

Irreparable flaws in human life philosophy essay

[Philosophy](#), [Life Philosophy](#)



Discuss how either the overcoming of the world or the humanization of the world deals with the irreparable flaws in human life. For the purpose of the paper, take either the teachings of the Buddha or the philosophy of Schopenhauer (as expressed in the assigned passage from *The World as Will and Representation*) to exemplify the overcoming of the world. Consider the teachings of Confucius in *The Analects* to be representative of the humanization of the world.

Is Schopenhauer's 'overcoming of the world' a solution to Unger's 'irreparable flaws in human life'?

Schopenhauer's and Unger's philosophies are similar only at first sight. They are both concerned with salvation, understood as deliverance from a flawed human existence. Human existence is flawed, because it is full of vain and groundless suffering. The two philosophers even agree on one fundamental flaw of human life – the preoccupation with one's fickle desires – insatiability in Unger's terminology and the principium individuationis (henceforth PI) in Schopenhauer's. Although not preoccupied with belittlement, which in Unger's philosophy means a discrepancy between our objective conditions and our aspirations, Schopenhauer agrees with Unger that this flaw can be overcome here and now.

But the differences are many more. While for Unger the flaws of human existence are accessible and acutely felt by each and everyone of us, Schopenhauer sees most people as completely or partially under what he calls 'the veil of Maya' or an illusion generated by the PI. For Schopenhauer most people do not suffer from the anticipation of mortality and the

groundlessness of their existence in a bigger framework – two of Unger’s flaws of human life. In fact, in Schopenhauer’s theory people not only have hope, but a certain self-confidence generated by the will-to-life that guards against the fear of death. Not only this, but groundlessness is only felt by those who experience a special realization through suffering or reflection upon the suffering of others. As soon as groundlessness is experienced as an intuition that suffering is vain and futile, it is succeeded by the contrary intuition that there is only one common being that is torn apart by one perpetually unsatisfied will and that this will, the will-to-life, can be overcome.

Denying the reality of flaws and overcoming the will-to-life is an answer to all of Unger’s flaws. However, Unger does not see Schopenhauer’s response as adequate. It weakens ‘the sole practical antidote to the threat of nihilism, which is life itself’ (RMU 55). It fails to transform society by destroying its distinctions and its ethic of the strong, but instead denies that what happens in historical time has any significance. In fact, Schopenhauer’s philosophy wages a war on life and recommends the anticipation of death as the way to salvation. The disagreement between these philosophies arises from the disparate assumptions of the two authors. For Schopenhauer the world is government by necessity – a causal law that operates in nature as in humans. Salvation is therefore not just an end to suffering, but freedom from the yoke of nature over man. For Unger the world of necessity is long gone and the world we live in now is one where ‘the basic flaws in our existence come to the center of our consciousness’ (RMU 30). Salvation means

autonomy from these flaws, which can be achieved by revising human relations and social constructs - deep freedom.

Therefore I will argue that Schopenhauer's philosophy does not provide answers to Unger's flaws of the human condition, because it fails to acknowledge their ubiquity and urgency in the way that Unger does. In addition, Schopenhauer's philosophy is exclusive and contains empirical and ethical contradictions that render its wider application problematic. In what follows I will first examine the disparate assumptions of the two philosophies, then I will look at Schopenhauer's answers to the flaws of human life and Unger's criticism, and finally I will discuss two contradictions within Schopenhauer's theory that enhance its exclusivity - the un-intuitive character of the denial of the will-to-life and the impossibility of virtue at the middle ground, which is most accessible to ordinary people.

In the first place the two philosophies disagree about how to describe human existence: Schopenhauer focuses on vain suffering in general, Unger on the anxiety arising from the four flaws. Schopenhauer describes the world as 'governed by chance and error,' dominated by 'suffering humanity and the suffering animal world, and a world that passes away' (S 379). Schopenhauer uses a metaphor to describe life as a string of pleasure and pain: a path made of cool and hot coals. What makes this path more treacherous is the fact that 'every satisfaction is...only a pain removed, not a positive happiness brought' (S 375). The ordinary man will walk down the path consoled by the hope the cool coals give him (S 380). For Unger the world is not so imperfect - people have developed productive capabilities and

civilization (RMU 69). Difficulties in human existence stem from anxieties: 'when we have achieved some measure of freedom from complete dependence on nature and developed further the high cultures that offer accounts of our place in the cosmos, the basic flaws in our existence come to the center of our consciousness' (RMU 30). These flaws are the terrors and the realities of death and of groundlessness, the torment of vain desire, the disparity between what we are and what we could be. Sophisticated culture has not only given rise to existential anxiety, but it has not provided it with adequate remedies. If existence according to Schopenhauer is an alternation between pain and its absence, on which we do not reflect, according to Unger it is a state of constant insecurity because we reflect too much.

