

Does Schopenhauer accept any positive pleasures?

Joshua Isaac Fox 

Department of Philosophy, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Correspondence

Joshua Isaac Fox, Department of Philosophy, The University of Chicago, 1115 E. 58th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA.
Email: jifox@uchicago.edu

Abstract

Schopenhauer repeatedly claims that *all* pleasure is negative, and this view seems to play key roles throughout his work. Nonetheless, many scholars have argued that Schopenhauer actually acknowledges certain positive pleasures. Two major arguments have been offered for this reading, one focused on the link between Schopenhauer's view of pleasure and Plato's, and one focused on Schopenhauer's distinction between two components of aesthetic pleasure. I argue that neither way of motivating the positive pleasure reading succeeds. Both overlook a key aspect of Schopenhauer's account: namely, his suggestion that there are two distinct kinds of negative pleasure, pleasures of *satisfaction* and pleasures of *distraction*. When Schopenhauer claims that *all* pleasure is negative, he means it.

Throughout his work, Schopenhauer repeatedly claims that *all* pleasure is negative in character. The ordinary assumption that human beings can exist in three meaningfully distinct hedonic states—pleasure, pain, and hedonic neutrality—is incorrect. Rather, pleasure is just a particular way of interpreting the neutral state: the neutral state feels much *better* than a painful state, and this sometimes leads us to confuse it with a state that feels positively good. At bottom, pleasure is a mere contrast feeling, nothing more than relief at the removal of pain.

This view of pleasure finds explicit expression throughout Schopenhauer's work. To give just a few examples:

All satisfaction [*Alle Befriedigung*], or what is generally called happiness [*Glück*], is actually and essentially *only ever* [*immer nur*] negative and *absolutely never* [*durchaus nie*] positive. (WWR I: 345, my emphasis)¹

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2022 The Authors. *European Journal of Philosophy* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

I must substantiate the proof I gave in the text for the negativity of *all* satisfaction [*Negativität aller Befriedigung*], which is to say all pleasure [*Genusses*] and happiness [*Glückes*], in contrast to the positivity of the pain. (WWR II: 590, my emphasis)

pain, suffering—which includes all lack, privation, need and even every wish—is what is positive, what is immediately felt. The nature of satisfaction [*Befriedigung*], pleasure [*Genusses*], or happiness [*Glücks*], by contrast, consists *only* in [*nur darin*] a privation's being removed, a pain's being stilled. So they have an effect negatively. (OBM: 202, my emphasis)

the nature of *all* enjoyment [*aller Genuß*] and *all* happiness [*alles Glück*] is negative, whereas that of pain is positive. (PP I: 355, my emphasis)

the good, i.e. *all* happiness and satisfaction [*alles Glück und alle Befriedigung*], is the negative, that is the mere suspending of desire and ceasing of a pain. (PP II: 263, my emphasis)

In all of these passages as well as many others, Schopenhauer highlights the universal scope of his claim about pleasure's negative character. His position is not that *many* or *most* pleasures are negative. It is that *all* pleasure is negative, that pleasure consists *only* in the relief of some pain.

This claim that *all* pleasure is negative in character seems to play several important roles in Schopenhauer's philosophy. In two particularly crucial cases, the negativity of all pleasure seems essential to Schopenhauer's defense of both his pessimism and his ethics of compassion:

With regard to his pessimism, it is crucial for Schopenhauer to establish that life's lack of value does not turn on the *quantitative* balance between human pleasure and human pain. A quantitative account would always be open to charges of one-sidedness: the optimist can simply claim that the pessimist has neglected to take some of life's pleasures into account (WWR I: 350). To get around this problem, Schopenhauer needs there to be a significant *qualitative* difference between pleasure and pain: something must ensure that *no amount* of pleasure can compensate for *any amount* of pain.

What seems to ensure this asymmetry is Schopenhauer's claim that all pleasure is negative while pain is positive. At bottom, pleasure is nothing more than the absence of pain. The absence of pain does not harm us, but it also does not benefit us. The *removal* of pain can be a *relative* benefit: it can make life *better* by making it less bad. Taken on its own, however, the state of painlessness is of no *absolute* benefit: the removal of pain can make life less bad, but it can never make it in any way good. Painlessness is of fundamentally neutral value. As such, as long as *all* pleasure is negative, no amount of pleasure can ever compensate for any amount of pain: no matter how many neutral states you add to a life that contains any harmful states, it will never become beneficial. If *any* pleasure is positive, however, this strategy for defending life's lack of value will no longer work: those positive pleasures might offer positive benefits, and thus might be able to compensate us for pain's positive harms. The moment Schopenhauer grants the existence of even one positive pleasure, he must also grant that his pessimism turns on quantitative questions about how much pleasure it is possible to obtain and how much pain it is possible to avoid. The moment Schopenhauer grants the existence of even one positive pleasure, then, the one-sidedness objection to his pessimism would come back into full force.

With regards to his ethics, it is crucial for Schopenhauer to establish that concern for another's *suffering* is the only way to take a direct interest in the quality of another's life. Schopenhauer identifies compassion—the desire to relieve the suffering of another—as the *sole* motive of moral action.² He does this by first arguing that morality requires us to take a direct interest in the quality of others' lives, and then suggesting that compassion is the only way for us to take such an interest. At first glance, this last suggestion seems to be incorrect: compassion is clearly *one* way to take a direct interest in the quality of another's life, but it is not obviously the only way to do so. Our concern for the quality of another's life might find expression in a desire to relieve her suffering, but it might also find

expression in a desire to increase her pleasures. For compassion to be the *sole* motive of moral action, then, Schopenhauer needs some way to deny that there are two distinct forms our desire to improve others' lives might take.

