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A (NEO)-SCHOPENHAURIAN ARGUMENT FOR RATIONAL PESSIMISM**

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## Irrationality and Happiness: A (Neo-)Schopenhaurian Argument for Rational Pessimism

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There is a long tradition in philosophy, a tradition arguably as old as philosophy itself, of blaming passions for our unhappiness. If only we were more rational, it is claimed, we would live happier lives. In a way, this might seem trivial. On any plausible view, happiness is a constituent of wellbeing and it is, at least normally, rational to secure one's wellbeing. Rational people should then normally track their contentment better and be less prone to diversionary temptations; they should accordingly manage to be happier. I believe that such optimism is misguided. I will argue that, even when it is perfectly rational to secure our own happiness, creatures with desires, like us, cannot be both happy and rational. More precisely, I will argue that if someone rational has desires he will not be fully happy, and if he has some desires that are rational and – in a yet-to-be-specified sense – demanding, he will be frankly unhappy. We can call this claim “pessimism for rationalists,” or, for short, *Rational Pessimism*.

The argument for Rational Pessimism can be considered as a variation on a classical pessimistic argument that can be traced back to Schopenhauer and bluntly claims that desiring souls like us cannot be happy (§ 1). This classical argument has been attacked often, both by Schopenhauer scholars and moral philosophers. I argue that, even if most of their objections miss the mark, Schopenhauer's argument indeed faces decisive empirical objections. We can, in particular, adopt what I call mourning and erotic attitudes toward our unsatisfied desires, which prevent them from eating into our happiness (§ 2). I argue, however, that adopting such attitudes makes us irrational and that the Schopenhauerian argument can be rescued if it is assumed that we are rational (§ 3). Rational Pessimism has an air of paradox. In the final section, I argue that this impression is misguided, and hinges on some unwarranted assumptions (§ 4).

### 1. Schopenhauerian Pessimism

In this section, I want to restate Schopenhauer's central argument to the effect that desires are inconsistent with happiness. I will not properly assess this argument until the next section (§ 2). I should also emphasize that my aim, here, is not exegetical. There are many ways to “reconstruct” Schopenhauer's central argument out of his various pessimistic remarks, and the argument I will present is but one such reconstruction. It is a reconstruction that tries to do without what I take to be Schopenhauer's most controversial premises. It is also the reconstruction I deem most philosophically fruitful. I do not claim, however, that it is the most exegetically accurate (I would even be ready to attribute the argument to a

close, fictional counterpart of Schopenhauer, say Schopenhauer\*). In any case, we shall see that most scholarly discussions of Schopenhauer's pessimistic argument prove relevant to the present reconstruction.

We desire something, in the wide sense of the term, when we want it and are disposed to make it happen (I desire in this sense to wash the dishes because I have to do it, even though I wholeheartedly wish someone else could do it instead of me). Desires bear on events in the wide sense that includes performances, states, activities, actions and states of affairs.<sup>1</sup>

Unfulfilled desires, claimed Schopenhauer, cause pain. "The basis of all willing is need, lack and hence pain, and by its very nature and origin it is therefore destined to pain" (Schopenhauer (1966/1819: I-312)). This claim might seem phenomenologically wrong. Some unfulfilled desires do not, after all, result in sensory pain. The desire for glory, say, unlike the desire for food of those who are starving, is not usually associated with any particular sensation, and it would be misleading to say that it causes "pain." When desires such as this one are not satisfied, their lack of satisfaction should in any case make their subject suffer or, more broadly, decrease his level of happiness. This, I take it, is what Schopenhauer should have said, and what he would have said had he not endorsed the rather unsophisticated hedonism that was quite common at his time. The claim that unsatisfied desires diminish happiness implies that unfulfilled desires will make us *less than fully or maximally happy*, not that they will make us *unhappy*. We might remain happy provided that the decrease in happiness – the "hedonic loss" – induced by unfulfilled desires is compensated by other means. This claim also implies, however, that unfulfilled desires at least *tend* to be inconsistent with happiness: they decrease our level of happiness, and, if the hedonic loss they provoke is not compensated, they will make us unhappy.

One might hope that the suffering caused by our currently unfulfilled desires is indeed compensated by the joys brought up by our currently fulfilled desires. However, Schopenhauer astutely notices, fulfillments of our desires never meet the joys they had promised. During four years, you will devote all your energy to the completion of a dissertation thesis, realizing only too late that accomplishing this goal does not, or does not substantially, make you happier. We have all experienced some of those disappointing responses to success. According to Schopenhauer, the reason why the fulfillment of our desires does not raise our level of happiness is very simple. It is that our desires vanish as soon as they are fulfilled, leaving us bored with the objects of our former longings: when we get what we want, we do not want it anymore. Of course, if a desire bears on an event that is extended in time, this desire might endure while we have started to fulfill it. If I desire to eat this burger, for example, I can still desire it after I have started eating it. The desire will vanish, however, once it has been (entirely and strictly speaking)

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<sup>1</sup> On this (rather orthodox) view, desires are thus dispositions to act, and do not bear on objects: when we say that we desire an object ("I want a screwdriver"), what we want is in fact *to get* that object, or that this object be present (see, e.g., Searle (1983: 30)).

fulfilled: I will stop desiring to eat that burger once I have eaten it all. “[A]ttainment quickly begets satiety. The goal was only apparent; possession takes away its charm” (Schopenhauer: I-314). As a result, “life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents” (ibid.: I-312).

This Schopenhauerian pessimist argument can be rendered as follows:

- (1s) Unfulfilled desires tend to be inconsistent with happiness: our unfulfilled desires decrease our level of happiness and if the hedonic loss they provoke is not compensated, our lives will not be happy.
- (2s) All our (current) desires are unfulfilled.
- (3s) Therefore, if we currently have desires, we will be unhappy.

The pessimism defended here is conditional on the claim that we have desires.<sup>2</sup> It is also psychological in that it bears on happiness rather than on wellbeing. In my terminology, while “wellbeing” is a value term, which characterizes how good our lives are for us, “happiness” is a psychological term that refers to a state of mind (this distinction is further elaborated by Haybron (2008, ch. 2)). It is a state of mind, for sure, that is highly valued and that is probably a constituent of wellbeing. It is, however, notionally distinct from the latter. Happiness has long been construed as a certain amount or proportion of pleasure. This hedonist conception, which is also Schopenhauer’s, has been under considerable pressure in recent years, some authors arguing that happiness consists in being globally satisfied with one’s life (see, for example, Sumner (1999, ch. 6)) or in a certain deep or central positive emotional state (Haybron 2008).<sup>3</sup> Even though I have much sympathy for Daniel Haybron’s emotional theory, I will try, in what follows, to remain neutral with respect to such theories of happiness. I will only assume, mainly for the sake of some examples, that everything being equal, and be it because of a causal rather than constitutive link, sufferings and negative emotions tend to diminish our happiness while enjoyments and positive emotions tend to augment it. I will also assume that our level of happiness can be represented as varying along a continuum that goes from “fully or maximally happy” to “fully or maximally unhappy,” passing by “merely happy” and “neither happy nor unhappy.” How exactly we should understand these levels of happiness will depend on our precise theory of

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<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer also argued for a stronger form of pessimism, which is unconditional. He claimed that the fulfillment of all our particular desires would normally engender a form of general boredom. Consistently with Schopenhauer’s claim that our essence is will, such a boredom can be construed as involving what Migotti (1995: 647-48) calls “the persistence of a transcendental willing,” which expresses our nature and of which particular desires are just common manifestations, a transcendental willing that Young (2005: 210-13) and Fernández (2006) construe as a second-order desire for particular (first-order) desires and that Henry (1985) construes as a *non-intentional* conative (or proto-conative) affective state. This transcendental willing would, by (1s-3s), be inconsistent with happiness. In what follows, I will ignore the stronger, unconditional, pessimist argument.

