Schopenhauer on Boredom

Joshua Isaac Fox
The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL USA
jifox@uchicago.edu

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Abstract: On the dominant interpretation, Schopenhauer possesses a will to will view of boredom: boredom consists in the dissatisfaction of a second-order desire to pursue objects of first-order desire. I challenge this account, arguing that it misconstrues one of boredom's effects for its essence. Instead, I suggest that Schopenhauer identifies boredom with distress at the inactivity of our faculties. The major contributor to this distress is the inactivity of cognition. Schopenhauer thus possesses a will to cognize view of boredom: boredom primarily consists in the dissatisfaction of a desire for specifically mental occupation. That boredom finds frequent expression in a will to will is simply a consequence of desire's role in generating mental activity.

Keywords: Schopenhauer, Boredom, Cognition, Mental Occupation, Will to Will

The Will to Cognize View of Boredom

Schopenhauer sees boredom as a problem belonging to those otherwise satisfied with their lot: it is when one has too little to desire that boredom strikes. To account for this, several commentators take Schopenhauer to identify boredom with dissatisfaction of a "will to will", a second-order desire to engage in the activity of pursuing objects of first-order desire. After first-order desires have been satisfied, it is no longer possible to engage in the activity of pursuing their objects. As we have a desire to engage in this activity, the satisfaction of our first-order desires entails the dissatisfaction of our second-order desire. We are, consequently, dissatisfied by satisfaction. This feeling of second-order dissatisfaction constitutes boredom.[1]

[1] For this reading, see Young (*Schopenhauer*, 211). Reginster ("Happiness as a Faustian Bargain", 54-55; *Affirmation of Life*, 120-126; "Nietzsche's New Happiness", 22-23) and Auweele (*Kantian Foundations*, 132-133) offer a subtly different but substantially similar view, suggesting Schopenhauer identifies boredom with dissatisfaction of a desire to merely *have* first-order desires, rather than to *pursue the objects* of first-order desire. Fernández ("Schopenhauer's Pessimism", 661) explicitly identifies the will to will with a desire to desire, but glosses this as desire for the "struggle" and "challenges" involved in actually pursuing desired objects. The distinction between these variants of the will to will account does not matter for my argument. The desire to desire and desire to pursue the objects of desire views falter on the same points.

Although other scholars often note the importance of boredom to Schopenhauer's pessimism, they rarely offer detailed accounts of how Schopenhauer understands boredom itself. See, e.g., the discussions in Janaway ("Schopenhauer's Pessimism", 330), Beiser (*Weltschmerz*, 50), and Shapshay

Although this account gets a lot right, it ultimately mistakes one of boredom's effects for its essence. Schopenhauer does think boredom typically finds expression in a will to will. He does not, however, think the will to will's dissatisfaction is what boredom fundamentally is. To see what the will to will view leaves out, it will help to consider how Schopenhauer presents boredom when describing life's constitutive elements.

In the course of defending his pessimism, Schopenhauer suggests that human beings always find themselves in one of three states: interested engagement, in which desire is responsible for holding boredom at bay; disinterested engagement, in which something other than desire is responsible for holding boredom at bay; and disengagement, in which boredom is in full force.[2] Schopenhauer describes the third of these states as follows:

> Finally, the third, the greatest lethargy of the will and of cognition bound up with it, empty longing, life-chilling boredom [*die größte Lethargie des Willens und damit der an ihn gebundenen Erkenntniß, leeres Sehnen, lebenerstarrende Langeweile*]. (WWR I: 347)[3]

The will to will view explains both the beginning and the end of that sentence: "the lethargy of the will" is the satisfaction of first-order desire; the "empty longing" is the second-order desire to have a desire. It does not, however, explain the sentence's middle. Why does Schopenhauer identify the lethargy of *cognition* bound up to will as the primary consequence of the lethargy of will? If the will to will view fully captures Schopenhauer's understanding of boredom, why does

(*Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics*, 76). This has left variants of the will to will account to dominate Schopenhauer scholarship for most of the last two decades. A notable exception is Woods ("Seriously Bored"), which shares my goal of challenging the will to will account. Woods effectively highlights one of the will to will account's defects, but his alternative misses the mark. See note 9 and section V below.

[2] These are not Schopenhauer's terms: he speaks of "violent willing", "the life of genius", and "life-chilling boredom". As discussed below, these are extreme forms of life's basic states: less extreme forms are often called want [*Noth*], contemplation [*Kontemplation*], and boredom [*Langeweile*]. I use different terminology to highlight the exhaustiveness of Schopenhauer's division. All conscious human beings are engaged or disengaged. All engaged human beings are interestedly engaged or disinterestedly engaged. These divisions may be broad, but they are as exhaustive as Schopenhauer claims.

[3] Citations reference the recent Cambridge editions.

he not move directly from the lethargy of will to the experience of empty longing? Why bother highlighting the lethargy of cognition as an intermediary?

In what follows, I argue that Schopenhauer identifies boredom with distress at the inactivity of our faculties. The major source of this distress is precisely the lethargy of cognition Schopenhauer emphasizes above. Human beings long to put their faculties to use, and they have an especially intense desire to make use of their cognitive faculties. We possess a will to cognize; a desire for mental occupation the dissatisfaction of which explains boredom more directly than dissatisfaction of the will to will.

