Bernard Reginster

Happiness as a Faustian bargain

In the original version of the legend, Faust gives Mephistopheles disposal of his soul in exchange for twenty-four years of pleasure. In Christopher Marlowe's version, he becomes more demanding – he now asks for twenty-four years of pleasure plus power and knowledge.

In contrast to these rather predictable demands, Goethe's Faust makes a deeply strange series of requests:

> Poor sorry Devil, what could you deliver?
> Was human mind in lofty aspiration ever
> Comprehended by the likes of you?
> Do you have food that does not satisfy? Or do
> You have red gold that will run through
> The hand like quicksilver and away?
> A game that none may win who play?
> A girl who in my very arms
> Will pledge love to my neighbor with her eyes?
> Or honor with its godlike charms
> Which like a shooting star flashes and dies?
> Show me the fruit that rots right on the tree,
> And trees that every day leaf out anew!

Though ready to oblige, Mephistopheles is incredulous:

> Such a demand does not daunt me,
> Such treasures I can furnish you.
> But still the time will come around, good friend,
> When we shall want to relish things in peace.

But Faust is implacable:

> If I ever lie down upon a bed of ease,
> Then let that be my final end!
> If you can cozen me with lies
> Into a self-complacency,
> Or can beguile me with pleasures you devise,
> Let that be the last day for me! [...]
> If I to any moment say:
> Linger on! You are so fair!
> Put me in fetters straightaway,
> Then I can die for all I care![1]

What Faust wants most of all, that for which he is ready to sell his soul to the devil, is not, according to Goethe, a life

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1 J. W. Goethe, *Faust*, trans. C. E. Passage (New York: McMillan, 1965), v. 1675 – 1702.

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of ease, complacency, and pleasure – a life "so fair" that it leaves nothing to be desired. On the contrary, Goethe's Faust above all wants to pursue desires that can never be satiated.

By and large, he does not demand desires that are, strictly speaking, unsatisfiable. He does want to get the gold, the girl, and the honors – but he only wants momentary possession of them. He wants, in other words, never to be satisfied *once and for all*, but to be moved by desires that are perpetually rekindled, like "trees that every day leaf out anew."

This remarkable idea lies at the heart of a dispute over the nature of happiness that took place in the nineteenth century. It began with the view that, under the circumstances of our life in this world, happiness is impossible. This view, developed by Arthur Schopenhauer, became very influential toward the end of that century under the name 'pessimism.' Schopenhauer saw in the "lofty aspiration" that Faust attributes to the human mind no less than the cause of the impossibility of happiness. As pessimism was gaining acceptance, however, Friedrich Nietzsche, an erstwhile admirer of Schopenhauer, was already developing a powerful philosophical remedy against it. In contrast to his predecessor, Nietzsche found in Faust's strange request an essential clue to the true nature of human happiness.

The dispute between these two philosophers remains largely ignored to this day. Perhaps this must be chalked up to the assumption, still widespread among professional philosophers, that serious study of happiness is the almost exclusive province of ancient philosophy. Although I am not interested here in a scholarly study of the details of the confrontation between Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, I believe we should examine with some care the key elements of their distinctive and contrasting conceptions of happiness. For the conflict between them continues to polarize our contemporary ethical sensibilities. Or so I hope to show.

Schopenhauer argues that happiness is impossible: "Everything in life proclaims that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated or recognized as an illusion. The grounds for this lie deep in the very nature of things."[2] This claim rests on a certain conception of happiness that Schopenhauer defines in opposition to suffering: "We call its [the will's] hindrance through an obstacle placed between it and its temporary goal, *suffering*; its attainment of the goal, on the other hand, we call *satisfaction*, well-being, happiness."[3] Happiness is defined in terms of the satisfaction of desires ("the will" is Schopenhauer's name for our faculty of desire), whereas suffering is caused by resistance to that satisfaction.

Contemporary philosophers usually distinguish between a conception of happiness as desire satisfaction and a conception that sees it as essentially hedonistic. On the first view, getting what we want makes us happy even if it provides little or no pleasure. And even if we derive pleasure from the sole fact of getting what we want, this pleasure is not essential to happiness. On the second conception, all we want, when we want to be happy, is pleasure.

