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## 5 **Schopenhauer on the Futility of Suicide**

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### 8 Abstract:

9 Schopenhauer repeatedly claims that suicide is both foolish and futile. But while many  
10 commentators have expressed sympathy for his charge of foolishness, most regard his charge of  
11 futility as indefensible even within his own system. In this paper, I offer a defense of  
12 Schopenhauer's futility charge, based on metaphysical and psychological considerations. On the  
13 metaphysical front, Schopenhauer's view implies that psychological connections extend beyond  
14 death. Drawing on Parfit's discussion of personal identity, I argue that those connections have  
15 personal significance, such that suicide does not allow one to, as Hamlet hopes, simply "not to  
16 be." On the psychological front, I argue that a distinction between agents' intentions and  
17 underlying desires makes room for Schopenhauer to claim that paradigmatic suicidal agents  
18 ultimately desire the opposite of what suicide accomplishes. I conclude by showing how the  
19 resulting account of futility can buttress the charge of foolishness as well. My interpretation still  
20 leaves Schopenhauer vulnerable to certain objections, but shows that his account is significantly  
21 more defensible than previous commentators have realized.

22

### 23 Keywords:

24 Schopenhauer, suicide, personal identity, Parfit, palingenesis

25

26 A cornerstone of Schopenhauer's philosophy is the claim that life is overwhelmingly  
27 miserable. As Schopenhauer recognized, that claim might seem to justify suicide.<sup>1</sup> Quoting  
28 Shakespeare, Schopenhauer writes:

29

30 our condition is so miserable that complete non-being would be decidedly preferable.

31 Now if suicide really offered this, so that the alternative 'to be or not to be' lay before us

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<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer's philosophical interest in suicide predates his mature philosophy, however, stemming from his father's death in 1805. See (D. E. Cartwright, 2010, pp. 88–94).

1           in the full sense of the words, then it would be the clear choice, a highly desirable  
2           completion ('a consummation devoutly to be wish'd'). (WWR1 2:383)<sup>2</sup>

3  
4 Schopenhauer's main work concludes with an endorsement of ascetic resignation, which can  
5 involve "a form of suicide" in which someone "stops living simply because he has stopped  
6 willing altogether" (WWR1 2:474). This form of suicide is an exception, however. Any other  
7 form, Schopenhauer insists, is a "futile and foolish act [*vergebliche und thörichte Handlung*]"  
8 (WWR1 2:472).

9           Schopenhauer's stated opposition to non-ascetic suicide has two distinct prongs: futility  
10 and foolishness. Foolishness is a broadly deontic epistemological property: an agent who acts  
11 foolishly should have known better. Futility, however, need have no deontic epistemological  
12 dimension: sometimes, actions fail to achieve an agent's aims for reasons nobody could have  
13 foreseen. Many futile actions, therefore, are not foolish. That said, one way for an action to be  
14 foolish is for its futility to be knowable, and Schopenhauer sometimes suggests that suicide is  
15 foolish *because* it is futile: "a futile and therefore [*darum*] foolish act" (WWR1 2:331). Even so,  
16 the logical independence of these properties suggests Schopenhauer's claims of foolishness and  
17 futility are worth evaluating separately.

18           Commentators generally agree that Schopenhauer's charge of foolishness is more  
19 important and more defensible than his charge of futility. Dale Jacquette suggests that the issue  
20 of futility is irrelevant to Schopenhauer's main objection to suicide.<sup>3</sup> Though Jacquette questions  
21 the plausibility of the foolishness charge,<sup>4</sup> other commentators have offered at least qualified  
22 defenses. For example, in a recent paper, Michał Masny argues that, given Schopenhauer's  
23 broader views, suicide is indeed foolish. This is because, Masny argues, Schopenhauer believes  
24 that intense suffering can lead one to an ascetic denial of the will that provides the ultimate  
25 escape from suffering. Hence, committing suicide to end suffering is, to use an analogy

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<sup>2</sup> References to Schopenhauer's work will use the following abbreviations: WWR1 = *World as Will and Representation*, Volume I; WWR2, *World as Will and Representation*, Volume II; OBM = "Prize Essay on the Basis of Morals"; PP2 = *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Volume 2. All references are to the volume and page numbers of the Hübscher edition. Quotations are from the Cambridge translations.

<sup>3</sup> (Jacquette, 2005, p. 134).

<sup>4</sup> (Jacquette, 2005, p. 142).

1 Schopenhauer suggests, like a sick person prematurely ending a potentially curative surgery  
2 (WWR1 2:472).<sup>5</sup>

3 Merely defending Schopenhauer’s foolishness charge, however, leaves it open whether  
4 the futility charge is also defensible. Yet this prong of Schopenhauer’s objection to suicide has  
5 generated more skepticism than the foolishness prong. To be sure, Schopenhauer claims that life  
6 in general is “futile, in vain, and contradictory” (WWR2 3:732), from which it would arguably  
7 follow that *all* actions, including suicide, are futile. But while Schopenhauer’s views make it  
8 clear how, say, the pursuit of happiness through fame is futile, it is hard to see how that would  
9 apply to suicide. In the first extended Anglophone discussion of the topic, Michael Fox writes  
10 that, contra Schopenhauer, “suicide is anything but futile, considering that the successful suicide  
11 accomplishes exactly what he intended, namely, to destroy his individual life, terminate his  
12 personal consciousness and his suffering”.<sup>6</sup> Three decades later, Paulo Stellino and Michael  
13 Cholbi both reconsider and concur with Fox’s assessment.<sup>7</sup>

14 My aim in this paper is to respond to Fox’s influential objection by explaining how the  
15 futility of suicide is implied by some of Schopenhauer’s psychological and metaphysical  
16 doctrines. Of course, such an approach amounts to a *defense* of Schopenhauer’s views only  
17 insofar as those other doctrines are themselves plausible – a full defense of a view must address  
18 more than its internal coherence. While some of Schopenhauer’s metaphysical views are, I  
19 concede, difficult to defend from a naturalistic contemporary perspective, his psychological  
20 views are not far from some widely accepted and broadly naturalistic contemporary views.  
21 Hence, Schopenhauer’s futility claim ends up being more defensible than many readers have  
22 supposed, even if it remains vulnerable to certain objections. In addition, appreciating the  
23 relation of the futility claim to Schopenhauer’s larger system helps bring to light aspects of that  
24 system that are often missed by Schopenhauer commentators.

