HEIDELBERGER GRADUIERTENJOURNAL FÜR GEISTESWISSENSCHAFTEN

The Negative Ontology of Happiness: a Schopenhauerian Argument

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Abstract

In this essay I will examine Schopenhauer's contention that there is, in fact, no happiness, and that instead it is merely a lack of suffering that we label as such. To do this, I will first explore the claim itself, as well as some additional hypotheses and arguments that Schopenhauer presents for this position. I will then make a number of objections and provide refutations for each of them, with the resulting conclusion being favourable for Schopenhauer's position; however, I will also comment on some areas of philosophy that could possibly yield problems for the position, as well as discussing briefly what sorts of further conclusions might be drawn from the nonexistence of happiness, and which areas are clearly not affected by it without further argumentation.

Introduction

For most people, it is naturally intuitive that all of their emotional states are, in fact, equal in terms of their existence; it is quite obvious that the hate that we feel, just as love, are both "there" — it is a direct experience that cannot be "refuted", only misinterpreted; I might be mistaken what my emotion "is about", or what "caused it", but I cannot be mistaken about its existence.

So naturally, the claim that happiness — a vast complex of emotions — does not, in fact, exist, seems to be as obviously false, as when someone tells me that I am not seeing a bottle

in front of myself, when I most certainly am — while it might be a hallucination, I am not mistaken about *seeing* the bottle, and can only be mistaken about *why* I am seeing the bottle — i.e. which causes are behind it — or *what* I think the sight of the bottle entails — for example a mind-independent object that reflects light to my eyes.

But no-one would argue that if it could be shown that I was under a hallucination, or was somehow otherwise mistaken, be it through prior assumptions or a mistaken use of language or some other error-inducing practice, that one would have shown that the bottle does in fact not exist; it was a figment of my imagination, brought on by causes that were unknown to myself; but had I known them, perhaps I might have guessed at the nature of the illusory bottle that I was looking at. Similarly, if I were to claim that the morning star was the planet Venus, rather than just Venus showing itself in a certain way, I can be shown that "the morning star" does in fact not exist as anything separate from Venus, since they are identical. There are, then, plenty of ways in which we might be shown that what we thought of a certain object or concept does not hold true, and that it in fact does not exist as anything other than our concept thereof.

But what if I were to make an even more egregious error, and I were to say that, because I felt comfortable when a person was around, and, due to some mental issue on my part, uncomfortable when no people were around, that there was such a thing as "no-people"? Certainly it is true that I felt differently when there were no people around, but that does not mean that the cause of this feeling was "loneliness", "emptiness" or the dreaded "no-people". It is clear that in such a ludicrous case, people would point out to me that, quite clearly, the emotional discomfort I was feeling was due to a lack of something, namely people, which is to say that I possess a sort of drive — the discomfort — that causes me to seek out people — a positive cause, rather than an ontologized negative one, such as the dreaded "no-people". And it is exactly along these lines that Schopenhauer will be arguing for the non-existence of happiness.

Before I begin, I want to make a short clarification; while I am not completely familiar with Buddhism, Schopenhauer's argument does not reduce to Gautama's, i.e. that all is suffering due to the impermanence of happiness — certainly, Schopenhauer will include a comment on impermanence in his argumentation. However, the claim is far, far more extreme: that not only states of happiness are impermanent, but that they are nothing more than absences of suffering, and thus do not have an existence of their own from which to derive a positive ontology[1][2].

[1]It should also be added that Schopenhauer's argument was not, as is often commonly held, inspired by Buddhism; he had already published the argument in his *The World as Will and Representation* in 1818, at which time there were, according to him, only few accounts of Buddhism to be found (see chapter 17 of the second volume of his work, first published in 1844, for his comments on this). He was, however, familiar with the Vedas and Upanishads, according to the foreword of the first edition of *The World as Will and Representation*.

[2]Mark Siderits' article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on Buddha as a philosopher is useful in comparing Gautama's and Schopenhauer's argument (See the Bibliography).

1 Prior clarifications and tentative definitions of suffering and happiness

We should first define our terms, to not only limit the scope of the argument, but also to clarify what Schopenhauer exactly means. It should first be said that he does not mean "good" or "bad", which Schopenhauer defines as being that which feels good or useful (or rather, what the will desires) in the case of the former, as well as that which is bad (what the will wishes to avoid or what displeases it) in the case of the latter[3]. He also does not mean certain forms of aesthetic enjoyment — I will very briefly come back to this later in the essay[4]. Finally, he also does not mean to imply that all emotions can be said to be of either a character of happiness or one of suffering — in fact, Schopenhauer is an early critic of the term "feelings", as he states in §11 of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, which I will quote at length, since it's scope is quite broad, and thus useful to our purposes of clarification:

> The concept that the word "feeling" denotes, certainly only has a negative content, being that something that is in consciousness is not a concept, not abstract knowledge of reason: whatever it may be, it belongs under the concept feeling, whose immoderately wide sphere conceives of the most heterogeneous of things, of which one will never accept how they come together, as long as one has not recognized, that only under this negative consideration of not being abstract concepts, do they coincide. For the most dissimilar, even antagonistic elements lie calmly next to one another in this concept, for example religious feelings, feelings of lust, moral feelings, bodily feelings as touch, as pain, as the feeling for colours, sounds and their harmonies and disharmonies, feelings of hate, detestation, self-satisfaction, honor, disgrace, justice, injustice, the feeling that something is true, aesthetic feeling, feelings of strength, weakness, health, friendship, love, etc., etc.. [5]

However, quite a few emotions will have either the character of being a desire to attain something or to avoid something, as Schopenhauer explains in §57, from which we will derive part of our definition for suffering:

> The constant efforts to banish suffering do nothing more than to prompt it to change its form. This is originally lack, hardship, care for the preservation of one's life. Was it, which is quite difficult, successful to push aside the pain in this form, it will immediately present itself in a thousand others, depending on age and circumstance, as sexual desire, passionate love, jealousy, envy, hate, fear, ambition, monetary greed, disease, etc., etc.. If, finally, it cannot present itself in another form, it appears in the sad, grey garb of weariness and boredom, against which many things are then attempted. If it is finally successful to chase away this form, it will hardly happen without letting the pain come back in one of its other forms, and to thus begin the dance anew; for every human life is thrown to and fro between boredom and pain.

[3] See §16 of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*.

[4] For more information on Schopenhauer's view of aesthetic enjoyment, see the entire third book of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*; I will also briefly comment on it further below.

[5] The translations in this essay are my own, unless stated otherwise.

Since Schopenhauer presents a multitude of observations on the nature of the different forms of suffering, we will have to give a few more quotes that will form the premises to his argument. First, Schopenhauer identifies all striving as pain in §57:

> Every human life flows onward between wanting and achieving. The desire is, by its nature, pain: achieving it quickly brings forth satiation: the goal was only apparent: possession takes away the attractiveness: in a new form the desire, the need begins anew: where it does not, it is followed by ennui, emptiness, boredom, against which the battle is just as agonizing as against hardship.

Note that Schopenhauer has not yet identified the characteristic of "lack", which is a part of striving; this will happen below in his main argument; for now, we will turn to boredom. As he has already explained in the prior quote that human life "is thrown to and fro between boredom and pain", we require a more clear picture of the former, also from §57:

> That which occupies all the living and keeps them in motion, is the striving for existence. But what to do with this existence, once it is secured, they do not know: thus the second thing that keeps them in motion is the striving to alleviate the burden of existence, to deaden it, "to kill the time", i.e. to escape boredom. Thus we see that almost all people that are secure from hardship and care, after they have finally thrown off all burdens, become a burden to themselves and now consider every passed hour to be a success, that is, every deduction from the life that they had until then used all their might to preserve for as long as possible. Boredom is to be taken as anything but a minor evil: in the end it paints true desperation onto the features. It makes it so that beings, which love one another as little as humans do, still seek one another, and thus becomes the source of companiable intercourse. It is also the case that everywhere, as with other general calamities, provisions are made against it, already as a matter of good poliy-making; because this evil, as much as its extreme opposite, famine, can drive men to the greatest excesses: panem et Circenses is what the people need.

From this we can see why boredom may be adequately classified as suffering.

Suffering, then, might be denoted in three categories: The craving or striving for things, in whatever form that may be; physical or mental agony, harm or pain; and finally, ennui, weariness and boredom. For the sake of clarity and simplicity I will call these striving, pain and boredom.By contrast, happiness is merely the opposite of these things: fulfilment, pleasure and the relief or freedom from pain and boredom. But to go into more detail, we will have to present Schopenhauer's argument for the non-existence of happiness. Also note that Schopenhauer himself equates striving as pain — for the sake of clarity in later objections I shall not do so, and since all ultimately fall under the concept of suffering, I do not think this will do Schopenhauer's meaning any violence[6].

[6]I have not given a quote explaining the nature of pain, for I find the definition used here to be fairly uncontroversial. I basically mean to encompass all concepts that might be seen to not fall under striving, such as the pain of a flesh wound or the agony of having lost a loved one, which will be of use when discussing objections that aim at these concepts, rather than at striving as a whole. More generally speaking, I would concur that these really do equate with striving, but some readers might not — hence the distinction.

2 Schopenhauer's argument

We now come to Schopenhauer's main argument against the existence of happiness[7]:

> All fulfilment, or what is generally known as happiness, is actually and inherently always only negative and not positive. It is never original, coming from itself as joy, but must always be the fulfilment of a desire. For desire, i.e. lack, is the prior prerequisite of every pleasure. But with fulfilment the desire ends and thus also the pleasure. This is why fulfilment or joy can never be more than the release from a pain, from hardship: for to these does not only every real, apparent suffering belong, but also every desire whose importance disturbs our peace, even the deadening boredom that makes a burden out of our existence.