Although he ostensibly characterizes it in terms of desire satisfaction, Schopenhauer's conception of happiness is ultimately hedonistic: true happiness for

2 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), vol. II, chap. xlvi, p. 573.

3 Ibid., I, § 56, p. 309.

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him requires a permanent absence of pain and, by extension, a lasting satisfaction of desires, because "of its nature, desire is pain."[4] As Schopenhauer sees it, the mere occurrence of a desire creates a kind of affective dissonance in the agent's psyche: the desire is a source of pain because it induces the agent to experience his actual condition as dissatisfying or lacking – and the resulting psychological tension is a source of pain. So if unsatisfied desires are inherently painful, then happiness must be "a final satisfaction of the will, after which no fresh willing would occur, . . . an imperishable satisfaction of the will."[5]

Schopenhauer's pessimism rests on his view that it is impossible to satisfy all of our desires. He defends this view in the following passage:

> The basis of all willing, however, is need, lack, and hence pain, and by its very nature and origin, it is therefore destined to pain. If, on the other hand, it lacks objects of willing, because it is at once deprived of them again by too easy a satisfaction, a fearful emptiness and boredom come over it; in other words, its being and its existence itself become an intolerable burden for it. Hence its life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents.[6]

The crux of this argument lies in the observation that human beings are susceptible to boredom and in the subsequent claim that human life "swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom." To appreciate the significance of this, we must ask what kind of state boredom is, and what our susceptibility to it shows about us.

Boredom sets in, Schopenhauer observes, when all our desires for determinate objects (fame, fortune, a new car, finishing this paper, and so on) are satisfied and no new desire comes to agitate us. And yet when we are bored, we feel as though something is lacking or left to be desired. Thus, Schopenhauer describes boredom as an "empty longing" – as a state in which the will, having attained some particular goal, continues to will, this time without any determinate intentional focus. Why does the attainment of a determinate goal not suffice to fulfill the will, so that it persists in the form of an empty longing? Schopenhauer offers this lapidary answer: "The goal was only apparent; possession takes away its charm."[7]

This answer is ambiguous. Suppose, first, that I am convinced that I really want to earn a medical degree, but that I experience a feeling of diffuse dissatisfaction or emptiness when I actually reach that goal. A natural, if complex, explanation for this feeling goes as follows: Earning the medical degree is not what I really want after all; it is not my *real* goal. My real goal, let us suppose, is to secure the esteem of my parents. This goal, however, remains unconscious: I could not admit it to myself, for example, because it would mean acknowledging the distressing fact that I do not have the esteem of my parents *already*. If earning the medical degree leaves my parents indifferent, I will find little satisfaction in it because my parents' esteem, not the degree itself, is my real goal. But, unaware as I am that this is my real goal, my dissatisfaction will remain diffuse and unintelligible to me.

Yet the feeling of emptiness described in this example cannot plausibly be char-

4 Ibid., § 57, p. 313–314.

5 Ibid., § 65, p. 360.

6 Ibid., § 57, p. 312; cf. § 38, p. 196.

7 Ibid., p. 313.

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acterized as boredom. There is a subtle phenomenological difference between boredom and the feeling of emptiness I just described. The diffuse dissatisfaction I experience at obtaining the medical degree when this does not secure my parents' esteem involves a sense that something is still lacking – something of a *determinate*, if unknown, nature. In contrast, when I am bored I have all the determinate objects I want, and although I have the sense that something is lacking, it is not the sense that something determinate is lacking.

An adequate account of boredom, then, must explain in one sense that only something *indeterminate* is lacking. Schopenhauer's suggestion, ultimately, is that we have, in addition to desires for determinate ends and objects, a desire to have desires, which is frustrated by the satisfaction of all our (occurrent) determinate desires. Boredom results from the frustration of this peculiar desire: we are bored, Schopenhauer declares, when we "lack objects of willing" – when we lack not the determinate objects of particular desires, but rather objects to desire.