<sup>3</sup> See Feldman (2004) for a much-updated defense of hedonism.

happiness. For example, on a simple hedonist conception being merely (resp. fully) happy will consist in having a high (resp. close to maximal) balance of pleasure over pain, while being merely (resp. fully) unhappy will consist in having a low (resp. close to minimal) balance of pleasure over pain. On a simple global satisfaction theory conception, being merely (resp. fully) happy will consist in being at least 60 percent satisfied (resp. close to 100 percent satisfied) with one's life, while being merely (resp. fully) unhappy will consist in being at most 40 percent satisfied (resp. close to 0 percent satisfied) with it, etc.

Even though it might seem counterintuitive, Schopenhauer's conclusion appears to be widely endorsed and it should be considered seriously. Countless thinkers, from Wagner and Huysmans to Bernhard and Houellebecq, have been deeply influenced by Schopenhauer's pessimism, and Buddhists all over the world profess that happiness requires the cessation of desires (this is how the "third noble truth," the third of Buddha's four central teachings, is usually summed up). Schopenhauer's argument is also attractively simple, and it has a genuine intuitive appeal. It is, however, ultimately unconvincing. Some of us believe that we are happy sometimes, and this argument will not persuade us that we are misguided. We can either deny that it is valid or that it is sound.

## 2. The Case Against Schopenhauerian Pessimism

### 2.1. Non-Conative Sources of Happiness

First of all, it is not obvious that the argument is valid. In order to derive the conclusion that we are unhappy when we have desires (3s) from the claims that unfulfilled desires decrease our level of happiness (1s) and that our current desires are all unfulfilled (2s), the Schopenhauerian has to assume that only our currently fulfilled desires (*viz.*, desires that we still currently have and that are currently fulfilled) could compensate the hedonic loss caused by our unfulfilled desires. This overlooks the possibility that this hedonic loss might be compensated by some other sources of happiness that do not depend on the satisfaction of desires – call these *non-conative sources of happiness*.

There are indeed some joys and pleasures that do not seem to depend on desires and that can make us happier. As noticed by Plato, we can enjoy the sound of music, a smell or a sight by surprise, without wanting them before or even while we perceive them (*Philebus*: 51A-52C). We enjoy them because, whether we *want* them or not, we *like* them (cf. § 4.3 for more on that distinction). In the same way, even though I do not *desire* to finish my dissertation thesis anymore – I have done that a long time ago and the desire has vanished – I might *like* the fact that I have finished it and still take

pleasure at contemplating it. The existence of such non-conative sources of happiness entails that (3s) does not follow from (1s-2s).<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2. When Current Desires Do Not Eat into Our Happiness

There is a second worry for the Schopenhauerian pessimist. Against premises (2s) and (1s), it seems possible to keep one's desires after they are satisfied, and to have unsatisfied desires that do not decrease our level of happiness.

### a. Keeping one's desires after they are satisfied

Premise (2s) can be traced back to Plato's claim that desires involve a "lacking condition" (*Symposium*: 205a5-b3) or Aquinas' contention that desires bear on pleasurable good considered as absent (*Summa Theologica*: Ia, IIae, 30, 2 and 1), and it has been endorsed, in one form or another, by Kenny (1966: 81, 83-84), Sumner (1999: 128-30) and Young (2005: 209).

**Unknown satisfaction.** As noticed by Kenny, however, our desires typically do survive their satisfaction when the latter remains hidden to us. I can, for example, still want to be cured of a life-threatening disease, not knowing that I am already cured. So we should claim that our current desires are such that we are not aware of their satisfaction, rather than that they are not satisfied.<sup>5</sup>

**Desires for activities.** Discussing Schopenhauer's pessimist argument, some commentators have tried to put forward examples of desires that we can keep even though we are aware of their satisfaction, and that might contribute to our happiness. All the interesting cases, I take it, hinge on the Aristotelian distinction among states, performances and activities (see Kenny (1966: 120-30); Vendler 1957).<sup>6</sup> Unlike states, performances and activities are typically described by verbs that have a continuous tense (to know, to be happy, etc.,

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<sup>4</sup> Schopenhauer considers something like this objection. Indeed, he argues that intellectual and aesthetic pleasures do not hinge on desire satisfaction. He contends, however, that such non-conative hedonic gains (he calls them "pure joys") are extremely rare (Schopenhauer (1966/1819: I-314)). He also construes them negatively, as stemming from the cessation of some desires (as opposed to their satisfaction) and of the suffering they inflicted (Schopenhauer in fact construes every pleasure and joy negatively). They will, accordingly, never, according to him, compensate the conative hedonic losses. Both the scarcity of such joys and their Schopenhauerian, negative account are, however, quite dubious.

<sup>5</sup> It is true that if I am not aware of my desire's satisfaction, the latter will not generally make me happier. It will not even alleviate the suffering caused by my desire's former unfulfillment. Still, premise (2s) is false as it stands.

<sup>6</sup> Some have also put forward, as a potential counterexample, the desire to keep an object one already has (Cartwright 1998). But even if I already have this object, the desire to keep it, which is a desire to have it in the future, is *not* satisfied. Other counterexamples are put forward in the literature on the nature of pleasure and pain by philosophers who want to reduce them to sensations we desire to be currently having vs. not having. I find them rather unconvincing; see Heathwood (2007: 34) and discussion by Massin (2011: 111-12).

vs. to walk, to cut, to study, to weep, to build a house, to win the Goncourt Prize). Performances are distinguished from activities, in that if V is a verb describing a performance (think of “to build a house”) and I am V-ing, we would normally say that I have not Vd. If V is an activity verb, on the other hand (think of “to walk”), and I am V-ing, we would normally say that I have Vd. Unlike activities, performance are *specified by their ends*, and we say that they *take time* (states and activities *go on for a time*; cf. Kenny (1966: 122-23)). Thus to cut, to grow up, to win the Goncourt prize, to build a house are performances, while to walk (as opposed to walk from X to Y), to study, to weep, to become richer and richer, to hang out with friends are arguably activities. Setiya (2014: 12-13) argues that desires for activities (he calls them “atelic activities,” reserving the term “telic activities” for performances) can be satisfied even though the activity is not completed, and he mentions the desire to have a walk, to hang out with friends or family, to study philosophy or to live a decent life as counterexamples. Young (2005: 42) mentions the desire to *be* a philosopher, but he makes it clear that he takes this to involve an activity (something we should rather call doing philosophy, or becoming a better and better philosopher). These counterexamples all presuppose that, as soon as one has started to engage in a given *activity*, the desire for this activity is both already satisfied and maintained. On such a view, if at t I form the desire Dt to have a walk, and if I walk from t+1 to t+n:

- i. My desire Dt to have a walk is maintained at least from t+1 to t+n and satisfied from t+1 on.

But one might wonder why the case should not be described, rather, as one in which:

- ii. My desire Dt to have a walk is maintained at least from t+1 to t+n, but can only be *fully* (and strictly speaking) *satisfied*, if at all, at t+n.

Or again, as a case in which:

- iii. My desire Dt vanishes at t and is replaced by a desire Dt+1 to *pursue* the walk until t+1, which is replaced at t+1 by a desire Dt+2 to pursue the walk until t+2, etc.