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<sup>5</sup> (Masny, 2021). Other commentators have explored this line as well, though with less emphasis on the charge of foolishness. See, e.g., (Young, 2013, p. 128), (Stellino, 2020, pp. 108–110), and (Janaway, 2022b, p. 121).

<sup>6</sup> (Fox, 1980, p. 168).

<sup>7</sup> (Stellino, 2020, p. 103), (Cholbi, 2021, p. 153). See also (van der Lugt, 2021, p. 381). Fox, Stellino, and Cholbi all assume that futility is to be evaluated relative to the agent’s actual aims. Julian Young, however, seems to suggest that its futility holds relative to “the problem of cosmic suffering,” whether or not the suicidal agent cares about that cosmic problem (Young, 2013, p. 129). I set aside this suggestion here, though it is compatible with what I offer below.

1 Four preliminary points. First, though moral questions about suicide mattered to  
2 Schopenhauer, I set those questions aside.<sup>8</sup> second, I also generally set aside Schopenhauer's  
3 views on asceticism and ascetic suicide, which raise their own difficulties. Hence, "suicide" in  
4 what follows refers only to non-ascetic suicide. Third, it is not clear in Schopenhauer's  
5 discussions whether he holds that *every* instance of non-ascetic suicide is both futile and foolish,  
6 or whether he holds that *paradigmatic* instances of non-ascetic suicide are both futile and foolish  
7 – instances where someone decides "not to be" in order to escape what Hamlet describes as the  
8 "heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to."<sup>9</sup> To simplify my discussion, I  
9 take the latter reading, leaving open that some instances of suicide might, for Schopenhauer, lack  
10 either futility or foolishness.<sup>10</sup> Finally, though Schopenhauer's charge of futility is separable  
11 from his charge of foolishness, I will return to the latter issue at the end, where I explain how my  
12 defense of Schopenhauer can complement defenses of the foolishness charge like Masny's.

13 My discussion has two parts. I begin by discussing Schopenhauer's views on the  
14 metaphysics of survival and death. I then turn to his views on the psychology of suicide.

15

## 16 1. The Metaphysics of Survival and Death

17

18 Fox's objection hinges on a necessary condition for futility: an act is futile only if it fails  
19 to achieve what an agent's aims at or desires.<sup>11</sup> Fox's objection to Schopenhauer therefore can be  
20 broken into two parts: first, the claim that suicidal agents aim at or desire the destruction of their  
21 individual life, consciousness, and suffering; and second, the claim that suicide results in exactly  
22 that destruction.

23 In this section, I set aside the question of what suicidal agents hope to accomplish, and  
24 consider what, on Schopenhauer's view, the result of suicide is. I will argue that the destruction  
25 of the individual that results from suicide is less *personally significant*, given Schopenhauer's  
26 metaphysics, than it is on most other views. Personal significance can be understood as those  
27 relations that are most relevant to the prudential question, "how does that bear on me?", though it

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<sup>8</sup> The main presentation of Schopenhauer's view is PP2 6:325-30. See (Stellino, 2020, pp. 78–90) for discussion.

<sup>9</sup> Act 3, Scene 1, 70.

<sup>10</sup> After all, Schopenhauer does not condemn heroic self-sacrifice (see, e.g., WWR 1:402, 545).

<sup>11</sup> This condition is not sufficient for futility, however. As a referee for *Mind* points out, a futile action must also be one that was *bound* to fail, as opposed to just happening to fail. The parts of Schopenhauer's doctrine I appeal to below do, I believe, satisfy this condition, since they are meant to be modally robust.

1 is a non-trivial question whether those same relations stretch beyond the limits of individual  
2 persons. If suicidal death is of less personal significance than we ordinarily assume, then suicide  
3 may result in less than a paradigmatic suicidal agent ultimately desires – though whether that is  
4 so will depend on what those desires are.

5

### 6 *1.1.Fox's Objection and Parfit on Psychological Connections*

7

8 Fox is right that, on Schopenhauer's view, suicide results in the end of an individual's  
9 life, consciousness, and suffering. Schopenhauer ties our individual conscious lives to our living  
10 bodies (see, e.g., WWR1 2:23-24, 118, 123), so the destruction of the latter entails the  
11 destruction of the former. Hence, Schopenhauer claims that the person who commits suicide  
12 "negates... the individual" (WWR1 2:472). Nonetheless, Schopenhauer claims, suicide does not  
13 destroy our inner essence, our nature in ourselves. It leaves "the thing in itself untouched"  
14 (WWR1 2:472). This inner essence is the will, or will to life, which "is the sole metaphysical  
15 entity or thing in itself", which is such that "no violence can break it" (WWR1 2:474). For those  
16 who value life, he claims, this fact can provide consolation in the face of death:

17

18 since human beings are nature itself... anyone who has grasped and retained this  
19 perspective can... rightly console himself over his own death and that of his friends by  
20 looking at the immortal life of nature that he himself is (WWR1 2:325-36).<sup>12</sup>

21

22 On Schopenhauer's view, however, those same metaphysical facts imply the futility of suicide.

23 Fox compares Schopenhauer's doctrine with the modern physicalist view that, since  
24 "matter and energy are interchangeable and whatever exists is ultimately made of the same  
25 'stuff', everyone is, in some abiding sense, one with the cosmos".<sup>13</sup> This comparison reinforces  
26 Fox's objection to Schopenhauer. For few people hoping for immortality would be encouraged  
27 by learning that they are constituted by the same stuff as the rest of the cosmos. Similarly, few  
28 people attempting to end their individual existence would take this modern view as a reason to  
29 abandon their attempts. To put it in my terms: the fact that their constituent stuff is of the same

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<sup>12</sup> For a general discussion of why Schopenhauer takes these facts to be consoling, see (Janaway, 2022b).

