Resignation

Bernard Reginster
Brown University

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I. The Elusiveness of Fulfillment

Schopenhauer claims to find in resignation the key to the only form of happiness possible for human beings. He argues that happiness as it is commonly conceived is impossible for human beings under the conditions of life in this world: “Everything in life proclaims that happiness on earth is destined to be frustrated or recognized as an illusion. The grounds for this lie deep in the very nature of things.” (WWR II xlvi, 573; cf. WWR I §59, 323) Schopenhauer’s conception of happiness is a matter of some perplexity, since he appears to conceive of it both as pleasure and desire satisfaction—as a matter of both feeling good and getting what we want. Thus, he often defines happiness in terms of satisfaction, more specifically in terms of fulfillment: “a final satisfaction [eine finale Befriedigung] of the will, after which no fresh willing would occur, [...] an imperishable satisfaction [ein unzerstörbares Genügen]” (WWR I §65, 362). At the same time, he also characterizes it as a “contentment [Zufriedenheit] that cannot again be disturbed” (WWR I §65, 362), a “final satisfaction [Befriedigung]” in the subjective sense, or simply “pleasure [Genuss].”

The perplexity disappears once we attend to his conception of pleasure. Two basic notions frame this conception. First is the notion that all pleasure is “negative,” which means that it is the experience of the absence of pain. I shall here largely take
this view for granted as I have discussed the grounds for it in detail elsewhere.¹
Second is the notion that pain and desire imply each other. On the one hand, pain
constitutively involves desire: pain essentially is the experience of a state of mind (a
thought, a sensation, etc.) together with the desire for that state of mind to end. On
the other hand, all desire is a source of pain by virtue of exposing one’s current
situation (in which the object of that desire is lacking) as “dissatisfying” (WWR I
§56, 309).² It follows that desire is “the precedent condition of every pleasure” and
that any experience of the absence of pain must result from the elimination of a
desire.³

In the common conception of happiness, as Schopenhauer understands it,
one eliminates desire by satisfying it. Happiness requires fulfillment. The necessity
of fulfillment indicates that happiness is not simply a fleeting or mixed state of
pleasure. Fulfillment is supposed to satisfy the will “completely and forever
[vollständig und auf immer]” (WWR I §65, 362): it is first a condition of complete
satisfaction, that is to say, a state in which all of one’s desires are satisfied; second, it
is also a condition of permanent satisfaction, in which one’s desires are satisfied
once and for all. Hence, the supposition that fulfillment is a necessary condition of
happiness implies that happiness must be a state of permanent and complete or
unmixed pleasure. Schopenhauer accepts this conception of happiness, but argues

¹ See Reginster 2005.
² See also: “of its nature, the desire is pain” (WWR I §57, 313).
³ “[P]ain, suffering that includes all want, privation, need, in fact every wish or
desire, is that which is positive and directly felt and experienced. On the other hand,
the nature of satisfaction, enjoyment, and happiness consists solely in the removal
of a privation, the stilling of a pain; and so these have a negative effect. Therefore,
need and desire are the condition of every pleasure and enjoyment.”(BM §16, 146)
that fulfillment cannot deliver it because fulfillment itself is impossible. And the objective of his analysis of resignation is to show that happiness does not require fulfillment but might be achieved in another way.

Schopenhauer argues that fulfillment is essentially elusive with respect to both of its characteristics. Human beings can neither satisfy all of their desires, nor satisfy them permanently. The satisfaction of any desire, he declares, “cannot be lasting satisfaction and gratification, but always delivers us from a pain or want that must be followed either by a new pain, or by langor, empty longing, and boredom.” (WWR I, §58, 320) The satisfaction of our desires not only fails to yield lasting pleasure (“gratification” or “satisfaction” in the subjective sense), but, unless a new pain comes to torment us, it soon leaves us with a feeling of “langor, empty longing, and boredom.” This passage thus lays out two distinct claims. First, the satisfaction of desires cannot yield lasting pleasure; there can be no permanent satisfaction. Second, unless a new desire “appears on the scene,” it gives way to boredom; we shall see that this means there can be no complete satisfaction. I will consider each claim in turn.

The argument for the first of them is the following:

“All satisfaction, or what is commonly called happiness, is really and essentially always negative only, and never positive. It is not a gratification which comes to us sui generis and of itself, but it must always be the satisfaction of a desire. For desire, that is to say, lack, is the precedent condition of every pleasure; but with the satisfaction, the desire and therefore the pleasure cease” (WWR, I §58, 319).

As I noted earlier, it is because pleasure is nothing other than the experience of the absence of pain, and because pain and desire imply each other, that we must
conclude that desire is “the precedent condition of every pleasure.” What requires explanation is why the satisfaction of a desire cannot yield *lasting* pleasure.

Schopenhauer claims that the satisfaction of a desire causes the desire to cease. Since desire is a necessary condition of pleasure, its elimination also causes “the pleasure to cease.” Presumably, the pleasure we take at an object depends upon our continuing to see it as appealing or interesting, but these are characteristics it has by virtue of being desired, and it ceases to be desired as soon as its possession is secured. Schopenhauer’s paradigmatic examples of desire, hunger and thirst, offer vivid illustrations of this point: drinking water, for instance, is pleasurable only when we are thirsty, and it loses its appeal as soon as our thirst is quenched. To be sure, it is possible to enjoy the absence of thirst some time after it has been quenched, specifically so long as we *remember* the pain of which we are now freed: “The satisfaction and pleasure can be known only indirectly by remembering the preceding suffering and privation that ceased on their entry.” (WWR I, §58, 319) But unless the pain returns, the memory of it is bound to fade and so is our ability to experience its absence.

The satisfaction of a desire causes the desire to cease only on the assumption that the desire is *unmotivated*. Unmotivated desires are best described in contrast to motivated desires. Motivated desires are desires motivated by the recognition of the *intrinsic* desirability of their objects. In this case, it is because one judges the object good that one comes to desire it. Unmotivated desires, by contrast, express a pre-existing need for a certain object. In this conception, the object’s desirability is *extrinsic*, entirely determined by its capacity to meet the relevant need. Absent this
need, the object loses its desirability and therefore its appeal or interest. In this case, one judges the object good or desirable only because, and insofar as, one desires it.⁴

We now understand why the satisfaction of unmotivated desires “cannot be lasting satisfaction or gratification.” Pleasure is taken not in the object, but in the fact that the object satisfies a desire. The possession of the object thus eliminates its appeal by eliminating the desire for it. When its desirability depends solely on the fact that it is desired, the possession of an object cannot be a source of lasting enjoyment. But why should the satisfaction of unmotivated desires give way to boredom? Or why, now that the determinate desires have been satisfied (even if the pleasure we take at this satisfaction eventually dissipates), should we then become agitated by an “empty longing”?