What allows Schopenhauer to deny this distinction seems to be his claim that *all* pleasure is negative in character. Increasing another's pleasure just means relieving her pains. As such, there is only one way to take a direct interest in others' well-being. Compassion is the sole moral incentive because relieving pain is the sole mode of improving others' lives (WWR I: 402–403; OBM: 202). Again, admitting the existence of even a single positive pleasure would seem to undercut the argument. Even if positive pleasures are extremely rare, a desire to help another individual experience them would still count as an immediate desire to improve the quality of another's life. Compassion—desire to relieve another's suffering—would no longer be the *only* way to directly desire another's well-being, and would thus also no longer be the *sole* moral incentive.

At first glance, then, there seems to be a great deal of evidence for taking Schopenhauer to hold that *all* pleasure is negative in character. Schopenhauer makes this claim explicitly throughout his work, and he seems to rely on it when defending some of his most central views. Nonetheless, an expansive and ever-growing number of scholars have denied this claim, suggesting that Schopenhauer in fact grants the existence of at least some positive pleasures. Broadly speaking, two kinds of evidence have been offered in favor of this position:

1. Young (1987, p. 57, 2005, p. 215) points to Schopenhauer's suggestion that his view of pleasure should be identified with the one Plato defends in *Republic* IX. Plato held that *many* pleasures are negative, but that a small class of pleasures are nonetheless still positive. If Schopenhauer's view of pleasure is meant as a repetition of Plato's view, then he must accept the existence of this small class of positive pleasures as well. I will refer to this view as the Plato argument for the positive pleasure reading.
2. Chansky (1988, p. 77–79), Guyer (1996, pp. 124–126, 2008, pp. 172–173), Vandenberg (2007, pp. 570–571), and Simmons (2021, p. 124) all point to Schopenhauer's suggestion that there are two components of aesthetic pleasure. One of these components is defined as relief from the pains of willing. If the other component is to be genuinely distinct from such relief, then it must consist of something other than the removal of pain. This second variety of aesthetic pleasure must, consequently, be positive in nature. I will refer to this view as the aesthetic argument for the positive pleasure reading.³

In what follows, I will consider both of these arguments in turn.⁴ Ultimately, I will conclude that neither is successful. We should take Schopenhauer at his word: when he claims that *all* pleasure is negative in character, he means it.⁵

To see that this is the case, it will help to start with a discussion of the Plato argument. The same feature of Schopenhauer's view which distinguishes his position from Plato's also explains much of what seems puzzling in his discussion of aesthetic pleasure.

1 | THE PLATO ARGUMENT

The way I described Schopenhauer's view of pleasure above should be recognizable from book IX of the *Republic*.⁶ There, as part of his effort to prove the superiority of rational pleasures over appetitive ones, Plato suggests that there is an important sense in which appetitive pleasures are not actually genuine pleasures at all.⁷ When unsatisfied, appetite involves a painful sense of lack. The satisfaction of appetite removes this pain, returning us to a neutral state. The neutral state feels much *better* than the painful state of lack that preceded it, and this leads many people to confuse it with a state that feels positively good. The state that most people call pleasure is in fact nothing more than a misinterpretation of painlessness.⁸

Importantly, however, Plato does not hold that *all* pleasure has this deceptive character. The point of his discussion is to establish the superiority of the true pleasures offered by reason. The above argument only establishes the

illusory nature of the pleasures of *satisfaction*.⁹ The pleasure we feel at obtaining something we desire is illusory: satisfaction removes a painful lack, and we confuse the resulting neutral state for a genuinely pleasant one. Pleasures that do not involve the satisfaction of desire may, however, be true. Such pleasures will not involve the removal of a painful lack. They will, consequently, not involve the kind of contrast with previous pain that leads us to mistake the neutral state for a pleasant one. Any pleasure that is not produced by obtaining something we were previously distressed by lacking will be genuine. Plato's examples include unexpected pleasant smells—you do not need to have previously *desired* to smell a rose to enjoy doing so—and the rational pleasures of contemplating knowledge you already possess—if you *already possess* this knowledge, your joy in contemplating it cannot depend on removing the pain of lacking it. Plato, then, holds that all pleasures which involve the satisfaction of a distressing desire are false, but that there is nonetheless a small class of true pleasures remaining.

Schopenhauer's view of pleasure is explicitly inspired by this aspect of Plato's account. Plato's reasons for considering the pleasures of satisfaction to be false are more or less the same as Schopenhauer's reasons for considering the pleasures of satisfaction to be negative. This influence forms the basis of the first argument for taking Schopenhauer to accept the existence of some positive pleasures. If Schopenhauer's view of negative pleasure is so similar to Plato's view of false pleasure, then it seems reasonable to expect it to have a similarly limited scope. Schopenhauer too should hold that it is only the pleasures of *satisfaction* that are negative: he should grant that any pleasure which does not depend on filling a painful lack will be a positive one. On the account defended in Young (1987, p. 57, 2005, p. 215), this is more than just a speculative claim about what Schopenhauer's view *should* be given its Platonic foundations. Rather, Young suggests that in the passage where Schopenhauer acknowledges his view's debt to Plato, he also explicitly accepts Plato's claims about its limits.