I. Dissatisfaction of the Will to Cognize as Boredom's Primary Constituent

Schopenhauer views the human body as a phenomenal expression of the human will: our bodies are simply the way our wills appear to cognition. More specifically, Schopenhauer suggests that each part of the human body manifests a specific will: namely, the will to engage in the particular activity characteristic of that body part. As Schopenhauer puts it:

> The will to *cognize* [*Wille zu erkennen*],[4] intuited objectively, is the brain; just as the will to *walk*, intuited objectively, is the foot; the will to *grasp* is the hand, the will to *digest* is the stomach, to *procreate* is the genitals, and so on. (WWR II: 272)[5]

The details of this metaphysical view are not important at present. What matters is the view's psychological implications. Human beings desire to engage in a wide array of different activities:

[4] I have modified the Cambridge translation, replacing "will to cognition" with "will to cognize". This will's object is an *activity* not a state: it parallels "the will to digest" and "the will to procreate", not the will to digestion and the will to procreation. Schopenhauer uses verbal rather than substantive forms throughout. I am grateful to a reviewer for suggesting this change.

[5] See also, PP II: 159: "the body of the human individual is only the visibility of his individual will and its objective representation . . . even his intellect, or brain, precisely as the appearance of his will to cognize [*Erkennenwollens*], belongs to the will".

namely, all those activities characteristic of the different parts of their bodies. Among these activities is cognizing: human beings possess a "will to cognize", a desire to engage in mental activity. This desire for mental activity is simply built into us: the will to cognize corresponds to the human brain, and we can no more escape the one than we can live without the other.

Human beings, then, have an inborn desire to engage in certain activities. Boredom consists in this desire's frustration:

> the original purpose of the faculties [*Kräfte*] with which nature has endowed human beings is the fight against want, which presses them hard from all sides. But when this fight stops for once, the idle powers become [*werden*] a burden [*Last*] for them. Therefore, they must now play with them, i.e. employ them without a purpose; otherwise they immediately fall prey to the other source of human suffering, boredom. (PP I: 292)

The insufficiently used faculties are *themselves* directly distressing to us: Schopenhauer claims that "the idle powers *become* a burden"(my emphasis), not that their idleness exposes us to some burden separate from themselves. Thus, Schopenhauer is not simply identifying the use of our faculties as an effective *means* of securing boredom's relief. He is, rather, identifying the disuse of our faculties as boredom's ultimate source. The idle powers are a burden for us, *therefore* we must play with them in order to keep boredom at bay: the burdensome nature of unused faculties is itself what explains our inability to avoid boredom unless we put our faculties to use.

The view of the faculties discussed above makes it clear why Schopenhauer endorsed this claim. Each of our faculties corresponds to a will, a desire to engage in the activities characteristic of that faculty. As a result, the faculties become a burden when left unused: the inactivity of a faculty amounts to the dissatisfaction of the will it expresses. This dissatisfaction is distressing to us, constituting the particular variety of suffering known as boredom.[6]

[6] I thus agree with Reginster (*Affirmation of Life*, 120) and Young (*Schopenhauer*, 212) that boredom is painful in the same way any state is painful: namely, by involving dissatisfaction of the will. This is fortunate, as Schopenhauer both explicitly denies that pain can have any other origin, and explicitly

On this view, boredom is a potentially composite state. Each faculty corresponds to a distinct will to engage in a distinct activity. The dissatisfaction of any of these wills can contribute to boredom. There are, however, significant differences in the degree of these wills' contributions. Thus, Schopenhauer emphasizes that the struggle against boredom is really a struggle against the inactivity of our *most prominent* faculties: "every unoccupied individual will choose a game for exercising his powers, in accordance with the kind that is predominant within him"(PP I: 293). There is, however, one faculty that is predominant in all human beings: cognition. The inactivity of cognition is, consequently, the dominant source of human boredom.

Schopenhauer identifies three "fundamental physiological powers", basic kinds of faculty we might play with to keep boredom at bay: the faculties of "reproduction"[*Reproduktionskraft*], active in "eating, drinking, digesting, resting, and sleeping"(PP I: 293); the faculties of "irritability"[*Irritabilität*], active in "hiking, jumping, wrestling, dancing, fencing, riding, and athletic games of every kind"(PP I: 293); and the faculties of "sensibility"[*Sensibilität*], active in "contemplating, thinking, feeling, writing literature, creating, playing music, learning, reading, meditating, inventing, philosophizing, and so on"(PP I: 293-294). Each kind of faculty might be more or less developed in a particular individual, and thus play a greater or lesser role in causing or relieving her boredom. The role of sensibility, however, will always be greater than that of the other two powers. It is sensibility "whose predominance distinguishes human beings from the

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affirms boredom's painful character. I take the first point to be uncontroversial. For the second, consider the following:

> satisfaction or happiness can never be anything more than the liberation from a pain [*Schmerz*] or need [*Noth*]: and this includes not only every actual, manifest suffering, but also every desire whose importunity disturbs our peace, and in fact even the deadly boredom that turns our existence into a burden. (WWR I: 345)

By including boredom on this list, Schopenhauer identifies it as either pain or need. Schopenhauer, however, holds that need is always painful ("the basis of all willing is need [*Bedürftigkeit*], lack [*Mangel*], and thus pain [*Schmerz*]"[WWR I: 338]). Identifying boredom as either pain or need means identifying it as either pain or something painful. In either case, it must involve dissatisfaction of some will.

other animal species"(PP I: 294): although the degree of sensibility's predominance may vary sharply between individuals, the basic fact of its predominance is the distinguishing mark of the species. Sensibility corresponds to the faculty of cognition: "our powers of cognition belong to sensibility"(PP I: 294). Cognition is thus the predominant human faculty. As such, it is also the faculty it is most distressing not to use. Above all else, boredom is the distressing dissatisfaction of the will to cognize.