The answer to this question lies in Schopenhauer’s analysis of boredom. As I have argued elsewhere,⁵ he recognizes in boredom the frustration of a peculiar desire, namely, a desire to desire: “boredom,” he declares, is “the empty longing for a new desire” (WWR, I §52, 260). Boredom is therefore the sense that something—though nothing determinate—is left to be desired. Schopenhauer’s analysis of boredom brings to light a crucial feature of human motivational psychology: it includes both first- and second-order desires. First-order desires are desires for states of affairs that do not themselves include other desires, such as wealth, love, wealth, or love.

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⁴ If the agent had access intrinsic goods, Schopenhauer notes, “he would then first know a thing to be good, and in consequence will it, instead of first willing it, and in consequence calling it good. According to the whole of my fundamental view, all this is a reversal of the true relation.” (WWR I §55, 292; cf. §65, 360)
fame, security, and the like. Second-order desires are desires for states of affairs that essentially include a desire, such as the desire to desire. Schopenhauer claims that the satisfaction of first-order desires requires the dissatisfaction of second-order desires, and vice-versa. It follows that we cannot satisfy all of our desires: “every human life is tossed backwards and forwards between pain and boredom.” (WWR I §57, 313)

Why are first- and second-order desires thus necessarily conflicting? A conflict of desires can be of two sorts. The conflict is extrinsic if the desires themselves are compatible, but the circumstances of their satisfaction are such that the satisfaction of one requires the frustration of the other. This means that if these circumstances could be changed appropriately, both desires could be satisfied. A conflict of desires is intrinsic, by contrast, if the desires themselves are incompatible, so that no change in the circumstances of their satisfaction could allow for their simultaneous satisfaction. At times, Schopenhauer appears to suggest that the conflict between first- and second-order desires is intrinsic. This would explain why it is inevitable.

Note that the conflict is inevitable only on the assumption that the satisfaction of (first-order) desires eliminates them; and this is the case only if they are unmotivated. The satisfaction of an unmotivated desire causes it to cease because it causes its object to lose its appeal or desirability. Objects whose value depends on being desired are only extrinsically good. If there were intrinsically good objects, however, they could motivate desires. Securing possession of an intrinsically good object, which is desired for its intrinsic goodness, would not deprive it of its
appeal or desirability (since it is intrinsic), and it could therefore continue to motivate a desire. Accordingly, intrinsically good objects could satisfy simultaneously the first-order desire for them and the second-order desire to desire.

In the final analysis, then, the conflict between first- and second-order desires has its source in the absence of intrinsically good objects. It is because there is no intrinsic good that all (first-order) desires are unmotivated and that their satisfaction is bound to leave the (second-order) desire to have desires or to be interested unsatisfied, and thus to give way to boredom:

"Their satisfaction is hard to attain and yet affords him nothing but a painless state in which he is still abandoned to boredom. This, then, is positive proof that, in itself, existence has no value; for boredom is just the feeling of its emptiness. Thus if life, in the craving for which our very essence and existence consist, had a positive value and in itself a real intrinsic worth, there could not possibly be any boredom." (PP, II §146, 287)

It is undeniable that drinking water ceases to be interesting to you as soon as your thirst is quenched, but why should a state in which you have lost interest in an object, the need for which was a source of pain a moment ago, induce in you a feeling of emptiness or boredom? The answer, as we are now able to see, is simply this: you are left dissatisfied because in addition to your desire for the water, you also have a desire to desire, or a desire to be interested. And this desire, which is satisfied so long as you are thirsty, is frustrated as soon as your thirst is quenched. You are dissatisfied, however, not because the object of your desire failed to be all that you had expected. In one respect, extrinsic goods are undeniably valuable: for

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6 Here is how Schopenhauer defines what it is for an object to be interesting to human beings: "to be interesting to them, it must (and this is to be found already in the meaning of the word) in some way excite their will" (WWR, I §58, 314).
instance, water does deliver you from the pangs of thirst. But in another respect, they fall short: they fail to keep you interested.

It is thus from the standpoint of this desire to desire that the lack of intrinsic value of the object of your desire assumes its significance. If anything in your existence had value “in itself,” its possession would be a positive good, rather than merely the absence of the pain caused by the need for it. It would retain its “charm” or its interest to you, it would continue to inspire desire, even after you had secured possession of it, and its possession would be a source not of boredom, but of fulfillment. And so, for Schopenhauer, the appeal of intrinsically good objects does not simply lie in their intrinsic goodness, but also in the fact that, by virtue of their intrinsic goodness, they are capable of satisfying the desire motivated by your need for them and your desire to be interested by them. And the defect of extrinsically good objects is not their lack of intrinsic goodness as such, but the fact that, by virtue of lacking intrinsic goodness, their ability to satisfy your desire to be interested is severely limited.

7 This appears to generate a paradox. An intrinsic good has its value “in itself,” and not in the fact that it satisfies a pre-existing desire. But Schopenhauer clearly suggests that an important part of the value of intrinsic goods lies precisely in the fact that they satisfy a desire, namely the desire to desire. However, I do not believe this paradox to be vicious: it is by virtue of their intrinsic goodness, i.e., their ability to inspire desire, rather than simply to satisfy it, that such objects can satisfy the desire to desire. The present paradox is structurally similar to one Harry Frankfurt (1999) identifies when he observes that final ends can also be useful, i.e., means to some further end, by virtue of being final, or ends to be pursued for their own sake. They are useful, specifically, insofar as they satisfy our desire to have things to love, or to care about, where to love something is to regard it as good for its own sake.

8 It is worth noting how Schopenhauer’s diagnosis of human misery differs from a philosophy with which his own is closely associated, namely, Buddhism. Both find the cause of human misery in a defect in the objects of desire, though they offer different views of this defect. While Schopenhauer attributes it to the fact that the
II. The Character of Resignation

Schopenhauer compares human life, in which fulfillment is necessarily elusive, to an “unquenchable thirst.” This makes for a rather bleak picture:

“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 reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow. Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace. [...] Thus the subject of willing is constantly lying on the revolving wheel of Ixion, is always drawing water in the sieve of the Danaids, and is the eternally thirsting Tantalus.” (WWR I §38, 196)

Human life is essentially “willing and striving,” and “[n]o possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its craving, set a final goal to its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart” (WWR I §65, 362; cf. II xlvi, 573).