As far as I can tell, the argument for favoring description (i) relies on the above-mentioned linguistic criterion for activities: if V is an activity verb, and if I am V-ing, we would normally say that *I have Vd*.<sup>7</sup> To yield the sought-after conclusion, however, this linguistic fact must be combined with the claim that we would only say that I have Vd if my desire to V is satisfied. But this last

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<sup>7</sup> Setiya (2014: 13) thus argues “going for a walk does not by nature come to an end, since it contains no point of termination or exhaustion: you can always keep wandering. Nor is it incomplete: *at the same time, one is walking and has walked* (emphasis mine).” As I understand it, the emphasized clause is supposed to show that the desire is satisfied as one has started walking. The fact that the walk continues would show that the desire persists.

claim is extremely dubious. If I want to walk with you and we go out and walk, but after 32 seconds you insist that we should come back home to work, I will typically concede that we have walked all right, but deny that my desire has been satisfied. I will typically assert that my desire has in fact been frustrated and I will deny that we have done what I wanted.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, if I want to get richer and richer, I might still find that my desire is not satisfied even if for one year I have indeed gotten richer and richer. It is in fact arguable that every desire for an activity has conditions of satisfaction that are more demanding than simply engaging in the activity. For sure, these conditions are often tacit and fuzzy or indeterminate (when I desire to walk, anything between walking for half an hour and walking for two hours will usually satisfy my desire) and they might be open-ended and unreachable (consider the desire to become richer and richer). Still the desire for the activity will not be satisfied unless these conditions are fulfilled.<sup>9</sup>

We can conclude that (2s) is falsified by desires whose satisfaction remains unknown, but not by desires for activities.

### **b. Being happy with one's unsatisfied desires**

(1s) also has a respectable pedigree. Plato claimed that unsatisfied desires are painful (*Gorgias*: 496c-597a) and many of those who do not endorse this claim acknowledge that they at least decrease our level of happiness or our level of wellbeing (as, for example, Setiya (2014: 12)).

While discussing Schopenhauer's pessimist argument and its cognates, commentators have put forward various examples of desires whose unsatisfaction does not seem to cause pain or even to eat into our happiness. Janaway (1999: 329) mentions his desire to retain his good health, Migotti (1995: 649) the desire to reach the finish line of a marathon, Young (2005: 217-18) the desire to complete the writing of his book. Likewise, Buddhist scholars now often argue that Buddha did not claim that we must renounce all (unfulfilled) desires in order to be happy, but rather that we must renounce a certain

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<sup>8</sup> If I can say that that I have Vd even though my desire to V is not satisfied, it is because, as Graff Fara (2013) puts it, "the embedded clause [of desire reports] underspecifies what each wants." She dubs this "the problem of underspecification" and draws interesting semantic conclusions from it. I am grateful to Kieran Setiya for bringing this article to my attention.

<sup>9</sup> Kieran Setiya (personal communication) suggests that we should distinguish derivative from nonderivative desires. My desire to walk, for example, can be derivative on the desire to walk around the park. He conjectures that, even if it is not true in general, *in the particular case of a nonderivative desire for V*, we would only say that I have Vd if my desire to V is satisfied (because, he suggests, the embedded clause of nonderivative desire reports, unlike that of derivative desires, fully specifies the conditions of satisfaction of such desires). I find the conjecture quite plausible, but I believe that if nonderivative desires meet this conjecture, it is precisely because they are always specified by their ends – that is, because they are desires for performances as opposed to activities.



class of desires that we might call “cravings,” the only desires whose unfulfillment diminishes happiness (Webster 2005).<sup>10</sup>

Even if we grant that these desires provide counterexamples to (1s), the *reason why* this is so is not particularly clear. Janaway claims that his desire to retain his good health is benign because this desire is not a striving, by which he means that it is dispositional and that it does not aim at a change the way strivings typically do (it is the desire to *retain* rather than to change something). It seems to me, however, that the desire to retain one’s glory or to stay alive can sometimes cause extreme anxiety and suffering even when they are not strivings in Janaway’s sense. Migotti (1995: 649) suggests that the desire to finish a marathon does not diminish his happiness in part because running a marathon is “an activity goal-directed yet valued for [its] own sake as well as for the sake of the goal aimed at.” He acknowledges, however, that participating in such an activity is not sufficient to constitute a counterexample to (1s): the pressure of an unsatisfied desire to finish the race need not diminish one’s happiness, but it seems that it sometimes can, and drastically so (think of a professional runner whose career is at stake).<sup>11</sup> Conversely, and we will come back to this point soon, it is not clear that *only* unsatisfied desires that bear on activities or performances that are “goal-directed yet valued for their own sake as well as for the sake of the goal aimed at” can fail to diminish our happiness.<sup>12</sup>

Nietzsche also confronted Schopenhauer’s argument and its decisive premise (1s) to the effect that unsatisfied desires are harmful, but he took it that if some desires’ unsatisfaction is indeed benign, it is not in virtue of certain intrinsic features such desires would share, but rather because of the attitudes we adopt toward them (and more deeply, the values we endorse and which these attitudes reflect).<sup>13</sup> Even if I disagree with him on the nature of

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<sup>10</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1977) also famously denied that desires necessarily diminish one’s happiness on the ground that they need not involve any lack. Desires, they claimed, should be construed as “production-without-a-specific-object” (as opposed to “lack-of-a-specific-object”). I will argue that, even if desires necessarily involved a lack, that would not allow them to threaten our happiness.

<sup>11</sup> One might claim that desires that do not matter at all to me (say desires that matter less to me than the desire to become one euro richer) are also such that their unsatisfaction does not diminish one’s happiness. It is not clear, however, that these desires do not sometimes diminish my happiness at least a little – that is, in proportion to how much they matter to me.

<sup>12</sup> As I understand it, the Buddhist distinction between desires and cravings does not help much either here, as what distinguishes cravings from mere desires is that the former are particularly intense, obsessive and addictive, which, I take it, is just another way of saying that they are harmful (and of specifying a little the way they harm).

<sup>13</sup> “The normal dissatisfaction of our drives, e.g., hunger, the sexual drive, the drive to motion, contains in it absolutely nothing depressing; it works rather as an agitation of the feeling of life, as every rhythm of small, painful stimuli strengthens it (whatever pessimists may say). This dissatisfaction, instead of making one disgusted with life, is the great stimulus to life” (Nietzsche (1968/1883-88, § 697)). Or again: “What is happiness? – The feeling that power increases – that a resistance is overcome. Not contentment, but more power; not peace at all, but war; not virtue but proficiency (virtue in the Renaissance style, virtù, virtue free of moral-

the attitudes in question, I believe that he was right on that point. In what follows, I will argue that two types of attitudes, which I call erotic and mourning attitudes, respectively, contribute to exorcise our desire's unsatisfaction. We shall see that none of these attitudes necessarily bears on the kinds of desires on which Young and Migotti focus: they can, for example, bear on desires for states (rather than performances or activities, let alone performances and activities that are valued for their own sake) or on strivings.