The primacy of the will to cognize in Schopenhauer's account of boredom is confirmed by mental activity's special role in boredom's relief. The bored engage in a wide range of activities in order to bring boredom to an end. Schopenhauer suggests, however, that most of these activities are pursued instrumentally. The bored engage in non-mental activity for the sake of generating mental activity:

> intellectual obtuseness gives rise to that inner emptiness, pronounced in innumerable faces and betraying itself through the constant lively attention to even the most trivial events in the external world, an emptiness that is the true source of boredom and constantly craves external stimulation in order to stir intellect and mind through anything at all [*um Geist und Gemüth durch irgend etwas in Bewegung zu bringen*]. Hence it is not fastidious in its choice, as attested by the pitiful pastimes that people resort to, and also by the nature of their sociability and conversation, and no less so by the people who stand around in doorways or gape out of windows. (PP I: 287-288)

The bored engage in a variety of pastimes, socialize, gape out of windows, etc. However, they do all of this instrumentally, "in order to stir intellect and mind". This suggests that the non-mental activities pursued by the bored provide little direct relief of boredom. It is not, e.g., the use of the vocal cords in speech that makes socialization a source of relief. Whatever relief of boredom might be derived from putting our vocal cords to use is slight compared to that derived from putting our minds to use: this is why those trying to escape boredom use their vocal cords as a means of using their minds instead of using their minds as a means of using their vocal cords. As

we will see in Section III, Schopenhauer analyzes much of the non-mental activity engaged in by those fleeing boredom in these terms. He does so because he views dissatisfaction of the will to cognize as by far the biggest element of human boredom. This is not only true for individuals with especially developed cognitive faculties. Rather, as emphasized above, it is also true for those marked by "intellectual obtuseness". Cognition is the most prominent faculty for all human beings. Dissatisfaction of the will to cognize is, consequently, boredom's main constituent for human beings quite generally.

II. What does the Will to Cognize Will?

I have argued that Schopenhauer identifies dissatisfaction of the will to cognize as boredom's primary constituent. Before considering this view's textual merits further, it will help to say more about what exactly the will to cognize wills.

The will to cognize is a desire to engage in mental activity. Mental activity is understood broadly: the activities of sensibility range from philosophizing and writing literature to simply reading and feeling. Standard ways of distinguishing actively doing from passively experiencing are not relevant here. It is distinctive of cognition that it is active even in passive experience: the *presentation* of such experience to consciousness is among its chief forms of activity. Thus, Schopenhauer notes that

> cognition has multiple functions and never takes place wholly without effort [*Anstrengung*], which is needed for fixing attention [*Fixiren der Aufmerksamkeit*] and making the object clear [*Deutlichmachen des Objekts*], and then further for thought [*Denken*] and reflection [*Überlegen*] (WWR II: 218)

This list, though certainly not exhaustive, gives a sense of the different kinds of activity that might constitute mental occupation. Cognition is active in deploying our attention: the mind's

activity increases as absorption in objects of attention increases. Cognition is active in crafting clear representations: the mind's activity increases as representations become more detailed and distinct. Cognition is active in thought: the mind's activity increases as conceptual reflections become more elaborate and complex. All of these different processes require mental effort. As such, they all increase our level of mental activity. As Schopenhauer puts it, "The *intellect* . . . [has] degrees of *excitation* [*Grade der Erregung*] (from lethargy [*Schläfrigkeit*] up through capriciousness [*Laune*] and enthusiasm [*Begeisterung*])"(WWR II: 218). All of these different forms of exertion help move the intellect through these states of excitation, freeing it from the lethargy that would otherwise overcome it. The will to cognize can thus be satisfied by any of these activities as long as they are sufficiently demanding. What matters is that a high *degree* of mental excitation be achieved. The particular *kind* of mental exertion that brings this about is irrelevant. This is what distinguishes the will to cognize from the "intellectual needs"(PP I: 300) characteristic of the particularly intelligent. Those with specific intellectual needs desire to engage in specific kinds of mental activity: to philosophize, to write, to botanize, etc. The will to cognize, in contrast, aims at a high degree of mental activity of any kind.[7]

Schopenhauer makes no attempt to specify the particular degree of mental activity needed to avoid boredom. This is unsurprising, as Schopenhauer holds that boredom itself varies by degree. Thus, to return to the passage on life's constitutive states, Schopenhauer emphasizes that all three are presented in their most extreme forms. He notes that

[7] Schopenhauer holds that aesthetic experience anesthetizes the pains of dissatisfied willing. As such, even if aesthetic experience were boring, this would not distress us while aesthetically engaged. The above makes it clear, however, that aesthetic experience cannot be boring. Even the simplest aesthetic experiences involve concentrated attention and representational clarity. This directly satisfies the will to cognize. The will to cognize view thus captures Young's helpful distinction between *un*interested contemplation and *dis*interested contemplation (*Schopenhauer,* 212), explaining how disinterested contemplation differs from boredom. In fact, it explains this better than the will to will view, which must accept that aesthetic experience anesthetizes boredom without relieving it.