Note how this passage suggests that it is only “so long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires” that happiness eludes us. In other words, it is only so long as we conceive of happiness as requiring the permanent satisfaction of all of our desires, or fulfillment, that we are doomed never to achieve it. This leaves open the possibility that happiness might still be achievable, albeit by a radically different path. Happiness, remember, is the condition in which we are once and for all and completely free from pain, a “satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines.” The passage intimates that we might

objects of our desires lack intrinsic value, Buddhism attributes it to their changeability or impermanence. This is supposed to explain why the satisfaction of desires cannot bring permanent peace of mind, but only anxiety over the prospect of losing them that accompanies their possession, and inevitable eventual disappointment in losing them. See Rahula (1961), chapter 2; Gethin (1998), p. 70. In an apparent contrast to Buddhism, Schopenhauer’s diagnosis also places a great deal of emphasis on the character of desire itself, particularly the fact that it is unmotivated and the fact that we have a second-order desire to desire, in addition to our ordinary first-order desires.
achieve such freedom from pain by *renouncing* our desires, rather than by seeking to satisfy them. Schopenhauer calls this “complete resignation.”

Resignation is ordinarily understood as a form of *acceptance* of a state or condition that is at once unwanted and inescapable. Presumably, to accept an unwanted state is to accept the fact that the desire to escape it will go unsatisfied. However, what this acceptance amounts to is ambiguous: it amounts either to renouncing the *pursuit* of the desire, or to renouncing *the desire* itself. The difference between these two forms of renunciation can be seen in the contrasting responses one would have to the unexpected satisfaction of the desire. The agent who has achieved resignation in the first sense would welcome such satisfaction with delight since it would constitute the satisfaction of a desire that is still live in him, so to speak, and thus continues to exercise its motivational force. The agent who has achieved resignation in the second sense, by contrast, would respond to its satisfaction with indifference since it is the satisfaction of a desire that is no longer live in him. Indifference to whether or not a desire is satisfied amounts to *not having* the desire itself simply because having a desire *just is*, or at least requires, not being indifferent to whether or not it is satisfied.

We might thus think that resignation comes in two forms, one weaker and the other stronger. But this is dubious. Consider the agent who only renounces the *pursuit* of a desire, but not the desire itself. She holds onto the desire, presumably, 

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9 I use the verbal term ‘renouncing’ though, as will soon become clear, I do not intend it as an *active* verb, designating a deliberate or intentional action. A better phrase would be ‘letting go’ since it corresponds to Schopenhauer’s *Erlösung*. But besides being often stylistically more cumbersome, this term can also designate an intentional, deliberate action.
because she blames the fact that it goes unsatisfied on the contingent circumstances of her life. Seeing these unpropitious circumstances as contingent, she may coherently wish them to be different. In a way, she shares the outlook of the suicide, insofar as they both lament the particular circumstances of their life, but not the desires that motivate their will to live. Resignation in this purportedly weak sense would differ from suicide simply as the acceptance of one’s miserable lot differs from the refusal of it.

We might wonder whether resignation so understood is a sustainable stance. The agent who accepts her frustration but holds on to her desire seems to gain little from this acceptance. She not only fails to achieve the peace of mind Schopenhauer associates with resignation, she also seems to worsen her misery by adding hopelessness to her deprivation. In a way, the agent who in similar circumstances refuses to accept her frustration and continues to struggle in the (vain) hope of undoing it is better off: she may be deprived, but she is not hopeless. A truly hopeless agent should deem suicide the only acceptable option. This suggests that the agent who accepts her frustration but does not end her life must in fact manage to avert despair in one of two ways. Either, she holds on to the tenuous hope that her present circumstances will eventually be replaced by circumstances more propitious to the satisfaction of her desires, in which case she has not really resigned herself to her miserable lot after all. Or she renounces the desire itself, so that its frustration elicits no longer despair, but indifference.

This is the condition Schopenhauer calls “complete resignation”: it consists of a state of “denial of the will” or “will-lessness.” What are the distinctive features of
such “complete resignation”? And how does one achieve it? The following passage suggests answers to both questions:

“Now since, as we have seen, that self-suppression of the will comes from knowledge, but all knowledge and insight as such are independent of free choice [Willkür], that denial of willing, that entrance into freedom [Freiheit], is not to be forcibly arrived at by intention or design, but comes from the innermost relation of knowing and willing in man; hence it comes suddenly, as if flying in from without.” (WWR I §70, 404)

On the face of it, this description looks paradoxical. On the one hand, resignation seems not to be an act of will: its occurrence is “independent of free choice”; it is not “arrived at by intention or design”; “it comes suddenly, as if flying in from without.” In fact, Schopenhauer compares it to the Christian phenomenon of an “effect of grace,” which designates a gift from God that the agent can do absolutely nothing to elicit. On the other hand, resignation seems to be an act of will: it is the “self-suppression of the will.”

Both characteristics are grounded in the phenomenology of resignation. Resignation has the character of surrender, giving up, or “letting go” (Erlösung). It is “sudden” and therefore cannot be the product of calculation or design. At the same time, only a willful agent can give up or surrender; a plant cannot give up or achieve resignation. Forces external to the will can either impede it, or destroy it; but they cannot by themselves produce resignation. It is only when the agent herself gives up or surrenders to impediments that resignation is achieved. So, it certainly seems accurate to describe resignation as something the will does to itself. Nevertheless, an examination of the underpinnings of this phenomenology, which I undertake in the next two sections, should reveal more about the nature of resignation.
III. *Velle Non Discitur*

Schopenhauer says that resignation depends on knowledge, specifically the knowledge that the frustration of a desire is grounded in *metaphysical necessity.* I shall return to the issue of how such knowledge could prompt resignation, but for now I want to focus on its bearing on the *involuntary* character of resignation. Schopenhauer says that resignation is “independent of free choice” because the knowledge that makes it possible is independent of free choice. This is certainly true: we cannot freely choose what to believe. What is here true of belief also seems true of *desire:* we cannot freely choose what, or whether, to desire. We neither produce, nor eliminate, a desire by a sheer act of choice; we rather *find ourselves* desiring, or no longer desiring, something. If resignation consists of an alteration of desire itself, then it, too, must be “independent of free choice.”

This is not to say that we cannot freely and intentionally put ourselves in a position in which resignation is possible, much as the Christian must freely and intentionally prepare himself to receive God’s grace, but we cannot freely and intentionally produce resignation itself. (In fact, as I shall suggest in the final section, asceticism is most plausibly seen as a kind of preparation to resignation.)

