

The Pessimistic Existentialism of Arthur Schopenhauer: An Expository and Evaluative Study

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Abstract

This work interrogates the seeming ambivalence between Arthur Schopenhauer's existentialist pessimism and his advocacy for artistic, moral and ascetic forms of awareness, as means of managing the absurdities and frustrations of life. The objective of this work is to discover whether or not his apparently orthogonal positions can be reconciled in any way at all, and what that might portend for the contemporary philosopher. Schopenhauer's metaphysics and philosophy of nature led him to the doctrine of pessimism: the view that sentient beings, with few exceptions, are bound to strive and suffer greatly, all without any ultimate purpose or justification and thus life is not really worth living. Arthur Schopenhauer was among the first 19th century philosophers to contend that at its core, the universe is not a rational place. Inspired by Plato and Kant, both of whom regarded the world as being more amenable to reason, Schopenhauer developed their philosophies into an instinct-recognizing and ultimately ascetic outlook, emphasizing that in the face of a world filled with endless strife, we ought to minimize our natural desires for the sake of achieving a more tranquil frame of mind and a disposition towards universal beneficence. Often considered to be a thoroughgoing pessimist, Schopenhauer in fact advocated ways to overcome a frustration-filled and fundamentally painful human condition. He believed that the "will-to-life" (the force driving man to survive and to reproduce) was the driving forces of the world, and that the pursuit of happiness, love and intellectual satisfaction was essentially futile and anyway secondary to the innate imperative of procreation. This essay argues that phenomenologically, Schopenhauer had an "existentialist" orientation towards the spatio-temporal world that informed his pessimism, but also engenders further questions regarding the actual sincerity of his mental commitment to such a position.

Keywords: Epistemology, Pessimism, Evaluation, Study, Artistic, Moral, Ascetic, Awareness.

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1.0: INTRODUCTION

Human suffering is a constant theme in Schopenhauer's writings. Its origin, forms, nature, and omnipresence in existence are a subject that his philosophy seeks to elucidate as a genuine philosophical problem. It is well known that Schopenhauer is a pessimist. His works show that he is admittedly and proudly so, someone who regards optimism as, not merely an absurd, but also a really wicked way of thinking. Although Schopenhauer clearly had a dark streak in his outlook, it would be simplistic to attribute his pessimism to his personal propensities, as is often done by many of his biographers, for he offers a cogent set of arguments for pessimism, along with a substantive critique of scholarly optimistic doctrines as well as of a naive

singing of the assumed glories of human life [¹]. It is also to be noticed that the source of his arguments is not just peculiar philosophical insight but also a deeper moral standpoint on human exploitation and cruelty, especially that of his time. At the same time, Schopenhauer frequently refers to the vanity, that is, the futility and pointlessness of human existence [²]. Is this just an extreme standpoint of his pessimistic outlook on reality or does he have genuine philosophical insight underneath his radical judgment of the ultimate value of

¹Joshua Isaac Fox (2022) "Schopenhauer on Boredom," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30 (3):477-480.

²Michael Cholbi (2022) "Schopenhauer, Suicide, and Contemporary Pessimism," In Patrick Hassan (ed.), *Schopenhauer's Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), p. 25.

human life as such? This work shall expose and appraise Schopenhauer's pessimistic existentialist epistemology, with some attention to his theory of the world as representation. In conjunction with Schopenhauer's well-known position that the essence of the world is a non-rational impulse that he calls "will," his existentialist attitude towards the spatio-temporal world locates him historically as a more significant predecessor to twentieth-century existentialist thought than has been appreciated [3].

1.1: Existentialism and the Notion of Absurdity

The philosophy of existence popularly called existentialism is not, according to Jim Unah and Chris Osegenwune, a title for a homogeneous school or a coherent system of philosophy. Instead, existence philosophers are thought to belong to a single philosophical movement partly because certain theories such as human subjectivity, facticity, finitude, absurdity, nothingness, anxiety, guilt, death, essence and existence, among others, recur in their numerous works and partly because all of them make human existence the focal point of philosophy. But their treatments of these themes are so different as to make existentialism a title for 'vague generalities' [4]. The dictum of existentialism is that 'existence precedes essence.' Existentialists profess, among other themes: individuality, authenticity, forlornness, alienation, and absurdity of life. And most importantly, existentialists reject any attempt from religion, sciences and philosophy to give meaning to life [5]. Existentialists, thought focusing mainly on human existence, admit the most radical differences among themselves. However, the pursuit of objectivity and the passion for totality had been their most explicit formulation and articulation. For the typical existentialist, man is inescapably connected to the world. Man first of all becomes aware as a being in the world. There can be no existence without the world. It is also important to that although existentialists emphasize man's indissoluble link in the world, they do not in any way suggest that he should allow himself to be totally submerged by the world [6].