<sup>13</sup> (Fox, 1980, p. 157), but cf. (Janaway, 2022b, p. 125) and WWR2 3:549.

1 type as the rest of the cosmos, and that this stuff will persist beyond their death, is of negligible  
2 personal significance. If Schopenhauer's view is indeed comparable to this physicalist view, then  
3 his charge of futility would be implausible by his own lights, as Fox claims.

4         However, Fox's comparison is misleading, both philosophically and interpretively.  
5 Setting aside interpretive questions for now, consider the philosophical question: is the end of  
6 one's individual life necessarily the end of everything personally significant? There is a case to  
7 be made for a negative answer, based on a view of persons that is several steps removed from  
8 Schopenhauer's: that of Derek Parfit.<sup>14</sup> Parfit describes hypothetical cases of personal fission and  
9 fusion.<sup>15</sup> In fission, one person's brain is divided and put in two bodies, resulting in two people.  
10 In fusion, two people merge their brains and bodies. Appealing to some broadly naturalistic  
11 assumptions, Parfit argues that the original individuals (the 'ancestors') do not survive in either  
12 case. However, he argues, in both cases, the ancestors can be *psychologically connected* to the  
13 'descendent' people, and this connection has the same sort of value that ordinary survival has to  
14 us – hence, in my terms, that having connected descendants shares the same type of personal  
15 significance as ordinary individual survival.<sup>16</sup> Memory (or memory-like) connections are the  
16 most obvious form of significant psychological connection between ancestors and descendants,  
17 but Parfit grants that other types of connection may be significant and so allow for survival in,  
18 e.g., cases of amnesia.<sup>17</sup> Hence, Parfit claims there are ways in which an individual can be  
19 destroyed that are, with respect to personal significance, closer to ordinary survival than to  
20 complete annihilation.

21         Consider what Parfit's conclusions might mean for the futility of suicide. Say that a  
22 suicidal person is offered an opportunity to end their individual existence and undergo Parfitian  
23 fission, yielding two psychologically connected descendants, both of whose lives would be filled  
24 with suffering. Though this act might result in the end of the suicidal person's *individual*  
25 conscious suffering, the suicidal person might be reasonably convinced that the act of fission

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<sup>14</sup> Parfit's metaphysics of persons differs from Schopenhauer's in many respects, but it is noteworthy that both find affinities between their views and certain Buddhist doctrines (see (Parfit, 1986, p. 273)). I am indebted here to (Persson, 2021) for demonstrating the fruitfulness of putting Parfit and Schopenhauer in conversation.

<sup>15</sup> (Parfit, 1986, pp. 254–255, 1986, p. 298).

<sup>16</sup> "The value to me of my relation to a resulting person depends both (1) on my degree of connectedness to this person, and (2) on the value, in my view, of this person's physical and psychological features." (Parfit, 1986, p. 299).

<sup>17</sup> (Parfit, 1986, p. 208).

1 would be futile. They might be so convinced even if they could ensure that both descendants  
2 would be amnesic, lacking any memories of their ancestors.

3           With that philosophical point in place, we can return to interpretive issues. Schopenhauer  
4 would reject most of Parfit’s naturalistic framework, but his view of what happens in death is  
5 closer to Parfit’s fission and fusion cases than to the physicalist view Fox invokes. This is  
6 because, for Parfit, what matters most in survival are psychological connections, regardless of  
7 whether these hold between stages of a single individual. By contrast, on the physicalist view  
8 Fox invokes, an individual who dies would have no psychological connections to any succeeding  
9 being. Now, Schopenhauer flatly denies that there are any memory connections that extend  
10 beyond an individual’s death: “just as the individual has no memory of his existence before birth,  
11 neither will he be able to remember his present existence after death” (WWR2 3:561). However,  
12 Schopenhauer does hold there are other psychological connections, which I turn to next.

13

#### 14           1.2. *Psychological Connections Beyond Death*

15

16           What types of psychological connections does Schopenhauer think stretch beyond the  
17 death of individual? There are at least two: one that holds between individuals, and another that  
18 holds between individuals and something deeper than individuals.

19           First, on psychological connections between individuals: Schopenhauer thinks that  
20 idealism and our shared essence of will make possible some interpersonal psychological relations  
21 that only idealist views can account for. One of these connections happens in compassion, in  
22 which someone *literally* feels another’s token states of suffering (see, e.g., OBM 4:211-12) –  
23 something possible only because, Schopenhauer claims, “all plurality is apparent” and “in all the  
24 individuals of this world... only one and the same truly existing essence really manifests itself”  
25 (OBM 4:268).<sup>18</sup> Tellingly, Schopenhauer also takes the compassionate person to view others as  
26 “I once more,” aligning psychological links with personal significance (see OBM 4:271).  
27 Though compassionate actions are rare, in Schopenhauer’s view, some amount of compassion is

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<sup>18</sup> For more discussion, see, e.g., (D. Cartwright, 2012) and (Marshall, 2021).

