We painfully feel the loss of pleasures and enjoyments, as soon as they fail to appear, but when pains cease even after being present for a long time, their absence is not directly felt, but at most they are thought of intentionally by means of reflection. For only pain and lack can be felt positively, and therefore they proclaim themselves; well-being, on the contrary, is merely negative.<sup>5</sup>

The upshot is that the qualified version of Schopenhauer's pessimism that I just described needs to be read as the view that, as long as desires arise in us, suffering is inescapable. Let us call this view 'Schopenhauer's conditional pessimism' or, for short, 'CP':

(CP) As long as desires arise in us, suffering is inescapable.

The fact that Schopenhauer held CP, as opposed to an absolute form of pessimism, explains that he exhorts us to will-lessness as the road to 'salvation' or 'liberation' despite his pessimism.<sup>6</sup> The thought is simply that if Schopenhauer were an absolute pessimist, then it would be very hard to understand why he would exhort us to give up our desires. Clearly, there is a point in pursuing will-lessness only if suffering is somehow avoidable through it.

So much for what 'happiness is destined to be frustrated' means. What are Schopenhauer's grounds for CP? For the next three sections, I shall address this question in detail.

### 3. Needs, desires and suffering

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One may distinguish, at least, two arguments for CP that are supported by a fair amount of textual evidence. Both arguments share, as their first premise, the claim that having desires necessarily involves a kind of pain or suffering. They differ in their second premises, though. In order to yield CP, one of the arguments combines the claim that having desires is painful with the claim that satisfying all of our desires is impossible. The other argument combines it with the claim that satisfying any of our desires soon yields to boredom, which is taken to be a form of suffering. Let us examine, first of all, the premise shared by both arguments.

The starting point of both arguments for CP is the above-mentioned claim that having desires involves a kind of suffering. Let us call this view the ‘painfulness of desire’ view or, for short, ‘ $(D \rightarrow P)$ ’:

$(D \rightarrow P)$       Having desires is painful.

The painfulness of desire view is a consequence of two more basic views on the nature of desire endorsed by Schopenhauer. These two views constitute what we may call ‘Schopenhauer’s need-based model of desire’ or, to abbreviate, the ‘NB model of desire’. What are those two views?

First of all, Schopenhauer believed that all desires stem from needs:

For all striving springs from want or deficiency, from dissatisfaction with one’s own state or condition [...].<sup>7</sup>

Schopenhauer also held the view that experiencing a need is painful. He speaks of the desire that arises from some need thus:

We call its hindrance through an obstacle placed between it and its temporary goal, suffering.<sup>8</sup>

We can then summarize Schopenhauer's NB model of desire in the following pair of theses:

- (D → N)      Any desire is generated by a need.  
(N → P)      Any experience of a need is painful.

Given Schopenhauer's NB model of desire, we can see why he would naturally endorse (D → P). But (D → P) alone will not allow Schopenhauer to reach CP. Thus, Schopenhauer uses (D → P) in combination with two further theses in order to obtain CP through two different routes. Let us examine those two routes in order.

#### 4. The argument from the lack of satisfaction

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Schopenhauer seems to have held the view that we cannot satisfy our desires. Thus, commenting on human desires, Schopenhauer complains that they 'buoy us up with the vain hope that their fulfillment is always the final goal of willing.'<sup>9</sup> We may call this the 'the lack of satisfaction' view or, for short, 'LS':

- (LS)      Satisfying all of our desires is impossible.

The first argument for Schopenhauer's conditional pessimism that I will be concerned with has  $(D \rightarrow P)$  and LS as its premises. Thus, the argument, which I shall refer to as 'the argument from the lack of satisfaction', has the following structure:

- (D  $\rightarrow$  P)      Having desires is painful.
- (LS)              Satisfying all of our desires is impossible.
- Therefore,
- (CP)              As long as desires arise in us, suffering is inescapable.