This account of boredom is borne out by the distinctive phenomenology of this state. A bored individual will complain that he has nothing to do. Obviously, he does not mean that he is under no *obligation* to do anything; this would be a condition of leisure, not a state of boredom. He means rather that he has no *inclination* or *desire* to do anything. Nothing arouses his interest; nothing engages his will. He is in the grip of an empty longing, for he does not desire anything determinate: he desires something to desire, but nothing in particular. He only wants to desire again.

From Schopenhauer's reflections on the susceptibility to boredom emerges the following picture of human willing. Human beings obviously have many *first-order* desires for determinate objects (e.g., fame, wealth, food and shelter, and so on). But their susceptibility to boredom reveals that they also have a *second-order* desire, i.e., a desire whose object is, or includes, another desire. This structure of human willing in first-order and second-order desires shows why a final and complete satisfaction of all desires – happiness – is impossible. The satisfaction of first-order desires for determinate objects, which eliminates ordinary pain, necessarily implies the frustration of the second-order desire to have (first-order) desires, and therefore boredom. The satisfaction of this second-order desire meanwhile implies the frustration of first-order desires, and the ordinary pain it causes. And so human life indeed swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom.

Happiness as a Faustian bargain

Nietzsche does not deny that we have a second-order desire to desire. In fact, he appropriates and refines Schopenhauer's idea. For one thing, he claims, the bare desire to have desires does not adequately account for our susceptibility to boredom. When we are bored, we do not complain that we have nothing to desire, but rather that we have nothing to *do*. The desire whose frustration is a source of boredom is therefore more specifically a desire not just to have but also to *pursue* desires. We want desires, in other words, because they give us something to do. We can also be bored, however, even when we are engaged in the pursuit of desires, namely when this pursuit consists only of unchallenging activities. And so the desire on which the susceptibility to boredom depends is a desire to confront challenges, or resistance, in the pursuit of a determinate desire. To these qualifications, Nietzsche adds another: Although we might occasionally want

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desires we are powerless to satisfy, most commonly we want not only to confront resistance, but also to *overcome* it. Hence, he calls this desire for the overcoming of resistance in the pursuit of determinate desires "the will to power."

Two features of this peculiar desire require our attention. First, defined as the overcoming of resistance, the concept of power is, in and of itself, devoid of any determinate content; it acquires such content only from its relation to some determinate desire. For example, a recalcitrant puzzle is an obstacle to the desire to understand, and the strength of an opposing player is resistance against the desire to win a game. Accordingly, the will to power cannot be satisfied unless the agent has a desire for something other than power. It is, specifically, the second-order desire for the overcoming of resistance in the pursuit of some determinate first-order desire.

Second, insofar as it is a desire for "striving against something that resists," this will to power contrasts starkly with the desire for happiness (understood as pleasure), because "that which is here the driving force must in any event desire something else [than happiness] if it desires displeasure in this way and continually looks for it."[8] This peculiar desire is not for a state in which resistance to the satisfaction of desires *has been overcome* (happiness in Schopenhauer's sense), but for the *process of overcoming* resistance. So against the backdrop of Schopenhauer's conception of suffering as resistance to the satisfaction of desires, the will to power implies a desire for displeasure:

> Human beings do not seek pleasure and avoid displeasure .... What human beings want, what every smallest organism wants, is an increase of power; driven by that will they seek resistance, they need something that opposes it. Displeasure, as an obstacle to their will to power, is therefore a normal fact ... ; human beings do not avoid it, they are rather in continual need of it ....[9]

The two features of the will to power that I have been describing – that its satisfaction requires that the agent desire something other than power and that its satisfaction entails displeasure – combine to give the will to power its complex structure. The will to power implies a desire for resistance to overcome, which cannot be satisfied unless the agent also desires some determinate ends in terms of which this resistance can be defined; yet, in desiring the overcoming of resistance, the agent must also desire resistance to the realization of those ends. As Nietzsche puts it:

> That I must be struggle and a becoming and *an end and an opposition to ends* – ah, whoever guesses what is my will should also guess on what *crooked* paths it must proceed. Whatever I create and however much I love it, soon I must oppose it and my love; thus my will wills it.[10]

The pursuit of the will to power is, therefore, eminently paradoxical, for "the will is not satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance" – unless, that is, it is dissatisfied. By contraposition, this amounts to the claim that the satisfaction of the will implies dissatisfaction.