1 present in all humans (OBM 4:252-53), implying that everyone is directly psychologically  
2 connected to at least one other individual.<sup>19</sup>

3 In addition to connections through compassion, Schopenhauer invokes his metaphysics to  
4 explain a rarer sort of psychological connection: paranormal events. Schopenhauer takes some  
5 reports of such events at face value:

6  
7 the vegetative life... is a life shared by all, in virtue of which they can even communicate  
8 under exceptional circumstances, for instance, in the direct communication of dreams, or  
9 when the thoughts of the magnetist go directly into the somnambulist, or finally in the  
10 magnetic or even magical influences that come from intentional willing. Such a thing...  
11 is wholly different in kind from every other physical influence in being a true action at a  
12 distance in which the will... performs its actions in its metaphysical capacity as the  
13 omnipresent substrate of the whole of nature (WWR2 3:371-72).

14  
15 Many contemporary readers might think that Schopenhauer is wrong to give credence to reports  
16 of such paranormal psychological connections. Regardless, the fact that he does so shows that he  
17 allows for direct psychological connections beyond the boundaries of individuals.

18 At first pass, the psychological connections Schopenhauer posits in compassion and  
19 paranormal events might seem to be restricted to simultaneously-existing people, and so not  
20 carry over to the case of suicide. However, Schopenhauer follows Kant in claiming that time is  
21 ideal, not pertaining to things in themselves: “The most thorough response to the question of the  
22 continued existence of the individual after death lies in Kant’s great doctrine of the ideality of  
23 time... The concepts of ceasing to be and continuing on can be applied only to appearances”  
24 (WWR2 3:564). Hence, whatever psychological connections support compassion or paranormal  
25 events in virtue of idealism and the shared essence of will could also extend beyond the present,  
26 and so, it would seem, beyond death.

27 Next, on psychological connections between individuals and something deeper than  
28 individuals: even though Schopenhauer believes that “consciousness presupposes individuality”

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<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Schopenhauer invokes his idealist metaphysical monism to support the doctrine of eternal justice, according to which, “tormentor and the tormented are one. The former is mistaken in thinking he does not share the torment, the latter in thinking he does not share the guilt” (WWR1 2:418-19). The claim that they “share the torment” can be understood as some kind of psychological connection.

1 (WWR2 3:370), he also held that some sort of psychological state was present even after the  
2 death of the individual – a state similar to one sometimes ascribed to the divine intellect:

3  
4 when we forfeit the intellect through death, we are thereby only transferred [*versetzt*] to  
5 the primal state without cognition, which however is not therefore simply unconscious;  
6 instead it will be a state elevated beyond that form, one where the contrast between  
7 subject and object disappears... see the formulation of Giordano Bruno...: ‘The divine  
8 mind, and the absolute unity, without any difference is itself that which knows and that  
9 which is known.’ (PP2 6:292)

10  
11 Note the word “transferred,” which indicates a connection of some sort to a new psychological  
12 (or quasi-psychological) state. This resulting “not... simply unconscious” state does not count as  
13 ordinary individual consciousness, by Schopenhauer’s lights, but *our being transferred* to it  
14 would seem to have personal significance. In fact, Schopenhauer’s invocation of Bruno suggests  
15 it would have the significance of acquiring or merging with a super-human mind (though, in  
16 Schopenhauer’s view, this mind would not be blissful).<sup>20</sup>

17 The transfer to this not-unconscious state would presumably involve a loss of memory.  
18 That would seem to make the loss of our individual intellect, on Schopenhauer’s view, similar to  
19 a case of Parfitian fusion plus amnesia, and so of at least some personal significance.<sup>21</sup> Given  
20 that “the in-itself of life, the will, existence itself, is a constant suffering, partly miserable, partly  
21 horrible” (WWR1 2:315), however, this would seem to mean that suicide does not provide an  
22 escape from all suffering – something of personal significance to the suicidal agent survives, and  
23 continues to suffer. All this assumes, of course, that Parfit is right in taking direct psychological  
24 connections to have personal significance, and though that view has been widely accepted since  
25 “the justly world-famous work of Locke” (WWR2 3:668), it could be rejected.<sup>22</sup> Yet given that

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<sup>20</sup> So it would be too strong to say, as Dale Jacquette does, that this state “is not like anything at all” (Jacquette, 2005, p. 125).

<sup>21</sup> Schopenhauer rejects the Cartesian view that the intellect is our proper self (see (Zöllner, 1999)). In addition, there are passages that suggest that the conscious ‘I’ itself survives death in some non-individual way. For instance, Schopenhauer writes that “the subject... does not lie in either space or time because it is present complete and undivided in each representing being” (WWR1 2:60). See also WWR2 3:557, 580.

<sup>22</sup> Within the European tradition, the main alternative would be to link personal significance to an immaterial soul whose identity did not require psychological connections. Both Parfit and Schopenhauer reject this view (see (Parfit, 1986, pp. 224–228) and WWR1 2:345)

1 assumption and Schopenhauer’s larger metaphysics, there would indeed be grounds for holding  
2 that suicide was futile.