Schopenhauer presents the argument from the lack of satisfaction in a specially graphic manner in the following passage:

All willing springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering. Fulfillment brings this to an end; yet for one which that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied. Further, desiring lasts a long time, demands and requests go on to infinity; fulfillment is only apparent; the wish fulfilled at once makes way for a new one; the former is a known delusion, the latter a delusion not as yet known. No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines; but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which relieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow.<sup>10</sup>

The argument from the lack of satisfaction has been attributed to Schopenhauer by several commentators under some form. When David Cartwright, for instance, discusses whether Schopenhauer's 'metaphysics of the will' is the basis upon which he argued for pessimism, this is the argument that is being considered and attributed to Schopenhauer.<sup>11</sup> Also, it is what Mark

Migotti calls Schopenhauer's 'argument to the metaphysical thesis' (the metaphysical thesis being the claim that all life is suffering).<sup>12</sup> Bryan Magee attributes this argument to Schopenhauer as well. He tries to motivate it by inviting us to share the intuition that the satisfaction of our desires 'can never be more than temporary, and then we are on the rack once more.' Unhappiness or dissatisfaction, he tells us, must be our normal state.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the argument from the lack of satisfaction seems to be the argument that Georg Simmel attributes to Schopenhauer when, defending him from a certain objection, he sympathetically comments that 'inasmuch as it follows from the unitary nature of will that it never can really be pacified, the negative balance of suffering over happiness in life is established.'<sup>14</sup> There is, then, a number of commentators that seem to attribute some version of the argument from the lack of satisfaction to Schopenhauer.

But the argument from the lack of satisfaction is not Schopenhauer's only argument for pessimism. He also combines ( $D \rightarrow P$ ) with the psychological observation that we are susceptible to boredom, and he tries to obtain CP from those two points. Let us turn to that argument now.

##### 5. The argument from boredom

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In some passages of *The world as will and representation*, Schopenhauer claims, not that satisfying all of our desires is impossible, but that satisfying any of them will eventually lead us to a certain 'empty longing' that is a form of suffering, namely, boredom:

Of its nature the desire is pain; attainment quickly begets satiety. The goal was only apparent; possession takes away its charm. The desire, the need, appears again on the scene under a new form; if it does not, then dreariness, emptiness and boredom follow.<sup>15</sup>

We can summarize Schopenhauer's basic point about boredom in the following 'satisfaction yields boredom' thesis or, to abbreviate, 'SB':

(SB) Satisfying any of our desires ultimately produces boredom in us.

Schopenhauer's SB basically amounts to the empirical observation that we are susceptible to boredom. It is indeed a quite compelling folk psychological generalization that, once our desire for some object has been satisfied and we have come to acquire it, it is relatively easy for us to take it for granted. Admittedly, some substantial qualifications regarding the degree of boredom that we may reach in each case and the time that it will take for us to reach it are needed. But SB does seem to enjoy a strong intuitive appeal.

Now, given Schopenhauer's view that desiring is painful, his thesis that satisfying our desires ultimately leads us to boredom has the consequence that, as long as desires keep arising in us, we shall either experience them painfully (while they are unsatisfied) or we shall eventually get bored (when we satisfy them). Schopenhauer describes this inescapable cycle of pain and boredom thus:

The basis of all willing, however, is need, lack, and hence pain, and by its very nature and origin, it is therefore destined to pain. If, on the other hand, it lacks objects of willing, because it is at once deprived of them again by too easy a satisfaction, a fearful emptiness and boredom come over it; in other words, its being and its existence itself become an intolerable burden for it. Hence its life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents.<sup>16</sup>

We may reconstruct Schopenhauer's argument in the text above as follows:

- (D → P)      Having desires is painful.
- (SB)            Satisfying any of our desires produces boredom in us.
- Therefore,
- (CP)            As long as desires arise in us, suffering is inescapable.