> We can assume three theoretical extremes to human life and regard them as its actual components [*sie als Elemente des wirklichen Menschenlebens betrachten*] . . . The life of the individual, far from remaining fixed in one of these extremes, only rarely touches on them, and is mostly just a stronger or weaker approximation [*schwaches und schwankendes Annähern*] of one or the other of these aspects (WWR I: 347-48)

Thus, although Schopenhauer introduces the state of interested engagement by discussing "the great passions" of epic heroes (WWR I: 347), he concludes by directing us to see a less intense version of the same state in the "needy willing of petty objects"(WWR I: 348) characteristic of ordinary life. The description of boredom in terms of "the greatest lethargy of the will and of cognition bound up to it"(WWR I: 347) is similarly a "theoretical extreme". Hence the talk of "the *greatest* lethargy"(my emphasis): other, lesser degrees of lethargy and boredom will be more common. The lowest levels of mental activity create the sort of "life-chilling boredom"(WWR I: 347) Schopenhauer describes in the extreme case. As the level of mental activity increases, however, boredom becomes less severe. Eventually, a level is reached where the part of boredom contributed by the will to cognize fades away completely. The exact point at which this transition occurs is a question for experimental psychology rather than philosophy. It is simply a matter of degree, of greater and lesser levels of mental excitation corresponding to greater and lesser levels of boredom.

To summarize, then, I have argued that Schopenhauer identifies dissatisfaction of the will to cognize as boredom's main constituent. The will to cognize is a desire to engage in mental activity. Mental activity is construed broadly, covering everything from feeling and perceptual representation to thought and creative production. The important question is the degree of mental exertion an activity involves, not the kind of activity it is: sufficiently intense feeling and sufficiently detailed perception will constitute high levels of mental activity, just like sufficiently complex thought and creativity. Boredom too will be a matter of degree: as the level of mental

activity increases, the level of boredom decreases; as the level of mental activity decreases, the level of boredom increases.

III. The Will to Cognize and Empty Longing

I have pointed to some features of Schopenhauer's account which suggest he identifies the dissatisfaction of a will to cognize as boredom's primary constituent. Schopenhauer holds that disused faculties are themselves the burden that plagues the bored, a view which is well-explained by his claim that each faculty corresponds to a will to engage in a specific kind of activity. He then identifies cognition as the most prominent human faculty, and claims that the bored engage in non-mental activities less as a direct source of relief than a means of setting their minds in motion. All of this suggests that dissatisfaction of the will corresponding to our cognitive faculty is the main constituent of human boredom.

The will to will view is not, however, without its own textual support: it is well-positioned to explain Schopenhauer's tendency to link boredom with "empty longing [*leeres Sehnen*]"(WWR I: 347) and "longing without a definite object [*Sehnen ohne bestimmtes Objekt*]"(WWR I: 189). The will to will involves a second-order desire to either have or act on first-order desires. For its purposes, *any* first-order desire will do: it does not matter what we desire, just that we desire something. The will to will is thus itself a "longing without a definite object": it is a desire to desire, but not a desire to desire anything in particular. By the same token it is an "empty longing": although the will to will has an object, that object is highly indefinite and insubstantial. In wanting it, there is nothing particular that we want: the desire is empty insofar as it has no *concrete* object. The will to will view, then, easily explains Schopenhauer's

tendency to link boredom with these kinds of longing. Boredom consists in the will to will's dissatisfaction, and these phrases are simply ways of describing the will to will.[8]

I agree that the will to will effectively captures what Schopenhauer means by "empty longing" and "longing without a definite object". Nonetheless, I argue that the will to cognize view is equally capable of explaining the link Schopenhauer draws between boredom and longing of this kind. This is because the will to cognize view is well-positioned to explain boredom's frequent expression in the will to will. Boredom is not constituted by dissatisfaction of the will to will. The will to will is, however, one of its most common effects.

As noted above, Schopenhauer sees cognition as "bound up with" will. By this, he means that desire is typically responsible for mental activity. Things grab our attention because we desire them. Feelings and affects fill our mind in response to assessments of how we stand in relation to desired objects. Our thoughts are deliberative in nature, efforts to determine the best means of realizing desired ends. As such, "lethargy of will" naturally leads to lethargy of cognition. With the satisfaction of desire, we lose that which had previously directed our attention and are no longer inspired to the feelings which had previously filled our minds. Some people are able to hold this lethargy off via disinterested engagement, replacing concern for how the world stands in relation to desire with direct interest in how the world is. Those who cannot do this, however, are given over to boredom once desire is satisfied. If cognition is fully bound to will, then it will be left unoccupied when will no longer has a use for it. For those incapable of disinterested engagement, the satisfaction of the will to cognize is incompatible with the satisfaction of all other desires.