Schopenhauer goes on to recap the earlier quotations on the nature of desire, i.e. that once fulfilled, it brings forth a new one, ad infinitum. He then adds:

> Directly given to us is always only the lack, i.e. the pain. But we can only conceive of fulfilment and pleasure indirectly through the memory of the prior suffering and privation that had ended with its appearance. This is why we are neither really aware of the good and advantages that we actually possess, nor do we appreciate them, instead believing that this is merely the way that things are: for they always only bring joy negatively, preventing suffering. Only after we have lost them do their works become palpable: for the lack, the privation, the suffering is the positive, the directly communicated. This is also why the memory of overcome hardship, disease, lack, etc., makes us happy, because it is the only means to enjoy the present good.

Basically, given the prior definition of suffering as desire, pain and boredom, Schopenhauer contends that happiness only ever occurs when one of these is overcome, that is, it never appears on its own, in the absence of prior suffering. For already gained happiness disappears together with the need that had preceded it, which we can see in the way that the importance of prior achievements soon fade into the background. Should an achieved good be lost, we again feel the need that had been previously staved off through it. It is in fact only through the memory of a prior suffering that happiness occurs — one might say that it is a type of knowledge of an overcome need, or perhaps merely knowledge of the lessening of suffering, given that once one desire is fulfilled, another will appear in its place.

It would seem however that this, at least at first, is not very convincing — certainly the most obvious objection one might make is that this merely explains how happiness functions. But since it is still experienced, it seems like this is merely a kind of a semantics game, or worse, that Schopenhauer is fundamentally mistaken in making happiness merely a kind of knowledge of the level of suffering being currently experienced. Also, why does suffering have to have the sort of primacy presented here — could we not merely claim that happiness does exist, even if only under the above conditions?

[7] Both of the following quotes are from §58 of *The World as Will and Representation.*

These, as well as many more objections, are what we are going to turn to now, at the end of which we will see that while 'happiness' is a valid concept, it is only so in the same way that 'no-people' or 'solitude' is — it is a description of a lack of something, rather than a description of a thing.

3 Objections against the argument itself

1. Phenomenological knowledge must necessarily be knowledge *of* something, it cannot come from nothing at all.

   This seems to be the most intuitively valid criticism — after all, emotions are usually said to have an object to which they react, such as an object of love. The wide variety of happiness therefore cannot merely be "relief" from forms of suffering, but must also be able to be oriented towards an object in the world, of which it represents a kind of reaction to, or knowledge of.

   However, knowledge of, or a reaction to something is not itself the object to which it refers or reacts to. These are necessarily different. Also, we do have abstract concepts that have no object, but which describe a lack of something, such as solitude, emptiness, nothingness, etc..

   This is of course easily granted; but the objector would probably continue that phenomenological knowledge is not the same as knowledge of abstract concepts, and thus this is not a fair analogy. There are two ways to respond to this:

   First, there have been philosophical approaches to do exactly that, for example, Heidegger has tried to claim that anxiety has, in fact, no object[8]. Similarly, we might point out that moods in general are not directed at an object. So this criticism does not seem to be as obviously valid as it first seemed.

   Second, we can have emotional responses *to* abstract concepts as the object of these responses — even if, aside from the concept itself, there is nothing actually in existence behind it. For example, we can fear non-existence or solitude. Some of these responses are, of course, merely an expression of a desire, such as loneliness being not a reaction to solitude per se, but instead being a desire to be with other people. But others such as non-existence cannot be explained away in this manner; saying that it is a desire to 'live' would only make sense if that were something that one did not already have, which is impossible for obvious reasons; it is also not a desire to not lose what one has — life is not a possession, but the ground upon which possession of something that could be lost is made possible. Claiming that this kind of anxiety is irrational, or that non-existence is only feared because we mistakenly believe it to be a possession, is not an obviously valid route; the former is merely an unsubstantiated claim, and without

[8] Heidegger, Martin *What is Metaphysics?*

further argument the latter can be refuted by many a dissatisfied reader of Epicurus' saying that we need not fear death because when we are, death is not, and when we are dead, we are no longer there to fear anything.[9]

Even if we claimed that the above is an irrational kind of fear, because the fear had no object, nothing would be gained other than to claim that happiness itself would be irrational; for as we can see in Schopenhauer's argument, there is no 'object' of happiness, only an object of suffering which — once achieved — ends in a brief bout of happiness. If it is in fact true that happiness only appears in such instances, and cannot appear on its own, then it cannot have an object — for if it could have an object, it would be able to appear on its own when presented with the object. Instead, we have objects of desire, pain and boredom[10], or are in one of these states of suffering and are brought out of it when an object that relieves it is presented to us — for if we did not care about the object, it would not relieve our suffering and go unnoticed — without a prior form of suffering, we cannot be presented with something that will bring us happiness, in the same way that a rich man would have no abundant reaction to finding a dollar on the ground, while a poor man might be quite delighted in the same situation. So instead of undermining Schopenhauer's argument, this line of thought would make it far, far worse — for at least Schopenhauer acknowledges that happiness informs us of the lessening of suffering, instead of claiming that it is something completely irrational to be let go of[11].