Let us call this ‘the argument from boredom’. Several commentators find some version of the argument from boredom in Schopenhauer’s writings. Christopher Janaway calls it ‘the argument from the ubiquity of suffering within the structure of willing.’<sup>17</sup> Janaway presents it by means of a diagram where the possible different outcomes of having a desire are represented. Satisfaction of a desire is represented as leading to boredom, and the whole diagram is meant to illustrate how some form of suffering is always the ultimate outcome of desiring. The argument from boredom is also the second of four arguments for pessimism distinguished by Julian Young in Schopenhauer’s writings.<sup>18</sup> Magee refers to the argument from boredom as ‘a further and devilish twist’ to the argument from the lack of satisfaction and he formulates its conclusion, very much in the spirit of Schopenhauer’s writings, as the claim that ‘human beings are caught between the Scylla of willing and the Charybdis of boredom.’<sup>19</sup> Ivan Soll also attributes the argument from boredom to Schopenhauer. He does not think that the argument from boredom and the argument from the lack of satisfaction are independent either. Commenting on the latter, Soll quotes Schopenhauer as claiming that the will is incapable of final satisfaction, and he correctly points out that this alone will not give Schopenhauer the intended conclusion that suffering is inescapable in life. According to Soll, what is required is a view that is roughly entailed by (D → P), namely, the view that ‘one does not really attain any substantial satisfaction even in what would normally be considered a successful life of striving for and achieving a series of goals.’ Soll then proceeds to describe the argument from boredom as Schopenhauer’s grounds for that

view.<sup>20</sup> It therefore seems to have been clear to a number of commentators that some version of the argument from boredom was endorsed by Schopenhauer.

To recapitulate, we have distinguished two arguments for Schopenhauer's view that, unless we can attain will-lessness, suffering is inescapable. The argument from the lack of satisfaction derives CP from  $(D \rightarrow P)$  and LS, whereas the argument from boredom derives CP from  $(D \rightarrow P)$  and SB. As we have seen,  $(D \rightarrow P)$  is grounded on a certain model of desire, according to which desires are based on lacks or needs that are experienced as painful. But what are SB and LS based on? What are Schopenhauer's reasons in support of those two views? I turn to this issue in the next section.

## 6. Desire and aimlessness

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In this section, I shall argue that a single thesis supports both SB and LS, namely, the view that desire is aimless. Then, I shall point out that neither the argument from the lack of satisfaction nor the argument from boredom, as Schopenhauer seems to have conceived them, are sound. For the view that desire is aimless and the need-based model of desire are, on the most reasonable reading of the latter, inconsistent. In the next two sections, I shall propose a way of fixing this problem. Eventually, my conclusion will be that Schopenhauer is better off by dropping the view that desire is aimless. For there is an alternative explanation of both SB and LS that fits especially well within the need-based model of desire and it does not generate the trouble that assuming desire to be aimless does.

What are Schopenhauer's grounds for LS? A good measure of textual evidence suggests that the reason why Schopenhauer thought that our desires cannot be ultimately satisfied is that the will is

actually aimless. There is no object whose possession will come to stop our willing because, quite simply, there is no object of our willing. No wonder, then, that our desires cannot be satisfied once and for all. Schopenhauer expresses this view several times. He claims, for instance (my emphasis):

In fact, absence of all aim, of all limits, belongs to the essential nature of the will in itself, which is an endless striving. [...] *Therefore*, the striving of matter can always be impeded only, never fulfilled or satisfied. But this is precisely the case with the striving of all the will's phenomena.<sup>21</sup>

We clearly saw how, at all grades of its phenomenon from the lowest to the highest, the will dispenses entirely with an ultimate aim and object. It always strives, because striving is its sole nature, to which no attained goal can put an end. Such striving is *therefore* incapable of final satisfaction.<sup>22</sup>

All that these remarks are intended to make clear, namely the impossibility of attaining lasting satisfaction and the negative nature of all happiness, *finds its explanation in* what is shown at the end of the second book, namely that the will, whose objectification is human life like every phenomenon, is a striving without aim or end.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, it seems clear that Schopenhauer's reason for LS lies in the following 'aimlessness of desire' (or 'AD') claim:

(AD) Desire is aimless.

Now, the phenomenon that Schopenhauer is pointing at in SB also calls for explanation. Why would securing the object of our desires ‘take away its charm’? Schopenhauer does not provide us with a full-fledged account of boredom, but two sorts of claims that he makes about boredom can help us reconstruct what his account might have been.