3

### 4 *1.3. Palingenesis and Individual Continuity*

5

6 It may be possible to go further in supporting Schopenhauer’s futility charge, however.  
7 Schopenhauer at times appears to favorably entertain (if not endorse) the possibility of  
8 *palingenesis*, in which particular humans’ *wills* (not just the single will, as thing in itself<sup>23</sup>)  
9 survive death, taking on new intellects in rebirth.<sup>24</sup> Without abandoning his claim that  
10 individuality pertains only to the level of spatiotemporal phenomena,<sup>25</sup> Schopenhauer writes:

11

12 death separates a person’s will, in itself individual, from the intellect... and now  
13 according to its modified constitution receives a new intellect through a new act of  
14 procreation (WWR2 3:575-76)

15

16 Every newborn being[‘s]... fresh existence is paid for by the age and death of some  
17 deceased person who has perished, but who contained the indestructible seed from which  
18 this new existence has arisen: they are a single being (WWR2 3:577)

19

20 Death openly proclaims itself as the end of the individual, but in this individual lies the  
21 seed to a new being. Accordingly, then, nothing of all that dies does so forever... What  
22 dies perishes, but a seed is left over from which a new being proceeds which now enters  
23 existence without knowing whence it comes from (PP2 6:293)

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<sup>23</sup> Stellino rightly considers palingenesis as a test case for the futility of suicide, but (a) assumes the doctrine concerns the will in itself, not individual wills (i.e., intelligible characters – see PP2 6:242) and (b) follows (Janaway, 2022b) in holding that Schopenhauer cannot accept palingenesis at face value (Stellino, 2020, p. 106). WWR2 3:575-76, quoted next, shows that (a) is incorrect, however, and (b) is questionable, for reasons noted below. On the two uses of “will”, see (Shapshay, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Schopenhauer contrasts the doctrine of palingenesis with that of metempsychosis, in which individual *intellects* survive death. While Schopenhauer thinks metempsychosis serves as one of the “mythological cloaks for truths that are inaccessible to the untutored human senses” (WWR1 2:420), he insists it cannot be literally true. Hence, despite his sympathy for parapsychology, Schopenhauer would reject most contemporary parapsychological work on surviving death, which focuses on memory (e.g. (Matlock & Mishlove, 2019)).

<sup>25</sup> For some discussion of how to make sense of non-spatiotemporal particulars for Schopenhauer, see (Marshall, 2021, p. 788). It is likely that Schopenhauer himself would remind us here that “[a]nswering transcendent questions in the language created for immanent cognition can indeed lead to contradictions” (PP2 6:297).

1

2 Schopenhauer claims that there are empirical grounds for believing in palingenesis: “the great  
3 fertility of the human race that arises as the result of devastating epidemics” (WWR2 3:576). He  
4 cites the prominent pathologist Johann Ludwig Casper as demonstrating that, “at all times and  
5 places, the number of deaths and births increases or diminishes in the same proportion” (WWR2  
6 3:577).<sup>26</sup>

7 Schopenhauer asserts that the doctrine of palingenesis “accords greatly with my doctrine  
8 of the metaphysical permanence of the will” (PP2 6:294), and provides no explicit reason for  
9 rejecting it. If he really is open to this doctrine, then death would not merely involve some level  
10 of direct interpersonal connection or psychological fusion, but would also, as Fox notes, be a  
11 non-religious version of Judeo-Christian doctrines of personal immortality.<sup>27</sup> Of course, many  
12 contemporary readers will, like Fox, reject palingenesis as “pure fancy.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, charitable  
13 interpreters of Schopenhauer might worry that palingenesis contradicts other, more central  
14 aspects of his views, such as his restriction of individuation to the realm of space and time. I  
15 myself am unsure how seriously Schopenhauer took the possibility of palingenesis. There is also  
16 ample textual evidence that his opposition to suicide long predated his understanding of  
17 palingenesis – his claim about the futility of suicide appeared already in the 1818 edition of  
18 *World as Will and Representation*, whereas his explicit discussions of palingenesis begin only in  
19 the 1850’s.<sup>29</sup> Hence, his reasons for the futility charge cannot be limited to the doctrine of  
20 palingenesis.

21 Regardless of what we make of Schopenhauer’s attitude towards palingenesis, however,  
22 there is ample textual evidence that Schopenhauer believed that death did not mark the limit of  
23 everything significant to the person dying. Instead, he believed in psychological connections  
24 between individual consciousness and subsequent (or timeless) beings, and these connections,

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<sup>26</sup> This would seem to imply that each suicide paves the way for a new birth, and thus *supports* procreation. If so, then suicide would be an affirmation of the will in perhaps the strongest sense, since “[t]he affirmation of the will to life... is... centered around the act of generation” (WWR2 3:655)). Schopenhauer does not explicitly draw this connection when he claims that suicide is an act of affirming the will (WWR1 2:471), but it would seem to follow directly from the doctrine of palingenesis, and would fit well with his suggestion that lovers’ attraction to each other “is in fact already the life-will of the new individual who they want to conceive” (WWR2 3:613).

<sup>27</sup> (Fox, 1980, p. 167). (Langone, Forthcoming) argues that Schopenhauer’s eventually acceptance of palingenesis, understood as the ultimate reality of individual wills, conflicted with some of his monist and idealist commitments.

<sup>28</sup> (Fox, 1980, p. 153). But see (Ketcham, 2018) on similarities between palingenesis, as Schopenhauer understands it, and Buddhist views.

<sup>29</sup> See (Langone, 2022, p. 87).

1 like those that would exist in Parfitian fission, carry at least some personal significance. Of  
2 course, some contemporary readers will find those metaphysical doctrines implausible, but, at a  
3 minimum, they show that Schopenhauer's charge of futility cannot be dismissed without  
4 engaging in broader metaphysical issues.

## 6       **2. The Psychology of Suicide**

8           In the previous section, I argued that Schopenhauer's metaphysical views imply that  
9 suicide has less personal significance than people often assume. Even so, Fox's objection to the  
10 futility charge might still hold, if the paradigmatic suicidal agent really desired *nothing more*  
11 than the destruction of themselves qua individual. In this section, I argue that, on Schopenhauer's  
12 broader psychological views, paradigmatic suicidal agents *desire* more than that, though they  
13 may not always have that desire at the front of their minds. Moreover, while the metaphysical  
14 views described in the last paragraph may be hard for many contemporary readers to accept,  
15 Schopenhauer's psychological views, I suggest, at least partly align with some contemporary  
16 views.