[8] For discussion of this text, see Reginster (*Affirmation of Life*, 120-123). I agree with Reginster that these passages cannot refer to truly objectless desire rather than desire aimed at a highly indefinite object. Schopenhauer holds that phenomenal will *always* requires an object: "Every will is the will to something, it has an object [*Objekt*], a goal of its willing"(WWR I: 187).

Someone in this position who wishes to end the painful dissatisfaction of the will to cognize has only one option: she must come up with something else to desire, some object – any object – the pursuit of which can occupy her mind. Consequently, where disinterested engagement is impossible, the will to cognize finds expression in the will to will. Boredom is associated with a desire to desire, not because the frustration of this desire to desire is what boredom is, but because developing a new desire is often the only means to fulfill the desire which boredom is. Empty longing is the chief expression of the lethargy of cognition, which is in turn the chief consequence of the lethargy of will. It is the final step in a three-step process, and aims at liberation from the second step (lethargy of cognition) by way of terminating the first (lethargy of will).

Above, I discussed the instrumental structure of the non-mental activities pursued by the bored: the bored socialize, play cards, etc. as a way of setting their minds in motion. In other passages, Schopenhauer presents the effort to excite new desires as filling the same instrumental role. The bored try to develop new desires, but not because desire alone directly relieves their boredom. Rather, the bored try to develop new desires, because developing new desires is the best way to put their faculties – and especially their cognitive faculties – back in use.

> That limited minds are so much subject to boredom is due to the fact that their intellect is nothing but the medium of motives for their will. Now if for the time being there are no motives to be grasped, the will rests and the intellect takes a holiday, the latter because, like the former, it does not become active by itself; the result is terrible stagnation of all powers [*Stagnation aller Kräfte*] in the whole human being – boredom. In order to fight it, people present trivial motives, provisional and arbitrarily adopted, to the will in order to excite it and thereby also to activate [*in Thätigkeit zu versetzen*] the intellect, which has to comprehend them. (PP 1: 289)

The bored often cast about for something to desire: they present the will with arbitrary motives in the hopes that one of them will secure its excitation. The reason they do this, however, is not

because desire is itself a direct solution to boredom. Rather, desire is provoked in order to fight the "terrible stagnation of all powers". Those incapable of disinterested engagement lack any faculty capable of acting without desire's direction: none of their faculties can "become active by itself". In order to activate their faculties, they must first activate the only thing capable of moving those faculties: namely, desire. The excitation of desire is thus the only means of fighting boredom available to "limited minds". It is, however, a replaceable means for others: anyone capable of disinterested engagement can escape boredom even without desire being excited. This is because such people possess a faculty capable of initiating its own activity, and what reliving boredom requires is not the excitation of desire as such but the activity of our most prominent faculties. That so many people respond to boredom by longing for desire is simply evidence that most people lack faculties capable of acting in desire's absence.[9]

Schopenhauer thus treats the will to will in the same way he treats boredom's other *effects*. He offers structurally identical explanations for boredom's expression in desires for socialization, travel, and alcohol:

> what makes human beings sociable is their inability to bear solitude, and within solitude themselves. It is inner emptiness and tedium that drive them to society, and also to foreign lands and travel. Their mind lacks the elastic force [*Federkraft*] to impart its own movement; therefore, they seek to enhance it through wine, and many turn into alcoholics in this way. For the same reason they need constant excitement from outside, in fact the strongest excitement, i.e. that which comes from beings like themselves. Without this their mind collapses under its own weight and falls into an oppressive lethargy [*Lethargie*]. (PP I: 371)

[9] Woods ("Seriously Bored", 967) effectively highlights the will to will's instrumental role. However, he misses Schopenhauer's suggestion that mental occupation is the end the will to will typically serves. Woods sees the will to will as a means of *distraction*: we long to will, because willing helps us avoid confronting the emptiness of existence. As we have seen, however, this does not fit Schopenhauer's account of why boredom follows satisfaction: the unused faculties are *themselves* the burden faced by the bored. Using the faculties relieves the burden they *are*. They do not simply distract us from a burden separate from themselves.

Here again, Schopenhauer points to common effects of boredom and explains them as attempts to generate activity in minds that cannot move themselves. In the case of socialization and travel, the problem is that "external excitement" is needed: the mind cannot stimulate its own activity, so some external stimulus is required. The explanation of boredom's expression in alcohol consumption has the same basic structure: alcohol confers some degree of self-motion on minds that would otherwise require external stimuli to act. Schopenhauer consistently makes the same explanatory move: the common effects of boredom are simply different strategies for moving minds that cannot move themselves. That the effort to acquire new motives and desires stands in the same relation to boredom as socialization, travel, and alcohol consumption should make its status clear. It is one effect among many, one more strategy that might be employed to generate mental activity. It is an interesting strategy, and the will to will views do valuable work in analyzing it. Ultimately, however, this gets us no closer to understanding boredom itself than would analyzing any of its other effects.

The will to cognize view thus retains the will to will view's ability to explain the link Schopenhauer draws between boredom and "empty longing". Unlike the will to will view, however, it does this without obscuring Schopenhauer's suggestion that empty longing has an instrumental role. Boredom often finds expression in a will to will. This, however, is simply because willing is an effective means of generating mental activity.

IV. The Will to Cognize and Life's Constitutive Elements

The will to cognize view may seem to undermine Schopenhauer's defense of pessimism. For Schopenhauer sometimes appears to defend pessimism by asserting that human beings can only exist in one of two states: pain and boredom.