Consider, first of all, the claim that, when we achieve a goal and we get bored, the goal ‘was only apparent.’ This claim suggests that, according to Schopenhauer, the reason why securing the object of our desires takes away its appeal is that the object in question was not the real object of our desire. In other words, if we get bored once we achieve what we apparently want, it is simply because we did not really want it in the first place. This would indeed explain why securing the objects of our desires eliminates their appeal and, as a result, we are unable to enjoy their possession. If we never really wanted a certain object that we have pursued and finally secured, then it is not surprising that we are not able to enjoy its possession.

This explanation of SB does not commit Schopenhauer to AD. It allows for the possibility that our desires do have objects, but we are very bad at identifying them. However, this does not seem to be what Schopenhauer had in mind. For he sometimes claims that, in boredom, what is experienced is a sort of pressure that lacks any goal.<sup>24</sup> This kind of talk suggests that Schopenhauer’s grounds for his view that, in boredom, we have achieved goals that are not our real goals ultimately come down to the AD view: The goals of our desires are not meant to be ‘only apparent’ in that we systematically misidentify them. They are meant to be only apparent in the sense that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as the goals of our desires.

A problematic picture of Schopenhauer’s pessimism arises at this point. Let us recall what the two arguments for Schopenhauer’s pessimism under consideration are:

- (D → P)      Having desires is painful.
- (LS)            Satisfying all of our desires is impossible.
- Therefore,
- (CP)            As long as desires arise in us, suffering is inescapable.
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- (D → P)      Having desires is painful.
- (SB)            Satisfying any of our desires produces boredom in us.
- Therefore,
- (CP)            As long as desires arise in us, suffering is inescapable.

We have seen that (D → P) is supported by (D → N) and (N → P). And we have just seen that LS and SB seem to be grounded on AD. Now, consider (D → N). How plausible is the claim that desires originate in needs?

Consider a paradigmatic example of desire for Schopenhauer, namely, thirst.<sup>25</sup> It is certainly plausible that, when I am thirsty, the desire that I experience is being produced by the fact that my organism is in need of water. But consider *why* this is plausible: Why should the need for water in my organism bring about a certain desire? Once we specify that the desire in question is the desire to drink, there is a perfectly good evolutionary explanation for this causal relation. The reason why my organism being in need of water causes me to have a certain desire is that having that particular desire while being in that condition contributes to my survival. For, *ceteris paribus*, my having that desire tends to elicit action that results in the need for water being fulfilled. This is why the idea that desires are caused by needs is intuitively appealing. In other words, this is why (D → N) seems plausible to us. Now, notice that the fact that the desire caused by my need is the desire *to eliminate that need* is essential to this explanation of the (D → N) claim. In other words,

if we read  $(D \rightarrow N)$  as the claim that our needs produce desires that are not aimed at their elimination, then the reason why  $(D \rightarrow N)$  holds true becomes a mystery. Basically, the only way to make a case for  $(D \rightarrow N)$  is to assume that there is a systematic connection between those needs that elicit desires and what those desires are aimed at.

The problem is now that AD is clearly incompatible with this reading of  $(D \rightarrow N)$ . If our desires are aimed at the elimination of those needs that generate them, then there clearly is a very specific aim for each of them, which makes AD false. The upshot is that Schopenhauer needs to face a serious dilemma: Either  $(D \rightarrow N)$  is meant to be read as the claim that desires are aimed at the elimination of those needs that generate them, or it is not. In the former case, the premises of both arguments are based on inconsistent assumptions. In the latter case,  $(D \rightarrow N)$  becomes highly implausible and, as a result, one premise in each argument is left unsupported. In either case, both of Schopenhauer's arguments turn out to be unsound.

### 7. Specific desires *versus* the will in itself

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We may try to defend Schopenhauer by drawing a distinction between 'The Will' (or 'the will in itself') and specific desires, the latter somehow being manifestations or concrete instances of the former. The idea would then be to read Schopenhauer as speaking of The Will when he claims that desire is aimless, and to read him as speaking of specific desires when he claims that the will springs from need.<sup>26</sup> As a matter of fact, Schopenhauer himself might have tried to draw this distinction. His following claim suggests it:

Every individual act has a purpose or end; willing as a whole has no end in view.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, in the second book of *The world as will and representation*, we can find Schopenhauer claiming that ‘every will is directed to something; it has an object, an aim of its willing’ and that ‘In fact, absence of all aim, of all limits, belongs to the essential nature of the will in itself, which is an endless striving’ in two adjacent paragraphs.<sup>28</sup> It is hard to make sense of those two claims unless the will in itself is taken to be different from any particular desire.