In apparent contradiction to this, Schopenhauer repeatedly maintains that resignation is a manifestation of free will: “In general, the denial of the will by no

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10 It is worth emphasizing that Schopenhauer’s motivation here is *not* what is known as the “paradox of desire” in scholarship on Buddhism. Herman (1979) formulates the paradox as follows: “If I desire to cease desiring then I have not ceased all desire after all; I have merely replaced one species of desiring by another. The paradox of desire points to the practical contradiction or frustration involved in the desire to stop all desiring and states simply that those who desire to stop all desiring will never be successful.” (91) This paradox is so central that it is the starting point of the recent treatment of the Buddhist conception of desire in Webster (2005)
means results from suffering with the necessity of effect from cause; on the contrary, the will remains free. For here is just the one and only point where its freedom enters directly into the phenomenon” (WWR I §68, 395). To resolve this apparent contradiction, we must turn to Schopenhauer’s famous discussion of character. In this discussion, he maintains both that an individual agent cannot deliberately choose either whether or what to desire and that resignation is a manifestation of freedom of the will.

Schopenhauer accepts a strict psychological determinism: every action or behavior is caused by a determinate motive, according to strict laws. Now, every causal relation—every relation between an event cause and an event effect— involves the operation of character. The notion of character is a term of art Schopenhauer borrows from Kant’s conception of causality. Suppose an event A is the cause of another event B; character is that in virtue of which A can actually cause B to occur. In inorganic nature, the character that makes possible any given kind of causal relation is a force. For example, it is in virtue of the force of gravity that the release of my grip causes the fall of the pencil.

As a psychological concept, “character” operates in exactly the same way:

“Just as everything in nature has its forces and qualities that definitely react to a definite impression, and constitute its character, so man also has his character, from which the motives call forth his actions with necessity. In this way of acting his empirical character reveals itself, but in this again is revealed his intelligible character, i.e., the will itself, of which he is the determined phenomenon.” (WWR I §55, 287)

For instance, it is in virtue of her compassionate character that a person will respond in a certain way to the sight of the suffering of others: her character is what gives this suffering its causal force as a motive. In the psychological sense, an agent’s
character is therefore the collection of his predilections, proclivities, propensities, inclinations, or dispositions, in virtue of which certain states of affairs possess for him the causal force of motives. The agent’s desire to help a certain person is thus a function of his compassionate character and his awareness of the fact of the other person’s suffering.

Schopenhauer distinguishes the “empirical” character from the “intelligible” character. The empirical character is whatever the individual agent has come to know by experience about himself that allows him to predict what he will do, or will desire to do, in certain situations. The intelligible character simply is what he discovers as he comes to know what motivates him to act as he does in experience. The empirical character is the (phenomenal) manifestation of the intelligible character. From the point of view of the individual agent, his intelligible character is “inscrutable and impenetrable” (WWR I §55, 291), as well as “fixed and settled”:

“Therefore he cannot decide to be this or that; also he cannot become another person, but he is once and for all, and subsequently knows what he is. [...] Man does not change, but his life and conduct, in other words his empirical character, are only the unfolding of the intelligible character, the development of decided and unalterable tendencies already recognized in the child. Therefore his conduct is, so to speak, fixed and settled even at his birth, and remains essentially the same to the very end.” (WWR I §55, 293)

Since his character determines what the agent desires in given circumstances, and since this character is “fixed and settled even at his birth,” he cannot decide what to desire. I take Schopenhauer’s notion that an individual’s character is “fixed and settled” to be intended (at least in part) to reflect the fundamental fact that we do not, and cannot, choose what to want. Since, as you recall, there are no intrinsic goods to motivate our desires, our deliberations about what to desire cannot be
creative acts aiming to make up our minds; they are better conceived as inquiries aimed at discovering what we actually desire (or desire most strongly).\footnote{The ability to deliberate [...] yields in reality nothing but the very frequently distressing conflict of motives, which is dominated by indecision and has the whole soul and consciousness of man as its battlefield. This conflict makes the motives try out repeatedly, against one another, their effectiveness on the will. This puts the will in the same situation as that of the body on which different forces act in opposite directions, until finally the decidedly strongest motive drives the others from the field and determines the will. This outcome is called resolve, and it takes place with complete necessity as the result of the struggle.} (FW, 37)

Schopenhauer characterizes resignation as a radical transformation whereby the individual appears to have become free from the causal determinism of motives:

“Nothing can distress or alarm him any more; nothing can any longer move him; for he has cut all the thousand threads of willing which hold us bound to the world, and which as craving, fear, envy, and anger drag us here and there in constant pain. He now looks back calmly and with a smile on the phantasmagoria of this world which was once able to move and agonize even his mind, but now stands before him as indifferently as chess-men at the end of a game, or as a fancy dress cast off in the morning, the form and figure of which taunted and disquieted us on the carnival night.” (WWR I §68, 390)

If the agent cannot choose freely what to desire, and if his actions are effectively determined by specific motives in accordance with strict laws, how can he attain a condition in which those “motives become ineffective”?

Schopenhauer argues that the intelligible character, while inscrutable and “fixed and settled,” must be free, in the sense that it is not itself determined by empirical motives. The reason for this is simple: “From without, the will can be affected only by motives; but these can never change the will itself, for they have power over it only on the presupposition that it is precisely such as it is.” (WWR I §55, 294) If the intelligible character is what accounts for the causal power of motives, then they cannot determine it. It will not do to object that a person’s
compassionate character, for example, can itself be the object of empirical determination, such as the influence of cultural forces. For we would still have to explain *in virtue of what* these cultural forces have this particular causal influence on him. We can avoid a vicious infinite regress only by supposing that the person’s character is ultimately free, in the sense that it is not itself determined by empirical motives. The freedom of the intelligible character indicates that the individual agent has the *capacity* no longer to be moved by motives, and this amounts to the capacity to *renounce* the desires that confer upon those motives their causal efficacy.

Resignation is the *activation* of this capacity, which is why Schopenhauer describes it as an “entrance into freedom.” This entrance into freedom is not, however, the result of an act of free choice. It is one thing to have “freedom of the will [*Freiheit des Willens,*]” understood as the capacity not to be moved by motives, and quite another to have “free choice [*Willkür,*]” understood as the ability to exercise this capacity at will. The former is a necessary condition of the possibility of resignation, while the latter can play no role in it. It is *knowledge* that prompts resignation:

“The motives determining the phenomenon or appearance of the character, or determining conduct, influence the character through the medium of knowledge. Knowledge, however, is changeable, and often vacillates between error and truth; yet, as a rule, in the course of life it is rectified more and more, naturally in very different degrees. Thus a man’s manner of acting can be noticeably changed without our being justified in inferring from this a change in his character. What the man really and generally wills, the tendency of his innermost nature, and the goal he pursues in accordance therewith—these we can never change by influencing him from without, by instructing him, otherwise we should be able to create him anew. […] All that the motives can do, therefore, is to alter the direction of the will’s effort, in other words to make it possible for it to seek what it invariably seeks by a path different from the one it previously followed. Therefore instruction, improved knowledge, and thus influence from without, can indeed teach the will that it erred in the means it employed. Accordingly, outside influence can bring it about that the
will pursues the goal to which it aspires once for all in accordance with its inner nature, by a quite different path, and even in an entirely different object, from what it did previously. But such an influence can never bring it about that the will wills something actually different from what it willed hitherto.” (WWR I §55, 294-5)

What accounts for a change in the agent’s desires, and therefore in his actions in response to motives, is a change not in his character, but in his knowledge. In other words, a change in knowledge can alter the will’s pursuit of its aim, but it cannot alter this aim itself. Resignation can be understood along these lines.