In fact, they urge that man should resist being completely immersed in the cares of the world, since he is not merely an object in the world. Man, for them, is a

³ Eric S. Nelson (2022) "Schopenhauer, Existential Negativity, and Buddhist Nothingness," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 49 (1):83-86.

⁴ Jim Unah and Chris Osegenwune, *Phenomenology and Existentialism*. (Lekki: Fadec Publishers Lit. 2010), p. 129.

⁵ Nuriel Prigal (2022) "Schopenhauer's Pessimism: The Trial of Existence," *Contrastes: Revista Internacional de Filosofia* 27 (2):73-76.

⁶ Alexander Sattar (2022) "Kantian Vs. Platonic: The Ambiguity of Schopenhauer's Notion of Ideas Explained Via Its Origins," *Journal of Transcendental Philosophy* 3 (2):213-215.

synthesis of the eternal and the temporal, both part of the world and not part of the world [7]. One of the main innovations of existentialism in contemporary thought is the rejection of all-inclusive systems. All inclusive system refers to man's tendency towards absolutization or totalization. Organized religion such as Christianity and any system of thought that arrogates a rational grasp of the totality of experiences to itself such as Platonism and Hegelianism, are eloquent examples of all-inclusive systems [8]. Anguish, according to the existentialists, is the feeling of emptiness we get when we reflect on the precariousness of the human situation. When man realizes that life is meaningless and absurd, that existence is gratuitous and unnecessary that he might well not have existed, that the good things of life may someday turn sour in the mouth, that he is like an orphan cast into existential anguish. Existential anguish can also arise when man realizes that he has no satisfactory answers to the baffling questions of life, that he might soon vanish from the scene without accomplishing his aims or that he cannot prevent what he cherishes clearly from perishing. Finally, another thing that gives rise to the most disturbing anguish, according to the existentialists, is the enormity of man's freedom and the accompanying responsibility. When man realizes that he has total freedom to chart the course of his life and the possibility that he might fail, he is thrown into anguish. 'Everyday', says the existentialist, 'feels this kind of anguish because it is one of the basic traits of human existence [9].

1.1 Immanuel Kant's Idealism and its influence on Schopenhauer

In the 19th century, Germany witnessed two important movements: Romanticism and Idealism. Romanticism was a response to the rationalism of the age of enlightenment, and a reaction against what many saw as the dehumanizing effect of the industrial revolution. Romanticism can be characterized as an appeal to the emotion over reason and a desire to return to a direct experience of nature (as opposed to a scientific understanding of it) [10]. German idealism on the other hand stems from the writings of Immanuel Kant, whose philosophy is often termed 'transcendental idealism' it is a philosophy which holds that our knowledge about the world is based on the experience we have of them. That is to say, human beings could only experience the world in terms of sound, colour, sensation, etc., but we cannot know what the world is actually like independent of these sense impressions

⁷ Jim Unah and Chris Osegenwune, *Phenomenology and Existentialism*. p. 138.

⁸ Jim Unah and Chris Osegenwune, *Phenomenology and Existentialism*. p. 147.

⁹ Eric S. Nelson (2022) "Schopenhauer, Existential Negativity, and Buddhist Nothingness," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 49 (1):94-96.

¹⁰ Gareth Southwell, *A Beginner's Guide to Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 9.

[11]. Following Kant, many philosophers such as Johann Gottlieb, Friedrich Schelling and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel took up his ideas and adapted it to their own ends. In this way, their ideas became metaphysical in that they took it upon themselves to talk about the true nature of such things as God, the soul, free will and other issues which Kant himself had considered being beyond experience and unknowable [12]. Schopenhauer admired Kant as a supreme theoretician. (As a surveyor of the human heart, on the other hand, he regards him as fatally crippled by a lack of contact with the 'real' world, by a life spent in lecture theatres). The *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), according to Schopenhauer, is a source of so many fundamental and 'incontestable' theoretical truths as to make Kant's name indisputably 'immortal' [13]. In his appraisal of Kantian Idealism, Schopenhauer writes: Kant's greatest merit is the distinction of the phenomenon from the thing in itself, based on the proof that between things and us there always stands the intellect. Kant's central achievement, in other words, was to show that rather than being a blank sheet on which reality simply stamps its character, the knowing mind is *active*, actively engaged in constructing intelligibility out of unintelligibility, consciousness out of sensations. From this it follows that the world of everyday experience, indeed the whole space-time world of 'nature', is 'appearance' or 'phenomenon', merely, utterly distinct from reality as such, from the 'thing in itself' [14].