Trying to defend Schopenhauer by separating the aimlessness of specific desires from the aimlessness of the will in itself is a problematic move for two reasons. First of all, it is exegetically problematic because, despite the just-mentioned texts, there are several passages where Schopenhauer himself does not seem to use the distinction between specific desires and the will in itself for that purpose. Recall the three examined texts where Schopenhauer claims that desire cannot be satisfied because it has no object:

In fact, absence of all aim, of all limits, belongs to the essential nature of the will in itself, which is an endless striving. [...] Therefore, the striving of matter can always be impeded only, never fulfilled or satisfied. But this is precisely the case with the striving of all the will’s phenomena.<sup>29</sup>

We clearly saw how, at all grades of its phenomenon from the lowest to the highest, the will dispenses entirely with an ultimate aim and object. It always strives, because striving is its sole nature, to which no attained goal can put an end. Such striving is therefore incapable of final satisfaction.<sup>30</sup>

All that these remarks are intended to make clear, namely the impossibility of attaining lasting satisfaction and the negative nature of all happiness, finds its explanation in what

is shown at the end of the second book, namely that the will, whose objectification is human life like every phenomenon, is a striving without aim or end.<sup>31</sup>

Notice that, in the first text, Schopenhauer affirms that the striving of matter cannot be satisfied and, he adds, this is the case with all of the will's phenomena (including, presumably, human willing). Likewise, in the second text, he claims that striving is the whole nature of the will and he explicitly claims that this is true 'at all grades of its phenomenon from the lowest to the highest.' Finally, in the third text, Schopenhauer claims that the will is a striving without aim, and he specifies that the will's objectification is human life like every phenomenon (which seems pointless to bring up unless he means to imply that what he is claiming about the will in itself is also true of any specific human desire). So it is quite difficult to reconcile Schopenhauer's claim that every individual act has a purpose or end but willing as a whole has no end with his own claims about the reason why the will is incapable of satisfaction.

Of course, this only shows that there is a choice that we need to make: Either we dismiss Schopenhauer's remarks in the three texts above as passing comments or we reject his apparent distinction between the aimlessness of the will in itself and the aimlessness of specific desires. So why should we opt for the latter? The reason has to do with a second difficulty about drawing the distinction between The Will and specific desires. Basically, we could argue that the will in itself is aimless whereas specific desires are not, but it would do no good to either of Schopenhauer's arguments. Let me explain.

Let us suppose, for the sake of the argument, that we take Schopenhauer's view regarding the aimlessness of desire not to be AD, but the following 'aimlessness of The Will' (or 'AW') claim:

(AW) The Will is aimless.

This would allow us to save Schopenhauer from a charge of incoherence, but we would do it at the cost of leaving SB and LS groundless. For how could AW help Schopenhauer to argue that one cannot satisfy all of one's desires once and for all? How could AW help him to argue that one gets bored after one satisfies one's desires? The claim that The Will is aimless seems irrelevant to both issues. The point in LS was meant to be that one cannot permanently satisfy one's *specific* desires. If we grant that those desires have goals, then it is difficult to see why the fact that The Will is aimless should prevent us from being able to achieve all of those goals. Similarly, the susceptibility to boredom described in SB concerns our specific desires. And if we grant that those desires have goals, then AW does not shed any light on why boredom occurs. The Will may very well be aimless but if my specific desires do have real objects, then why do I get bored after I come to possess them?

What we need is an alternative to AD. That is, we need (1) a good reason why one might naturally think that it is impossible to permanently satisfy all of our desires, and (2) an account of boredom. In the next two sections, I shall present a view that can play both roles. Unlike AD, this view will have the virtue of being compatible with Schopenhauer's NB model of desire and, although it introduces a hierarchy of desires, it avoids the problematic ontological commitment to The Will as an entity over and above our specific desires.