The passage in question is one that I referenced earlier on: namely, Schopenhauer's attempt to explain why compassion alone is the sole moral incentive. To explain why concern for others' well-being must take the form of a desire to relieve suffering rather than a desire to increase pleasure, Schopenhauer appeals to pleasure's negative character. In the process, he identifies Plato as someone who shares his view in a way that Young takes to involve explicitly endorsing the limited scope of Plato's critique:

The nature of satisfaction, pleasure, or happiness, by contrast, consists only in a privation's being removed, a pain's being stilled. So they have an effect *negatively*. And for that very reason need and wish are the condition of every pleasure [*Bedingung jedes Genusses*]. Plato already recognized this, and excepted only pleasant smells and the joys of the intellect [*Dies erkannte schon PLATON, und nahm nur die Wohlgerüche und die Geistesfreuden aus*] (*Republic IX*, p. 264ff. Bip.). Voltaire too says: "There are no true pleasures without true needs." Thus the *positive*, that which makes itself known of itself, is pain: satisfaction and pleasures are the *negative*, the mere removal of the former. Upon this rests first of all the fact that only the suffering [*nur das Leiden*], the lack, the danger, the helplessness of the other awaken our sympathy directly and as such. (OBM 202)

As Young rightly notes, Schopenhauer suggests that Plato recognized the same truth about pleasure's negativity that he did. The question is what we should make of Schopenhauer's suggestion that Plato recognized this truth *with a few exceptions*. Is the implication that Schopenhauer's view is exactly the same as Plato's, and thus that he recognizes these exceptions as well? Or, is it rather that Schopenhauer holds a view that overlaps with Plato's but goes further than it, radicalizing the Platonic critique by claiming that *all* pleasures are negative rather than just most of them?

There are two kinds of reasons for thinking that the latter reading is the correct one. Taking Schopenhauer to present his view as going further than Plato's makes the best sense of what he says in this specific passage. Moreover, Schopenhauer has a clear philosophical basis for preferring the stronger view: his grounds for considering pleasure to have a negative character include those presented by Plato in *Republic IX*, but they also extend beyond Plato's in a way that justifies ruling out the kinds of exceptions Plato grants. Schopenhauer does not endorse Plato's

exceptions to the negativity thesis in this passage, and he has genuine reasons not to endorse those exceptions despite Plato's influence on his view.

To start with the question of whether Schopenhauer endorses Plato's exceptions in this passage, it will help to note a few things about the text. Young (1987, p. 57) emphasizes that Schopenhauer presents Plato's exceptions without explicitly dissenting from them. This, however, cannot be decisive, for Schopenhauer also offers no explicit dissension from the much stronger view attributed to Voltaire in the following sentence: Voltaire claims that there are *no* true pleasures without true needs, that is, that *all* pleasure is negative in character. In citing these authors without explicitly dissenting from their views, then, Schopenhauer cannot be suggesting that his view of pleasure is *identical* to theirs: after all, their views of pleasure are not identical to each other. The question of how much Schopenhauer takes his view to overlap with that of each of these figures must be decided by considering what he says in the rest of the passage. Here, it seems clear that the rest of what Schopenhauer says is much closer to the stronger view attributed to Voltaire than the weaker one attributed to Plato. Schopenhauer claims that pleasure consists *only* in the relief of pain, and identifies need as the precondition of *every* pleasure. If Schopenhauer does not explicitly dissent from Plato's exceptions, this seems to be because the uncompromising presentation of Schopenhauer's own view renders explicit dissension unnecessary. Schopenhauer notes that *every* pleasure depends on prior pain immediately before discussing Plato's position: the contrast is sufficiently direct that Schopenhauer does not have to spell it out.

As a further textual point, it is unclear how the argument Schopenhauer makes in this passage would function if Schopenhauer fully identified his view with Plato's. As discussed earlier, Schopenhauer aims to establish that compassion—the desire to relieve another's suffering—is the *sole* moral incentive. To do this, he has to establish that desiring to relieve another's suffering is the *only* way of taking a direct interest in another's quality of life. To this end, he argues that the amount of suffering a life contains is the *only* thing that has an impact on its quality, and thus the *only* thing we can be interested in if we are interested in the quality of another's life. The negativity of pleasure helps Schopenhauer establish this conclusion, but only if it is absolutely exceptionless: Schopenhauer needs to reduce *everything* that impacts an individual's quality of life to questions about the presence or absence of pain. The moment he grants that some pleasures involve more than just pain's removal, his entire argument falls apart. The conclusion is “that *only* the suffering...of the other” (my emphasis) excites direct interest in their quality of life. If this *only* appears in Schopenhauer's conclusion, it must have been introduced by his premises. The premise that *many* pleasures are negative could never support the conclusion that *only* concern for suffering can motivate genuinely moral action.

Nothing in the passage where Schopenhauer likens his view to Plato's, then, seems to support taking Schopenhauer to endorse Plato's position on the existence of positive pleasures. Young's claim, however, is not just that Schopenhauer seems to endorse Plato's position in this particular passage, but that he *should* endorse this position. Schopenhauer's reasons for taking pleasure to be negative are, at bottom, the same as Plato's. Like Plato, Schopenhauer holds that people are prone to confuse the termination of a distressing state with the initiation of a delightful one: whenever we feel *better*, we are inclined to assume that we must feel genuinely good. This means that Schopenhauer, like Plato, has reason to suspect that the pleasures of satisfaction will be negative in character: these pleasures turn on eliminating a distressing desire and are thus likely to be nothing more than a misinterpretation of the neutral state. Again like Plato, however, Schopenhauer is well aware of the fact that not all pleasures are pleasures of satisfaction: we are sometimes delighted by things even though they do not bring any of our desires to an end. Schopenhauer thus *should* have endorsed the same exceptions to pleasure's negativity that Plato does. His view rests on nothing more than the same critique of the pleasures of satisfaction deployed by Plato. Thus, it would be illegitimate for his conclusions to stretch any farther than Plato's own.