**Erotic attitudes.** Some desires positively contribute to please us *before* they are fulfilled. Strippers please their spectators by hiding, as long as they should, what the audience desires to see. Future lovers can willingly prolong their flirting period, enjoying the obstacles that separate their desire to love and be loved from its foresighted satisfaction. In such cases, if the subjects are pleased by their unfulfilled desires, it is arguably because they take pleasure in the mere idea of their possible fulfillment, in the activities involved in this fulfillment or in both. They can accordingly “play” with these desires, and readily delay their satisfaction. This phenomenon is not the privilege of erotic desires in the strict sense and concerns just as much desires for leisure activities and ludic or sportive performances and even some desires for states. I desire to spend my next vacation in Japan and I actually take pleasure in contemplating the idea that I might really spend my vacation there. My desire contributes to my happiness even though it is not, and it might never be, satisfied, and even though, for that matter, I might never engage in the activities involved in its satisfaction.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, I desire to run a marathon, and I take so much pleasure in the activities involved in this performance (passing through beautiful landscapes, running smoothly) that my happiness is not decreased by the fact that I have not yet finished the marathon. Finally, I desire to know why there is something rather than nothing, and contemplating the state of knowledge that might satisfy this desire pleases me a lot. Because such attitudes paradigmatically (if not uniquely) bear on erotic desires, we will say that I have an *erotic attitude* toward a given desire whenever

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ic acid)” (Nietzsche (1968/1888: 2)). For an extremely insightful and thorough account of Nietzsche's answer to Schopenhauer's pessimism, see Reginster 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard was very sensitive to this rewarding nature of the mere contemplation of possible satisfactions and he even suggested that it was the only possible source of gratification for people at a certain stage of the development of their personality, which he termed the “aesthetic stage.” Under his pen, the pseudonymous A, who has been “forsaken by the jinn of joy,” complains:

My soul has lost possibility. If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere. Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not. And what wine is so sparkling, so fragrant, so intoxicating! (Kierkegaard 1987/1843: 41).

(i) it is an unfulfilled desire that does not eat into my happiness, and (ii) because I take pleasure in the mere contemplation of its possible satisfaction or in the activities involved in satisfying this desire.<sup>15</sup>

**Mourning attitudes.** Erotic attitudes are not the only explanation for why unfulfilled desires do not always eat into our happiness. There is evidence that some unfulfilled desires do not diminish our happiness even though we neither significantly contemplate their possible satisfaction nor engage in the activities involved in their satisfaction.

It is a common observation that important and irremediable losses can have little impact on one's happiness. Persons losing their dearest relatives can rapidly adapt to their new situation. Even in the early phases of mourning, and despite their obvious sadness, some subjects report feeling happy "in the depths of their soul." Less anecdotally, victims of disabling injuries or chronic illnesses tend to quickly return close to their former happiness "set point." This general phenomenon of "hedonic adaptation" or "hedonic treadmill" has been extensively studied in the last 20 years and has been confirmed by different measures. It was shown first that, (i) after a sudden and short-lived decrease, judgments of *global life satisfaction* of the victims of irremediable losses reliably return very close to what they used to be. It was shown also that (ii) their *moods and affects* follow the same temporal pattern (Kahneman and Krueger (2006: 14-18)). These two observations, which strongly suggest that their happiness follows the same pattern,<sup>16</sup> are surprising. Some have accordingly questioned the claim that they indicate a form of stability or adaptation of the subject's level of happiness. It has been wondered, in particular, whether the observed stability of both measures is not an artifact of scale recalibration (a change in the standards used to assess one's happiness). However, after they have adapted, victims of irremediable losses, injuries or diseases do not rate various other aversive circumstances differently from other people (Lacey et al. (2008)).

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<sup>15</sup> Bernard Suits (1978) famously argued that in order to play a game one has to accept the rules of the game just because they make it possible to play the game, and he has called such acceptance of the rules a "lusory attitude." It seems to me that lusory attitudes generally involve a form of erotic attitude toward winning the game (or more broadly attaining what Suits calls the pre-lusory goal), but the converse is not true: I can adopt an erotic attitude toward my desire to travel to Japan without playing a game and, a fortiori, without adopting a lusory attitude.

<sup>16</sup> Some general doubts have been raised concerning the adequacy of either life satisfaction judgments (i) or positive reported affects (ii) when it comes to measuring happiness. It is indeed plausible that even if those measures often provide a raw estimate of happiness, they do not always exactly track the latter. Divergences between those measures and happiness are less likely, however, when both measures are matching. They should also be less significant, if at all, when we are dealing with large samples (in which case, errors made in different directions should cancel each other out (Haybron (2008, ch. 10))). Accordingly, general skepticism about the current measures of happiness should not cast doubts on the reality of hedonic adaptation.

It is tempting to explain hedonic adaptation as a form of *conative adaptation*. The subjects would maintain their levels of happiness by giving up those desires whose fulfillment is thwarted by their losses. People disabled by a car accident would, for example, return to their original happiness level by renouncing the desire to walk or dance again. This natural explanation is, I believe, commonsensical, and Schopenhauer arguably endorsed it.<sup>17</sup> It is seldom noted, however, that it has been empirically refuted. People maintain very strong desires to regain their healthy state *even when they have hedonically adapted to their chronic illness or their disability*. For example, although dialysis patients are almost as prone to positive moods as controls and report being satisfied with their life, they “state that they would give up almost half their remaining years to once again live with normal kidney function (Torrance (1976)). Similarly, Smith et al. (2006) measured the wellbeing of people with colostomies against those without and failed to find any significant difference in self-reported mood. Yet, people with colostomies report, on average, that they would give up almost 15 percent of their remaining lifespan to regain normal bowel function (Ubel and Loewenstein (2008: 203)).”

Those are very strong preferences. They reflect desires we would expect to eat deeply into one’s happiness.

It is, moreover, implausible that subjects such as these, who wholeheartedly desire to regain normal kidney function, prevent the hedonic loss that their unfulfilled desire might provoke by imagining that they are cured, pleasantly contemplating the idea that they might be cured one day or even by engaging in the activities that will get them cured. It has, in fact, been shown that this kind of hedonic adaptation only arises when the subjects do not hope for relief (see § 4.3). We can call “a *mourning* attitude” the attitude manifested in these examples (which prevents unfulfilled desires whose satisfaction we consider hopeless to eat into our happiness).

Mourning attitudes and erotic attitudes thus represent two ways for the subject to deal with his unfulfilled desires. They differ by the kind of mechanisms they involve (one, but not the other, appeals to imagining the desire’s satisfaction or to engaging in the activity of satisfying it) and on our expectancies regarding the desire’s satisfaction (one, but not the other, necessarily bears on desires we do not hope to satisfy).<sup>18</sup>

In sum, (1s) is not falsified by desires that are not strivings or by desires for goal-directed activities that are valued for their own sake, but by desires toward which we adopt erotic or mourning attitudes.

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<sup>17</sup> Schopenhauer acknowledges that the difficulty of satisfying a desire can yield a form of “complete resignation” that prevents the unsatisfied desire to harm us, but he argues that the latter necessarily involves a renunciation of the desire or “will-lessness,” and that it is exceptional (1966/1819: I, §§ 68-71).

<sup>18</sup> Notice that I remain neutral on the mechanisms involved in mourning attitudes.

### 3. Rational Pessimism

Let us take stock. The existence of non-conative sources of happiness shows that the Schopenhauerian argument is not valid. The fact that we can maintain some desires after their fulfillment when the latter remains unknown and the existence of mourning and erotic attitudes toward unfulfilled desires both show that the Schopenhauerian argument is unsound. I would like to argue that the Schopenhauerian argument can, however, be rescued, provided that it is slightly modified. The modification is twofold. It involves, first, construing both premises as conditional on our rationality in order to make the argument sound. It also involves making the conclusion more precise in order to save the argument's validity. The amended argument does not conclude that whoever has desires will be unhappy, but that whoever has desires and is rational will *not* be *fully happy*, and will be *unhappy* if she has desires that are both rational and, in some yet-to-be-specified sense, "demanding."