This leads me to the two philosophers' idea of human nature.

Schopenhauer's human is an egoist blinded by an illusion, which also appears under the names principium individuationis (the PI) and veil of Maya. This illusion is far-reaching – it encompasses both the conviction of our own individuality and our narrow engagement with the world. The egoist knows only 'particular things and their relation to his own person, and these then become ever renewed motives of his willing' (S 379). In Schopenhauer's analysis motives arise out of necessity just like any other action or event in the natural world – what he calls 'the principle of sufficient reason.' Even the fact that humans have will does not mean they are free from the laws of causality, because their will is conditioned to obey them. It is what Schopenhauer calls the will-to-life. The will is what stands between the 'phenomenon' that we are and the Idea, the ideal of man; willing binds us to the imperfect world (S 390). While Schopenhauer's human is an oblivious

automaton governed by necessity, Unger's human is a doubter torn with anxiety. Human nature is marked by the anxiety of meaninglessness: 'without some such faith, it may seem, life, our life, would remain both an enigma and a torment, and could cease to be a torment only insofar as we contrived to forget the enigma' (RMU 31). But forgetting, becoming an automaton, is not an option. Neither is the consolation that everything will be OK, offered by one religion after another. Humans are capable of improving the social and thought structures that govern them and live fuller spiritual lives as part of society.

But neither is Schopenhauer's man incapable of change, nor is Unger's man so uncomplicated as to only require better instructions. The human condition for both philosophers is characterized by struggle: between egoistic and altruistic impulses for Schopenhauer and between social and anti-social tendencies for Unger. Schopenhauer asserts that it is possible to 'see through' the PI and overcome egoism by contemplating the vain suffering of others. As a result 'in the lesser degree justice arises, and in the higher degree real goodness of disposition, a goodness that shows itself as pure, i. e., disinterested, affection towards others' (S 375). At this middle ground heroic self-sacrifice is possible – dying for a friend, for one's native land, for universal truth and for the eradication of great errors (S 375). But one can go even further by attaining to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete will-lessness' (S 379). This state is one of voluntary death and an ultimate rebellion against injustice and suffering in general. This ethical scale of good and bad (egoistic and altruistic) does not exist for Unger. Challenges to the human condition arise from three sources:

the problem of relating to others, of relating to institutions and of relating to one's own life. Relating to others is characterized by the dilemma of wanting recognition and dreading dependence. Similarly, relating to institutions entails both voluntary participation and surrendering 'powers of resistance and reconstruction' (RMU 68). Relating to one's own life is the context of belittlement: how to balance vulnerability with aspiration and risk-taking. Depersonalization, alienation and regarding life as drudgery are the poor outcomes of these struggles.

Finally, the two philosophies make different value judgments. Both define salvation as freedom, but because they have seen human existence, human nature and the human condition in different ways, their normative prescriptions about freedom also differ. For Schopenhauer freedom is freedom of causality or necessity. But since he has posited causality as extending to voluntary action, freedom can only be achieved when one dispenses with voluntary action: 'it appears only when the will, after arriving at the knowledge of its own inner nature, obtains from this a quieter, and is thus removed from the effect of motives which lies in the province of a different kind of knowledge, whose objects are only phenomena' (S 404). The quieter proceeds to extinguish both the will and life starting with sexuality, property, nourishment and ending with voluntary death. This conduct surpasses virtue on Schopenhauer's value scale - it is asceticism, 'the deliberate breaking of the will by refusing the agreeable and looking for the disagreeable' (S 392). In this way salvation, defined as 'deliverance from life and suffering' (S 397) can be achieved here and now - it resembles 'ecstasy, rapture, illumination, union with God, peace that is higher than all

reason, that ocean-like calmness of the spirit, that deep tranquility, that unshakeable confidence and serenity' (S 409-410). In much less mystical terms, Unger defines salvation here and now as the engagement in a project to transform humanity and revise its institutions: 'to this marriage of the effort to lift up the ordinary lives of ordinary people with the method of institutional experimentation and reconstruction I give in this book the name deep freedom' (RMU 26). Deep freedom, unlike Schopenhauer's freedom, is a collective endeavor. It reaffirms life in a world perceived as real rather than deny life in an illusory world.

The first consequence of these divergent assumptions and values is that mortality, while a fundamental problem for Unger, is not an issue for Schopenhauer. The ordinary man is not only consoled by the cool coals down the path of his life, but he shares in 'that same firm, inner assurance, which enables all of us to live without the constant dread of death, the assurance that the will can never lack its phenomenon' (S 398-9). It seems that mortality is neither a ubiquitous, nor an urgent preoccupation for humans in Schopenhauer's account. On the contrary, death should not be dreaded at all by those who have penetrated the PI, the illusion of Maya. The realization of the person who 'recognizing in all beings his own true and innermost self, must also regard the endless sufferings of all that lives as his own, and thus take upon himself the pain of the whole world' (S 379) results in both goodness, affection, virtue and nobility of character, as well as an intolerance for life thus perceived and a desire to 'overcome' it. 'Now how could he, with such knowledge of the world, affirm this very life through constant acts of will, and precisely in this way bind himself more and more

firmly to it, press himself to it more and more closely?,' asks Schopenhauer (S 379). For those who persevere in their denial of the will-to-live and become ascetics, when death comes, it 'is most welcome, and is cheerfully accepted as a longed-for deliverance' (S 382). In other words, mortality is not to be feared at all – it is the only way to 'overcome' a world that we cannot accept.

In addition to embracing death as a way out of the illusion of life, Schopenhauer's logic would also dismiss mortality as an illusion. Death is not only intended as deliverance from life and suffering. If it were, Schopenhauer argues, as in the case of suicide, it would be an affirmation of life – a life that was denied to us and that we claimed by dying (S 398). Overcoming the world springs not from individual discontentment with life, but from a conviction that both life and individuality are vain and illusory. The point is to abolish both the phenomenon and the will: 'for him who ends thus, the world has at the same time ended' (S 383). In order to understand this cryptic message, all we have to do is contrast it with the normal conviction of dying people that they are leaving the world and loved ones behind. In this case the ascetic believes the world is only in his mind and will be no more: 'no will, no representation, no world' (S 410). What is left is nothingness, but a nothingness only from the point of view of ordinary people, not that of the ascetic. This relativizing and devaluation of what we take for fundamental givens such as life, the self, death, the world is what Unger calls nihilism. For Unger nihilism is no answer to the problem of mortality – it simply recasts the problem as fiction.

Groundlessness is equally unproblematic for Schopenhauer. Not only is he untroubled by Unger's question of what ground to chose and why, but groundlessness, when experienced, is merely a gateway to what he calls the 'only act of freedom to appear in the phenomenon,' (S 398) i. e. to deny the will. Schopenhauer treats groundlessness not as a flaw experienced by the individual, but as the true reality - life, the self, time and space are illusions, hence there can be no grounds. In describing the process of unveiling the illusion of life Schopenhauer asks the question of how can a man who has perceived the extent of the illusion continue to affirm life as before (S 379). This resembles an experience of groundlessness - there is no meaning to life as we practice it. This experience is not singular, because according to Schopenhauer we have all felt it upon the sight of suffering or while suffering. Not only this, we have also felt an impulse to deny our will: 'we would like to deprive desires of their sting, close the entry to all suffering, purify and sanctify ourselves by complete and final resignation. But the illusion of the phenomenon soon ensnares us again...' (S 379). In trying to prove that both the realization about the vanity of suffering and the impulse to deny the will are intuitive, Schopenhauer offers a solution to groundlessness: become an ascetic and 'overcome' the world. However, this solution is too radical for Unger, who is not convinced that life, the self and the world are illusions and that we have to suppress life in order to make a statement about this illusion.

Insatiability and belittlement are flaws that Schopenhauer does not distinguish between: they both belong to the illusory human condition of Maya, but a closer examination will show that they also penetrate the middle

ground of realization and the resigned state of asceticism. At first sight, until the will is denied, 'everyone is nothing but this will itself, whose phenomenon is an evanescent existence, always vain and constantly frustrated striving, and the world full of suffering as we have described it' (S 397). Frustrated striving follows Unger's description of insatiability closely. At a closer look, the noble and awakened person who has penetrated the PI or the veil of Maya is in an unstable state: 'it is no longer enough for him to love others like himself, and to do as much for them as for himself, but there arises in him a strong aversion to the inner nature whose expression is his own phenomenon, to the will-to-live, the kernel and essence of that world recognized as full of misery' (S 380). In this sense the awakened individual can be both insatiable and suffer from belittlement - no sacrifice is enough to correct the injustice of reality, apart from the final act of denying the will and breaking free from the illusion of causality. Finally, even the resigned ascetic's existence is not free of struggle: 'on earth no one can have lasting peace. We therefore see the histories of the inner life of saints full of spiritual conflicts, temptations, and desertion from grace...' (S 391). The ultimate quieting of the will represents both a cure for insatiability and belittlement. For Schopenhauer there is no bigger achievement than the denial of the will: 'the most significant phenomenon that the world can show is not the conqueror of the world, but the overcomer of the world' (S 386). However, from Unger's point of view, the discipline and status of achieving holiness cannot be universal answers to insatiability and belittlement.

Before concluding I would like to draw attention to two contradictions in the thought of Schopenhauer that challenge its conclusions and applicability. In

the first place, the lines between asceticism and suicide, which Schopenhauer criticizes for affirming the will-to-life, are too thin. His insistence on disregarding particular justifications prevents us from making effective comparisons. Hindu ascetics have undergone voluntary death not just by starvation, but also from crocodiles, jumping over a precipice, live burial, a car accident (S 388). From this perspective it seems gratuitous that Schopenhauer later asserts that 'no other death than that by starvation is here conceivable' (S 401). Suicide by starvation as protest against an unhappy life is entirely conceivable. Schopenhauer insists that knowledge of the illusion of life is intuitive and therefore it is immaterial by 'what myths and dogmas' ascetics have accounted for their actions (S 394). But the courageous decision to abolish the will can be very different from some of these motivations, which can range from superstition and hatred to outright madness. Schopenhauer's empirical argumentation is unsound: he bases the intuitiveness of asceticism on its long-time practice in India (S 389); he argues that asceticism is not a form of madness, because different ages and races have practiced it (S 389); and that asceticism appears rarely, because it is superior conduct (S 389). Neither of these arguments conclusively excludes alternative explanations for the phenomenon of asceticism. If it is not conclusively intuitive, then it cannot be the cure for the human condition.

In the second place, even the middle ground of partial penetration of the veil of Maya, where people are 'sad, noble and resigned,' (S 396) seems fraught with contradiction. Schopenhauer draws a line between sentimentality and resignation: the latter involves courage and 'pure knowledge' (S 396-7). But

if knowledge is intuition (rational argumentation is irrelevant) and resignation looks like depression ('the joy of grief', S 396), then the distinction becomes impossible without an examination of inner justification. For the same reason distinguishing between altruistic, selfish and mixed virtue is also impossible. Schopenhauer draws a distinction between virtuous acts done out of deliberation/motives ('works') and those done out of knowledge ('faith') (S 407). Virtuous acts done from motives 'would always be only a prudent, methodical, far-seeing egoism' (S 407). Without questioning the meaning of motives and knowledge, which has been dealt with earlier (causation and intuition), it is worth asking why is selfish goodness so unacceptable? Can mixed motives - feel-good intentions and self-negation together - be acceptable? Schopenhauer has already affirmed that 'friendship is always a mixture of selfishness and sympathy' (S 376). He has also enlisted Socrates and Giordano Bruno for his cause, but who is to say if their motive was purely the advancement of humanity and not the selfish desire to make their ideas immortal? It becomes clear that even in its most promising aspect of the middle ground, Schopenhauer's philosophy can ill serve humanity as a guide for everyday conduct.

In conclusion, I would like to offer a way to exonerate Schopenhauer. Indeed, his answers to mortality, groundlessness, insatiability and belittlement suffer from lack of applicability to the majority of human beings. He denies that most of us even experience these flaws and subsumes them under an exaggerated conception of the imperfection of the world and the self - that it is in fact an illusion. His philosophy is exclusive and applies only to those who are truly anxious about general suffering. And yet, the concept of an

ethical scale of egoism and altruism with a middle ground that combines some selfish and some altruistic tendencies, can relate to the flaws of human life as outlined by Unger. Being in the middle of the sliding scale could provide a diminished fear of death and meaninglessness by the realization that we are part of a big game that transcends the present; a degree of satiability by being more disciplined and doing more of what we would not like to do; a chance to realize our full potential by helping others and changing what we can. This is an option unexplored by Schopenhauer that overlaps with Unger's agenda: ' by transcending finite structure and by living out, through love and cooperation, the implications of our incompleteness, we open ourselves up both to other people and to the world' (RMU 250).