Schopenhauer's views about the negativity of pleasure do not, however, rest solely on Plato's critique of the pleasures of satisfaction. Rather, Schopenhauer supplements this Platonic critique with a further argument of his own. This additional argument provides Schopenhauer with a principled reason for reaching a stronger conclusion than Plato does.

Schopenhauer's argument for the negativity of *all* pleasure starts with a basic thought about the nature of pain. Pain, Schopenhauer holds, is not directly produced by dissatisfaction of the will. Rather, pain only arises when we are *conscious* of dissatisfaction of the will. As Schopenhauer puts it, "the obstruction of the *will* must, in order to be perceived as pain, be accompanied by *cognition*" (PP II: 268). There are, then, two different conditions that must be met for an individual to experience pain: (1) her will must be dissatisfied and (2) she must be *aware* that her will is dissatisfied.

Insofar as there are two different conditions that must be met for an individual to experience pain, there will be two different ways in which an individual's pain might be relieved. On the one hand, pain might be relieved by *satisfaction*: your distress at lacking some object will be relieved if you are provided with that object. On the other hand, pain might be relieved by *distraction*: your distress at lacking some object will be relieved if you are rendered unaware of that lack. Redirecting an individual's attention away from her dissatisfaction will be just as effective at eliminating her pain as actually providing the object of her desire.

Plato's argument suggested that we should be suspicious of any pleasure which depends on the relief of pain. Whenever our pain is relieved, we enter a state that feels *better* than our previous one, and whenever we enter a state that feels better than our previous one, we are likely to mistake it for a state that feels positively good. What Schopenhauer notes beyond Plato, however, is that the pleasures of *satisfaction* are not the only pleasures that depend on the relief of pain. Rather, the pleasures of *distraction* also have this feature. When I am distracted from my dissatisfaction, this dissatisfaction ceases to pain me. Distraction thus moves me from a painful state to a neutral one. This neutral state will, however, still feel better than my previous painful state. I will, consequently, be inclined to mistake it for a state that feels positively good. The pleasures of distraction will thus have precisely the same negative character as the pleasures of satisfaction.¹⁰

Having extended Plato's argument in this way, Schopenhauer has a principled basis for denying Plato's exceptions. Plato is right that not all pleasures are pleasures of satisfaction: the object of our delight may well be something that was never the object of our desire. Nonetheless, this does not mean that there must be any positive pleasures. Our delight in these undesired objects may simply stem from the way that they distract us from the absence of things that we do desire. In Schopenhauer's view, this is precisely what explains the kinds of cases that Plato mistakes for positive pleasures. Thus, although Schopenhauer holds that many intellectual and aesthetic pleasures do not involve satisfying our desires, he also holds that these pleasures depend on the relief of prior pains. Intellectual and aesthetic pleasures are produced when we focus so much of our attention on an object unrelated to our will that we have none left over to remain aware of our will and its dissatisfactions. The will is simply crowded out of consciousness, and all suffering disappears along with it. As Schopenhauer puts it:

When consciousness of other things is so highly potentialized that consciousness of our own self disappears, then pure will-less cognition has been achieved...Now, since all suffering arises from the will that is the true self, when this side of consciousness retreats all possibility of suffering is at the same time removed, making the state of pure objectivity of intuition a thoroughly happy one; this is why I have shown it to be one of the two components [*zwei Bestandtheile*] of aesthetic pleasure. (WWR II: 385)

The aspect of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure that Schopenhauer describes here does not depend on the satisfaction of any will. Nonetheless, it is still entirely dependent on the relief of pain: we delight in absorbed contemplation of things other than our will precisely because this absorption hides the will's dissatisfaction from view. Schopenhauer, then, has a clear reason for reaching a stronger conclusion than Plato does. Where Plato finds a distinction between negative and positive pleasures, Schopenhauer simply finds a distinction between two different kinds of negative pleasure: the pleasures of satisfaction and the pleasures of distraction.¹¹

2 | THE AESTHETIC ARGUMENT

The Plato argument fails to establish that Schopenhauer admits the existence of any positive pleasures. There is, however, still another argument for this position, one that has attracted support from a broad range of scholars. This argument builds from a helpful observation about the *complex* nature of Schopenhauer's account of aesthetic pleasure. At the end of the last section, I quoted a passage where Schopenhauer describes a clearly negative form of aesthetic pleasure: namely, the aesthetic pleasure of being so absorbed in the representation of an object that we lose sight of our will and its struggles. Notably, however, Schopenhauer described this as just "one of the two components of aesthetic pleasure." In Schopenhauer's view, aesthetic pleasure is not something uniform, but something complex: there is more than one source of the joy we find in the aesthetic state. One component of this pleasure is clearly negative, a product of the relief we feel at no longer attending to our own wills. The aesthetic argument turns on suggesting that the second component of aesthetic pleasure must be positive. If this component of aesthetic pleasure is to be distinct from that provided by relief from the pains of willing, it will have to be a genuinely positive delight, a kind of joy in the aesthetic state that does not depend on contrast with prior states of pain.