## 7. Boredom and the will to will

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Let us begin by trying to provide an account of boredom. I would like to highlight two characteristic features of boredom. First of all, in boredom, we do not want to do anything. Second of all, this is not something that we like. Simple as they are, these two points provide us

with the key to an explanation of boredom that squares with Schopenhauer's NB model of desire and it does not require an appeal to AD. Let me explain.

Suppose that you are bored. Suppose, too, that I ask you what you would like to do. Your answer is bound to be 'nothing'. This is ambiguous, though. Let us distinguish the following two things that you may mean:

(a) I desire that there is no action  $\phi$  such that I  $\phi$ .

(b) There is no action  $\phi$  such that I desire to  $\phi$ .

Intuitively enough, your answering 'nothing' to my question does not express the kind of desire mentioned in (a). What happens when you are bored is not that you want to be in a situation where you are doing nothing. Rather, what happens is that there is nothing you particularly want to do. What your answer reports is the sort of desire mentioned in (b). If, in order to treat desires as propositional attitudes, we construe the objects of desires as propositions, we can reformulate what a (sophisticated) bored subject would report as:

(c) There is no proposition  $p$  such that I desire that  $p$ .<sup>32</sup>

Now, notice that boredom is unpleasant. In other words, when one is bored, one would like not to be bored. Thus, when you are bored, not only is (c) the case, but it is also the case that you desire (c) not to be the case. In other words, if you were asked about it while being bored (and you had the appropriate conceptual repertoire, you were paying attention to your interlocutor and other standard conditions obtained), you would probably report something along the following lines:

(d) I desire that there is a proposition  $p$  such that I desire that  $p$ .

In the spirit of Schopenhauer's terminology, let us call the meta-desire expressed by an utterance of (d), a 'will to will'.<sup>33</sup> My proposal is basically to drop the AD claim and to show that the following thesis can do the grounding work that AD does for Schopenhauer:

(WW) We have a will to will, that is, a desire to have desires.

Unlike AD, WW is clearly compatible with the NB model of desire. What we need to see is that it can support both SB and LS.

How does the view that we have a will to will support the SB claim? In order to get WW to support SB, I suggest to construe boredom as the sort of suffering that accompanies the unsatisfied will to will. The basic idea in WW is that not only do we want to achieve certain goals that, so to speak, involve objects 'out there', in the world. We also want challenges, we enjoy the struggle involved in desiring and, thus, we want to want things. What this suggests is that we are disposed to experience a 'lack' of desiring or, to put it differently, we have a psychological 'need' to desire. We can then see the will to will as the desire that, as Schopenhauer's  $(D \rightarrow N)$  suggests, must originate from such a need. What completes this picture is the unpleasantness that, according to Schopenhauer's  $(N \rightarrow P)$ , should accompany the experience of any lack. The hypothesis that I wish to put forward is that boredom is precisely the unpleasantness that accompanies our unfulfilled need to will.

How does this suggestion account for boredom? It does in that it makes intelligible the fact that, in boredom, the secured object of desire loses its appeal. In order to appreciate this point, we need to distinguish the appeal that an object may have in virtue of its intrinsic properties from the

appeal that the object may have in virtue of its relational properties.<sup>34</sup> You may find an object appealing in virtue of its intrinsic properties, which will elicit a desire for it in you. Now, within the picture of boredom that I am putting forward, the fact that it elicits your desire is a property of it that makes the object appealing to you as well. The idea is that the object of a given desire does a kind of double duty within our cognitive economy. The object is appealing in virtue of its intrinsic properties, but it is also appealing in so far as desiring it satisfies a different desire of ours, namely, our will to will.

Now, construing boredom as the unpleasantness that accompanies our unsatisfied will to will explains the fact that, in boredom, the desired objects are unappealing upon being secured by highlighting the fact that it is the second kind of appeal that disappears. Notice that this kind of appeal is totally independent from the intrinsic properties of the object. What we find appealing about the object, in the relational sense, is the fact that it is appealing to us, no matter what we find appealing about it. Thus, for any object of desire, it is true that once it is secured and we experience no more pressure to possess it, there is something about the object that we used to find appealing and it has now changed, namely, its eliciting a striving for it in us. This is why all objects of desire lose their appeal once they are secured. This is why SB holds true.