### 18       *2.1. The Intentions and Desires of the Suicidal Agent*

20           Before turning to textual questions, a distinction will be useful. Say that an agent's  
21 *intention* is the motivational state that immediately guides their action, directed at a specific state  
22 of affairs, whereas their *underlying desire* is the motivational state that ultimately fuels that  
23 intention. These most obviously come apart when the agent takes their underlying desire to not  
24 be fully realizable. For example, say that my underlying desire is to get a snack that is both  
25 filling and enjoyable, yet none of the foods I can purchase are enjoyable. In such a case, I might  
26 give up on the enjoyable and form the intention of buying a merely tolerable filling snack. If it  
27 turns out that all of the items available were merely tolerable and not at all filling, I would regard  
28 that purchase as futile. In terms of my intention, the action was not entirely futile: I took myself  
29 to be buying something that was merely tolerable, and that was the result. But the real question  
30 of futility rests on my underlying desire, which, it turns out, could not be even partly satisfied. In  
31 that case, I could probably recognize what my underlying desire was through reflection, but in

1 other cases, we can get so wrapped up in realizing our intentions that we lose sight of our  
2 underlying desires, such as when we get so involved in winning a game that we forget we're  
3 playing it to have fun.

4 With that distinction in place, we can start untangling Schopenhauer's views on the  
5 intentions and underlying desires of someone attempting suicide. Consider the immediate context  
6 for his futility charge:

7  
8 We have already found that for the will to life, life is always a certainty, and suffering is  
9 essential to life, so it follows that suicide, the wilful destruction of one single appearance  
10 that leaves the thing in itself untouched, just as the rainbow remains stable however  
11 rapidly the drops that support it at any given moment might change, is a futile... act.  
12 (WWR1 2:472)

13

14 This passage might be read as showing that Schopenhauer believes that the suicidal agent's  
15 underlying desire is the destruction of the thing in itself, the will that is the essence of all things.  
16 Michael Cholbi interprets Schopenhauer this way, and registers his disagreement, saying that  
17 Schopenhauer's "complaint appears to be that suicide does nothing to annihilate will itself," but  
18 that he is thereby "imputing to the suicidal individual a motivation she almost certainly does not  
19 have."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Paolo Stellino conjectures that Schopenhauer is "projecting his metaphysical  
20 worldview" onto the suicidal agent.<sup>31</sup>

21 However, while Schopenhauer does think that suffering can *lead to* the desire to negate  
22 the will itself, he does not impute that (ascetic) desire to the suicidal person. Instead, he writes,

23

24 The person who commits suicide wills life, and is only unsatisfied with the conditions  
25 under which life has been given to him. Thus, when he destroys the individual  
26 appearance he is relinquishing only life, not the will to life. He wills life, wills the  
27 unimpeded existence and affirmation of his body, but the tangle of circumstances does  
28 not allow him this and he undergoes great suffering. (WWR1 2:471)

29

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<sup>30</sup> (Cholbi, 2021, p. 153).

<sup>31</sup> (Stellino, 2020, p. 104).

1 Suicidal agent’s underlying desires, then, is simultaneously for (a) the continued existence of  
2 their individual body and (b) an escape from suffering, where suffering is “the conditions under  
3 which life has been given to him.”<sup>32</sup> The agent takes the joint realization of (a) and (b) to be out  
4 of reach, and so forms an intention to bring about (b) without (a).

5         If the suicidal person’s underlying desire is for both (a) and (b), is the action of suicide  
6 then entirely futile? Suicide, of course, does not secure (a), but it might seem to secure (b).  
7 However, in light of the previous section, we can see that, on Schopenhauer’s view, suicide  
8 leaves personally significant connections to future beings.<sup>33</sup> Add to this Schopenhauer’s view  
9 that suffering is essential to life (e.g., WWR1 2:366, 374-5), and the result is that suicide does  
10 not provide an escape from suffering.

11         That said, suicide could lead to a *reduction* in suffering, for Schopenhauer recognizes that  
12 suffering came in degrees, and that not all lives are equally miserable.<sup>34</sup> Assuming the truth of  
13 palingenesis, for example, suicide could lead to an individual will transitioning to a new life in  
14 which they experienced less suffering than in their previous life. Of course, the result could also  
15 be negative, and it might end up with a life involving more suffering. Even so, the possibility of  
16 a reduction in suffering would be enough to undermine the unqualified claim that all acts of  
17 suicide are futile.

18         In light of that, we need to refine our reading of Schopenhauer’s statements about  
19 suicidal agents’ underlying desires. I suggest that, in order for Schopenhauer to coherently hold  
20 that *any* act of suicide is futile relative to the agent’s underlying desire, he must understand that  
21 desire in absolutist terms: as an escape from absolutely all suffering. Such an absolutist desire  
22 would be structurally similar to Kant’s infamously inflexible attitude towards lying, as well as to  
23 certain religious attitudes according to which all sins are absolutely prohibited.<sup>35</sup> Schopenhauer  
24 takes the ascetic to adopt such an attitude towards the will, as an unqualified “loathing for... the  
25 will to life” (WWR1 2:449). Similarly, in the *Aphorisms*, Schopenhauer describes a tendency to

---

<sup>32</sup> Of course, *non-paradigmatic* suicidal agents might have different basic desires. Someone could, in principle, basically desire to join with the God-like, “not unconscious” state described in §1.2, even if that came with novel forms of suffering. Such an agent’s actions would not, by Schopenhauer’s lights, be futile, though Schopenhauer might deny such an agent was possible.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Hamlet again: “To die, to sleep— to sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause” (Act 3, Scene 1, 72-76). For Hamlet, then, the possibility of psychological continuity beyond death counts against suicide.

<sup>34</sup> See (Shapshay, 2008, pp. 16–20).