> life swings back and forth like a pendulum between pain and boredom; in fact, these are the ingredients out of which it is ultimately composed. (WWR I: 338)

On this account, human life is a whole composed of exclusively bad parts. A state of pain is harmful. A state of boredom is harmful. A life composed entirely out of pain and boredom will thus be harmful as well. Schopenhauer gets all he needs to establish pessimism simply by asserting that human life can be exhaustively divided into states of boredom and pain.

The will to cognize view undermines the exhaustiveness of this division, suggesting it is possible to be both unbored and free of other pains. Schopenhauer holds that desire is painful, but that disinterested cognition is painless. If boredom can be relieved *either* by desire-driven cognition *or* by disinterested cognition, then it can be relieved either by entering a painful state or by entering a painless one. Human life thus has three ingredients rather than two. It is no longer possible to establish that life is harmful on the whole simply by pointing to the harmful nature of its only two parts.

I fully grant that the will to cognize view blocks this particular defense of pessimism. In this, however, it is in line with Schopenhauer's own detailed account of life's constitutive elements. As noted above, Schopenhauer elsewhere claims that life is built out of *three* states:

> We can assume three theoretical extremes to human life and regard them as its actual components. First, the violent willing, the great passions . . . Next we have the second extreme, pure cognition, the comprehension of the Ideas conditioned by the liberation of cognition from the service of the will . . . Finally, the third, the

> greatest lethargy of the will and of cognition bound up with it, empty longing, life-chilling boredom" (WWR I: 347)

The three states Schopenhauer divides life into here are exactly the ones the will to cognize view leads us to expect: a state of boredom, a state where boredom is held at bay by desire, and a state where boredom is held at bay by disinterested cognition. This account of life's constitutive elements cannot sustain the quick argument from the exclusive badness of life's parts to the badness of life as a whole. Disinterested cognition is not a harmful state in the way that boredom and painful desire are. It can, however, still sustain a more complicated argument: Schopenhauer will need to show that the best whole which can be built from these parts is a harmful one despite one of the parts not itself being harmful. This more complicated argument is the one Schopenhauer actually makes. Thus, he goes out of his way to emphasize that disinterested cognition is both temporary and of merely negative value: it cannot fill all of life, and cannot compensate for the harmful nature of those parts spent outside it.

The will to cognize view of boredom, then, helps us see the real basis of Schopenhauer's pessimism. The will to cognize view makes it clear that there are two different ways of avoiding boredom. In so doing, it explains why Schopenhauer divides human life into three basic states rather than two. This tripartite division in turn explains why Schopenhauer cannot ground his pessimism in a quick argument to the effect that life must be harmful because all the states that constitute it are harmful. Schopenhauer needs a more complicated argument for pessimism because he has a more complicated account of human life. The will to cognize view of boredom is the source of this complication.

V. The Will to Cognize and the Burden of Existence

Schopenhauer frequently connects boredom to the burdensome or empty character of existence. Thus, Schopenhauer suggests that the overly satisfied will is

> seized with a terrible emptiness [*Leere*] and boredom [*Langeweile*]: i.e. its essence [*Wesen*] and its being itself [*Dasein selbst*] become an intolerable burden [*Last*] to it (WWR I: 338)

Elsewhere, Schopenhauer claims that boredom

> proves that existence in itself has no value [*das Dasein an sich selbst keinen Werth hat*], for boredom is precisely the sensation of the emptiness of existence [*der Leerheit desselben*] (PP II: 259)

In a recent challenge to the will to will view of boredom, Woods ("Seriously Bored", 965-966) relies on these passages to argue that Schopenhauer identifies boredom with a sensation of the emptiness of existence. In boredom, we are directly aware of life's worthlessness. This awareness is distressing, explaining boredom's painful character.

I would like to conclude by arguing that the will to cognize view is better positioned to explain these passages than the sensation of emptiness view. Woods is entirely correct that we need an alternative to the will to will account. However, the will to cognize view is the better candidate to fill this role.

Schopenhauer repeatedly suggests that boredom "turns our existence [*Dasein*] into a burden [*Last*]"(WWR I: 345). The will to cognize view easily explains these passages. Our faculties become a burden to us when left unused: as Schopenhauer puts it, "the idle powers become a burden *[Last]*"(PP I: 292). We are constituted by these faculties: they are directly identified with the parts that compose our bodies. Being burdened by them thus amounts to being burdened by our existence. In boredom, we are not burdened by existence because we are

distressed by the worthlessness of our lives. Rather, we are burdened by existence because we are distressed by the very faculties that make us up.