What Schopenhauer took from Kant is the conviction that the natural world is, in philosophers' jargon, 'ideal' rather than 'real'. To read and understand Kant's proofs of idealism, he says, produces a change so fundamental as to amount to an 'intellectual rebirth', an overcoming of that 'inborn realism which arises from the original disposition of the intellect. As will be obvious in the next section, Schopenhauer regards the human mind as an evolutionary product of the struggle for survival. From this point of view, 'realism' *has* to be built into the intellect. Creatures with a disposition to sit around doubting the reality of the tiger bearing down on them are likely to come to a tragic end before reproducing their kind.

¹¹ See Jill Vance Buroka, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 14-15.

¹² See Gareth Southwell, *A Beginner's Guide to Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 9.

¹³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*. Vol. 1. translated by E. F. J. Payne. (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 437.

¹⁴ Stephen Puryear (2022) "Schopenhauer's Rejection of the Moral Ought," In Patrick Hassan (ed.), *Schopenhauer's Moral Philosophy*, (London: Routledge) pp. 18-22.

1.2 Schopenhauer's Pessimism

Arthur Schopenhauer's ideas were very popular at the time; heavily influencing not only young philosophers but also artists and musicians. Schopenhauer is traditionally associated with pessimism or the philosophical view that existence has a negative value [15]. Schopenhauer cites a number of pieces of evidence for the claim that existence has a negative value: he argues that if the orbit of the earth were to shift minutely, the temperature of the earth were to change by a few degrees, or other similar changes were to take place, then life as we know it would end. So, in this sense, we are living a mere step away from total extinction, and therefore in what he termed "the worst of all possible worlds" [13]. Another key feature of Schopenhauer's pessimism is his contention that the most powerful source of human behaviour is not intellect, but will. By will, Schopenhauer here means the basic instinctive drives of the human person, such as the need to reproduce, to eat, to find shelter and security, to defend oneself, and preserve one's life [16]. For a better understanding of Schopenhauer's notion of absurdity, needs to explore his theory of the world as will and idea, which is the crux of his entire philosophy, and the foundation on which his notion of absurdity is anchored [17].

1.3: The World as Will and Idea

Schopenhauer rose to limelight when he wrote the aforementioned book. He began this famous work with the statement 'the world is my idea (or representation).' This statement of radical idealism is, according to Schopenhauer, a truth so certain that it needs no proof. This odd claim - odd, since radical idealism is so contrary to common sense - is illumined in the second volume as follows:

The world is my representation, is like the axioms of Euclid, a proposition which everyone must recognize as true as soon as he understands it, although it is not a proposition that everyone understands as soon as he hears it [18].

This declaration is based on his Kantian believe that you cannot imagine a world without someone perceiving that world. This means that the way you see a tree, for instance, is profoundly

¹⁵ Rudolf Dircks, *Essays of Schopenhauer* (Pennsylvania: Penn Classics Series.Publication, 2005), p. 60.

¹⁶ Gareth Southwell, *A Beginner's Guide to Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil*, (UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publications Ltd., 2009), p. 10.

¹⁷ Alistair Welchman & Judith Norman (eds.) (2022) *Schopenhauer's 'the World as Will and Representation': A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 25

¹⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*. Vol. II. translated by E. F. J. Payne. (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 31.

determined by the constitutions of your particular, culturally constructed way of apprehending reality. But this is like arguing that since we always see through our eyes, we always see our eyes, or that since we always talk in language we always talk about language, which is not the case. Granted that the medium, to be sure, must always affect the character of the message, but that does not mean it is usually or even part of the message. For Schopenhauer, 'the sum total of experience is object for a subject: its reality consists in its appraising to or being perceived by a subject' [19]. This view re-echoes Berkeley's popular expression *esse est percipi*. To understand what Schopenhauer talks about, one has to comprehend the vital distinction he makes: intuitive presentations (*intuitive Vorstellungen*) and abstract presentations (*abstrakte Vorstellungen*). When he talks about the world being an idea, he is referring to the intuitive presentation. The conditions for the existence of the intuitive presentation are described in Copleston's own words as 'the a priori forms of sensibility, namely space and time, and the category of the understanding namely causality' [20]. But abstract presentations involve the reflection on the abstract conception of space, time and causality. Hence, 'he [Schopenhauer] does not mean, for example, that a tree as perceived by me exists only in relation to me as a percipient subject. Its reality is exhausted, so to speak, in its perceptibility. It is simply what I perceive or can perceive it to be. Consequently, Schopenhauer's stance includes lower animals as beneficiaries of intuitive presentation, but not as part of the abstract presentation, which is only enjoyed by human beings' [21]. As noted earlier, Schopenhauer was a disciple of Kant and continued his work on phenomenon and noumenon. Kant had earlier said that the phenomenon is the only thing we can know and that the noumenon is unknowable. Schopenhauer disagreed with Kant by identifying what the noumenon is. He says that the noumenon is the Will. This metaphysical Will of Schopenhauer is interchangeable with the unknown noumenon of Kant: Schopenhauer arrived at this understanding by indulging in an inwardly directed perception. According to Copleston:

To find the key to reality, I must look within myself. For in inner consciousness or inwardly directed perception lies 'the single narrow door to the truth.' Through this inner consciousness I am aware that the bodily action which is said to follow or result from volition is not something different from volition but one and the same. That is to say, the bodily action is simply the objectified will: it is the Will become idea or

presentation. Indeed, the whole body is nothing but objectified Will; Will as a presentation to consciousness. According to Schopenhauer, anyone can understand this if he enters into himself. And once he has this foundational intuition, he has the key to reality. He has only to extend his discovery to the world at large [22].