To assess this argument, it will help to consider the passage where Schopenhauer goes into the greatest detail about the distinction between aesthetic pleasure's two components:

the source of aesthetic pleasure [*Quelle des ästhetischen Genusses*] will sometimes be located more in the apprehension of the Ideas that are cognized, and sometimes more in the happiness and peace of mind of pure cognition that has been liberated from all willing and thus from all individuality and the pain that comes from it (WWR I: 237)

In this passage, Schopenhauer suggests that aesthetic pleasure has two components. First, there is the pleasure of gaining knowledge: this is what Schopenhauer refers to as pleasure "in the apprehension of the Ideas that are cognized." Second, there is the pleasure of no longer attending to our own, inevitably dissatisfied wills: this is what Schopenhauer refers to as the "peace of mind of pure cognition that has been liberated from all willing." In Schopenhauer's view, our ordinary way of seeing the world is distorted by the will's influence on our understanding. We view everything relationally because what ultimately concerns us is how objects relate to our desires. The kind of total absorption in an object involved in aesthetic experience removes this distorting filter from our view: with the will pushed from consciousness, we are able to consider what things are actually like rather than just how they affect us. Aesthetic experience, then, is also a crucial source of knowledge in Schopenhauer's view. Absorption in an object frees us from attending to the will. It thus both removes the pains involved in conscious willing, and provides the kind of knowledge that the will's influence typically hides from us. Schopenhauer's suggestion is that *both* of these experiences are pleasant: we enjoy being relieved from the pains bound up in attending to our will, and we also enjoy acquiring knowledge. Aesthetic pleasure has two separate components: the pleasures of will-lessness and the pleasures of knowledge.

The question, then, is whether there is any reason to suppose that the pleasures of knowledge must be positive ones. Nowhere in his discussion of this pleasure does Schopenhauer give any explicit indication that this is the case.¹² Nonetheless, scholars have frequently taken the positive character of these pleasures to be implicit in Schopenhauer's distinction. The first component of aesthetic pleasure is relief, the joy felt at no longer being aware of our suffering. If the second component of aesthetic pleasure is to be genuinely distinct from the first, then it cannot also be relief. The pleasures of knowledge must be positive because otherwise there would not be any meaningful difference between them and the pleasures of will-lessness.

This interpretive move, however, seems quite similar to the feature of Plato's argument we saw Schopenhauer reject in the previous section. Like Plato, the proponents of this reading overlook the fact that there are two importantly different kinds of negative pleasure: the negative pleasures of satisfaction and the negative pleasures of distraction. Schopenhauer, consequently, has room to distinguish between the two components of aesthetic pleasure

without suggesting that either is positive in nature. The pleasures of will-lessness are the pleasures of distraction, the joy we feel in no longer noticing our dissatisfaction. If the pleasures of knowledge are distinct from those of will-lessness, then this means that they cannot similarly be pleasures of distraction. This, however, is perfectly compatible with them still being negative pleasures. For they may simply be pleasures of satisfaction instead. This would be the case if Schopenhauer takes some people to have a desire for knowledge, a need to know that causes them to be distressed at their ignorance. Aesthetic experience would help to satisfy this desire, and thus eliminate this pain. The pleasures of knowledge would thereby differ from those of will-lessness insofar as they involve actually satisfying some of our desires rather than simply distracting us from their dissatisfaction. They would, however, still be entirely negative, consisting of nothing more than the removal of a prior pain.

The above is, I take it, already enough to undercut the aesthetic argument. Schopenhauer never explicitly indicates that the pleasures of knowledge are positive in character, and he repeatedly claims that all pleasure is negative in character. The only credible reason for taking the pleasures of knowledge to be positive, then, would be if there was no other way to make sense of some feature of his account: anything else would be forcing an inconsistency on Schopenhauer without a genuine interpretive motive. Schopenhauer's distinction between the pleasures of distraction and the pleasures of satisfaction gives him room to distinguish the pleasures of will-lessness from the pleasures of knowledge without granting that either is positive in character. An interpretation of these claims that is consistent with the rest of Schopenhauer's view is *possible*, and this is already enough reason to reject any interpretation of these claims that is inconsistent with other aspects of his account.

There is, however, no need to settle for such a speculative point. Schopenhauer is quite explicit that the pleasures of knowledge are pleasures of satisfaction, negative joys exclusively available to those who suffer from their ignorance. Thus, Schopenhauer suggests that what distinguishes those capable of the pleasures of knowledge is precisely the presence of intellectual *needs*:

The existence of people with predominantly intellectual powers is rich in ideas and full of life and meaning; worthy and interesting subject matters occupy them as soon as they can devote themselves to them, and they have within themselves a source of the noblest pleasures...Because of all this, they naturally have one need more [*ein Bedürfnis mehr*] than the others, the need to learn, to see, to study, to meditate, to practice, and thus also the need for leisure. But since, as Voltaire rightly observed, “there are no real pleasures without real needs,” this need is the condition [*Bedingung*] for their having access to pleasures that others are denied, for whom beauty of nature in art and intellectual works of all kinds, even if they accumulate around them, at bottom are only what mistresses are to an old man. (PP I: 295–6)

The pleasures of knowledge at issue here are identified as the same ones that play a role in aesthetic pleasure: those incapable of them are also incapable of appreciating “beauty of nature in art.” The precondition of access to these pleasures is the possession of certain *needs*. For Schopenhauer, need always involves a painful state of lack. This is what allows him to make claims like the following: “the basis of all willing is need [*Bedürftigkeit*], lack, and thus pain” (WWR I: 338). Schopenhauer's suggestion, then, is that to find joy in gaining knowledge, we must first experience its absence as a painful state of lack. The pleasures of knowledge are thus pleasures of *satisfaction*: what we enjoy in knowledge acquisition is the termination of our distressingly dissatisfied desire for knowledge. As such, Schopenhauer analogizes capacity for the pleasures of knowledge to capacity for sexual pleasure. The person who lacks intellectual needs cannot enjoy knowledge for the exact same reason that the person who lacks sexual desires cannot enjoy sexual experience: because in both cases, the pleasure at issue is a pleasure of satisfaction, a negative delight available only where a prior state of distressingly unfulfilled desire can be removed.