2. If various forms of phenomenological suffering are supposed to be knowledge of actual states of suffering, then this is an incoherent position, because it is either not possible to ascribe suffering to an extra-mental phenomenon, or only mental suffering is of importance.

   My response to this would be to look at what states of the world exactly induce suffering, and why it may be adequate to label them as suffering. This is easily done, and does

[9]Schopenhauer's own position on "nothingness" is that it is a relative nothingness, i.e. there can only be "nothing" in regards to specific criteria that one is searching for, a position adopted from Kant, which he expounds on in §71 of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*. For an interesting and lengthy exploration of various concepts of nothingness in continental, medieval and ancient philosophy and the major religions, one might read the excellent, but currently untranslated German work *Nichts. Abschied vom Sein, Ende der Angst* by Ludger Lütkehaus, though it unfortunately neither covers the Kyoto school, nor much analytic philosophy on the subject.

[10]It may be argued, as some of Heidegger's essays do, that boredom does not, in fact, have an object. For the purposes of this essay, I won't assume this position, as the true status of boredom in this regard is not important for the central arguments presented here (but see the conclusion for a few more thoughts on it). For pointing out this potential problem, I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer.

[11]Though he does evaluate it as negative, since the promises of happiness give us false hopes that we might achieve a lasting impression of happiness — which is impossible due to its very nature. Furthermore it is important to Schopenhauer's philosophy that the will to life denies itself by experiencing suffering, so that we might become nothing, rather than our essence being reworked into the fabric of nature. For more on the self−denial of the will, see *The World as Will and Representation* §69−71 of the first volume, as well as chapters 48−49 of the second volume. For more on the temporary nature of happiness, see §57 of the first volume. These sections are, however, not going to play a role in the rest of this essay, though we will briefly mention them again later.

not require Schopenhauer's metaphysical will to do so — we must merely observe the nature of organisms.

Organisms have certain desires which push them to do things, or, depending on one's phenomenological assumptions, inform them towards what sorts of things they are being driven. For example, we could say that sexual lust either drives an organism to procreate, or we can say that an organism is driven to procreate by its internal or metaphysical mechanisms, of which it is informed by the feeling of sexual lust. In both cases, the phenomenon of sexual lust is experienced by the organism, and is thus a form of knowledge about the state of being driven, that is, of desiring, of striving.

Similarly, physical and mental anguish also work in informing the organism of its desire to avoid certain circumstances. Boredom also works by informing the organism of its drive to act in some way other than it is acting now. Thus we can claim that the phenomenological correlates of striving, pain and boredom are actual states of the driving mechanisms of the organism, which we might call their "material correlate", or, to be metaphysically more neutral, their "exterior correlate", i.e. that which is seen of an entity by other entities, their "empirical correlate to others", if you will.

Note that happiness *also* has an empirical correlate, in the forms of various brain chemistry that come into play once a form of suffering is relieved. However, note that this is merely the "material" correlate of what Schopenhauer had argued for phenomenologically — it is still the case that these chemicals only ever come into play to relieve suffering via a memory of prior suffering that has now ended. The situation, then, has not changed, and is still identical to Schopenhauer's argument, only now we are arguing about the external, rather than the internal appearance of happiness, or rather, the lack thereof as anything other than a concept denoting a lessening or lack or suffering. So this objection does not change the status of happiness at all by bringing in the external correlates of suffering and happiness.

One might claim that this is a kind of false analogy between the mental and the "physical", or at least, that what actually matters is only the mental side of the correlation. Even if we grant any of these two further objections, they do not resolve the problem. All they do is say that there are certain inherent external correlates in entities, of which they are informed via suffering. Happiness would also still remain a mere correlate to a cessation of these external correlates. Nothing, then, is gained in favour of happiness, and Schopenhauer's argument still holds[12].

[12]Schopenhauer himself would go further than merely claiming this correlation between the mental and physical to be a valid one. To Schopenhauer, we experience reality as both subjects and objects, from within a body and from outside a body, so to speak. The latter external "form" is only a product of our sensory apparatus, which, with its forms of space, time and causality, structures our experience of the world into that which we label "empirical reality" or "matter". This is the World as Representation. This complex part of Schopenhauer's epistemology and ontology is laid out in §1−7 and §18−21 of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, however further elucidations of this view are found spread across the whole of his

3. Not all lack of suffering is necessarily preceded by suffering. For example, certain forms of inner peace or lack of desire might be invoked to take the place of happiness.