Moreover, Schopenhauer says that this metaphysical Will is characterized by the following adjectives: irrational, blind, and endless striving. This will keeps imposing its desires and promptings on the individual. Besides, Schopenhauer describes the individual as the objectification of the metaphysical Will. The metaphysical Will is one, but is individuated in the phenomenal world. Hence, one can say that the principle of the metaphysical Will's individuation is 'objectification' [23]. Now considering the fact that Schopenhauer describes this metaphysical Will that induces the urge for endless striving in us in terms of being 'blind,' one wonders with Copleston, why he chose the term 'Will' for if that, ordinarily, earmarks 'rationality.' Schopenhauer's reply to this question is that in knowing, perhaps he borrowed this from Aristotle, we move from science to pre-science: from the known to the unknown [24]. Thus, since human volition is the principle of every human action, it commonsensically follows that we ought to attribute to this metaphysical principle of phenomenal existence and operations the name proper to what it stimulates: the human will. By the way, Schopenhauer had earlier mentioned that the only way to know this metaphysical Will is by entering into oneself in order to get in touch with one's will. Lastly, Schopenhauer presents us with yet another characterization of the metaphysical Will, the Will to live. He says that in addition to the metaphysical Will being a blind impulse, an endless striving and eternal becoming, it is also the Will to live, because since empirical reality is the objectification and appearance of it (i.e. the metaphysical Will), it necessarily manifests the Will to live [25]. Now, in order to catch a glimpse of the concrete manifestation of the Will to live in nature, Copleston writes as follows:

Birds...build nests for the young which they do not yet know. Insects deposit their eggs where the larva may find nourishment... If we look at the untiring activity of bees and ants and ask what it all leads to, what is

²²Frederik Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 7, p. 273.

²³Christopher Janaway (2021) "Worse Than the Best Possible Pessimism? Olga Plümacher's Critique of Schopenhauer," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30 (2):211-215.

²⁴Michal Masny (2021) "Schopenhauer on Suicide and Negation of the Will," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 29 (3):494-516.

²⁵William Mattioli (2021) "Schopenhauer and the Two Orders of Purposiveness in the World," *Voluntas: Revista Internacional de Filosofia* 12:e13.

¹⁹Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*. Vol. 7, (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 267.

²⁰Luan Corrêa da Silva (2021) "Unity and Universality in Schopenhauer's Spherical Cosmology," *Voluntas: Revista Internacional de Filosofia* 12:e19.

²¹Jonathan Head (2021) *Schopenhauer and the Nature of Philosophy* (Lanham: Lexington Books), pp. 47-49

attained by it, we can only answer 'the satisfaction of hunger and the sexual instinct,' the means...of maintaining the species of life. And if we look at man with his industry and trade, with his inventions and technology, we must admit that all this striving serves in the first instance only to sustain and to bring a certain amount of additional comfort to ephemeral individuals in their brief span of existence, and through them to contribute to the maintenance of the species [26].

In addition to this, Schopenhauer tells us that since the Will to live is an endless striving and blind impulse, it always strives, but never attains and, consequently, subjects the human person to the persistent torture of a forever elusive mirage of happiness and satisfaction. We shall treat in details what this means vis-a-vis his notion of absurdity [27].

1.4: Suffering and the will to Live

Endless human desires and striving for their fulfillment, and frequent hindrances and failures in the way of this striving are all traced by Schopenhauer as the very nature of the will to live. The will which is the innermost nature of life, seduces man to affirm it constantly and yet is never satisfied. The appalling effect of this ceaseless striving in human life is brilliantly captured by Copleston as follows:

Man seeks satisfaction, happiness, but he cannot attain it. What we call happiness or enjoyment is simply a temporary cessation of desire. And desire, as the expression of a need or want is form of pain. Happiness, therefore, is 'the deliverance from a pain, from a want'; it is 'really and essentially always only negative and never positive [28].