Schopenhauer puts these same points even more crisply in his definition of the philistine:

[The philistine] is a human being *without intellectual needs* [*geistige Bedürfnisse*]. Several things follow from this: first, *in respect of himself*, that he remains without intellectual pleasures [*geistige Genüsse*],

according to the already mentioned principle: “There are no true pleasures without true needs.” No keen urge [*Drang*] towards knowledge and insight for their own sake animate his existence, nor one towards actual aesthetic pleasures [*eigentlich ästhetischen Genüssen*], which are definitely related to the first urge. (PP I: 300)

Here again, Schopenhauer suggests that intellectual needs are the preconditions of intellectual pleasures. This is explicitly because knowledge can only be enjoyed where a “keen urge” to acquire knowledge is felt: in other words, knowledge can be enjoyed only when we have a strong desire to acquire it.¹³ Our distress at this keen desire's dissatisfaction is eliminated by knowledge acquisition, and the elimination of this dissatisfaction is what we experience as intellectual pleasure. The pleasures of knowledge are straightforward pleasures of satisfaction, and thus just as negative as all pleasures of satisfaction are. The pleasures of knowledge in question here are, once again, directly identified as the ones relevant to aesthetic pleasure.¹⁴ The component of aesthetic pleasure related to the acquisition of knowledge is, Schopenhauer makes clear, only available where an urge to acquire such knowledge has been previously felt. This, however, is just to say that the knowledge component of aesthetic pleasure is only available via contrast with a prior state of pain. It is, in other words, just to say that the knowledge component of aesthetic pleasure is a thoroughly negative pleasure.¹⁵

Schopenhauer, then, has a clear way of distinguishing aesthetic pleasure's two components without suggesting that it involves any kind of positive pleasure. The two components of aesthetic pleasure are two distinct kinds of negative pleasure: (1) a pleasure of distraction, offered by absorbed attention to an object unrelated to our own wills and (2) a pleasure of satisfaction, offered by the acquisition of knowledge that we have longed to possess. Careful attention to the distinction Schopenhauer draws between pleasures of satisfaction and pleasures of distraction thus allows both the Plato argument and the aesthetic argument to be rejected. There is no reason to read Schopenhauer as accepting the existence of any positive pleasures. His conception of negative pleasure is rich enough to support both Schopenhauer's expansion of Plato's critique and his complex account of aesthetic pleasure. It is, consequently, also rich enough for him to consistently assert that all pleasure is negative in character.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For invaluable discussion of these and related topics, I am grateful to Agnes Callard, Brian Leiter, Martha Nussbaum, and a variety of students in classes I have taught on Schopenhauer's pessimism. For helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal.

ORCID

Joshua Isaac Fox  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5188-9132>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Citations of Schopenhauer's work reference the recent Cambridge editions of the text.
- ² Throughout this paper, I follow Schopenhauer in identifying compassion specifically with a direct desire to relieve the suffering of others. Compassion is sometimes understood in a broader sense that would also cover direct desire to promote others' pleasure. Schopenhauer, however, conceives of compassion more narrowly. He understands it in a way that tracks the literal meaning of the German term *Mitleid*: suffering with. This is why Schopenhauer takes himself to have achieved something substantial by establishing that “All love [*Liebe*] (*αγάπη*, *caritas*) is compassion [*Mitleid*]” (WWR I: 401; the relevant argument is on 402). The claim that all love is compassion is meant to seem paradoxical at first, because love is a broader concept than compassion. In arguing that all love is compassion, Schopenhauer is arguing that human beings can only take a direct interest in improving each other's lives (love each other) by taking a direct interest in relieving each other's suffering (having compassion for each other).
- ³ Variants of the aesthetic argument are also endorsed by Norman (2017, pp. 207–208) and Shapshay (2022, pp. 56–57), who both suggest that Schopenhauer takes the pleasures of music to be uniquely positive. For Norman's version, see discussion in note 15.