#### 8. Lack of satisfaction and the will to will

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Not only does assuming WW help us to explain the fact that SB describes. It also provides us with good grounds for the LS claim. Let us turn to how assuming that we have a will to will makes the view that it is impossible to satisfy all of our desires compelling.

If we assume that there is such a thing as the will to will in us, then we can see how one could be led to the view that it is impossible to satisfy all of our desires. For it is impossible to satisfy the

desire to have specific desires as well as those specific desires. The reason is that, in so far as one satisfies one's desires, one's will to will is *thereby* not satisfied and, in so far as one satisfies one's will to will, some of one's desires will *thereby* not be satisfied. Let me elaborate.

Consider my will to will. As we saw, this is the desire that I am disposed to express by uttering a sentence of the following form:

(d) I desire that there is a proposition p such that I desire that p.

Suppose that all of my other desires are satisfied. Then, there is no proposition p such that I desire that p. But if there is no proposition p such that I desire that p, then my will to will is not satisfied. (For my will to will is precisely the will for there to be something that I desire.) Suppose, conversely, that my will to will is satisfied. Then, there is a proposition p such that I desire that p. Thus, there is something that I desire and, consequently, there is some desire of mine that is not satisfied. It follows from these considerations that my will to will is such that it will be satisfied if and only some other desire of mine is unsatisfied. No wonder, then, that LS holds if WW is correct.

An additional virtue of the WW view is that it is consistent with Schopenhauer's claim that 'life is a pendulum between boredom and pain.' In fact, it explains why one might think that quite naturally. The relevant considerations here are analogous to those just produced in support of LS. If a will to will is among the desires that we need to satisfy, then we are left with only two ways to proceed: We can satisfy our 'first-order' desires. We will then avoid the experience of the sort of suffering that is associated to the needs that generate them. But this will be at the cost of keeping our will to will unsatisfied. Which will lead us to boredom if the hypothesis about the nature of boredom above is correct. Alternatively, we can keep acquiring desires. We will then

avoid the experience of boredom. But this will lead us to experience the ‘pain’ associated to the relevant lacks or needs wherein those desires originate. There simply is no way to avoid both unpleasant experiences.

## 9. Recapitulation and concluding remarks

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Let me take stock. We have distinguished two of Schopenhauer’s arguments for the view that, as long as desires arise in us, we cannot attain a state of permanent pleasure. We have seen how the first premises of both arguments are based on a model of desire according to which desires arise from needs, which are experienced as painful. We have also seen how the second premises of those arguments are based on the view that desire is aimless. And we have seen how this generates a tension between the grounds of both premises in each of the two arguments. In order to solve this difficulty, I have proposed the view that we have a desire to desire.

As we have seen, the view that we have a desire to desire not only accounts for boredom but it also yields the consequence that we cannot satisfy all of our desires. Thus, the general position I have defended here is essentially this: What is responsible for our being susceptible to boredom and our not being able to satisfy all of our desires is no mysterious aimlessness of desire. There is no need to introduce an entity of a controversial ontological status (such as the will in itself) either. What explains the facts described by LS and SB is that the intentional objects of our desires relate to each other in a certain way. In other words, what explains boredom and the impossibility of satisfying all of our desires is not that we do not want anything. It is a fact about the complexity of what we want. The view that we have a will to will is an alternative basis for SB and LS that Schopenhauer would have been better off subscribing. For, as we have seen, the view that we have a will to will is compatible with the NB model of desire, which is a virtue that Schopenhauer cannot claim for the view that desire is aimless.

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Abbreviations:

WWR = *The world as will and representation*, trans. Payne (Dover Publications, 1966).

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<sup>1</sup> The reconstructions of Schopenhauer's arguments in sections four and five, as well as the identification of the problem discussed in section six, owe a great deal to Bernard Reginster's work on Schopenhauer. For Reginster's own views on Schopenhauer, see his (Forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> WWR II 46, p. 573.

<sup>3</sup> WWR I 65, p. 362.

<sup>4</sup> WWR I 65, p. 362.