The striving in man is appropriately called 'Will'. This term by Schopenhauer is indicative of resolve, process, goals, ends, and endless desires. When the will is hindered through obstacles between it and its temporary (immediate) goal, it is called, 'Suffering' [29]. Thus, suffering is defined as hindrances placed in the advance of the will towards its immediate and

presumed aims. The attainment of the temporary goal of the will is defined as satisfaction, well-being and happiness, according to Schopenhauer. Hence, both suffering and temporary satisfaction do not deliver lasting happiness, since each so-called satisfaction is the starting point of a new striving. Thus, that there is no ultimate aim of striving means that there is no measurement or end, with regard to suffering. Thus, inevitability of striving that is part and parcel of the will means that suffering is inevitable and ineradicable as a matter of course. This, according to Singh, gives Schopenhauer the rationale for his pessimistic judgment of life as such. The result of the endless striving of each objectified metaphysical Will, that is the constituents of the empirical reality-to assert itself at the expense of the other leads to conflict. This conflict is the externalization of the slavery of the will and the manifestation of man's subservience to the will to live. To remedy this predicament, Schopenhauer presents two ways of escaping from the slavery of the will; first, through aesthetic contemplation and second, through the path of asceticism. The first is ephemeral, while the second is long-lasting [30].

Finally, love of life or the view of it as a glorious possession is erroneous, for life is, for the most part, a delusionary affirmation of will's endless cravings, doomed to be thwarted by reality. What Schopenhauer wants to emphasize is that the sufferings of life are neither accidental nor negative, but essential and positive [31]. Thus, suffering is not a negation of matter. Life on the whole cannot be called good, glorious and by itself meaningful. It is something that cannot be regarded in itself a good occurrence. It is something whose denial is more important than its affirmation. Thus, life as such is to be recognized as vain, pointless, and futile [32]. It does offer to an individual an opportunity for the will's denial and thus on that account human life is superior to that of an animal. In aesthetic contemplation, the observer is disinterested in the desirable object, but not uninterested. He is disinterested because, contrary to the natural promptings of the metaphysical Will for the individual to approach an appealing object as the object of desire or stimulant of desire, the observer focuses on its aesthetic significance. The concentration of the disinterested observer on the aesthetic significance of the desirable object tames the fiery urge of his will and

²⁶ Murphy Sean T. (2021) *Acting Within Yourself: Schopenhauer on Agency, Autonomy, and Individuality*, Dissertation, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 66.

²⁷ Marco Segala (2021) "Trieb and Triebe in Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Nature," In Manja Kisner & Jörg Noller (eds.), *The Concept of Drive in Classical German Philosophy: Between Biology, Anthropology, and Metaphysics* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan) pp. 299-303.

²⁸ Byron Simmons (2021) "A Thousand Pleasures Are Not Worth a Single Pain: The Compensation Argument for Schopenhauer's Pessimism," *European Journal of Philosophy* 29 (1):120-124.

²⁹ Vasfi Onur Özen (2020) "The Ambiguity in Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Thing-in-Itself," *Review of Metaphysics* 74 (294):251-255.

³⁰ Michel-Antoine Xhignesse (2020) "Schopenhauer's Perceptive Invective," In Jens Lemanski (ed.), *Language, Logic, and Mathematics in Schopenhauer* (Basel, Schweiz: Birkhäuser), pp. 95-97.

³¹ Billy Holmes (2019) "Is Human Life Absurd?" *Philosophia* 47 (2):429-432

³² Allison Parker (2019) "A Pragmatic Look at Schopenhauer's Pessimism," *Stance* 12 (1):107-110

liberates him temporarily from its slavery [³³]. This temporary escape from the slavery of the will through aesthetic contemplation is linked to the Platonic ideas. These ideas which are eternal, unchanging, and real are the exemplars of the individual natural things we have in the world. Now, Schopenhauer, by introducing this concept is trying to tell us that what brings freedom from one's slavery to the will is the abandonment of the promptings of nature, which is fleeting, mutable and imperfect, and the adherence to the ideas of things which are perfect, knowable and unchanging. Copleston consolidates these points as follows:

In aesthetic contemplation, the beholder is participating in this apprehension of the Ideas. He, thus, rises above the temporal and changing and contemplates the eternal and unchanging. His attitude is contemplative, not appetitive. Appetitive is stilled during aesthetic experience [³⁴].

Hence, one can say that in aesthetic contemplation, a man transcends the original subjection of knowledge to the Will, to desire. He becomes the 'pure will-less subject of knowledge, who no longer traces relations in accordance with the principle of sufficient reason, but rests and is lost in fixed contemplation of the object presented to him, apart from its connection with any other object. Having presented the taming effect of aesthetic contemplation, though it is fleeting, Schopenhauer offers us another which is long lasting: self-denial and renunciation [³⁵]. He says that since man is the objectification of the Will to live which is characterized by hatred, conflict, evil and wickedness, the only way to ensure a lasting freedom from this inevitable predicament is self-renunciation, self-denial, and mortification. These practices, by taming the 'Wild beast' in us, liberate us from ordinance and governance of the Will to live [³⁶]. This method is self-emanicipation from the objectified self aims at debilitating the pillars that uphold the edifice of conflict, hatred and evil. Thus, Copleston writes:

For the Will to live, manifesting itself in egoism, self-assertion, hatred and conflict, is for Schopenhauer the source of evil. 'There really resides in the heart of each of us a wild beast which only waits the

opportunity to rage and rave in order to injure others, and which, if they do not prevent it, would like to destroy them.' This wild beast, this radical evil, is the direct expression of the Will to live. Hence, morality, if it is possible, must involve denial of the Will. And as man is an objectification of the Will, denial will mean self-denial, asceticism and mortification [37].