   This objection might be granted, but it is basically merely a restatement of Schopenhauer's argument himself — states of inner peace without desire are, of course, states in which suffering has ceased.

   However, one might claim that these states of inner peace are not, in fact, necessarily preceded by suffering, and thus are something that is not reliant on suffering. But this is incorrect for a few reasons. For one, no organism is born in such a state — some instinct, desire or drive will propel it onward, and it will feel the empirical correlates thereof. These inner periods of peace only ever occur if there is no desire present, which seems to be impossible for entities: at the very least they are either driven to somehow keep themselves alive, or they are bored. Even if this were not the case, the very nature of thought and inner phenomenological life is oriented around striving, pain and boredom. This is because thinking is always about something, an active affair born from one desire or another: for a being that lacks nothing, need not think about anything and has no intellectual problems to solve; neither does he have the need to feel anything. It is hard to imagine that we can still call such a "perfect" entity an "entity" at all — it is rather, nothing. And while this goes beyond the scope of Schopenhauer's argument, it is a far cry from refuting it — the type of happiness that Schopenhauer addresses is circumvented here in favour of a kind of happiness which equates to some form of "nothing" or "nothingness" — which cannot be used to establish a positive ontology for happiness[13].

4. Labelling the process of suffering and happiness as merely "suffering" is a conceptual presumption: we might as well label the entire thing happiness.

   This response aims at identifying suffering and happiness with one another, or as certain forms or functions of a single process, and then claiming that happiness and suffering are both as viable as a label for the entire thing, or at least, that suffering is just as ill−suited a label for it as happiness is.

   But this is to misunderstand the argument Schopenhauer is making. He is not saying that happiness is merely a form of suffering. What he is saying is that the concept of happiness describes a lack or relief of suffering, or at the very least, a lessening of suffering. Happiness is still a useful concept, as is suffering, but they are fundamentally different things: whereas suffering has a positive ontology, happiness only has a negative

work, with chapters 1−4, 18 and 20−22 of the second volume of his magnum opus being worthy of particular notice.

[13]This point is, of course, is reminiscent of Buddhist concepts such as "emptiness" or "non−ego". The interested reader might be directed to Bret W. Davis' informative Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on the Kyoto school of philosophers, in particular the sections referring to Nishida, Nishitani, Tanabe and Ueda, which deal with various permutations of this concept, as well as the section on the concept of "nothingness" in general. (See the Bibliography)

one that is parasitical on suffering, as it merely describes a lack thereof. With this in mind, as well as happiness' inability to exist on its own without suffering, we can see that using the label of happiness to describe suffering itself, while it would net it a positive ontology, would be to merely make it a synonym of suffering. But this merely gets completely rid of the concept of happiness in favour of at least keeping the word as something that refers to something positive, in itself existing — which is not a viable line of argumentation. Attempts such as these are often fuelled by a perceived notion that "happiness" has inherent value of its own, and/or that "suffering" has an inherently negative value, and thus dropping the former would be quite a negative thing in terms of value. However neither the argument presented here, nor the rest of this essay, deals with evaluating either happiness or suffering as something good or bad — while the negative nature of happiness in terms of its ontology might be important to how one reasons about what one values, it would require extensive arguments of a quite different nature to actually make evaluations of happiness and suffering, which is beyond the scope of this essay.

4 Objections aimed at specific aspects of the argument itself

1. The definitions of "happiness" and "suffering" are either not broad enough or too broad, too vague, or only of subjective worth.

   As for the first of these objections that the concepts here are too broad, I do not think this to be the case (but see the next objection). This *could* be the case, however I am quite uncertain of what else might be put under the label of suffering, since it includes all states of striving, physical and mental anguish, as well as boredom. Normally, the concept does encompass these things, and the same goes for happiness as the opposites of them in the forms of fulfilment, joy and freedom from boredom. As for being too broad, the same response applies; suffering and happiness seem to me to be adequate labels for these phenomenon.

   Now of course there might be other words that one might use the term "happiness" for, such as religious experiences, aesthetic pleasures, laughter or something else entirely. I would argue however that it is not clear that these "feelings" are suitably described as either forms of happiness or suffering. Some descriptions of them might fall into one category (being filled with the spirit that one worships, being struck by the beauty of a painting, laughing at something funny) or the other (powerlessness in the face of a spirit of worship, struck with awe by a painting, the laughter of despair or madness). But I think there is reason to believe this to be fundamentally mistaken, for the reasons given by Schopenhauer in his discussion of the word "feeling": Aesthetic experiences,

laughter and religious experiences are of a fundamentally different nature. Each of these would require a different sort of argument, but perhaps I can outline certain directions of argument that one might make for these positions.