#### 3.1. Rationality, Desires, Actions

Let me introduce some terminology. I will say that a subject, in a given context, has most reason to do A if he has stronger reasons to do A than anything else. In that case, A is what he really should do, and his reasons for doing A are decisive. We might want to say that a given subject's action is rational when it is the action he has most reason to do, and that it is irrational if it is an action he has most reason not to do. Call this the "*objective* sense" of "reasons" and "rational." It happens, however, that we sometimes want to say that a subject has decisive reasons to accomplish a given action, and that this action is rational, even though it is an action that he really should not accomplish. Suppose that I am facing a wire dilemma. In order to disarm a bomb, I have to cut the blue and the red wires in the right order. I mistakenly believe that I must cut the blue wire first. This is what I do; the bomb blows. Objectively, I had most reason not to cut the blue wire first, so what I did was not rational in the objective sense. There is a sense, however, in which this action was rational: if my beliefs about the wires and the bomb had been true, I would have had most reason to accomplish this action. When my action is rational in this conditional sense, we will say that it is *subjectively* rational and that I had decisive *subjective reasons* to accomplish it. We will say, moreover and in either sense, that an action is irrational if I have decisive reasons not to accomplish it. Because it is more fundamental, in what follows, I will focus on the objective sense of "rational." It should also be noted that the senses of rational and irrational under consideration are quite demanding. If I have equally good reasons to give my blue painting to my wife or to my daughter, giving it to my wife would neither be rational nor irrational: it would be *rationally indifferent*.

Desires can, like actions, be called rational or irrational: a desire is rational if it is rational for its subject to satisfy it – that is, to cause its satisfaction. We can assume, for simplicity, that by desires, we mean desires that are not overridden by stronger desires. Accordingly, *a rational subject must not only act in ways that are never irrational, but also have only desires which are not irrational.*

### 3.2. Rescuing the Second Premise

Consider the second premise: “All our (current) desires are unfulfilled.” It might be argued, as we have seen, that they are not. It remains true, however, that it would be blankly irrational (in the objective sense) to have a desire that is already fulfilled. If I desire to win the Goncourt Prize, it would be irrational for me to keep this desire after I was actually awarded the prize.<sup>19</sup> Keeping a desire indeed implies being disposed to satisfy it, but it would be plainly stupid to be so disposed if the desire is already satisfied.

Quite generally, and however rational it might initially seem, the fact that a desire is already satisfied gives me a decisive reason not to cause its satisfaction, and makes this desire irrational. It might be said that, in some cases, it is rational to maintain a desire that is already satisfied. If I forgot that I was awarded the Goncourt Prize, it might be claimed that it would not be irrational for me to still desire the prize. The sense of irrationality involved here is, however, not the objective sense that we have adopted, but the subjective one. The fact that I was awarded the Goncourt Prize always gives me a decisive (objective) reason not to desire it, but it will not give me a “subjective reason” not to want it unless I am aware of that fact. One might also wonder whether it might not be rational to maintain a desire for a certain *activity* after it is satisfied. If I desire to have a walk and I am walking, why would it be irrational to still desire to walk? The answer is twofold. First, as I have already argued in § 2.2, the fact that I am walking does not imply that my desire to have a walk is satisfied (if I have walked for 30 seconds, it will usually *not* be satisfied). Second, when my desire  $D_t$  to have a walk is indeed satisfied, I can still desire to walk and be rational, but, in such a case, I will only desire to walk in virtue of a second desire  $D_{t+1}$ , which is a desire to *pursue* the walk a little longer than I initially wanted to.

We can accordingly replace (2s) with the following:

- (2r) All the desires *of someone rational* are unfulfilled: we cannot rationally maintain a desire that is already satisfied.

### 3.3. Rescuing the First Premise

We saw, against (1s), that unfulfilled desires do not always decrease our level

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<sup>19</sup> The Goncourt Prize is the most prestigious French literature prize. Unlike the Nobel Prize, the Goncourt Prize can only be awarded once to any single person.

of happiness. I will argue, however, that at least some of the unfulfilled desires of someone rational will eat into his or her happiness. Very roughly, the idea is that:

**The Rationality of Doing One's Best:** Someone rational with unfulfilled desires has at least one desire that he will do his best to satisfy.

**The Spur of (Un)happiness (first pass):** We do not do our best to fulfill a desire unless its being unfulfilled makes us less than fully happy.

Accordingly, a rational subject's unfulfilled desires will tend to be inconsistent with his happiness and prevent him from being fully happy.

I will now tackle *The Rationality of Doing One's Best* and *The Spur of (Un)Happiness* in turn.

### a. The Rationality of Doing One's Best

We saw that having a desire implies being disposed to cause this desire's satisfaction. There are, however, various ways to be so disposed. I can be disposed to act in ways that make the desire's satisfaction almost certain, or only merely probable. If I desire to eat something, for example, I can spontaneously rush to find ways of getting hold of some food and invest in that task all the energy I can invest without frustrating other desires. Alternatively, I might need to be prompted in order to start my search. I might also subsequently invest less energy in that search (than I possibly could without frustrating other desires). We will say that *I do my best to satisfy a desire* when my action, or disposition to act, maximizes the probability of satisfying this desire.

Now, it is not always irrational not to do one's best to fulfill a given desire. It is arguably not irrational not to do one's best to fulfill an irrational desire (say the desire to square the circle) or even a rationally indifferent one. It is, however, always irrational not to do one's best to fulfill a desire *when this desire is rational*. It would, for example, be irrational not to do my best to get cured from a (curable) life-threatening disease. A rational desire is a desire I have most reason to fulfill and, if I have most reason to fulfill it, I have most reason to maximize the probability of effectively fulfilling it – that is, to do my best to fulfill it.

Someone rational will accordingly do his best to satisfy his rational desires (as opposed to his rationally indifferent ones). We can get a stronger claim by noticing that, even if someone rational can have many desires that are rationally indifferent rather than rational, she must have at least some rational desires. The easiest way to see this is to consider the desire to satisfy at least one of my desires. This is a desire that I will have if I am rational and that can be shown to be rational rather than rationally indifferent. Desiring

not to satisfy any of my desires would indeed be *self-defeating* (it is logically impossible to satisfy this desire) and thus irrational. So I do not have equally good reasons to satisfy and not to satisfy this desire, and it is a rational desire rather than a rationally indifferent one. It follows that if I am rational and have unfulfilled desires, there are some desires I will do my best to satisfy.

We can sum up the above argument for The Rationality of Doing One's Best as follows:

Someone rational with desires will have some rational desires.

Someone rational with rational desires will do his best to fulfill these desires.

So someone rational with desires will do his best to fulfill some of his desires.

I have argued for The Rationality of Doing One's Best. I will now defend The Spur of (Un)happiness.

### **b. The Spur of (Un)happiness (first pass)**

The Spur of (Un)happiness claims that I will not do my best to satisfy an unfulfilled desire unless its being unfulfilled makes me less than fully happy. This is an empirical claim about happiness and performance, and it can be defended empirically by appeal to the *Yerkes-Dodson law*, or rather to one of its multiple guises, stating that:

**Yerkes-Dodson law:** The relationship between the intensity of noxious stimuli, anxiety or punishment on the one hand, and learning or performance on the other hand, follows an inverted U curve for complex tasks and a direct linear relation for simple tasks.