Life and existence, for Schopenhauer, due to the nature of the will to live, is itself a crime: it is our original sin. So, it should be expiated by suffering and death. From what we have seen so far, it would seem that suicide would be the best moral act to assuage the tortures of the Will to live, but Schopenhauer disagrees with this by saying that in the act of suicide, the victim relinquishes his will rather than deny it [³⁸]. For the man who commits suicide does to escape certain evils. And if he could escape from them without killing himself, he would do so. Hence, suicide is, paradoxically, the expression of a concealed Will to live. Consequently, denial and renunciation must take some form other than suicide [39]. This is indeed a bleak and deeply pessimistic view of the common conduct of humanity and seems to have a complete disregard of the notion that there is something basically good in every individual, a soul or a conscience. But Schopenhauer's extreme pronouncements never fail to be thought provoking.

1.5: An Appraisal of Arthur Schopenhauer's Pessimistic Existentialism

Schopenhauer, in his critique of Kant's argument, which consequently led to his philosophy of the world as representation, attempts to prove that 'space and time cannot be *conceived*, when closely considered, as ... an order of things in themselves, or as something absolutely objective and positively existing: for if we attempt to think it out to the end, it leads to contradictions.' The problem for Schopenhauer, however, is that he (actually quite rightly) *rejects* Kant's argument on this point, regards the attempt to prove that realism about space and time leads to insoluble contradictions as a transparent failure. What this means is that to establish the truth of radical idealism Schopenhauer cannot rest on his Kantian laurels. He urgently needs something over and above what is to be found in Kant.

³³ David Bather Woods (2019) Seriously Bored: Schopenhauer on Solitary Confinement, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27 (5):959-962.

³⁴ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 7, (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 278

³⁵ Timothy Stoll (2018) "Science and Two Kinds of Knowledge: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and the Ignorabimus-Streit," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 56 (3):519-521.

³⁶ Yaoping Zhu (2018) "Schopenhauer, Husserl and the Invisibility of the Embodied Subject," *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 10 (2):353-356.

³⁷ Jens Lemanski (2017) "Schopenhauer's World. The System of The World as Will and Presentation I," *Schopenhaueriana. Revista Española de Estudios Sobre Schopenhauer* 2:297-300.

³⁸ Colin Marshall (2017) "Schopenhauer and Non-Cognitivist Moral Realism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55 (2):293-316.

³⁹ Dennis Vanden Auweele (2016) "Arthur Schopenhauer: Parerga and Paralipomena Short Philosophical Essays," *Philosophischer Literaturanzeiger* 69 (1):96-98.

1.5.1: A Critique of the Claim of Radical Idealism: Realism as Self-contradictory

Schopenhauer's assertion that space and time characterize things as they appear and not things in themselves, places him in the category of a radical idealist. Like Kant in the 'First Antinomy', Schopenhauer tries to argue that some kind of contradiction is involved in affirming the world of every day experience to have mind independent existence. In his words:

If we attempt to imagine an objective world without knowing a subject, then we become aware that what we are imagining at that moment is in truth the opposite of what we intended, namely, nothing but just the process in the intellect of a knowing being who perceives an objective world, that is to say, precisely, that which we sought to exclude [⁴⁰].

According Julian Young, A 'postmodernist' would be inclined, at this point, to leap tiresomely to Schopenhauer's defense. 'The way you see the tree', he would likely point out, 'is profoundly determined by the constitution of your particular, culturally constructed, way of apprehending reality. The subject is, therefore, always present' [⁴¹]. But this is like arguing that since we always see through our eyes we always see our eyes or that since we always talk *in* language we always talk *about* language. The medium, to be sure, must always affect the *character* of then message. But that does not mean it is always, or even usually, part of the message. Why else might Schopenhauer think that 'no object without a subject' is a simple and obvious truth which places radical idealism beyond doubt? Maybe because, in a sense, 'no object without a subject' *is* an obvious and simple truth that 'needs no proof' [⁴²]. There can be, that is, no *object of consciousness* without a subject of consciousness. But whether *material objects* are nothing but objects of consciousness is, of course, the very point at issue. If, that is to say, 'no object without a subject' is a statement of radical idealism then it is not a trivial and obvious truth. If, on the other hand, it is a trivial and obvious truth then it is not a statement of radical idealism. The whole appeal to the principle is, in short, a disaster and cannot begin to do the job of replacing the rejected argument of Kant's 'Antinomy.' Schopenhauer, then, badly needs something else with which to support the truth of radical idealism [⁴³].