Laughter occurs in light of something absurd being perceived, where certain concepts do not fit together in a way that is expected. It deals, then, with abstract concepts that we have, and how our expected relationship amongst them is thwarted by an event that we experience or are told about. No need seems to be relieved by this process, so it appears to be something quite other than suffering. I don't find the label happiness fitting here, for it feels very different to be laughing rather than having joy, fulfilment or something related to these. Also, as shown in the examples I chose above, laughter is not bound to these phenomena. I would say that it would be better to not categorize laughter as either happiness or suffering, though I would not deny that it might have some relation to both of them; for example that laughter can relieve tension, which then can bring joy to inform us that the tension has been lifted. Claiming that laughter should then count as a form of happiness would be to relegate it to a mere form of relief from suffering, which would suppose that there are no forms of laughter that can accompany suffering or be simply unrelated to either[14][15].

Aesthetic experiences, I would say, are also different, in that they have a very specific sort of evaluative feeling that seems to be able to evaluate, experience and "appreciate" objects of aesthetic experience completely divorced from any kind of suffering or happiness — we might even suffer through a specific kind of aesthetic experience, such as feeling reduced to nothing by the vastness of the cosmos, or horrified by a particular story portrayed on stage, film or in a video game. Similarly, we might be able to both aesthetically appreciate and be filled with joy by a heart-warming picture. But aesthetic appreciation is not dependent on either, and like laughter above, cannot be reduced to either suffering or happiness.

Religious experiences are quite tricky, and perhaps too much of a subjective character to list here, as it is rather difficult to make statements about something of this sort, but perhaps some general notions might be shared here. Should the objects of religious experience be real things, then it does not seem to be the case that they are forms of suffering or happiness, but rather a special kind of knowledge of their object[16]. If the

[14]For an exploration of laughter by Schopenhauer, see the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, §13, as well as chapter 8 of the second volume. Also of interest might be the untranslated German work of Julius Bahnsen, *Das Tragische als Weltgesetz und der Humor als Ästhetische Gestalt des Metaphysischen.*

[15]Note that when I use "laughter" here I did so as to not conflate that which is amusing with that which is humorous, which could be different. I am more talking about humour here than amusement, and chose laughter as a very specific example that should be familiar in what it feels like, to separate it from that which is known as merely being amused. As for the status of amusement itself, I confess to not be entirely certain — seeking out amusement does seem like an activity to negate boredom or striving, or even some forms of mental anguish, such as the saying "a fun way to pass the time" might denote.

[16]For certain religions, this might equate to happiness, or eternal bliss, without suffering being involved — I refer them to the third of the objections against the argument itself: it could be a relief from a very strong

religious experience does not point to anything outside of the natural — I only mean to use this word very loosely here — world, then the kind of experience it signifies might be, if it is not merely a misidentified feeling belonging to some wholly other category, one that either satisfies some kind of need or it is something specific that is independent of such a satisfaction. While I do not believe the former to be the case, we might say that in such a case it would merely be another form of relief from suffering, and could then easily be put under the category of happiness, with no ill effects to our definitions. If the latter is true, then the current lack of data documenting the various claims of religious experience do not, I think, allow us to make any sort of judgement on what category it could belong to, or if it is some sort of happiness over and beyond what we have currently defined.

However, we might briefly try to broach the subject to give a picture of why I am sceptical that "happiness" is to be found here: from the little I know of them, I would say that they are more to be compared with suddenly joyous realisations — mistaken or not — of a form of order, or pieces of facts coming into connection with one another, over and beyond what was expected, which is evaluated as having a high value or as being of great significance and importance (and one's relation thereto), often accompanied by feelings of elation and force that spreads through some parts of the body. This latter would be the "joy" and "happiness" that the religious bring into connection with their entities of worship. Perhaps one might more easily describe it as "being part of something big", which would easily reduce this to some kind of satisfaction of a great need to be a part of something of importance, but I feel this would be mistaken, or at least not universally true for all such experiences. However, I think the discovery of something that is evaluated as something of unexpected, and thus comparatively enormous, significance is what is in play here, and that it would thus — as my examples above sought to show — not be specifically linked to either happiness or suffering, though it can coincide with them. A great awe and terror may just as well come over one in such instances.