First, resignation is made possible by a change in knowledge: “It appears only when the will, after arriving at the knowledge of its own inner nature, obtains from this a quieter, and is thus removed from the effect of motives which lies in the province of a different kind of knowledge, whose objects are only phenomena.” (WWR I §70, 404) This new knowledge is “the knowledge of its inner conflict and its essential vanity, expressing themselves in the suffering of all that lives.” (WWR I §68, 397) The agent who achieves this insight “knows the whole, comprehends its inner nature, and finds it involved in a constant passing away, a vain striving, an inward conflict, and a continual suffering.” (WWR I §68, 379) It is, in other words, the recognition that fulfillment, that is to say, the permanent satisfaction of all of our desires, is impossible (a “vain striving”) because “the grounds for this lie deep in the very nature of things.”

Second, this change in knowledge does not alter the ultimate aim of the will. What is the ultimate aim of the will? It is “final satisfaction ... after which no fresh willing would occur” or “contentment (Zufriedenheit) which cannot again be disturbed.” To see how final satisfaction or contentment is the ultimate aim of the will, or of desire in general, we must recall a central feature of Schopenhauer’s
conception of human desire as unmotivated. On this conception, remember, the object of an unmotivated desire derives its appeal from the fact that its possession fulfills that desire: it is itself devoid of intrinsic value. The appeal of drinking, for example, derives from the fact that it delivers me from the discomfort of being thirsty, not from the intrinsic value of drinking. Accordingly, the aim of my thirst cannot really be the possession and consumption of water, but the elimination of the pangs of thirst.\footnote{The claim that resignation fulfills the ultimate \textit{aim} of the will certainly appears to conflict with the purported "aimlessness" of the will. On this difficult issue, see the Appendix.}

This allows us to distinguish between two ways of understanding how the satisfaction of a desire is gratifying: either, it is gratifying because of the object whose possession it secured; or it is gratifying \textit{insofar as it eliminates the pain} that is associated with the desire. If the value of an object lies in its being desired, then it has no intrinsic worth. And if the object of desire has no intrinsic worth, then securing its possession can be gratifying only because it eliminates the pain associated with the desire.

This in turn allows Schopenhauer to distinguish between two ways in which the absence of pain can be achieved. Either, one might \textit{satisfy} the desire (secure possession of its object), or one might \textit{renounce} the desire (achieve detachment from it). The latter option would not be allowed if the object of a desire had intrinsic worth, and the desire were motivated by it: in that case, the desire could not be fulfilled unless the agent had secured possession of its object. But in the absence of
intrinsic goods, in a predicament in which all desires are unmotivated, matters are quite different.

Knowledge of the metaphysical impossibility of satisfaction induces the agent to renounce the desire itself. As it turns out, such resignation produces the very absence of pain that was the ultimate aim of the will all along—“the complete self-effacement and denial of the will, true will-lessness, which alone stills and silences for ever the pressure of willing (Willensdrang), which alone gives that contentment which cannot again be disturbed” (WWR I §65, 362). Schopenhauer explicitly compares the satisfaction of the will with its negation, intimating that both are strategies enacted in the pursuit of the same aim—the complete deliverance from pain—and declares the latter to be more effective at achieving it than the former: “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.” (ibid.)

On this interpretation, his endorsement of resignation would be, in the final analysis, a matter of simple practical reasoning. All desires are essentially unmotivated, which implies that their pursuit really aims at the elimination of the pain associated with their arousal; and resignation is more effective at eliminating pain completely and permanently than the pursuit of their satisfaction. Hence, it ought to be preferred. Once again, it is important to recognize that resignation is not the product of free choice based on practical deliberation with the desire for happiness as one premise and the belief that happiness is best achieved through
resignation as the other. Resignation “comes suddenly, as if flying in from without,” and the recognition that it achieves the aim of the will comes only after the fact.

IV. Pain, Expectation, and Resignation

We now have a grip on the notion that resignation cannot be an act of choice, even if it constitutes an “entrance into freedom.” But how are we to understand Schopenhauer’s claim that it is also something the will does, the product of its own operation—the “self-suppression of the will”? The notion that resignation achieves the ultimate aim of the will cannot suffice here, for that could be a happy accident, rather than the will’s own doing. The conjecture I will now develop is that Schopenhauer conceives of resignation as depending on a psychological mechanism that is involved in the ordinary operations of the will. Hence, despite its rare occurrence, resignation can be seen as a product of the normal operations of the will, and therefore as something the will, in some sense, does.

Resignation is the product of knowledge of the *metaphysical necessity* of suffering (that is, the impossibility of fulfillment). How does this knowledge produce resignation, that is to say, not just the acceptance of suffering (in renouncing renunciation the *pursuit* of desires), but actual “indifference” to it (which requires renouncing *desire* itself)? As we saw, this insight does not figure as a premise in a practical reasoning that leads to the intention to achieve resignation. In speaking of the “innermost relation of willing and knowing in man,” Schopenhauer suggests a more immediate impact of knowledge on the will, evident in the striking fact that
knowledge of the necessity of suffering can induce indifference to it directly. Here are two relevant passages:

“For it holds of inner as of outer circumstances that there is no more effective consolation for us than the complete certainty of unalterable necessity. No evil that has befallen us torments us so much as the thought of the circumstances by which it could have been warded off. Therefore nothing is more effective for our consolation than a consideration of what has happened from the point of view of necessity, from which all accidents appear as tools of a governing fate; so that we recognize the evil that has come about as inevitably produced by the conflict of inner and outer circumstances, that is, fatalism. [...] Hence we see that innumerable permanent evils, such as lameness, poverty, humble position, ugliness, unpleasant dwelling place, are endured with complete indifference, and no longer felt at all by innumerable persons, just like wounds that have turned to scars. This is merely because they know that inner and outer necessity leaves them nothing here that could be altered.” (WWR I §55, 306-7)

“We are not usually distressed at evils that are inescapably necessary and quite universal, for example, the necessity of old age and death, and of many daily inconveniences. It is rather a consideration of the accidental nature of the circumstances that have brought suffering precisely on us which gives this suffering its sting. Now we have recognized that pain as such is inevitable and essential to life; that nothing but the mere form in which it manifests itself depends on chance; that therefore our present suffering fills a place which without it would be at once occupied by some other suffering which the one now present excludes; and that, accordingly, fate can affect us little in what is essential. If such a reflection were to become a living conviction, it might produce a considerable degree of stoical equanimity, and greatly reduce our anxious concern about our own welfare.” (WWR I §57, 315)

But how can the knowledge of the impossibility to satisfy a desire induce the agent to renounce not simply the pursuit of that desire, but the desire itself? How can the knowledge of the necessity of suffering produce “indifference” to it, rather than merely (grudging) acceptance of it?