This psychological law entails that, whatever the complexity of a task may be, a certain dose of noxious stimuli, anxiety or punishment will always promote learning and performance. It strongly suggests, then, that a diminution of happiness can act like a spur, and that we will not do our best to satisfy a desire unless its being unsatisfied makes us less than fully happy.<sup>20</sup> Even though it is one of the best-established psychological results, Yerkes-Dodson is still poorly understood (for example, the precise mechanisms underlying it are unclear), and it can be useful to provide a more intuitive rationale for The Spur of (Un)Happiness. A simple and fairly commonsensical argument for this claim is that:

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<sup>20</sup> Formulated in 1908, the Yerkes-Dodson law has received many confirmations: it is one of those few psychological results that has acquired the status of a law. As the law has been formulated in many different ways, it is not totally clear, however, that the different confirmations target the same phenomenon, nor that a single formulation escapes criticisms (see Teigen 1994). It should be noted, in any case, that the most serious doubts concern the idea that noxious stimuli, anxiety, arousal or drive can, at a certain, very high level, hinder learning and performance, not on the idea that they can promote them.



Someone will not do his best to fulfill a desire unless he *invests emotionally* in the fulfillment of the desire – that is, unless he feels concerned by its fulfillment.

But to invest emotionally in the fulfillment of the desire implies being disposed to experience negative emotions if this desire is frustrated.<sup>21</sup>

Assuming that negative emotions generally decrease one's level of happiness, it follows that someone will not do his best to fulfill a desire unless it diminishes his or her happiness.<sup>22</sup>

Some happy people, it might be replied, might happen to do their best without needing any kind of spur for that. This, however, is hardly an objection. Like most, if not all, psychological claims, The Spur of (Un)happiness is only meant as a *ceteris paribus* claim. It is worth stressing, in any case, that, because it depends on such a *ceteris paribus* premise, the conclusion that we have dubbed Rational Pessimism is a *ceteris paribus* claim as well.

In its present state, The Spur of (Un)happiness is a relatively weak claim that only allows us to conclude, along with The Rationality of Doing One's Best and (2r), that, for someone rational, desires tend to be inconsistent with happiness: if a rational subject has desires, this will decrease his level of happiness and he will not be *fully* happy.

### c. Demanding desires

In order to strengthen The Spur of (Un)Happiness and to get a more significant conclusion, we need to classify rational desires according to how difficult it is to do one's best to fulfill them (how much trouble and effort it takes). For example, while it is very easy for me to do my best to get some food – some food is just there, within reach – it is extremely difficult to do my best to have a very long life, to make my children live the best life they can, to prevent starvation in the Third World, etc. Here, bigger efforts might always bring up small improvements, and, in retrospect, it is fairly easy for someone to regret that he or she did not do more to make those improvements. The amount of effort required to do one's best to satisfy such

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<sup>21</sup> In the same spirit, it might be claimed that a certain dose of (unpleasant) stress can always increase one's motivation and that, except for complex tasks, and when the subject is already overstressed, a motivational increment should prove useful.

<sup>22</sup> This connection between happiness and motivation, mediated by emotions, is nicely illustrated by patients such as Phineas Gage, who suffer from ventromedial damage in the prefrontal cortex and whose capacity for emotional investment is subsequently impaired. These patients often seem not to care about the fulfillment of their rational desires and they accordingly fail to do their best to satisfy them ... and behave quite irrationally (Damasio 1996).

desires is, accordingly, *virtually limitless*.<sup>23</sup> We might say that desires of the second kind, but not those of the first, are *demanding*. Now, we have argued that:

In order to do one's best to satisfy a desire, someone who is not already frankly unhappy must invest emotionally in the fulfillment of that desire, and that his level of happiness must accordingly be decreased by the desire's unfulfillment.

Quite similarly, we can argue that, in the case of a *demanding* desire, the emotional investment *required* to do one's best must not only be wholehearted and massive, but it also must be virtually limitless. The decrease of happiness such an emotional investment involves must accordingly be extremely significant. If that is so, a subject with demanding desires will not do his best to fulfill these desires unless their unsatisfaction makes him unhappy (rather than merely not-fully happy).<sup>24</sup>

**The Spur of (Un)happiness (second pass):** We do not do our best to fulfill a desire (respectively, a demanding desire) unless its being unfulfilled makes us less than fully happy (respectively, unhappy).

It might be objected that how much a rational subject should invest in the satisfaction of a given demanding desire depends on his other desires, and on how much he should invest in these. The idea, here, is that these other desires require some amount of investment as well, and might thus limit how much I should invest even in demanding desires. For example, given my (demanding) desire to stop starvation in the Third World, I might have decisive reasons to give a limited amount of money to Oxfam, but not to do more than that, for I would otherwise threaten the fulfillment of my desire to stay in good health, buy and read books, etc. In answer to this objection, it should be reminded that, whatever other desires I have and whatever resources I have invested in these other desires, if I really have a rational, demanding desire such as the desire to stop starvation in the Third World, I will always have decisive reasons to invest as much as I possibly can in the fulfillment of this desire. In other words, whatever resources I still have after having "invested" enough emotions and efforts in the satisfaction of my other desires, I should invest them *all* in the satisfaction of that demanding desire. But investing them all will, given the Yerkes-Dodson law, leave me frankly unhappy. At this point, it might be replied that I desire to be happy, that this desire is rational and that I have decisive reasons to secure my happiness. It might be added that, *if I have*

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<sup>23</sup> The distinction between *demanding* and *nondemanding* desires is reminiscent of the Epicurean distinction between *natural* desires (which have a natural limit and can easily be satisfied) and *nonnatural* desires (which have no natural limit and can never be fully satisfied); see Cooper (1999: XXII).

<sup>24</sup> In terms of the Yerkes-Dodson law, we will not do our best to satisfy our demanding desires unless our level of noxious stimuli/anxiety/punishments reaches the maximum of the inverted U curve (and much higher levels if some demanding desires involve simple tasks).

*decisive reasons to secure my happiness, then I have decisive reasons to limit my investments in my rational demanding desires* (and limiting this investment cannot be irrational after all). This is a very interesting objection. We shall see, however, that the last, emphasized inference on which it relies, which is an instance of the so-called inheritability of rationality, does not hold (§ 4.2). Admitting this for now, I conclude that we can accept the stronger version of The Spur of Un(Happiness).

With this stronger version, The Rationality of Doing One's Best (according to which someone rational with unfulfilled desires will have some rational desires and do his best to fulfill his rational desires) entails that:

- (1r) For someone rational, *unfulfilled desires* tend to be inconsistent with happiness: if someone rational has unfulfilled desires, he will not be fully happy, and if he has demanding desires that are rational, he will be unhappy.

One might object that the validity of this conclusion depends on some unclear quantitative matter: what is the precise import of non-conative sources of happiness? Where, exactly, do we set the limit between demanding and nondemanding desires? I agree that the argument for (1r) is still somewhat programmatic, and that much more could be said on demanding desires. But this objection misses the mark. The difference between nondemanding desires and demanding desires is not just that the latter require more investment (if we are to do our best to fulfill them). Unlike the former they require a *virtually limitless* investment. The defense of (1r) hinges on this qualitative difference.

