

Schopenhauer's case for nihilism

Schopenhauer's general argument

Why no life includes a preponderance of happiness over suffering

The problem of evil: why we can't appeal to God for help

Nihilism and the "denial of the will to live"

Of all the philosophers we will examine, the 19th century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer makes the most striking case for the gloomy view of nihilism. His case for nihilism focuses on the extent to which happiness is swamped by suffering in life.

The general lines of Schopenhauer's case may be represented as the following argument. (When we talk about arguments in philosophy, we mean sets of claims, some of which—the premises of arguments—are meant to be good reasons for accepting others—the conclusions of arguments. Typically in my lectures I will represent the premises of arguments with "P," "P1," "P2," etc., and the conclusions of arguments with "C," "C1," "C2," etc.)

Schopenhauer's general argument

(great amount)

P1. If a life is worth living then it needs a preponderance of happiness over suffering

P2. No life includes a preponderance of happiness over suffering

C. No life is worth living. Nihilism is true

Note that for Schopenhauer, happiness is the satisfaction of desire (getting what you want, satisfaction of needs) and suffering is the frustration of desire (not getting what you want, lack of satisfaction). If you want to get a good grade in one of your courses, for example, and you end up getting it, then you've had one of your desires satisfied and are in that case happy. If you want to get the good grade but fail to get it, then you've had one of your desires frustrated and in that case suffer. Even physical suffering can be understood along these lines: your body naturally wants to maintain its integrity, we might say, and when it fails to maintain its integrity (i.e. when it's injured) one of its desires is frustrated and it experiences physical suffering or pain.

You might think that, as far as it goes, the first premise of Schopenhauer's general argument, P1, is plausible enough. But that premise only gives us reason to accept the nihilist conclusion if it's conjoined with the second premise, P2. And you might think that P2 is obviously false, and hence that Schopenhauer's general argument is a bad one.

But Schopenhauer provides three main reasons for accepting P2. The first reason is quantitative in nature, the other two qualitative:

1. for every desire satisfied there is at least one instance of suffering
 (instance of happiness) (frustration of desire)

(unexpected happiness) (need to maintain the happiness)
joyous surprise only produces a new want, a suffering, to want to keep that joy

This is shown by the fact that you couldn't be trying to satisfy a desire unless it were currently frustrated. As Schopenhauer puts it: "[H]appiness and satisfaction always imply some desire fulfilled, some state of pain brought to an end" (45). (This, by the way, is related to a famous claim of Schopenhauer, viz. that happiness is "negative"—implies the negation or cessation of desire—whereas suffering is "positive"—implies the existence or continuation of desire.)

2. Happiness is rarely as good as we expect and Suffering is worse than we expect

Says Schopenhauer: "[W]e generally find pleasure [at the satisfaction of our desires] to be not so nearly as pleasant as we expected, and pain [at the frustration of our desires] very much more painful" (45).

3. Happiness tends not to last long and quickly gives way to boredom
 (more suffering)

(suffering) (happiness) (suffering)
 want -- satisfaction -- boredom

(Boredom, in Schopenhauer's view, is one particular kind of suffering: when you're bored, you have an unsatisfied desire to being doing something.) In Schopenhauer's own words: "No little part of the torment of existence lies in this, that Time is continually pressing upon us, never letting us take breath, but always coming after us, like a taskmaster with a whip. If at any moment Time stays his hand, it is only when we are delivered over to the misery of boredom" (46).

These, then, are the main reasons Schopenhauer thinks we should accept P2 of his general argument.

Although Schopenhauer thinks that P1 of his argument is more or less obviously true, he recognizes that some might be inclined to doubt it on supernaturalist grounds. You might, for example, think that even if a life fails to include a preponderance of happiness over suffering, it can still be worth living because it relates in the right sort of way to an all-powerful (including all-knowing), all-good being—to God as conceived in traditional forms of monotheism. Thus the idea might be that if we put up with all the suffering in life in the right way, we will be doing what God wants and will be rewarded by God in an afterlife, thus making our present lives worth living despite all the suffering they include.

So, to help make P1 all the more obvious, Schopenhauer tries to convince us that an appeal to God won't help here. The main reason he thinks it won't help is that there is no such all-powerful, all-good being to appeal to: there is no God of the sort conceived in traditional forms of monotheism. And why does he claim this?

Essentially, because of what's come to be known as "the problem of evil":

The problem of evil

The problem of reconciling the existence of an omnipotent being with the fact (apparent prevalence) of evil in the world.

----Leibnitz' believes that the prevalence of evil is all in the plan of an all good god and we as humans are unable to see the larger plan.

Similar to a child who believes a trip to the dentist is evil, while the truth is, it is a good thing.

Schopenhauer does not believe this, he believes the prevalence of evil cannot coincide with the existence of an all good omnipotent god.

There have been various attempts to solve the problem of evil in the history of Western philosophy. One of the most famous is that of the 17th century philosopher and mathematician, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

Leibniz argued that, whatever apparent evil it contains, this world is in fact the best world possible (the "best of all possible worlds"), and that our failure to understand this is due to the fact that we can't see the grand scope of things, how all the apparent evil in the world fits into the overall plan of God, and so on. If that's the case, then the apparent widespread evil in the world doesn't in Leibniz's view contradict the existence of all-powerful, all-good being like God, because in creating this world with all of its apparent evil, that being did the best that could possibly be done.

Schopenhauer doesn't buy this. He thinks that, despite the claims of people like Leibniz, the problem of evil really can't be solved and hence we have compelling reason to think that there is no all-good, all-powerful being of the sort supposed. As Schopenhauer puts it:

Even though Leibniz' contention, that this is the best of all possible worlds, were correct, that would not justify God in having created it. For he is [supposed to be] the Creator not of the world only, but of possibility itself; and, therefore, he ought to have so ordered possibility as that it would admit of something better.

(Minimize our many wants)

Finding ways to diminish our source of suffering, increasingly diminish desire is what Schopenhauer calls *“the denial of the will to live”* (52). It doesn’t mean suicide; it just means living in such a way that you are constantly decreasing your desires as much as possible. In Schopenhauer’s view, practicing the denial of the will to live—something that all saints and sages have done—is the best way to live life, even if it’s not a way that’s ultimately worth it.

Happiness comes at a great cost (overbearing suffering) by reducing our wants we also reduce our chances to achieve happiness but greatly minimize our suffering.