To answer this question, we must delve more deeply into Schopenhauer’s philosophical psychology, particular his conception of pain and pleasure. He observes that our susceptibility to pain and pleasure is directly responsive to what he calls “knowledge.” In particular, he observes that our susceptibility to pleasure
and pain is influenced by the representation of the “merely possible satisfaction” of desires in the following ways:

“Since man is a manifestation of the will illuminated by the clearest knowledge, he is always measuring and comparing the actual and felt satisfaction of his will with the merely possible satisfaction put before him by knowledge. From this springs envy: every privation is infinitely aggravated by the pleasure of others, and relieved by the knowledge that others also endure the same privation. [...] The calling to mind of sufferings greater than our own stills their pain; the sight of another’s suffering alleviates our own.” (WWR I §65, 363-4)

Representations of “merely possible satisfaction” influence our susceptibility to pleasure and pain. Let me call expectations beliefs about “merely possible satisfaction,” that is to say, beliefs about what and how much satisfaction is possible. Schopenhauer implicitly recognizes, as does common sense, that my expectations concerning them affect my actual susceptibility to pleasure and pain. Generally speaking, my susceptibility to pleasure and pain will decrease if either is expected, and increase if either is unexpected.

As Schopenhauer sees it, expectations can be shaped by the memory of my past experiences, or by the observation of the experience of others. Thus, I can diminish the pain I feel at a certain privation by remembering that it was once worse, or by contemplating worse privations in others. I can conversely blunt the pleasure I take at a certain satisfaction by remembering that it was once greater, or by observing greater satisfactions in others. Curiously, he does not mention imagination as a possible source of expectations, even though it is clear that imagining various forms of “merely possible satisfaction” can affect my actual susceptibility to pleasure and pain. I suspect that this omission points to a specific feature of his conception of an expectation. Imagination is unbounded and can
represent to the mind unqualified possibilities. But when he defines expectation as a belief about “merely possible” satisfaction, I believe that Schopenhauer simply means to contrast it with *actual* satisfaction, rather than to refer to *unqualified* possibility. For the influence of my expectations on my susceptibility to pleasure and pain will depend on how close or how remote the possibility of satisfaction is. Presumably, the more remote the possibility of satisfaction, the less painful my actual deprivation will be, whereas the closer its possibility, the more painful my deprivation will feel. This explains, for example, why the representation of privations or satisfactions in others whose circumstances vastly differ from my own will not affect as much my experience of my current privations or satisfactions: it will have an effect on me only if I can see the represented privations and satisfactions as possibilities that are close or real enough *for me*.13 (Accordingly, the representation of deprivations as a matter of metaphysical necessity should make me see the possibility of their absence as not a real possibility for me *at all*.)

We should begin by noting that Schopenhauer finds in this relation between pleasure and expectation an explanation for both the endless pursuit of fulfillment and for its elusiveness. The explanation proceeds in two stages, and begins with the

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13 The relativity of pleasure and pain to expectations has a noteworthy implication. Expectation is representational in nature: it is the *belief* that my desire for some object is more or less likely to be satisfied. This raises the question of how such a belief could affect the amount of pleasure I take at the satisfaction of this desire. One tempting answer would be that pleasure (and pain) are themselves *representational* in nature: pleasure would be the representation of an increase in the satisfaction of my desires, relative to expectation, and pain would be a representation of a decrease in that satisfaction, also relative to expectation. I will not discuss explicitly here this feature of Schopenhauer's theory, but for a clear recent statement of the representational theory of pleasure and pain, see Schroeder (2004), chapter 3.
following observation: “In proportion as enjoyments and pleasures increase, susceptibility to them decreases; that to which we are accustomed is no longer felt as a pleasure. But in precisely this way is the susceptibility to suffering increased; for the cessation of that to which we are accustomed is felt painfully. Thus the measure of what is necessary increases through possession, and thereby the capacity to feel pain.” (WWR II xlvi, 575) As we become accustomed to certain kinds of pleasures, we come to expect them, and it is this expectation that accounts for a decrease in our enjoyment of them when they continue to appear, and for an increase in the pain we feel when they unexpectedly fail to appear.

The second stage of the argument is rooted in the observation that human beings are capable of “reflection.” Through such reflection, they are capable of recognizing the fact that, as they grow accustomed to pleasures, they will come to feel them less and less. In fact, reflection is itself a factor of habituation: it is reflection on the fact that I have satisfied a desire many times before that spawns the expectation that it will likely be satisfied again and so diminish my enjoyment of its satisfaction. This realization compels human beings who pursue pleasure to create in themselves new needs or new desires in order to take fresh new pleasure at their satisfaction: “More closely considered, things seem to take the following course. In order to heighten his pleasure, man deliberately increases his needs that were originally only a little more difficult to satisfy than those of the animal; hence luxury, delicacies, tobacco, opium, alcoholic liquors, pomp, display, and all that goes along with this.” (PP, II §153) The human pursuit of pleasure is therefore bound to
be indefinite, and any “final satisfaction of the will” or “complete contentment” is necessarily elusive.

The possibility of resignation appears to depend on the very same relation between pain and expectation: the knowledge of the *metaphysical necessity* of frustration, when it becomes a “living conviction,” would actually diminish the pain it causes. It is presumably not that desires are any less frustrated, but that this frustration, now that it is viewed as inevitable, causes less pain because it is expected (WWR I §57, 315; WWR I §68, 379, 397). The recognition of the *metaphysical necessity* of privations leads to the *maximal expectation* of them, and the maximal expectation of deprivations eventually elicit indifference toward them, which amounts to the renunciation of the desire for their object.