In attempting to elucidate the significance of this paradox, I want to proceed carefully. I shall begin by distinguishing two versions of the paradox. On the

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1968), § 704.

9 Ibid., § 702.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), II, § 12, first emphasis mine.

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weaker version, the claim is that the satisfaction of the will to power implies *some* dissatisfaction in the agent. On the stronger version, the claim is that the satisfaction of the will to power implies *its own* dissatisfaction.

Let us begin with the weaker version of the paradox: The satisfaction of the will to power implies *some* dissatisfaction. This follows from the definition of the will to power as the desire for the overcoming of resistance. Willing power implies willing to have determinate desires *and* resistance to their satisfaction. Thus, an agent's will to power is satisfied when he has determinate desires that are dissatisfied, i.e., when there is resistance against their satisfaction.

On this reading, the paradox involved in the claim that the satisfaction of the will implies dissatisfaction is resolved simply by assuming that the terms in opposition have different referents. Thus we assume that in the first instance satisfaction is of the second-order desire to pursue determinate first-order desires, while in the second instance, dissatisfaction is of some determinate first-order desire. Still, it is a crucial characteristic of the will to power that it involves the stronger version of the paradox as well: The satisfaction of the will to power implies *its own* dissatisfaction.

To make sense of this, we must first remember that the will to power is not a bare desire to desire, which would amount to a desire for some determinate end and for *resistance* to its realization. It is rather the desire for the *overcoming* of resistance in the pursuit of a determinate desire. The will to power will not be satisfied unless there is some first-order desire for a determinate end, unless there is resistance to the realization of this determinate end, *and* unless there is actual success in overcoming this resistance. But then, the conditions of the satisfaction of the will to power do indeed imply its dissatisfaction. For the satisfaction of the will to power requires actual overcoming, i.e., it induces the agent to break down the resistance against the realization of some determinate end. But the presence of such resistance is a necessary condition of the satisfaction of the will to power. Hence, this satisfaction implies its own dissatisfaction, in the sense that it necessarily brings it about.

I may put the same point in yet another way. We can distinguish between the desire for the *activity* of pursuing a determinate end and the desire for the *determinate end* of that activity. The crucial observation is that to be genuinely engaged in an activity implies actually caring about realizing its determinate end. The activity itself consists of the pursuit of this end, which once achieved brings the activity to a close. Hence, the desire for activity is satisfied only by a successful effort to bring this activity to a close, that is to say, to bring about its own frustration. If we suppose the activity to be a game, for example, the paradox assumes the following form: Even though it is the taking part that matters, rather than the winning itself, we cannot really take part unless winning actually matters to us. But once victory is achieved, and the game thus ended, we find ourselves frustrated, since we are deprived of a game in which to take part.

What is the implication of this paradox for the pursuit of power? Nietzsche, remember, described it in the following terms: "Whatever I create and however much I love it – soon I must oppose it and my love; thus my will wills it." He who wills power must not, strictly speaking, hate what he creates and loves. He must rather overcome it. But he cannot simply undo what he has done and do it again: since the obstacles to doing

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it have already been overcome, doing it again would no longer count as genuine overcoming; living according to the will to power is not living the life of a Sisyphus. His will to power demands *new* challenges to meet, *new* resistance to overcome. And this explains why the pursuit of power assumes the form of indefinite *self-overcoming*.

Consider, as an example, the will to power as it relates to the desire to know. It motivates us to solve problems, discover new worlds, and the like. When we are moved by it, however, we would hardly find satisfaction in going again and again over problems that have already been solved, or traveling once more through worlds already discovered. What we need, rather, is new problems to solve and worlds as yet unknown to discover. Thus, the satisfaction of the will to power in the pursuit of knowledge necessarily produces a continuous *self-overcoming* in knowledge, i.e., the movement whereby as soon as we attain a certain level of achievement, we proceed to outdo ourselves.