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., <https://pastorunlikely.com/there-are-no-such-things-as-little-sins>.

1 suicide as arising from a general “weariness of life” (PP1 5:348).<sup>36</sup> So there are some grounds for  
2 thinking he means to ascribe a absolutist aversion to suffering to the suicidal person. Given such  
3 absolutism, the underlying desire would remain unfulfilled if *any* suffering remains – as it  
4 inevitably does, given Schopenhauer’s broader views.

5         If Schopenhauer does ascribe such an absolutist underlying desire to the suicidal person,  
6 that would help explain why he singles out suicide as being futile, even while holding that *all*  
7 striving is futile (WWR2 3:732).<sup>37</sup> The explanation suggested by the absolutist understanding of  
8 the suicidal agent is that the suicidal agent’s underlying desire gives that action *absolute* futility,  
9 whereas most other actions have only partial futility. Many of our actions, whether egoistic or  
10 compassionate, can realize our underlying desires to some degree – we can postpone death for a  
11 while, and can at least refrain from harming certain other people. Provided that the agent has  
12 some non-absolute underlying desires, those achievements can imply that their actions are not  
13 entirely futile. By contrast, the absolute nature of the suicidal person’s underlying desire means  
14 their action is entirely futile.

15         So given the absolutist characterization of the suicidal agent’s underlying desire, suicide  
16 achieves neither component of the agent’s underlying desire, and so is futile. What the agent  
17 really *wants* is a continuation of their individual bodily existence that is entirely free from  
18 suffering, yet what they *get* is a discontinuation of that individual existence combined with  
19 continued (and perhaps lesser, perhaps greater) suffering.

20

### 21         2.2.A Rejoinder: An Implausible Psychology?

22

23         The previous subsection does not provide a full answer to Fox, though. For we might still  
24 worry that Schopenhauer simply attributes to the suicidal individual a underlying desire that they  
25 clearly do not have, even if it’s not the particular desire that Cholbi and Stellino describe.

26         That worry could be reinforced with two potential arguments:

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<sup>36</sup> The *Aphorisms* are not a reliable report of Schopenhauer’s considered views, since he states up front that his discussion there “retains the ordinary, empirical standpoint and adheres to its error” (PP1 5:333-34). That is probably why he seems to countenance suicide “committed by the healthy and cheerful person entirely for objective reasons,” namely, when “the magnitude of the sufferings or of the inevitably approaching disaster vanquishes the fear of death” (PP1 5:348).

<sup>37</sup> In addition, as a referee for *Mind* points out, it’s plausible that Schopenhauer also focused on this case because it provided an important chance to head off misunderstandings of some of his core doctrines.

1 (1) Insofar as some of us have had suicidal urges at points in our lives, of the paradigmatic  
2 sort, we might find the ascription introspectively implausible – perhaps we really desired  
3 to end our suffering *as the individuals we were*. Moreover, perhaps we would have  
4 introspectively found a preference for (e.g.) some combination of amnesia and  
5 psychological fusion as a change of pace, even if that change of pace came with greater  
6 (but novel) suffering. If so, introspection might give us reason to deny that paradigmatic  
7 suicidal agents have the underlying desire that Schopenhauer posits.

8 (2) Other things being equal, we should be charitable in interpreting others' actions. Part of  
9 that charity would seem to involve attributing desires to agents that *made sense of* their  
10 actions. In light of that, we should ascribe to suicidal individuals underlying desires on  
11 which their actions would make sense, instead of being futile.<sup>38</sup>

12 Both these arguments carry real force, in my view. Nonetheless, I think it is possible to respond  
13 to both on Schopenhauer's behalf. The responses will not be enough to show that  
14 Schopenhauer's view is correct, but they would show that his view is not easily refuted.

15 Against the first, introspective argument, Schopenhauer follows some of his predecessors  
16 (such as Hume and Kant) in claiming that the motivational aspects of our psychology are often  
17 not easily accessible through introspection. With an eye towards self-flattering moral corruption,  
18 he writes that "we are often quite mistaken even about the real motive we have for doing or  
19 forgoing something" (WWR2 3:235). Similarly, he holds that

20  
21 [m]any a person would be amazed if he saw what his conscience, which presents itself to  
22 him in such stately fashion, is genuinely composed of: 1/5 fear of human beings, 1/5 fear  
23 of the gods, 1/5 prejudice, 1/5 vanity and 1/5 habit (OBM 4:192)

24  
25 Broadly speaking, then, Schopenhauer puts little stock in introspective reports of our  
26 motivations, so the first argument has limited dialectical force against him.

27 Against the second argument, Schopenhauer actually does accept a certain version of the  
28 principle of charity in the interpretation of actions. However, his principle applies not so much at  
29 the level of individuals as at the level of the agent's inner essence, the (non-individual) will. He

---

<sup>38</sup> An objection along these lines is expressed in (Stellino, 2020, p. 110). Stellino offers cases in which agents' basic desires would seem to be quite different from the one Schopenhauer ascribes to them.

1 writes that

2

3 The will to life as such finds itself so totally constrained in this particular appearance that  
4 it cannot develop its striving. So it reaches a decision in accordance with its intrinsic  
5 essence... the will affirms itself here through the very abolition of its appearance,  
6 because it can no longer affirm itself in any other way (WWR1 2:471-72).