Some will probably demur, arguing that (1r) has some implausible consequences. They will grant that *some* desires, which are particularly intense and obsessive, might prevent a rational subject from being happy when they are unfulfilled, but, they will add, this cannot be true of just any desire. If I desire to spend my next vacation in Japan, this will not make me less than fully happy, and this is no reason to claim that I am not rational. Unlike particularly intense desires or "cravings," it might be objected, such desires will not diminish one's happiness. The answer to this objection is twofold. First, it is not true that the above development entails that, if I am rational, I will be less than fully happy merely in virtue of desiring to spend my next vacation in Japan. It only entails that I will be less than fully happy *if this desire is rational* (rather than rationally indifferent) and unhappy if it is rational and demanding. But a desire such as this one will usually be precisely a desire that *is* rationally indifferent. I desire to spend my next vacation in Japan, but I am indifferent between this desire and the desire to stay home in order to get some work done, while going to Japan next year instead. I am also indifferent between this desire and the desire to go to Spain rather than Japan, etc. We can thus distinguish between those unfulfilled desires that will eat into the happiness of someone rational and those that will not: the first ones and only the first ones are rational (among the rational desires, the demanding ones will make someone unhappy while the nondemanding ones will only make

her non-fully happy). Second, and I will come back to this later, we spontaneously exaggerate the extent to which we behave rationally. In particular, I will argue that we often display a subtle form of nonchalance toward our rational desires, which makes us happier, but which is irrational in that it prevents us from doing our best to fulfill those desires.

We can now conclude. From (1r) and (2r), Rational Pessimism follows:

**(3r) Rational Pessimism:** For someone rational, *desires* tend to be inconsistent with happiness: if someone rational has some desires, he will not be fully happy, and if he has demanding desires, he will be unhappy.

Most people have desires, and many have desires that are both rational and demanding. Simply take the desires concerning one's wellbeing, that of our relatives or even that of strangers. I desire that everything be fine for my daughter at school; I want her to enjoy a perfect adult life later; I desire that no one starves; I desire not to die of a lung cancer; and I desire actually not to die, at least not before the next century ends. All such desires are stab wounds to the happiness of a rational subject. If we were rational, we would be unhappy.

#### 4. Three Ways to Miss the Point

I believe that the argument for Rational Pessimism (1r-3r) is valid and sound. I believe that it is significant, as well, for most of us have desires, and even demanding ones. This argument would still be significant if we rejected the second premise (2r), for most of us have *unfulfilled* desires as well, and some of them are both demanding and rational.

Before going any further, we should be reminded that the defense of (1r) relies on an empirical, *ceteris paribus* premise. Rational pessimism is, accordingly, *not* the claim that rationality is such that, necessarily, any rational creature with demanding desires will be unhappy. It is rather the claim that, as a matter of fact, human beings who are rational and have demanding desires will tend to be unhappy. The latter claim is less troubling than the former, because it allows that the rare human beings who escape the empirical generalizations justifying (1r) might have unsatisfied demanding desires, and be happy and yet rational.<sup>25</sup> The contention that, as a matter of fact, rationality might hinder the happiness of a vast majority of people might still have an air of paradox, however. I would like to spend some time clearing it up in the remainder of the paper.

##### 4.1. Supposing That We Are Rational

It is said that Diogenes refuted Zeno's paradoxical arguments by taking a little walk. One might likewise answer our argument with a smile. One might, that

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<sup>25</sup> I thank Kieran Setiya for pressing me on this point.

is, reply by showing how happy we are. I do not deny, however, that we often *are* happy or even fully happy. What I deny is that we are rational when this is the case. We can make the kind of irrationality involved more precise if we remember that, even if we can irrationally desire some events that have already happened, this does not in general help us be happy (§ 2.2). When we are fully happy with desires, or happy with demanding and rational desires, this is rather because we adopt erotic or mourning attitudes toward our desires. Such attitudes prevent us from being unhappy, but they also make us irrational. For they prevent us from doing our best to fulfill those desires on which they bear.

Consider erotic attitudes first. We saw that adopting an erotic attitude toward a desire involves playing with it, readily delaying its fulfillment. Allowing such delays is precisely not doing one's best to fulfill this desire. The example of sport is particularly telling here. Consider, for instance, running a marathon. The more one adopts an erotic attitude toward winning the marathon, the more one will tend to have fun and take pleasure in running the marathon, but the more the importance of simply participating and playfully running will outweigh that of winning, and the less one will accept suffering in order to win or even finish the marathon.

In the same way, when we adopt a mourning attitude toward a desire, we stop expecting that it might ever be fulfilled. We accept that it cannot be fulfilled, acting as if it just could not, and we stop looking for opportunities to fulfill it. We, accordingly, stop doing our best to attain that goal. Indeed, it has been shown that the kind of hedonic adaptation underwritten by mourning attitudes only occurs when the subject becomes quasi-certain that his condition is permanent and gives up his hope of relief. This connection between the absence of hope and adaptation has long been clinically observed. Quite recently, it has been empirically confirmed by Smith et al. (2009), who have shown that patients receiving colostomies only adapt when the colostomy is *not* potentially reversible.

Even if it is rather elusive, we often adopt mourning attitudes toward some of our rational desires. This adoption manifests itself either by an akratic behavior or, more subtly, by a form of nonchalance toward these desires, which we start treating as mere wishes. For example, I wholeheartedly desire to have a long life, but despite the importance of this desire, I often act as if it did not really depend upon my doings. I take some inconsiderate risks. I smoke, I practice dangerous sports, etc. If I did my best to fulfill my desire to live a long life, I would certainly behave quite differently. Of course, the nonchalance we adopt toward our desires might not be obvious when those desires are very easy to fulfill. For example, the chance that I might not eat well tonight is very small, so the fact that I do not do my best to fulfill this desire will not normally have any notable consequence, and will only appear introspectively as a feeling of carelessness about tonight's supper. The nonchalance we readily adopt, and more broadly our tendency not to do our best to fulfill some of our desires, might also strike us as not irrational

because we have a reason for adopting it: it often allows us not to be anxious and obsessive about the satisfaction of those desires and thus to be happier. Unfortunately, this reason is *not* a good reason. It is not a reason that can make this nonchalance rational. It *is* often rational to cause myself to adopt the kind of nonchalance that allows me to be happy with demanding desires; as we shall see in the next section, the latter nonetheless makes me irrational.

#### 4.2. Supposing That Rationality Can Be Inherited

We always have strong reasons to maximize our wellbeing and, for that, to secure our happiness. Let us, assume, for the sake of argument, that those reasons are decisive. It follows that it is rational to secure our happiness. Now, if in order to be happy we must have some irrational desires (say a desire for an event that has occurred already) or act irrationally (say by not doing one's best to fulfill one's rational desires<sup>26</sup>), then it is rational for us to cause ourselves to act irrationally or to have some irrational desires. But, it might be objected, if it is rational to cause ourselves to accomplish some actions or to acquire some desires, these actions and these desires cannot be irrational after all. Call this claim the *Inheritability of Rationality*. It entails, against Rational Pessimism, that happiness cannot but require desires and actions that are not irrational. It entails, in short, that rationality will always promote happiness and never eat into it. This principle, however, is false. It has been elegantly refuted by Derek Parfit (1984; 2011). His rebuttal hinges on the following case:

*Schelling's Case.* A robber threatens that, unless I unlock my safe and give him all my money, he will start to kill my children. It would be irrational for me to ignore this robber's threat. But even if I gave in to his threat, there is a risk that he will kill us all, to reduce his chance of being caught. I claimed that, in this case, it would be rational for me to take a drug that would make me very irrational. The robber would then see that it was pointless to threaten me; and since he could not commit his crime, and I would not be capable of calling the police, he would also be less likely to kill either me or my children (Parfit (2011: I-437); cf. also Parfit (1984: 12-13, 37-40), Parfit (2011: I-420-447)).