⁴⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*. Vol. II. Translated by E. F. J. Payne. (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 108

⁴¹ Julian Young, *Schopenhauer* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), p. 85

⁴² Alexandre Billon (2016) "Irrationality and Happiness: A (Neo-) Schopenhauerian Argument for Rational Pessimism,"

Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy 11 (1):1-5.

⁴³ Jordi Cabos (2016) "Schopenhauer and the Malaise of an Age," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42 (1):93-97.

1.5.2: The Magritte Problem

The second problem, as indicated by Young, is the 'Magritte problem'. This is named after Rene Magritte, a French artist and philosopher, who said: "Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see, but it is impossible. Humans hide their secrets too well [⁴⁴] Magritte said, "People are quite willing to use objects without looking for any symbolic intention in them, but when they look at paintings, they can't find any use for them. So they hunt around for a meaning to get themselves out of the quandary... They want something secure to hang on to... By asking 'what does this mean?' they express a wish that everything be understandable" [⁴⁵]. Surely, one might point out, the world as we experience it might *both* be a brain-construct *and also* correspond to the way reality in itself actually is. And in fact, one might opine that our evolutionary success suggests that this is no mere possibility but is actually the *truth of the matter*? Surely creatures whose representations of the world were habitually at variance with the way it actually is would have, according to W. V. O. Quine: 'the pathetic but praiseworthy habit of dying out before reproducing their kind'? One of the criticisms Schopenhauer had of Kant's philosophy, which in many other respects he deeply admired, was how the two sides of the Kantian distinction between things-as-they-appear, or 'phenomena', and the things-as-they-are-in-themselves, or 'noumena', interacted [⁴⁶]. The former was dependent on the latter, but this could not be a causal dependence because Kant had specified causality as a concept applicable only to phenomena, as a category of human cognition and not relevant to the unknowable thing-in-itself [⁴⁷]. Schopenhauer's emendation to the Kantian philosophy was to characterize phenomena and the thing-in-itself not as two separate spheres of reality, but two aspects of the same reality, like the two sides of a coin. One side is that of perception and representation. The other is more mysterious, being by definition *beyond* perception [⁴⁸]. Schopenhauer's great

⁴⁴ *Chronicles on History, Politics, Feminism and Culture*, "Was Magritte More a Philosopher Than an Artist? A Peak Beyond the Mysteries" The inquisitive philosophy of René Magritte." Available at: <https://medium.com/the-collector/was-magritte-more-a-philosopher-than-an-artist-325334ecf54b>

⁴⁵ Jens Lemanski (2017) "Schopenhauer's World. The System of The World as Will and Presentation I," *Schopenhaueriana. Revista Española de Estudios Sobre Schopenhauer* 2: 300-301

⁴⁶ Vasfi Onur Özen (2020) "The Ambiguity in Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Thing-in-Itself," *Review of Metaphysics* 74 (294):251-254.

⁴⁷ Dennis Vanden Auweele (2015) "Schopenhauer and the Paradox of Genius," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20 (1):149-152.

⁴⁸ Alistair Welchman (2016) "Eternity in Kant and Post-Kantian European Thought," In Yitzhak Melamed (ed.),

insight, clearly influenced by the Romantic trend, was to point to human inner experience, the awareness of our will, desires, wishes, pains and emotions, as the key indicator to understanding the inner nature of reality beyond sensory perception as mediated by representation. The whole of reality is, at bottom, Schopenhauer claimed, an arational and appetitive force of *will*, much as the Dharmic religions of the Classical East had taught for millennia [⁴⁹].

1.5.3: On the Notion of Suffering: Argument from Design

Another strong discuss in Schopenhauer's notion of absurdity is that the source of this world of suffering is something which, properly understood, cannot be viewed with anything but moral *horror*. For what it does in treating individuals as mere 'canon fodder' (having no significant value or worth) for the realization of its grand design is to infringe on the fundamental moral principle of, as Kant puts it, treating individuals always as 'ends', never merely as means. Schopenhauer's horror at nature, his horror, in particular at the fate of animals, comes over particularly strongly in the following passage in which he renders, in his own way, a report from Java by a European explorer, F.W. Junghuhn. Schopenhauer writes:

An immense field entirely covered with skeletons, and took it to be a battlefield. However they were nothing but skeletons of large turtles, five feet long, three feet broad, and of equal height. These turtles come this way from the sea, in order to lay their eggs, and are then seized by wild dogs (*cards rutilans*); with their united strength, these dogs lay them on their backs, tear open their lower amour, the small scales of the belly, and devour them alive. But then a tiger often pounces on the dogs. Now all this misery is repeated thousands and thousands of times, year in, year out. For this then, are these turtles born. For what offence must they suffer this agony? What is the point of the whole scene of horror? The only answer is that the will-to-live [the world-will] thus objectifies itself [50].