This interpretation should be preferred, because it is the one Schopenhauer relies on when offering a detailed account of why certain creatures experience mere existence as burdensome:

> The life of plants is expended in mere *existence* [*bloßen Dasein*], accordingly its enjoyment of the same is a purely and absolutely subjective, dull contentment. With animals, *cognition* is added, yet it remains limited entirely to motives, indeed the very closest. Thus they too find their full satisfaction in mere existence and it suffices to fill out their lives. Accordingly, they can spend many hours quite inactively, without experiencing discontent or impatience, although they do not think [*denken*] but merely intuit [*anschauen*]. Only in the very smartest animals like dogs and apes does the need for occupation, and therefore boredom as well, make itself felt [*macht sich schon das Bedürfnis der Beschäftigung, und somit die Langeweile fühlbar*]. This is why they like to play and also entertain themselves by gaping at passers-by, with which they enter the same class as human window-gapers. (PP II: 64)

Inability to bear mere existence tracks the development of cognitive faculties. The only explanation Schopenhauer offers for this is that the development of our faculties corresponds to a growing need for occupation. This need for occupation is what explains our boredom rather than the reverse: only in the smartest animals does "the need for occupation, and *therefore* boredom as well, make itself felt"(my emphasis). This order of explanation is what blocks the sensation of emptiness view from making sense of these passages: the need for occupation is boredom's source, not its consequence. As a creature's mental faculties grow, so too does its need to occupy those faculties. Boredom follows soon after, for it is the distress felt when this need is not met. Creatures with highly developed mental faculties cannot tolerate mere existence because mere existence bores them. Mere existence bores them, however, only because it is insufficient to keep their faculties occupied.

Thus, I take it Schopenhauer is being careful with his language when he claims that the need for occupation only "makes itself felt" in the more intelligent animals. The need for

occupation is not something new that first appears in the more intelligent animals. Rather, the less intelligent animals possess this need as well, it simply never makes itself felt in them. This is because needs only make themselves felt when not met: we feel needs via distress at their dissatisfaction. Thus, in explaining why the less intelligent animals are not distressed by mere existence, Schopenhauer emphasizes that even mere existence involves a certain level of activity. In the state of mere existence, the less intelligent animals do not think. They do, however, intuit, perceiving the world around them. This low level of mental activity is enough to render mere existence tolerable for the less intelligent animals. This is because it is enough to meet their limited need for occupation: it constitutes a significant deployment of relatively insignificant faculties. As our faculties develop, however, the amount of activity required to occupy them grows as well. Eventually, a point is reached when the level of activity mere existence provides is no longer sufficient to meet the need for occupation our faculties carry with them. It is at this point that the need makes itself felt, and boredom enters the scene.

In keeping with this, when Schopenhauer turns to the human case, he notes that mere existence is even less tolerable for the genius than the average human being. This is because mere existence is even less sufficient to occupy a genius' cognitive faculties:

> The quite abnormal enhancement of his cognitive powers deprives him of the possibility of filling his time with mere *existence* [*bloße Dasein*] and its purposes; his intellect requires constant and strong occupation [*beständiger und starker Beschäftigung*]. (PP II: 68)

What renders mere existence intolerable is possession of faculties that extend far beyond what mere existence requires. In being burdened by mere existence, then, what we are really being burdened by is our faculties: to suffer from existence is to suffer from existing as a set of faculties that are insufficiently occupied by merely being alive. Schopenhauer's detailed account

of how boredom "turns our existence into a burden", then, neatly matches the understanding of this claim which the will to cognize view suggests.

The will to cognize view is similarly well-positioned to explain Schopenhauer's claim that boredom proves existence's lack of value. Schopenhauer claims that our susceptibility to boredom "proves that existence in itself has no value, for boredom is precisely the sensation of the emptiness of existence"(PP II: 259). As Woods reads this passage, boredom proves the worthlessness of existence because it is a direct sensation of that worthlessness ("Seriously Bored", 966). As becomes clear in the surrounding text, however, Schopenhauer's proof does not require this interpretation. Schopenhauer is not making a quasi-empirical argument: the claim is not that boredom proves the worthlessness of existence because it provides direct sensory experience of that worthlessness. Rather, Schopenhauer is making a transcendental argument: boredom proves the worthlessness of existence, because the worthlessness of existence is a condition of the possibility of boredom. Thus, Schopenhauer continues as follows: "If life, in the craving for which our essence and existence consist, had a *positive* value and real substance in itself [*einen positiven Werth und realen Gehalt in sich selbst*], then there could be no boredom; instead, mere existence in itself [*das bloße Dasein, an sich selbst*] would have to fulfil and satisfy us"(PP II: 259, my emphasis). Schopenhauer's goal is to establish that "mere existence in itself" – simply being alive – possesses no *positive* value. He does this by pointing to the possibility of boredom, and noting that this possibility depends on existence lacking positive worth. For this argument to work, Schopenhauer does not need boredom to be a *direct* sensation of life's emptiness. All he needs is for boredom to be a sensation that presupposes that emptiness. Boredom is "the sensation of the emptiness of existence": it is the way life's emptiness makes an impact on our feelings. The argument Schopenhauer basis on this claim works just as well

whether this impact is direct or indirect: if we feel the emptiness of existence via boredom only in the same indirect way that we feel an explosion via its shockwaves, this will still be enough to get Schopenhauer's argument off the ground. As long as boredom could not be felt if mere existence possessed genuinely positive value, Schopenhauer has all that his argument requires.

The will to cognize view explains this claim about the preconditions of boredom. It does this because it explains Schopenhauer's general claim that positive good would not bore. Schopenhauer holds that all good is essentially *negative*. Good states are valued only as negations of bad ones: what we appreciate about them is the *absence* of things we find distressing rather than the presence of things we find delightful.[10] In a variety of passages, he suggests that the good's negativity is responsible for it quickly boring us once obtained:

> all happiness is of a negative [*negative*] rather than positive [*positiver*] nature, and for this reason cannot give lasting satisfaction and gratification [*dauernde Befriedigung und Beglückung*], but rather only ever a release from a pain or lack, which must be followed either by a new pain or by *languor*, empty yearning and boredom [*languor, leeres Sehnen und Langeweile*] (WWR I: 346)

We are rapidly bored by the good because it fails to offer lasting gratification. The good's failure to provide lasting gratification is, in turn, a consequence of its negative character.