- ⁴ A third argument is suggested by Shapshay (2019, p. 77): namely, that Schopenhauer describes some aesthetic pleasures—especially those of music—in terms that seem excessive for merely negative delight. For example, Schopenhauer speaks of the “heartfelt joy” (WWVR I: 283) music can provide. I do not devote a full discussion to this argument, because Shapshay seems to present it less as evidence that Schopenhauer accepts the existence of positive pleasures as part of his considered view, and more as evidence that Schopenhauer cannot avoid recognizing some positive pleasures despite his considered view. Nonetheless, I would like to quickly suggest that Schopenhauer’s use of such glowing terms to describe certain aesthetic pleasures does not suggest any wavering about their negative character. A point Nietzsche makes seems helpful here. Nietzsche suggests that Schopenhauer took pleasure in beauty “out of an ‘interest’, even out of *the strongest of all, the most personal of all interests*: that of the tortured one who breaks free from his torture” (GM III.6, my emphasis). As Nietzsche brings out, having a negative view of aesthetic pleasure in no way trivializes that pleasure, for our interest in escaping suffering is far from trivial. A state of negative pleasure genuinely feels much *better* than our ordinary condition, even if it does not feel positively good. If our ordinary condition feels sufficiently bad, the improvement offered by moving to a neutral state will be transformative. It seems appropriate to celebrate this improvement in the strongest terms, especially if no superior state is available.
- ⁵ Despite increasing embrace of the claim that Schopenhauer accepts certain positive pleasures, there are also still many scholars who take Schopenhauer to endorse the negativity of *all* pleasure. This claim is helpfully emphasized by, for example, Janaway (1999, pp. 331–332), Reginster (2006, pp. 110–111), Beiser (2016, p. 50), and Auweele (2017, pp. 135–136). With the exception of a brief defense in Woods (2021, pp. 11–13) (discussed in notes 12 and 14 below), the scholars who affirm this view have not, however, offered much explicit response to their critics.
- ⁶ The relevant argument occurs at 583b–585a. In discussing this argument, I will present it in the way that seems to track Schopenhauer’s understanding of it. I will, for example, follow Schopenhauer in taking Plato to suggest that appetitive pleasures are *entirely* negative, although it is unclear if this is actually Plato’s position. Thus, Shaw (2016, p. 377) suggests that, although Plato opens with the strong claim that bodily pleasures are entirely negative, he later transitions to the weaker claim that they involve a misleading mix of positive and negative pleasure. Butler (1999, p. 289) similarly suggests that, although Plato claims that the pleasures which result from the *completed* relief of pain are entirely negative, the pleasures produced by the *process* of relieving pain are a misleading mix of the positive and the negative. Regardless of whether this is the correct reading of Plato, it is certainly not the reading that Schopenhauer relies on when likening Plato’s position to his own: Schopenhauer assumes that Plato takes *all* pleasures involved in removing painful states of want to be false ones.
- ⁷ More precisely, Plato makes this claim about both the pleasures of appetite and the pleasures of spirit. For present purposes, however, this distinction between the pleasures of appetite and the pleasures of spirit is not relevant: on the argument offered in *Republic* IX, both have the same basic deficiency.
- ⁸ I take Schopenhauer to follow Plato in identifying negative pleasure as a kind of *false* pleasure. Thus, his suggestion that those who choose to undergo pain for the sake of pleasure “pay with something positive and real for something negative and hence chimerical” (PP I: 357). As the contrast with pain makes clear, negative pleasures are chimerical in the sense of not being real: they are, at bottom, not true pleasures at all. Human beings can only ever exist in one of two hedonic states: pain and painlessness. Negative pleasure is the condition in which contrast leads us to confuse the second of these states for a wholly imaginary third one. On this point, I disagree with Woods (2021, pp. 5–6), who reads Schopenhauer as claiming not that negative pleasures are themselves false, but simply that any belief in their positivity would be false. This does not seem to be what Schopenhauer claims in the passage above: the chimerical character of negative pleasure is presented as following directly from its negativity, not from an optional misunderstanding of that negativity. The claim is not that negative pleasures become chimerical *if* we misinterpret them, but that they are themselves already a kind of misinterpretation.
- ⁹ Plato suggests that the pleasures of anticipation have a similarly misleading character (584c), though this again is not crucial for present purposes.
- ¹⁰ To be clear about the exact point of Schopenhauer’s disagreement with Plato, it is important to note that Plato too holds that pain only results when we are both dissatisfied *and aware of our dissatisfaction*. Thus, at *Philebus* 43b, Plato resists the suggestion that constant bodily changes must produce constant pleasures and pains by noting that we only experience pleasure and pain in association with changes of *which we are conscious*. Despite agreeing with Schopenhauer on this point, however, Plato does not consider the possibility that pains might be relieved by pushing them below the level of conscious awareness. Rather, he seems to suggest that the *magnitude* of our dissatisfaction will fully determine whether we are aware of it: “Great changes cause us pains and pleasures, but moderate or small ones cause no pain or pleasure whatsoever” (*Philebus*, 43c). We are only able to notice—and thus only able to be pained by—dissatisfactions that stem from sufficiently serious lacks. Once a lack passes this threshold of significance, however, there is no way for us to avoid noticing it. Whether we attend to a lack is fully fixed by its magnitude, and this rules out any possibility of deploying *distraction* as a method of pain relief. All of this is in sharp contrast with Schopenhauer, who frequently

emphasizes the flexibility of our attention, suggesting that even the biggest problems can be rendered unconscious by more pressing concerns, and that even the smallest worries can dominate consciousness if nothing else competes for the space:

when a fortunate outcome lifts a central, oppressive worry from our chests, its place is immediately filled by another worry, whose entire content had already been present, but could not enter consciousness as a worry because there was no room for it there...even if its content is much more meagre than that of the evaporated worry, it still knows how to puff itself up so that it seems to equal it in size, and so it can fill the whole throne as the main worry of the day. (WWR I: 343–4)

- ¹¹ In addition to clarifying Schopenhauer's views about pleasure, I hope that the above has also made some progress toward filling a *desiderata* suggested in Reginster (2005, p. 188, n. 11): namely, that of offering an account of how Schopenhauer's version of the negativity thesis compares with the Platonic version that inspired it.
- ¹² This point is helpfully emphasized by Woods (2021, p. 12–13). Woods notes that Schopenhauer does not explicitly identify the pleasures of knowledge as positive in character, and points to some text where Schopenhauer seems to present the pleasures of knowledge as consistent with his general thesis about pleasure's negativity. Woods only gestures at an account of how Schopenhauer can hold that the pleasures of knowledge are negative, however. I aim to offer such an account, and thereby make good on the challenge to the aesthetic argument begun in Woods' article.
- Reginster (2005, p. 188, n.10), in contrast, grants that Schopenhauer clearly identifies the pleasures of knowledge as positive in this passage, but suggests that this is a momentary error which cannot be reconciled with the rest of Schopenhauer's view. This seems like an unnecessary concession, and Reginster does not identify the specific feature of the text which requires him to make it.
- ¹³ It is worth noting that this second passage removes an ambiguity introduced by the way Schopenhauer puts his point in the previous one. In the previous passage, Schopenhauer presented those capable of intellectual pleasures as needing to engage in certain *activities*, namely those activities by which knowledge is acquired: they need to learn, study, see, meditate, and so on. This could be taken to suggest that intellectual pleasure requires not a direct desire for knowledge, but only a desire to engage in knowledge-producing activities. In this second passage, however, Schopenhauer makes it clear that what is really at issues is an “urge towards knowledge and insight for their own sake”. Capacity for intellectual pleasure turns on direct desire for knowledge. The desire to engage in the activities which produce knowledge is derivative: if I need knowledge, then I also need those things that make knowledge available.
- ¹⁴ Given this, Woods (2021, p. 12) seems to overstate his case when suggesting that Schopenhauer only mentions the knowledge-component of aesthetic pleasure in two passages from the *World as Will and Representation's* first volume. An advantage of my reading is that it allows us to avoid minimizing the real insight of the aesthetic argument—namely, the observation that Schopenhauer views aesthetic pleasure as a complex state—without forcing Schopenhauer to abandon the thesis that all pleasure is negative in character.
- ¹⁵ In a variant of the aesthetic argument, Norman (2017, p. 207–208) suggests that Schopenhauer should be taken to view the pleasures of knowledge quite similarly to Kant. Kant held that making certain intellectual discoveries offered a pleasure unrelated to desire. Norman claims the knowledge-component of aesthetic pleasure in Schopenhauer should be understood on the same model. The above, however, should make it clear that Schopenhauer departs sharply from Kant on this front: although Schopenhauer shares Kant's view that intellectual discovery can be a source of pleasure, he denies that this pleasure can be had absent a prior desire for intellectual discovery. Even if Norman is right that Schopenhauer's account of musical joy turns heavily on the pleasures of knowledge, this would provide no evidence for taking him to view musical joy as positive in character, given that he does not view the pleasures of knowledge as positive in character more generally. A similar point speaks against the discussion of musical joy in Guyer (1996, p. 127–129).