<sup>5</sup> WWR II 46, p. 575.

<sup>6</sup> Salvation as will-lessness is discussed, for instance, in WWR I 70, pp. 402-408.

<sup>7</sup> WWR I 56, p. 309.

<sup>8</sup> WWR I 56, p. 309.

<sup>9</sup> WWR I 29, p. 164.

<sup>10</sup> WWR I 38, p. 196.

<sup>11</sup> See Cartwright's (1988).

<sup>12</sup> In Migotti's (1995). Migotti's terminology differs from mine in that he chooses to use the expression 'Schopenhauer's pessimism' to refer to the view that life is not choiceworthy.

<sup>13</sup> See Magee's (1983), p. 219.

<sup>14</sup> See Simmel's (1986), p. 53.

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<sup>15</sup> WWR I 57, pp. 313-4.

<sup>16</sup> WWR I 57, p. 312.

<sup>17</sup> See Janaway's (1999).

<sup>18</sup> See Young's (1987), pp. 58-61. Young thinks that the claim that satisfying our desires leads us to boredom presupposes the view that pleasure is the absence of suffering, and he discusses Schopenhauer's reasons for that view. For the purposes of this discussion, I will be conceding the view that pleasure is the absence of pain to Schopenhauer, so I shall not discuss those reasons here.

<sup>19</sup> In Magee's (1983), pp. 219-220.

<sup>20</sup> See Soll's (1988), pp. 110-111.

<sup>21</sup> WWR I 29, p. 164.

<sup>22</sup> WWR I 56, p. 308.

<sup>23</sup> WWR I 58, p. 321.

<sup>24</sup> Thus, Schopenhauer refers to boredom as a 'longing without a definite object' in WWR I 57, p. 312.

<sup>25</sup> There is a certain difficulty with  $(D \rightarrow N)$  having to do with the distinction between motivated and unmotivated desires. Unmotivated desires, such as thirst, are such that the subject does not need to have a motive for having the desire even though a causal explanation of the fact that she has it will typically be available. Motivated desires, such as the desire to take the bus when one wants to go to work and one thinks that the bus will take one there, are grounded on reasons and, therefore, they are susceptible of rational or motivational explanation. (See Thomas Nagel's (1970) for the distinction.) Claim  $(D \rightarrow N)$  seems plausible enough for unmotivated desires but it not as intuitive when it comes to motivated desires. However, the problem that I am just about to raise in the text remains whether or not a case for  $(D \rightarrow N)$  can be made when it comes to

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motivated desires. Thus, I shall sidestep the issue about the scope of  $(D \rightarrow N)$  and concentrate, for the sake of simplicity, on unmotivated desires such as thirst.

<sup>26</sup> Migotti proposes this move in his (1995), p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> In WWR I 29, p. 165.

<sup>28</sup> Both claims can be found in WWR I 29, pp. 163-164.

<sup>29</sup> WWR I 29, p. 164.

<sup>30</sup> WWR I 56, p. 308.

<sup>31</sup> WWR I 58, p. 321.

<sup>32</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, propositions are just meant to be abstract objects that capture the satisfaction conditions for desires. Nothing should hang on whether we construe propositions as sets of possible worlds, pairs of objects and properties or sentences of an ideal language. The discussion here is meant to be neutral on the nature of propositions.

<sup>33</sup> Naturally, (d) must be read as ruling out propositions about one's own desires. (Otherwise, the kind of desire that one expresses by uttering (d) turns out to be a self-fulfilling desire.) The claim that we have a will to will should be read as the claim that we have the desire to have some first-order desire or other. I shall leave this restriction implicit while referring to the will to will.

<sup>34</sup> The following characterization of intrinsic and relational properties should suffice for the purposes of our discussion: For every object  $x$  and property  $P$ , if  $x$  has  $P$ , then:  $P$  is an intrinsic property of  $x$  if and only if there is a possible world where  $x$  has  $P$  and no other object but  $x$  exists in that world. For every object  $y$  and property  $Q$ , if  $y$  has  $Q$ , then:  $Q$  is a relational property of  $y$  if and only if there is no possible world where  $y$  has  $Q$  and no other object but  $y$  exists in that world.