Schopenhauer explains how this happens early on in his main work:

“the evils that are once attached to our individuality, or the good things that must of necessity be denied to it, are treated with indifference, and in consequence of this human characteristic every wish soon dies and so can beget no more pain, if no hope nourishes it. It follows from all this that [...] all suffering really results from the want of proportion between what we demand and expect and what comes to us. But this want of proportion is to be found only in knowledge, and through better insight it could be wholly abolished.” (WWR I §16, 87-8)

The explanation is a bit muddled, but it includes all the necessary elements. The knowledge of the necessity of deprivation eliminates “the want of proportion between what we demand and expect and what comes to us” since it motivates us to regard our deprivation as proportional to our expectation. In virtue of being thus expected, deprivation causes us less pain and, in the maximal case, elicits only “indifference.” As we saw, indifference to whether or not we get the “good things” we want is tantamount to losing our “wish” or desire for them, for desiring
something just is, or at least essentially requires, not being indifferent to whether or not we get it. With the elimination of the desire, the possibility of future pain also disappears since it is in virtue of our desiring something that the deprivation of it can cause us pain. In this manner, knowledge of the metaphysical necessity of frustration would loosen the hold of the frustrated desire on us; and it could eventually bring about the complete cessation of this desire. Note that, as I announced earlier, this view has the possibility of resignation rest entirely on ordinary psychological mechanisms governing the operations of the will. It follows that resignation is, in some sense, something the will does and not something that happens to it from the outside, at it were, by involving the operation of factors external to it.

V. A Puzzle about Asceticism

"By the expression asceticism," Schopenhauer writes, “I understand in the narrower sense this deliberate breaking of the will by refusing the agreeable and looking for the disagreeable, the voluntarily chosen way of life of penance and self-chastisement, for the constant mortification of the will.” (WWR I §68, 392) This makes the role of asceticism in resignation puzzling. It might be tempting to suppose that asceticism is a practice designed to cause resignation, and Schopenhauer sometimes describes it in strong intentional terms: the ascetic “ceases to will anything, guards against attaching his will to anything, tries to establish firmly in himself the greatest indifference to all things” (WWR I §68, 380). From the outset, however, this view runs into a serious difficulty. Resignation, as we saw, is not a
deliberate or voluntary act. It is a non-voluntary response to the insight that suffering is metaphysically necessary: Schopenhauer repeatedly says that in resignation knowledge directly “quiets the will.” It is hard to see how voluntarily producing suffering could produce such knowledge: I could hardly become convinced of the metaphysical necessity of a suffering I know myself to have caused deliberately.

We must therefore seek a different purpose for asceticism. Schopenhauer sometimes suggests that asceticism is a consequence, rather than a cause, of resignation: it is “the phenomenon by which [resignation] becomes manifest” (WWR I §68, 380). It is a practice motivated by the experience of resignation, which it is designed to preserve or safeguard. For resignation is a fragile condition, never acquired once and for all: “On the contrary, it must always be achieved afresh by constant struggle.” (WWR I §68, 391) The individual who achieves resignation must have the knowledge that produces it, that is, he must recognize that suffering is metaphysically inescapable. By reaching a state of resignation, he learns other things as well. Specifically, he learns that a necessary cause of this suffering is desire (or willing) itself, and freedom from that suffering—happiness—can be achieved only through the renunciation of desire, that is, through the “denial of the will.”

Knowing these things gives him a reason to value resignation and want to preserve it. It is because resignation is fragile that it requires preservation. But in what way is it fragile? Perhaps, as our sufferings momentarily dissipate and our lives grow more pleasant and comfortable, we lose sight of the metaphysical
necessity of suffering. If that is the case, however, voluntary deprivation could hardly restore this sight in us, for reasons already mentioned.

In fact, Schopenhauer envisions are more robust role for asceticism than the production of insight. Ascetic practices are designed to “mortify” the will by depriving it of “nourishment”:

“For example, Tauler speaks of the complete poverty which one should seek, and which consists in giving away and divesting oneself entirely of everything from which one might draw some comfort or worldly pleasure, clearly because all this always affords new nourishment to the will, whose complete mortification is intended.” (WWR I §68, 389)

It is not precisely clear how we are to understand the metaphors of “mortification” and “nourishment.” Perhaps, Schopenhauer intends us to take them literally: we “kill” our desires by starving them. Thus, the ascetic “resorts to fasting, and even to self-castigation and self-torture, in order that, by constant privation and suffering, he may more and more break down and will the will that he recognizes and abhors and the source of his own suffering existence” (WWR I §68, 382). This may be an effective means of mortification, but it does so by way of achieving a state of catatonic exhaustion, which hardly amounts to the “inner cheerfulness and true heavenly peace” that is supposed to result from resignation (WWR I §68, 389).

We might also think of asceticism as motivated by a desire to maintain the state of will-lessness, now recognized as delivering the complete and permanent pleasure we were seeking all along: “Asceticism [...] is to serve as a constant mortification of the will, so that satisfaction of desires, the sweets of life, may not again stir the will, of which self-knowledge has conceived a horror.” (WWR I §68, 382) Two problems immediately arise for this view. First, while ascetic practices
certainly fortify us against the pain of deprivations by getting us accustomed to them, it is unclear how they could elicit complete indifference to them. And second, insofar as they are motivated by an on-going anxious concern to avert the arousal of new desires, ascetic practices seem liable to the “paradox of desire” mentioned earlier.\(^\text{14}\) The *deliberate* character of asceticism implies a continuing desire to preserve the state of desirelessness, which undermines the achievement of it.

Ascetic practices of voluntary deprivation are undeniably designed to make the agent relatively insensitive to the pain his deprivations cause, or at least fortified against it. But if they can produce neither the knowledge that prompts resignation, nor this resignation itself, what could their function be? We get a hint from a feature of Schopenhauer’s discussion of the “paths” to resignation I have so far ignored.

Schopenhauer insists that the knowledge that prompts resignation must be a “living conviction [*lebendigen Überzeugung*]” (WWR I §57, 315). While he does not say much about “living conviction,” three views of it suggest themselves. First, a “living conviction” might refer to ‘first-hand’ or *experiential* knowledge, rather than ‘second-hand’ or *testimonial* knowledge. It is, for example, “the suffering personally felt, not the suffering merely known” (WWR I §68, 392). Second, a “living conviction” is not abstract in the sense that it leaves the agent uninvolved and unmoved by it—like grasping that a situation in which he finds himself is dangerous without feeling any fear. Schopenhauer speaks in this case of a “withdrawal into reflection”: “In respect of this withdrawal into reflection, he is like an actor who has played his part

\(^\text{14}\) See note 10.
in one scene and takes his place in the audience” (WWR I §16, 85).15 Third, a “living conviction” might simply refer to knowledge that is ‘alive’ in the agent’s consciousness in the sense that he attends to it and appreciates its implications. Knowledge that is not “living” in this way would simply be knowledge the agent possesses but has temporarily lost sight of—a knowledge of which the agent may be reminded, for example, by the colloquial expression, ‘You know better.’