As for the last part of this objection, that suffering and happiness are only of a subjective character: I think this relies on a misunderstanding of the argument. Of course it might be granted that without subjects, suffering and happiness do not exist. However, they do exist for each subject that there is. Again, the categorization of things into "suffering" and "happiness" is not an evaluative one of "bad" and "good", which may or may not be subjective. Thus, other than when speaking of epistemological or alethiological relativism, we are not talking about something that is "only subjective" in this sense of subjective, since it is true of all subjects. I do grant that the level of

form of suffering that leads to a nothingness, or it is something completely unknown. In both cases it cannot be labelled as "happiness" in the way we are using the term here. Besides, religious experiences can only be earthly hints of such outer realms, and thus could only be experienced as happiness in the way we are talking about it here — a cessation of suffering.

suffering may indeed be subjective; that would involve the capacities for suffering and happiness which Bahnsen called "Posodynik", dealing with whether or not a certain person is more easily satisfied, stemming from his ability to better grasp all that is currently in his favour, instead of what is not (which Schopenhauer fits under the label of "Eukolos"), and the opposite kind of person that is less easily satisfied, and more capable of grasping all that is not in his favour, instead of what is ("Dyskolos")[17]. But these factors do not affect the fundamental distinction between the concepts of happiness and suffering, only the degree to which they are felt, and how often they are felt.

2. Categorical errors might be in play when we use the definitions given here of suffering and happiness, since boredom, the various forms of striving and satisfaction, as well as physical and mental pains and relief thereof are all phenomenologically different.

   It is true that a more in−depth exploration of the various concepts that make up our definitions of suffering and happiness would be required to understand these phenomena better. However, I do not think this would change anything for Schopenhauer's argument; in the same way that it does not matter whether or not these "emotions" have a causal role, or only are what−it−is−likenesses of certain states of affairs, it does not matter how exactly different forms of joy relate to one another to be put under the label of joy, and thus happiness. However, this does not mean that I would deny that some forms of joy are so dramatically different from other forms, that they really should be taken outside of the label of "joy" — this often occurs in more in-depth investigations of concepts, especially ones associated with the concepts "feeling" or "emotion". Whether or not these sorts of investigations would yield fundamentally different forms of joy, relief and/or satisfaction that do not only not fall into our definition of happiness, but can qualify as having a positive ontology, is not something that I can ascertain; I will however say that of all the objections, this is the candidate that would probably yield the most fruitful results that could be brought against Schopenhauer's argument — I have significant doubts that such a project would succeed however, given the nature of the arguments brought forward here.

[17] See the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* §57, but also Julius Bahnsen's German, untranslated work *Beiträge zur Charakterologie*, volume 1, under "Allgemeiner Teil — 3. Der Gegensatz des Dyskolos und Eukolos als Maß der Leidensfähigkeit".

5 Implications

One might wonder why the above matters — after all, one might simply concede the argument and leave it at that. However, it does matter in a lot of discussions of value, in which happiness and suffering are of import, especially if either of these is valued as categorically "bad" or "good". But let us examine some examples to make this more clear:

Aristotelian Eudaimonia becomes a very different sort of affair given Schopenhauer's argument. The search for a kind of "work" or "striving" that is in itself a fulfilment can be said to be a contradiction in terms, since the very nature of striving is one of suffering, with relief being what is actually sought. The kind of striving that is envisaged here would merely be one in which the release from itself is either quick, easy, or certain, or some combination of these. Furthermore, the kind of Eudaimonia that Aristotle speaks of is already often a negative one, i.e. one free of hardship and similar ills. So while it might still be a valid way to confront suffering, it sees the negation of suffering as what is important, but does so with means that are only negative, i.e. suffering is only ever lessened or removed for a very short time. If happiness in these senses is what is sought and important, then what is sought is a cessation of suffering, but given that goal, Eudaimonia only employs poor and ineffective means to do so.

As for positive Hedonists, those wishing to maximize pleasure, the same sort of criticism can be brought against them: they are merely negative Hedonists of a different sort, wishing to negate suffering, but using ineffective means to do so.

Desire−theorists, that is, people that find the fulfilment of desires to be what is most important are similarly mistaken, given that fulfilment is also only a form of quieting suffering for a short time.

On that note, Masochists do not escape the equation either: gaining pleasure from certain forms of suffering is still only ever used to quiet other forms of suffering, such as using pain against boredom or striving.

The problem of ineffectiveness for all of these is, then, that they seek things that would not be necessary if there were no suffering at all, i.e. if there were no pain, boredom or striving. Given the nature of subjects/beings, it is a fundamental part of their existence that they are suffering. Of course, this would seem to suggest that positions of Antinatalism, where one does not bring any more life into existence, and perhaps even suicide become highly ethically relevant positions — if what is judged to be of the utmost important is happiness or the avoidance of suffering, i.e. if achieving happiness is "the greatest good" and avoiding suffering is "the greatest bad" — that is, if these are seen to be the ultimate goals of ethics.

This, of course, need not be the case; we might bring forward arguments against suicide and/or Antinatalism, and thus avoid having to conclude the "good" in either of these[18]. But even if that is the case, it would seem that other ethical guidelines than the above would appear to be more effective in dealing with the issue of suffering, i.e. those that recognize the issues of happiness and suffering presented here, as well as related issues dealing with the "nature" of nothingness (Meontology) or those which do not deem them to be of the utmost importance[19]. As previously stated, answering questions of value is not the aim of this essay; it should merely be pointed out that the natures of happiness and suffering, as described here, are of major importance to such questions.