To say that the conditions of the satisfaction of the will to power bring about its dissatisfaction, then, is not to say that the pursuit of the will to power is self-defeating or self-undermining. It is plainly possible to satisfy the desire for the overcoming of resistance – one only has to engage in the successful overcoming of resistance. What I have called the strong paradox of the will to power reveals one of its most distinctive features, namely that it is a kind of desire that does not allow for *permanent* – once and for all – satisfaction. Its pursuit, on the contrary, necessarily assumes the form of an indefinite, perpetually renewed striving.

Nietzsche describes the appeal of this pursuit in the following terms:

> A tablet of the good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of their overcomings; behold, it is the voice of their will to power. Praiseworthy is whatever seems difficult to a people; whatever seems indispensable and difficult is called good; and whatever liberates even out of the deepest need, the rarest, the most difficult – that they call holy.[11]

We take the difficulty of an achievement to contribute to its value. At its core, the ethics of power is intended to reflect the value we place on what is difficult or, as we might prefer to say, challenging.[12] This view raises a number of questions, for example about the nature of the relevant difficulty and the exact role it plays in our evaluation of an achievement. Whatever the answers to such questions may be, the idea that we find value in the confrontation of difficulty for its own sake enables us to appreciate the appeal of Faust's strange request for a life without ease, self-complacency, and pleasure.

I began with the promise to show that the nineteenth-century dispute between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche exposes a conflict between two conceptions of happiness that continues to polarize our own ethical sensibilities. We found that the heart of this dispute concerns the role and significance of the Faustian desire to desire. We may now conclude with a general intuitive characterization of these two conceptions.

On the one hand, Schopenhauer defines happiness in terms of the permanent absence of pain, which requires a "a final satisfaction of the will, after which no fresh willing would occur."

11 Ibid., I, § 15.

12 That we do find happiness in the confrontation of difficulty has been established by some well-publicized empirical research. See, in particular, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), esp. chap. 4.

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On this view, happiness is a final resting point, a permanent *state* of peace and contentment, free once and for all from any form of agitation and worry. It is a state in which, quite literally, nothing is left to be desired. As a paradigm for this conception of happiness, Schopenhauer has prominently in mind the Christian eternal life in heaven.[13] As we are prone to imagine it, the eternal life represents a condition in which all of our desires are satisfied once and for all. The very desire to desire, which Faust describes as "human mind in lofty aspiration," precisely precludes the possibility of such complete and permanent contentment. In demanding satisfaction for it, Faust is therefore not only selling his soul to the devil, but also, quite literally, depriving himself of the eternal bliss of heaven.

On the other hand, in *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche declares: "What is happiness? – The feeling that power *increases* – that a resistance is overcome. *Not* contentment, but more power; *not* peace at all, but war . . . ."[14] On this conception, happiness is not a state, but a *process* – the activity of confronting resistance in the pursuit of some goal. This conception of happiness conflicts with the previous one in two important respects. First, far from excluding suffering, it actually presupposes it as an essential ingredient of happiness. Second, it precludes the possibility of a final state of rest or contentment: it is of the essence of Nietzsche's new happiness that it cannot be achieved once and for all.

In the Christian myth of the Fall, Adam and Eve begin their lives in the Garden of Eden, a place in which we imagine their needs and desires are satisfied easily, as soon as they arise. Expelled from the Garden, they now have to work – i.e., they have to overcome resistance – to fulfill their needs and desires: "you shall gain your bread by the sweat of your brow."[15] In claiming to find in this punishment the very essence of human happiness, Nietzsche assumes a radically 'anti-Christian' posture. In this, indeed, very much like Faust, he might be thought to be striking a bargain with the devil.

13 Another version of this conception of happiness that Schopenhauer considers is the Buddhistic Nirvana. This is not a state in which all desires have been satisfied once and for all, as is presumably the Christian heaven, but a state of detachment from all desires and therefore of indifference to their frustration. Schopenhauer argues that Buddhistic detachment is the only way in which we can hope to achieve complete deliverance from suffering, and even suggests that Christian ethics is best understood from that perspective.

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), § 2.

15 Genesis, 3:17 – 19.

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