The ineffectiveness of insight that is not “living conviction” in prompting resignation is not grounded in the failure to grasp relevant propositional content. What makes it ineffective must rather be the manner in which it appreciates or ‘takes in’ this content. It would not give the agent a direct feeling for its content, or it would leave her unaffected or uninvolved by it, or it would not elicit her full attention. Schopenhauer notes that resignation will usually require “the suffering personally felt, not the suffering merely known.” But his point is not the we should all somehow directly feel suffering, indeed feel suffering as inevitable (as does, for example, the convict on his way to the gallows), in order to be moved to resignation by it. In fact, he insists that it is possible to achieve resignation through an appreciation of the metaphysical necessity of suffering gained, for example, from reading his own works. It is one of the two “paths” to resignation he identifies

15 The second and third sense evoke an important distinction Freud draws repeatedly, for example, his 1913 essay on the unconscious: “To have learned something and to have lived something [das Gehörhaben und das Erlebhaben] are in their psychological nature two quite different things, even though the content of both is the same.” (Freud [1946], 275) The “psychological” difference presumably has to do either with the first-hand experiential access to the content, or with the fact of being involved or moved by that content, which is lacking, for example, in cases of traumatic dissociation.
But it will not be, by far, the most common path. And the reason for this is that knowledge so acquired runs the risk of not becoming a “living conviction” in the other two senses.

To see this, consider what Schopenhauer says about the individual who has acquired “mere knowledge” of the necessity of suffering: “Even in the case of the individual who approaches this point, the tolerable condition of his own person, the flattery of the moment, the allurement of hope, and the satisfaction of the will offering itself again and again, i.e., the satisfaction of desire, are almost invariably a constant obstacle to the denial of the will, and a constant temptation to a renewed affirmation of it.” (WWR I, §68, 392) The thought is that the individual with “mere” or, as we might also say, purely intellectual, knowledge of the necessity of suffering may enjoy a “tolerable condition in his own person” and the frequent satisfaction of his desires. This, in turn, makes him susceptible to the “flattery of the moment, the allurement of hope.” As a consequence, it is much more difficult to keep his insight into the necessity of suffering and its implications ‘live’ in his mind; and it is much more difficult for him to be involved or affected by it.

This is where asceticism comes in. Its function is not to produce knowledge of the necessity of suffering, nor to produce resignation itself. Indeed, its function cannot be either to elicit a direct experience of the suffering whose necessity is known only abstractly. For once again all ascetic practices can produce is a feel for deliberately endured suffering, not for metaphysically inevitable suffering. The

Note, however, that the “suffering which is merely and simply known” must be the object of an “appropriation [Aneignung]”—this knowledge must be *owned*, so to speak—in order to lead to resignation.
function of ascetic practices is to remove impediments to this knowledge becoming a “living conviction.” What prevents this knowledge from becoming a living conviction is precisely the will strengthened by frequent, even habitual, satisfaction. By mortifying the will, ascetic practices would not produce the knowledge necessary for resignation, but they would remove obstacles to its becoming living conviction. A person accustomed to deprivation will be less susceptible to the allurements of desire; they will no longer impede his appreciation of this knowledge and its implications (his ability to “own” the one and the others), or undermine his ability to be involved or affected by it. They will no longer prevent this knowledge from becoming “living conviction,” and, therefore, to prompt resignation.
Appendix: On the aimlessness of the will

Schopenhauer sometimes attributes the elusiveness of fulfillment to the aimlessness of the will: “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; it can be checked only by hindrance, but in itself it goes on forever.” (WWR I §56, 308) According to this explanation, the achievement of no particular aim or the possession of no particular object can satisfy the will because the will has no ultimate aim and object. This is a perplexing view since willing, understood as an intentional state, is defined by the fact that it aims at something, a feature of it Schopenhauer himself explicitly recognizes: “When a man wills, he wills something: his will is always directed to an object and can be thought of only in relation to an object.” (FW, 14; cf. WWR I §29, 163) If the will can be “thought of only in relation to an object,” how are we to make sense of the view of the will as an “aimless striving” (cf. WWR I §29, 164)?

We get a clue from Schopenhauer’s suggestion that we should think of the will, including the human will, on the model of what 19th century physicists call “force” (as in the “force of gravity” or the “life-force”) (see WWR I §56, 308-9; cf. §§ 21, 26-27). The chief characteristic of a force is that it keeps on exercising the pressure determined by its particular nature, but it is not intentional, it does not have an aim or a goal. It may be helpful to invoke in this connection the Freudian notion of a drive, a “borderline concept between the mental and the physical”: on the psychological side, we have a felt desire or inclination for a determinate object, or type of object; on the physical side, we have something of the order of a life-force, manifested in specific physiological needs, which like other forces presses on aimlessly. In this view, our desires and inclinations would be manifestations of such non-intentional forces. But how, precisely, do our desires manifest non-intentional forces?

For example, when blood sugar levels drop below a certain threshold, a sensation arises in consciousness, which gives rise to a desire to eliminate it. The hunger drive is thus a desire (a mental state) rooted in a physiological need (a physical state). Freud conceives of drives as “impinging” on the mind and calling it to action. This is because he takes the sensation aroused by a physiological change as causing disruption and raising tension in the mind. He invites us to conceive of the mind as being in a default (‘natural,’ ‘original’) position of ‘peace’ or ‘calm’ (the “constancy principle”), which is disrupted by the onset of the new sensation. The desire to reduce the tension by eliminating the disruptive sensation would thus manifest the mind’s aiming to return to its original condition of peace or calm. This desire itself is external impingement since it is itself foreign to the peace or calm that is the ultimate aim of the mind.

Similarly, Schopenhauer speaks of the “pressure of willing [Willensdrang]” as a pressure impinging on the consciousness of the agent, as it were, from the outside. Like Freud, Schopenhauer would invite us to conceive of the mind as aiming at a condition of peace or calm returning to its original condition of peace or calm by eliminating the disruption caused by the “pressure of willing.” The problem with this view is obvious: in Schopenhauer’s view, the mind is composed of two main
elements, namely, the will and the intellect. The intellect is a non-motivating faculty insofar as it does not “strive” for an aim or an object; the will provides all the motivation. Accordingly, if anything in the mind ‘aims’ to achieve a condition of peace or calm, it can only be the will. The will can therefore not be experienced as external impingement without restoring something like the Kantian distinction between the will (as the “proper self” and an autonomous source of motivation) and the inclinations (as “alien forces”), a distinction Schopenhauer vehemently rejects: “what everyone is, is just what he wills.” (WWR I §65, 366)

Moreover, Schopenhauer assumes, at least implicitly, that the mind aims at such a condition, since he defines ultimate happiness in terms of complete and permanent absence of pain (indeed, as “peace of mind,” or “calm”). He also evidently supposes that this is the ultimate aim the mind pursues in attempting to satisfy particular desires since he represents the realization that such satisfaction cannot achieve this aim as depressing or disappointing.
CITATIONS

Works by Schopenhauer:


