

# SCHOPENHAUER AND PESSIMISM

BY EMMANUEL OGUNDELE

## INTRODUCTION

Arthur Schopenhauer has been known and called a philosopher of pessimism. Yet a closer look at his pessimism would reveal that it was a position very much in agreement with how he saw life. His pessimism is not just pessimism for its own sake but one which is rooted in human nature itself, as he perceived it, because of the activity of the will or will-to-live. Man's life, in his view, is rooted and neck-deep in so much suffering that there is no respite for him through all the available means of seeking consolation save in the turning the will against itself in self-renunciation. The will is central to Schopenhauer's entire philosophy. This is why he has been called a 'metaphysical voluntaristic idealist' or a 'philosopher of the will'. My aim in this paper is to drive home the position that Schopenhauer is indeed a philosopher of pessimism and that there is every consistency with his entire philosophy. Before one can begin to argue for this position, it is important to espouse the nature of the will according to Schopenhauer.

## THE NATURE OF THE WILL IN SCHOPENHAUER'S

The primacy of the will to Schopenhauer's entire philosophy is without question. The common understanding of the will is that it is a conscious and deliberate choice to behave in a certain way. According to Stumpf, "We consider the will an agent of our intellect, that is an attribute or faculty possessed by a rational person."<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer was against this kind of idea especially as championed by Descartes for whom 'thought' is the essence of man. This manner of philosophising is absurd for Schopenhauer. Man has a body and he is primarily a doer and only secondarily a knower and so the nature of his consciousness is dependent on 'will was therefore taken over by Schopenhauer and used in a slightly different way. The will for him is a blind irrational force. This will, according to him, manifests itself as the "will to live" which is the cause of all the sufferings and evil in the will. The will is the "thing-in-itself, the spiritual source of Nature, the primordial subject which objectifies itself in space, time and causality. Far beyond the *noumenon* of Kant which could not be known, Schopenhauer claims that the will is indeed the "thing-in-itself" thus objectifying itself in different things. He declares at the very beginning of the *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, "The World is my representation," and again:

*The will as thing-in-itself is quite different from the phenomenon, and is entirely free of all the forms of the phenomenon into which it passes when it appears, and which therefore concern only its objective...*<sup>2</sup>

In essence, for Schopenhauer, to exist as a human being is to will since the will entails constant desire, want, striving and wishing. The world, for Schopenhauer, is ultimately the metaphysical will since it is manifested in space and time as a single, blind, insatiable, striving force, which imprints its nature in each and everything. This will-to-live is omnipresent and is objectified in the body in various parts and forms. He explains:

*Existence itself, and the kind of existence, in the totality as well as in every part is only from the will.... The will appears in everything, precisely as it determines itself in itself and outside time. The world is only the mirror of the willing; and all finiteness, all suffering, all misery that it contains, belongs to the expression of what the will wills.*<sup>3</sup>

The will is therefore the only meta-phenomenal reality or thing-in-itself even though it appears in various ways in different things. Nonetheless, Schopenhauer says it is still the same one will. But how did Schopenhauer arrive at the idea that thing-in-itself is will? According to him, the key to this reality is found by looking within oneself. This inward-directed look will reveal the single narrow door to the truth, which is the will, or will-to-live since the bodily action that is occasioned as a result of my volition and the volition itself are one and the same. Thus, the will is the directly evident thing that is seen; meaning that the will is in everything and that the whole body is nothing but objectified will. In other words, the fundamental intuition that is common to all is that we are willing beings and the body is will as a presentation to consciousness. Once and since this is known, one can then extend this discovery to the world at large. The will is not only manifest in the body alone, it is also present in many other forms such as the impulse by which magnet turns to the north pole, in the phenomenon of attraction and repulsion, in animal instinct, human desire and so on. The omnipresence of the will means that everything is determined to large extent by it and nothing can escape its influence. For just as the will is described as an endless striving, a blind urge which knows no cessation, this same will or will-to-

live is even manifested in the satisfaction of hunger, sexual instinct and the maintenance of the species. What controls nature therefore is not reason but an irrational force, which is the will. If the force behind the world is not reason but unreason or something irrational, then everything falls into place since we really cannot expect something positive from life itself. Slavery to the will, Schopenhauer contends, is the root of all evil. In essence, the will is everything in the world, it is evil, and things are like robots that are set in motion by it. But if the will is responsible for all the misery in the world, does it not mean that it is better not to live at all? This is an all-important question for Schopenhauer, hence his pessimism.

### SCHOPENHAUER'S PESSIMISM

Pessimism has been defined as "the habitual belief that bad things will happen or are happening, or the belief that a particular thing will be unsuccessful". Pessimism is therefore characterised by a negative attitude towards life. With this kind of outlook, one sees everything in life as a waste of time and the world itself as a 'vale of tears.' A pessimist is one who cannot stand the story that there is a positive ray of hope that the world is a place where anything worthwhile could be achieved no matter how you try. He could rightly be described as one who believes that life cannot offer anything positive.