REFERENCES

Works Cited by Abbreviations

- Schopenhauer, A. (1878). *Parerga und Paralipomena*. 2 vols. Leipzig, Germany: Brockhaus.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1905). In E. Grisebach (Ed.), *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. Leipzig, Germany: Inselverlag.
- Schopenhauer, A. (2007). *Über die Grundlage der Moral*. Hamburg, Germany: Felix Meiner Verlag.
- Schopenhauer, A. [OBM] (2009). Prize essay on the basis of morals. In *Two fundamental problems of ethics*. Translated and edited by C. Janaway (pp. 113–258). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Schopenhauer, A. [WWR I]. (2010). *The world as will and representation*. vol. 1. Translated and edited by J. Norman, A. Welchman and C. Janaway. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Schopenhauer, A. [PP I]. (2014). *Parerga and Paralipomena*, vol. 1. Translated and edited by S. Roehr and C. Janaway. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Schopenhauer, A. [PP II]. (2015). *Parerga and Paralipomena*, vol. 2. Translated and edited by A. Del Caro and C. Janaway. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Schopenhauer, A. [WWR II]. (2018). *The world as will and representation*, vol. 2. Translated and edited by J. Norman, A. Welchman and C. Janaway. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Other Works

- vanden Auweele, D. (2017). *The Kantian Foundation of Schopenhauer's pessimism*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Beiser, F. (2016). *Weltschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy, 1860–1900*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, J. (1999). On whether Pleasure's *Esse is Percipi*: Rethinking Republic 583b–585a. *Ancient Philosophy*, 19(2), 285–298.
- Chansky, J. (1988). Schopenhauer and aesthetic ideas: A groundwork for an aesthetic metaphysics. In E. von der Luft (Ed.), *Schopenhauer: New essays in honor of his 200th birthday* (pp. 67–81). Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Guyer, P. (1996). Pleasure and knowledge in Schopenhauer's aesthetics. In D. Jacquette (Ed.), *Schopenhauer, philosophy, and the arts* (pp. 109–123). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Guyer, P. (2008). Back to truth: Knowledge and pleasure in the aesthetics of Schopenhauer. *The European Journal of Philosophy*, 16(2), 164–178.
- Janaway, C. (1999). Schopenhauer's pessimism. In C. Janaway (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Schopenhauer* (pp. 318–343). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1998). *On the genealogy of morality*. Translated by M. Clark and A. J. Swensen. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Norman, J. (2017). Music and pessimism. In S. Shapshay (Ed.), *The Palgrave Schopenhauer handbook* (pp. 197–212). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Plato (1989). Philebus. Translated by R. Hackforth. In E. Hamilton & H. Cairns (Eds.), *Plato: The collected dialogues* (pp. 1086–1150). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Plato. (2004). *Republic*. Translated by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Reginster, B. (2005). Nietzsche on pleasure and power. *Philosophical Topics*, 33(2), 161–191.
- Reginster, B. (2006). *The affirmation of life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shapshay, S. (2019). *Reconstructing Schopenhauer's ethics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Shapshay, S. (2022). The moral perception of inherent value. In P. Hassan (Ed.), *Schopenhauer's moral philosophy* (pp. 52–76). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Shaw, J. C. (2016). Poetry and hedonic error in Plato's *republic*. *Phronesis*, 61(4), 373–396.
- Simmons, B. (2021). A thousand pleasures are not worth a single pain: The compensation argument for Schopenhauer's pessimism. *The European Journal of Philosophy*, 29(1), 120–136.
- Vandenabeele, B. (2007). Schopenhauer on the values of aesthetic experience. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 45(4), 565–582.
- Woods, D. B. (2021). The standard interpretation of Schopenhauer's compensation argument for pessimism: A nonstandard-variant. *The European Journal of Philosophy*, 1–16.
- Young, J. (1987). A Schopenhauerian solution to Schopenhauerian pessimism. *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch*, 68, 53–69.
- Young, J. (2005). *Schopenhauer*. New York, NY: Routledge.

How to cite this article: Fox, J. I. (2022). Does Schopenhauer accept any positive pleasures? *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12830>