The will to cognize view explains these claims. Thus, Schopenhauer repeatedly notes that a distinctive feature of the positive is its ability to "mak[e] itself felt"(PP II: 262) and draw attention to itself:

> If the entire body is healthy and in one piece except for some small sore, or otherwise painful spot, the health of the whole does not enter consciousness, but attention [*Aufmerksamkeit*] is focused continuously on the pain of the injured spot and our entire enjoyment of life is lost. – Equally, when all our affairs go well except for *one* that runs counter to our intentions, this one will come to mind again and again, even if it is of little importance; we frequently think about it and think little about all the other more important things that go according to our

[10] Young (*Schopenhauer*, 215) and Guyer ("Back to Truth", 172-173) take Schopenhauer to acknowledge some positive goods. There is no need to settle this question here: what matters is how positive good would impact our capacity for boredom, not whether we ever possess it.

> plans. . . . in both we see that [the will's] satisfaction acts always merely negatively [*negativ*] and hence is not felt directly [*direkt empfunden*], but at most becomes conscious by way of reflection [*Reflexion*]. Its inhibition, on the other hand, is something positive [*Positive*] and, therefore, makes its presence known [*sich selbst Ankündigende*]. Every enjoyment consists merely in the removal of this inhibition, in liberation from it, and consequently is short-lived. (PP I: 356)

The positive is distinguished from the negative by an ability to generate feeling and hold attention. Even the greatest of negative goods "does not enter consciousness" on its own and "is not directly felt". Even the smallest of positive evils "makes its presence known" and "come[s] to mind again and again". To the extent that negative goods enter consciousness at all, they do so only by way of reflection. Negative goods consist in the absence of positive ills. They thus draw attention to themselves only indirectly, via reflection on the contrast between them and the pains they relieved. Over time, however, our ability to call these past pains to mind diminishes. Negative goods, consequently, only briefly make themselves felt and draw attention to themselves. They do so only via contrast with positive pains, and our ability to appreciate this contrast is of brief duration.

That negative goods quickly become boring is, then, easy to understand on the will to cognize view. Shortly after being acquired, negative goods cease to inspire significant mental activity. They generate no feeling, which Schopenhauer listed among the activities of sensibility. They do not focus the attention, which Schopenhauer identified among the varieties of mental exertion. They make no impact on consciousness whatsoever. They are, consequently, utterly dull: negative goods bore precisely because they cannot set our minds in motion.

Positive goods, in contrast, would have no difficulty generating mental activity. Like positive ills, they would focus our attention and make themselves felt. It is Schopenhauer's assumption that any positive good would generate these mental activities in a degree sufficient to hold boredom at bay. Any positive good would be highly absorbing, able to "fulfill and satisfy

us" all on its own. In this regard, there is an asymmetry between Schopenhauer's view of positive good and his view of positive ill: although Schopenhauer holds that *some* positive ills are sufficiently absorbing to avert boredom, he cannot hold that all positive ills are able to generate this level of mental exertion. Thus, the pains of boredom, though certainly able to attract a certain amount of attention and make themselves felt to a certain degree, cannot do either of these things to an extent that would make boredom self-relieving. That Schopenhauer assumes this asymmetry is perhaps arbitrary: insofar as he denies the existence of positive good, he can have no basis for claims about the level of mental activity positive goods would generate. It is not, however, inconsistent: as we saw earlier, Schopenhauer holds that what matters is the *degree* of exertion a particular mental activity requires, not the *kind* of mental activity that it is. Thus, even though positive ills and positive goods generate the same *kinds* of mental activities – feeling and the focusing of attention – it is still consistent for Schopenhauer to suggest that all positive goods would hold boredom at bay even though only some positive ills are able to do so. He simply needs to hold that all positive goods generate a high degree of these activities, while positive ills are more variable in the intensity of mental activity they generate.

We can now see how the will to cognize view explains Schopenhauer's argument. Schopenhauer claims that the possibility of boredom proves mere existence lacks positive value. It does this, because if mere existence possessed positive value, then our minds would be kept in a constantly elevated state of activity. Any positive good would generate feeling and concentrate attention in a degree sufficient to hold boredom at bay. If mere existence was a positive good, then simply being alive would be enough to produce this effect. Merely being alive is not, however, enough to produce this effect: we are perfectly capable of being alive and bored at once. The possibility of boredom thus establishes that mere existence lacks positive value.

The will to cognize view of boredom, then, makes sense of both features of Schopenhauer's account that seem to support the sensation of emptiness view. It explains both Schopenhauer's claim that boredom makes our existence into a burden, and his suggestion that boredom proves existence's lack of value. It does both of these things in a way that better fits the rest of Schopenhauer's account, neatly matching his detailed discussion of why human beings are burdened by mere existence. The will to cognize view should, consequently, be the preferred alternative to the dominant will to will accounts.[11]

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