7

8 Given the goal of developing its striving, it makes sense for the will to dispose of certain  
9 individuals. As Schopenhauer writes elsewhere, individuals as such are insignificant in nature:

10

11 What nature says is: the life or death of the individual does not matter at all. Nature  
12 expresses this by abandoning the life of every animal and even of the human being to the  
13 most insignificant of accidents without stepping in to help (WWR2 3:541)

14

15 To be sure, the voice of nature Schopenhauer articulates does not seem to be a full expression of  
16 the will (nature, as Schopenhauer construes her, sometimes sounds kind and caring, e.g., WWR2  
17 3:542). Nature is, however, connected to the deep motivations that drive each being, which  
18 includes self-sacrifice for one's offspring (see, e.g., WWR1 2:326-27).<sup>39</sup> Strife and struggle are  
19 what issues from the will itself (e.g., WWR1 2:366), so insofar as suicide expresses this strife  
20 and struggle in an especially strong form, perhaps especially insofar as it involves a foolish and  
21 futile act, it makes sense from the perspective of the will.

22 What we find, then, are three levels of drive or motivation. Within an individual agent,  
23 there is the distinction between intention and underlying desires. When we go deeper than the  
24 individual, though, there are the goals, drives, or aims of the species, nature, or the will itself.<sup>40</sup>  
25 For an individual, an action's futility is evaluated relative to their underlying desire, but that  
26 same action can be anything but futile relative to the aims of nature or the will.

---

<sup>39</sup> Schopenhauer claims that “[a]ll instances of being in love, however ethereal they might pretend to be... are in fact nothing but more precisely determined... individualized instances of sex drive” (WWR2 3:610), so that the “final goal of all love affairs” is “the composition of the next generation” (WWR2 3:611). As Christopher Janaway summarizes Schopenhauer's view: “sexual love is: sex drive + delusion” (Janaway, 2022a, p. 107).

<sup>40</sup> There, of course, a challenge in making sense of the goals or drives of the will, given that it is intrinsically “blind” (WWR1 2:178).

1           It may be because of the deep, sub-individual aims that Schopenhauer frames his  
2 discussion as a description of *why* suicide is futile, not as an attempt to talk someone out of  
3 committing suicide. He shows no signs of thinking that his account could dissuade someone  
4 from ending their life, perhaps because he thinks the driving forces are beyond the reach of an  
5 individual’s deliberation.

6           I’ll close this section by noting that, while Schopenhauer’s views on introspection and  
7 deep motivation are not obviously correct, they do fit well with some contemporary views. First,  
8 even outside of depth psychology, many psychologists today believe we often fail to identify our  
9 genuine motivations, making us, at times, “strangers to ourselves.”<sup>41</sup> Second, and relatedly,  
10 though depression and suicide are *prima facie* puzzling from the perspective of evolutionary  
11 psychology, some explanations of them have been offered – for example, that suicide can benefit  
12 surviving kin.<sup>42</sup> None of that would entail that Schopenhauer’s view is correct (not least because  
13 evolutionary pressures need not manifest as any entity’s motivations), but it makes it harder to  
14 claim that Schopenhauer is simply wrong in what he says about the aims behind suicide, which  
15 set the most important standard for whether their actions are futile.

### 16 17           2.3. *Foolishness Reconsidered*

18  
19           Before closing this section, recall the other part of Schopenhauer’s charge against  
20 suicide: its foolishness. As I noted in the introduction, one arguably sufficient condition for an  
21 action being foolish is if the agent could recognize its futility on reflection. That condition is at  
22 least partly met here: Schopenhauer thinks that all sentient beings are to some degree aware of  
23 the indestructability of their essence:

24  
25           an innermost consciousness of their imperishable nature gives rise to the security and  
26 peace of mind that every animal, and even the human individual, possesses as it wanders  
27 carelessly through a sea of accidents that could annihilate it at any moment (WWR2  
28 3:552-53)

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41 This phrase is from (Wilson, 2002), who distances himself from Freudian views.

42 For a critical overview of the relevant literature, see (Chatterjee & Rai, 2021).

1 This innermost consciousness is not always prominent in our minds – that is why Schopenhauer  
2 thinks we can fail to recognize both our motivations and our own cognitive states. To the degree  
3 that it is accessible in principle, though, this would support the charge of foolishness.

4 This explanation can complement the defensive of foolishness offered by commentators  
5 like Masny. Recall that Masny claims that, for Schopenhauer, suicide is foolish because it takes  
6 us off the path towards a greater good (ascetic renunciation). Masny rests his reading largely on  
7 Schopenhauer’s comparison with a sick person who prematurely leaves the operating table.  
8 Someone sympathetic to Fox’s objection might think that Schopenhauer’s comparison is  
9 misleading, since a sick person leaving the operating table must then contend with their illness,  
10 whereas someone who commits suicide is not entirely foolish, since they succeed in their  
11 intention of escaping the illness of ordinary suffering (albeit in a way that prevents them from  
12 reaching some greater good). By contrast, on the reading I have offered, the person who commits  
13 suicide does not succeed in escaping ordinary suffering, even if they may cease existing as an  
14 individual. That means they both fail to realize their underlying desire and (for the reasons  
15 Masny identifies) cut themselves off from a greater good that they might not yet desire. Hence,  
16 the account of futility I have offered can show a further dimension along which their act was  
17 foolish: its (in principle) knowable futility.

18

### 19 **3. Conclusion**

20

21 I have argued that, in response to Fox’s objection, Schopenhauer takes suicidal agents to  
22 accomplish less of personal significance than Fox assumes, and that their underlying desires may  
23 not be introspectively accessible. This suggests a wide gap between the underlying desire and the  
24 result of suicide. Hence, Schopenhauer’s claim that suicide is futile is defensible at least within  
25 his broader system. Moreover, I have suggested that some of the relevant aspects of that system  
26 align, at least in part, with some contemporary views. That is not enough to show that his views  
27 on suicide are defensible overall, or that they fully cohere with either his broader pessimism or

- 1 his doctrine of ascetic suicide. It does suggest, though, that his views on suicide may be worthy
- 2 of greater attention than many previous commentators have thought.<sup>43</sup>

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