On the contrary, the traditional 'argument from design' for God's existence observes, first, the amazing 'harmony' of nature, the amazingly complete mutual adaptation between organisms and their environment. (Cacti are just the way they need to be to survive in deserts; deserts are just what you need to sustain cacti.) All the parts of nature seem to be mutually adapted just

like the parts of an intricate watch [⁵¹]. And just as it is inconceivable that there should be a watch without a watchmaker so it is inconceivable that the 'design' that the world manifests should exist without an all-powerful, world-creating designer. Moreover, since the order of things in the world is such a benign order we must conclude that the world creator is not only all-powerful but also wholly benevolent [52]. Additionally, if the world-will is the perpetrator of all this horror, then it is evil. But since it *is* the world, it is also the *victim* of its own evil. It bears all the suffering it itself creates. Since every part of the world is part of the world-organism, every time an animal sinks its teeth in the flesh of another, the world-will sinks *its* teeth in *its own* flesh. The world-will, that is to say, is like the Australian bulldog ant whose sharp-toothed head and stinging tail engage in a fight to the death. For 'at bottom, the will must live on itself, since nothing exists besides it, and it is a hungry will'. By implication, the world-will is thus not only bad. It is also, in a clear sense, mad [53]. Finally, I will like to add to this critique by saying that if the whole universe has no meaning as the existentialists, and indeed Schopenhauer claims, we should never have found out that it has no meaning; just as if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creature with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Darkness should be a word without meaning. Hence, Schopenhauer will need to tell us how he who is part of the 'meaningless' world got to know that there was such thing as meaningful and meaningless existence. Similarly, if the universe seems so cruel and unjust as he maintains, how had he got the idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. Hence, what was Schopenhauer comparing the universe with when he called it unjust? [⁵⁴].

1.6: CONCLUSION

So far, it has been argued that Schopenhauer fails to provide a convincing proof of radical idealism. On the other hand, it has been suggested that his appeal to evolutionary psychology does seem to provide a compelling case for partial idealism. However, in the light of the present day knowledge, there can be little doubt that Schopenhauer's despairing view of the world, above all his conviction of the terribleness of existence as such, were in some degree neurotic manifestations

Eternity: A History, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) pp. 179-182.

⁴⁹ David E. Cartwright, Edward E. Erdmann & Christopher Janaway (eds.) (2013) *Schopenhauer: On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason and Other Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 37-40

⁵⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Idea*. Vol. II, p. 354

⁵¹Kienhow Goh (2013) "Schopenhauer on the Role of the Intellect in Human Cognition," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 29 (1): 14-17.

⁵² Julian Young, *Schopenhauer* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), p. 81.

⁵³ Jonathan Head (2016) "Schopenhauer on the Development of the Individual," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20 (2):427-230.

⁵⁴ Sandra Shapshay (2012) The Problem with the Problem of Tragedy: Schopenhauer's Solution Revisited. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (1):17-20

which had roots in his relationship with his mother. If actions speak louder than words, then his life, as he lived it, tells us of a man in whom protean pleasures have been experienced side by side with mountainous frustration, misanthropy and desolate miseries of neurosis [55]. Schopenhauer's philosophy is indeed a bleak and deeply pessimistic view of the common conduct of humanity and seems to have a complete disregard for the notion that there is something basically good in every individual, a soul or a conscience. But Schopenhauer's extreme pronouncements never fail to be thought-provoking. The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, is well known for his pessimism. He did not believe in real happiness. In his view, the best a person can achieve is to reduce misery. At the end of his career, he wrote a book on how to live the most bearable life [56]. As he aged, though, his pessimism and bleak outlook on life grew almost comically excessive: at one point, he advised people to swallow a toad every morning so that they would not meet with anything more disgusting in the day ahead. It was only in his late years that Schopenhauer finally enjoyed a contentment of sorts, through his relationship with the attractive sculptress and admirer of his philosophy, Elisabeth Ney [57]. Schopenhauer was very much an atypical philosopher. He was genuinely interested and knowledgeable about Hinduism and Buddhism, and perhaps the only major Western philosopher to draw serious parallels between Western and Eastern Philosophy. He was allegedly the first major philosopher to be openly atheist, and was unusual in placing the arts and Aesthetics so highly. He is also considered among the supreme writers of German prose, and his elegant and aphoristic writing style has even led to the publication of standalone books of aphorisms and witticisms [58].

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⁵⁵ Bryan Magee. *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 13-18.

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