[18]For arguments against suicide, see Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*; Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, volume 1, §69; David Benatar's distinction between lives not worth living and lives not worth starting in *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*, under "2. Why Coming into Existence is always a harm — Can coming into existence ever be a harm?"; for arguments to the contrary, I am only aware of Philipp Mainländer's German and untranslated work *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*; however, for thoughts on the collective voluntary extinction of mankind, see Benatar's book, as well as the German and untranslated work *Das Untier — Konturen einer Philosophie der Menschenflucht* by Ulrich Horstmann. For a discussion on Antinatalism, see Benatar's book, as well as my essay *Problems and Solutions for a Hypothetical Right not to Exist* (See Bibliography).

[19]Of course the ethical guidelines of Buddhism come to mind (see footnote 13), but one might also recommend Schopenhauer's system of aesthetics, compassion−oriented ethics and self−denial of the will found in his *The World as Will and Representation*; Julius Bahnsen's views on the tragic and the role of humour in the previously mentioned *Das Tragische als Weltgesetz und der Humor als Ästhetische Gestalt des Metaphysischen*; Eduard von Hartmann's ideas on becoming part of the world−process in his German and untranslated *Die Philosophie des Unbewussten* and the ethics−oriented *Phänomenologie des Sittlichen Bewusstseins*; Philipp Mainländer's concepts of the dissolution and deliverance of the world as an ongoing process in his previously mentioned *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*; Ludger Lütkehaus' fulfilled nihilism in the previously mentioned *Nichts. Abschied vom Sein, Ende der Angst*, as well as his work on parental ethics — also unfortunately untranslated from the German — *Natalität. Philosophie der Geburt*; Albert Camus' examination of the absurdity and affirmation of life in *The Myth of Sisyphus*; lastly, Peter Wessel Zapffe's ideas on the four paths of avoiding the agony of consciousness employed by people in his *The Last Messiah*, as well as his untranslated, Norwegian work *Om det tragiske*. I mention these philosophical figures of the school of Pessimism not only as a kind of "promotional citation", but because I feel that they have been massively overlooked in the discourses on ethics and other areas of philosophy, which has impoverished and harmed the discipline accordingly.

6 Conclusion

Happiness exists, but we are fundamentally mistaken about its identity and relation to suffering, and hence in what way it is to be treated in questions of value. "Happiness" should be understood as a lack of suffering, or perhaps even a "momentary lessening" of suffering, and not something that has a positive ontology in any sort of way, as we usually assume in our common use of the term as the counterpart of suffering, a duality not unlike that of good and evil, black and white, etc.; for to do so would be to create a false dichotomy, as there can be no happiness without suffering, but there can be suffering without happiness, which tells us something about the nature of happiness as an aspect in the process of suffering — and not as anything beyond that. A more appropriate dichotomy would, then, not be suffering vs not suffering, but "increase of suffering" vs "decrease of suffering", such as fulfilment/pleasure vs frustration for striving, as well as relief vs panic/consternation in the case of pain. In each of these cases, we are speaking of a specific kind of phenomenological state of the increase of a specific sort of suffering, and a specific case in which it stops/lessens, getting us a p or not p state of affairs, which is to say true dichotomies of which we are phenomenologically informed through their unique natures. Since these specific qualitative states all happen on the background of suffering as a whole, we can see that existence can be accurately described as a battle between lessening and increasing factors of suffering.

A special case, however, is boredom, since it is relieved by other forms of suffering, rather than any forms of happiness. One might be tempted to imagine the psychological concept of "flow" as its correlate, but that is only a form of eudaimonic striving, which I have shown above to be a merely more tolerable form of suffering; similarly, something that awakes our interest relieves boredom only by invoking another form of striving, or satisfies some need that was already present in the background. Boredom does not appear to have two states in which one is the "special kind of relief from boredom that isn't a different form of suffering", nor the "special kind of increase in boredom that can't be said to be merely an increase in boredom itself", i.e. boredom doesn't involve "relief" or "satisfaction", nor "frustration" or "panic" of its own. Boredom merely increases or decreases. As the Schopenhauer quote above stated, one might accurately describe boredom as "the burden of existence", given its unique nature in this regard. So while it would seem that we can relieve certain forms of suffering, ultimately, one cannot get past boredom without reintroducing them - it becomes a problem of picking one's poison. And if one thinks boredom to be at least preferable to striving and pain, one might do well to think about Mainländer's judgement that while hardship "is a terrible evil...boredom is the worst of all."[20]

[20]Taken from a quotation made by Winfried H. Müller−Seyfarth in his portrait of Philipp Mainländer (See the Bibliography).

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