Even though it would be rational for me to take the drug, doing so would dispose me to act irrationally. Under the influence of the drug, I could act in damaging and self-defeating ways, cutting my hands to be cleverer, wounding my children because I love them, etc. We can also imagine that this drug would cause me to do all those things by causing me to desire to do them. Those desires and the acts they motivate would clearly be irrational. If you

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<sup>26</sup> It is not obvious that not doing one's best to fulfill some of one's desires is an action, as I suppose it is here, rather than a tendency to act in a certain way. The argument, however, would go through in the very same way if it were merely a tendency for action: even if it is rational to cause oneself to acquire a given tendency for action, acting upon that tendency is not always rational.

believe that they could still be rational because they would have good effects, showing the robber that I am irrational, you can add a feature to the case and suppose that it is enough to convince the robber that I am insane that he sees me take the drug (Parfit 2011: I-437-38). Schelling's case neatly shows that it can in general be rational to cause oneself to have some irrational desires and to act irrationally. Its lesson, moreover, applies to our case quite smoothly. Imagine that I am in misery because of my unsatisfied desires (having my exams, securing my beloved's wellbeing, a long and healthy life, etc.) and that an Evil Genius proposes that I take a *mourning pill* or an *erotic pill* that will make me adopt, respectively, a mourning attitude toward all my unsatisfied desires or an erotic attitude toward them, and *ipso facto* allow me to become happy. Assuming that it is rational to cause my happiness, it will be rational for me to take one of these pills. Yet, once I have taken it, I will either act as if my desires could not be satisfied and give up trying to satisfy them (mourning pill) or keep playing with them, adventurously delaying their satisfaction to enjoy the mere contemplation of their possible satisfaction or the mere activity of being on my way to satisfying them (erotic pill). I will accordingly either fail to satisfy any of them or at least importantly diminish the probability of satisfying them. This will threaten the satisfaction of my rational desire to have my exams, secure a long life, etc., and jeopardize my wellbeing. This will indeed make me act irrationally.

One should not be too puzzled by such "rational irrationalities." They arise, very simply, whenever irrationality is rewarded. To paraphrase Parfit (2011), if a whimsical tyrant will not save my life unless I become irrational, it will be rational, other things being equal, to cause myself to become irrational. Rational Pessimism depends on such rational irrationalities. We might say that it hinges on the fact that the structure of our motivation (and in particular the connection between performance and (un)happiness witnessed by the Yerkes-Dodson law) rewards irrationalities.

### 4.3. Confusing Liking and Desiring

I have claimed that rational subjects never desire a state of affairs that obtains. If this is the case, it might be wondered, how could we be fully rational and take pleasure in anything? Such puzzlement comes from the confusion between *likings* and *desires*. I normally take pleasure, say, in riding my bike, not because in doing so I am fulfilling a desire, but only because I *like* riding my bike. This confusion is probably encouraged by the ambiguity of terms such as "preference": "I prefer oranges to apples" might mean either that I *desire* to have some oranges more than I desire to have some apples or that I *like* oranges best. But as we have already seen, it seems possible for someone to like a thing for which she has no desires. I can like the sound of music by surprise. Conversely, it seems possible for someone to desire some things that he does not like. When a mosquito bites me, I desire to scratch my mosquito bite. It is not something I like and, usually, I do not take pleasure in

doing it. More importantly, addictions, and compulsive behaviors more broadly, often seem to involve such liking-free desires. That would explain why satisfying compulsive desires often does not bring any joy at all. Such dissociations between likings and desires have been claimed for centuries to exist.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, they have recently been suggested to have a biological basis. Indeed, in a series of papers, Berridge and Robinson (2003) have shown that liking and wanting depend on neurophysiological systems whose distinctness might explain addictions, compulsive behaviors and many of the difficulties we encounter in the pursuit of happiness.

Likings and desires differ in fundamental ways. Likings, unlike desires, are not intrinsically connected to actions or to the future. Unlike desires, they cannot be fulfilled. Likings, finally, cannot be rational or irrational either: they are *arational*. Accordingly, whereas I can rationally be blamed for some of my desires, I cannot likewise be blamed for my likings. Even Humeans, who are suspicious of the idea that desires can be irrational in any substantial sense, should acknowledge that a desire for something logically impossible (such as the desire to square the circle) is irrational. The corresponding liking is not, however, irrational. The mathematician who desires to square the circle would also like to square the circle in the sense that it would please him to, and he cannot be blamed for that.<sup>28</sup>

Notice that, even though likings are arational, it might be rational, and I take it that it actually is rational, to cause oneself to like some things rather than others, and to like some things rather than none (patients suffering from severe depression are sometimes described as not liking anything anymore). If it is better to like one thing than not, it is not the liking in itself that is rational however – likings are arational – but the action of causing oneself to like this thing and the desire to like this thing. (Compare with: it might be rational to cause oneself to weigh 150 pounds, but weighing 150 pounds is neither rational nor irrational.) Finally, liking some events, even though it is arational, arguably gives us some reasons to provoke those events. If I desire a given event because I like it, its occurrence will normally contribute to my

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<sup>27</sup> One may arguably detect this distinction in Plato (*Philebus*: 51a-52c; *Gorgias*: 494a-95a).

<sup>28</sup> See Parfit (2011: 54-56) for further elaboration on the distinction between likings and desires and for an important caution against the philosophical mistakes their confusion is responsible for. Sumner (1999, ch. 5) introduces a similar distinction. Interestingly, if, as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche claimed, there are no objective values and, if I can accordingly rightly like anything, it is not clear that likings will have conditions of correctness. But there is no sense in saying that a liking is satisfied or unsatisfied. Having no conditions of correctness or satisfaction, likings would be non-intentional. I surmise that the proto-conative non-intentional affective state that Henry (1985) takes Schopenhauer's transcendental Will (see n. 3) and Nietzsche's Will to Power to be might indeed be a form of non-intentional liking. Deleuze and Guattari's (1977) notion of "desire as production-without-a-specific-object" (as opposed to "desire as lack-of-an-object") might likewise hinge on the assimilation of desires to form a (socially structured) non-intentional liking.



happiness. It should be repeated, however, that we can and we often do desire things that we do not particularly like.<sup>29</sup>

As we have seen, we often exaggerate our rationality, confuse likings and desires, and wrongly assume that rationality can be inherited. I hope this, along with the claim that it is only meant as a *ceteris paribus* and contingent claim, helps show that rational pessimism is not paradoxical after all. Many people, especially those rationalists who have some faith in the powers of reason, might still find it unacceptable and claim that it is counterintuitive. I myself find it quite substantial, but not especially counterintuitive. Even if reason is a wonderful tool, it is a tool that is not *necessarily* beneficial to creatures endowed with it, and it is a tool that, in its most perfect form, happens not to be beneficial to most of us.

## 5. What Makes Us Happy

Even though it is usually rational to seek happiness, desiring creatures like us cannot be fully happy if they are rational. Even worse, given that we often have rational desires that are demanding, we are likely to be frankly unhappy when we are rational. What makes us happy, then, is what we might call rational irrationalities and rational arationalities: conditions in which it is rational to cause ourselves to be, but in which it is arational or irrational to be. We are happy because there are things we like, even though likings are arational. We are happy, also and overall, because we can adopt mourning or erotic attitudes toward our unfulfilled desires, even though such attitudes make us irrational.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Those reasons, however, are not always decisive, so one can like some events that one should not make happen.

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