A careful look at Schopenhauer's description and approach to life would reveal that he is rightly called a pessimist. Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Russell, however, believed that Schopenhauer was not a pessimist looking at his lifestyle and some other details about him. Nietzsche was of the view that Schopenhauer would have become a pessimist considering such factors as his enemies, Hegel, women (especially his mother), sensuality, yet he did not. He went further to say: "he believed in morality and played the flute, what? Is that really a pessimist?" Nietzsche further saw Schopenhauer's pessimism no more than "an invasion of his philosophy by personal neurosis." Kierkegaard concurred that he was not a pessimist looking at his desire for fame and renown that he could have scorned just as he did to pleasure but he did not. He went on to say: "Not without great self-satisfaction he says, he is the first who has designated a place for asceticism in a system. Yes, that is completely the talk of a professor, I am the first...." Bertrand Russell would not have agreed too to the fact that Schopenhauer was a pessimist considering what he says: "Nor was his doctrine sincere, if we may judge by Schopenhauer's life. He habitually dined well, at a good restaurant; he had many trivial love-affairs, which were sensual but not passionate..."<sup>57</sup> Russell further doubted the sincerity of Schopenhauer's pessimism when he pondered why a man who believed this world to be barren, empty, worthless yet could have a mental fortitude to complete a life's work spanning fifty years and close to ten thousand pages. The point Russell is

making here is that Schopenhauer could not have not be rightly called a pessimist considering that he enjoyed life just like anyone else, wrote a lot for prosperity, all of which one would count as affirmation of the will-to-live. Even though Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Russell would have us believe Schopenhauer to be an optimist, this claim cannot be supported by an avalanche of evidence on the ground against it. To elicit this fact, Frederick Copleston gave his book on Schopenhauer what one can call an appropriate title: *Arthur Schopenhauer: Philosopher of Pessimism*. In this book, Copleston confirms the idea that Schopenhauer was a pessimist.<sup>58</sup> Nobody could have painted the picture of life as the one by Schopenhauer without being a pessimist. He was such a philosopher who drew with such fatal and beautiful strokes the terrors of existence. It must be remarked, however, that if Schopenhauer's philosophy is pessimistic, this is established by the content of his philosophy and not so much by his life. Schopenhauerian pessimism points to the universality of the will as the cause of human suffering, an evil which, like bad weather, is shared by everyone.

I think the evidence in favour of Schopenhauer as a pessimist is stunning as well as staggering. Schopenhauer believes that to exist as a human being is the unkindest fate of all and that human beings not only suffer the pains and miseries of the present, these are augmented by their faculty of reason, which recalls past misery and anticipates future pain, "tormenting thoughts, from which the animal is completely free, living as it does in the present, thus in enviable ease and unconcern". Man can never know happiness because of the dominance of the evil will on his entire existence. David Cartwright cuts through Schopenhauerian pessimism when he says, "pleasure, joy and happiness do not exist within a Schopenhauerian world."<sup>59</sup> Schopenhauer drives home this fact himself, "pain is something negative, the mere elimination of the former."<sup>60</sup> He further compares life to "a walk over a circular path of red hot coals and even though there may be occasional cold spots, we would move on because of boredom. Our life is then tossed backwards between pain and boredom."<sup>61</sup> His belief that any mature person who confronts life-experience with honest eyes will come to the inevitable conclusion that life's sufferings outweigh its joys. This is nothing but a pessimistic idea. Writing on the nature of the story he had to tell, Patrick Gardiner remarking on Thomas Mann's contention says that Schopenhauer's literary genius reached "...the most brilliant and icy peak of perfection.... His detailed analysis of human vice and folly and the misery resulting inexorably from these have heightened, obnoxious", almost satiric quality, as if as he were partly luxuriating in the frightfulness of the story he had to tell."<sup>62</sup> The world which is will according to Schopenhauer is a world that is fundamentally in tension, conflict, pain, sorrow and misery.

We can therefore say that with all the facts on the ground, Schopenhauer can be called a pessimist and rightly so. His pessimism, it must be remarked, is based on the nature of the will, which is responsible for the tragedies of life. The affirmation of the will-to-live, which is fundamental to all living beings, results in a continuous life of suffering. One can say that his pessimism is consistent with the picture of life he has painted in his philosophy, one in which there is no joy or happiness but only sorrow, pain and misery. As a result of the impact of the will on everything, he said that it would have been better if we were not born at all. As Enoch Stumpf comments, "his concept of the will portrays the whole system of nature as moving in response to the driving force of all things."<sup>14</sup> Since the will is found in all things, it is what sustains and supports life and nothing can escape its control. What this means is that all things are not acting on their own accord but as the will wishes, driven by a kind of inexorable necessity. Human life, animal life or any other form of life is an unceasing tale of horrors. All that we do in this world with the efforts put into it is only to sustain man through ephemeral span of life. Life is therefore for Schopenhauer a bad bargain, for we dissipate our energies on things with no just reward: "life is a business, the proceeds of which are far from covering the cost of it". The worst of this scenario is that there can be no true happiness because it is only a temporary cessation of human pain: pain caused by desire expressing a want which can never be permanently satisfied. The life of every individual, Schopenhauer concludes, "is a tragedy, but gone through in detail, it has the character of a comedy". Arthur Hubscher a well-known authority in Schopenhauer has this to say about his pessimism:

*Schopenhauer's pessimism is not based on the accidental, isolated, unimportant things which can make us disgusted with life, (this) philosophical pessimist wants to give an explanation of the universal and essential, for the unchanging primary essence of the world, which is based on the will-to-live.<sup>15</sup>*

Hubscher is not alone in this opinion about Schopenhauer's pessimism and its effect on his philosophy. His entire life for Copleston was tainted by his pessimism.

*That Schopenhauer's personal character and temperament, together with his experiences and his observations of human suffering and the apparent futility of life, contributed to the*

*formation and elaboration of that philosophy, is no doubt correct; but he was convinced of the truth of his metaphysical system and, if that metaphysic were only held to be true, then from a logical standpoint, the one possible attitude towards life would be a pessimistic attitude.<sup>16</sup>*

The position of Schopenhauer on the nature of character is further proof of his pessimism. He believes that character is unalterable. A man is either good or bad and there is no possibility of a bad man changing for good or vice versa. Virtue in this wise cannot be taught since a man is either good or bad a radice. This deterministic feature of his ethics would mean that no matter what effort we make to be good, we can never attain it good if we have been made to be bad. All our efforts would always prove abortive in this regard. This is made worse by the fact that the bad man feels a thick partition within himself and others and so he is unable to tear the veil of Maya to see that himself and others are manifestations of the will-to-live. This means that the bad man will always get everything wrong and can never be altruistic in his ethical disposition, an altruism which would lead to compassion for others in the same sorry world. 'Egoism' which Schopenhauer calls that natural condition of human beings is one of the causes of pessimism. This is because the nature of the will makes man to attach more importance to his own interests than the rest of the world put together and so "is ready to annihilate the world in order to maintain his own self".<sup>17</sup> Thus, man is the greatest enemy of himself due to the nature of the will-to-live: *homo hominis lupus*. This fact has necessitated the state to protect human beings from the grosser forms of suffering that they would otherwise have inflicted on each other.

Faced with a Schopenhauerian map of the world therefore, pessimism seems the only option. This is precisely part of Nietzsche's disenchantment with his solution namely that the will should not be denied but rather be affirmed. To portray Schopenhauer not as a pessimist, and as someone only trying to project alternative *Gestalten* into the world by picking out different patterns or selecting different facts for special mention is beside the point. The Schopenhauerian claim that suffering is the inevitable consequence of human life is justified if we carefully look at the century since his death, and see what happened: the rise of nationalism, racism, the arms race, two world wars, environmental degradation and pollution, the threat of technology, nuclear rearmament etc. The fundamental nature of the will leads to a serious problem in Schopenhauer's philosophy. For if according to Schopenhauer, the will is evil to all intents and purposes, and can achieve no good for man; what then is the way out? In other words, is there any solution to this madness? Or has Schopenhauerian pessimism any cure?

## SOLUTION TO SCHOPENHAURIAN PESSIMISM

Since the will cannot be easily quietened according to Schopenhauer, the most obvious solution or antidote one would have expected from this great protagonist of pessimism is suicide.<sup>18</sup> Surprisingly, Schopenhauer did not recommend suicide as the cure to this malaise that the will is. For Schopenhauer, instead of playing the distressing and sadistic game of the will, one must seek what is distressing to the will to be able to still the "wheel of ixion". At the tale end of his philosophy, he rather suggested some solutions, some temporary and others permanent leading to salvation from a vale of tears to a realm of bliss. The permanent solution is what he calls the "way of Salvation" consisting of a this-worldly solution and an other-worldly solution. The first solution, which is only temporary, according to him, is in art or aesthetic contemplation. In his view, we can obtain some moment of repose through the contemplation of the great works of art where we become, "pure, will-less, painless, timeless, subjects of knowledge".<sup>19</sup> We are momentarily delivered from the fierce striving after our manifold desires by losing ourselves in our contemplation of the work of art. The object here is not viewed from a practical perspective, either as a possible end of a desire, or a means of satisfying some other want. Rather, the object is viewed disinterestedly, without any reference to our needs, desires, wishes and hopes. The work of art therefore absorbs us and removes us from the complicated matrix of our constant desires, thus we are free from suffering.

Taking the arts one by one, Schopenhauer believes that all the fine arts provided an insight into the nature of the reality behind the phenomena. Architecture for instance gave expression to some of the lesser ideas, particularly its concern for stresses and strains reflecting the conflict inherent in the will. In poetry, the ideas are expressed in concrete imagery. Music offers, according to him, the clearest insight of all into the nature of the will. Here the subject does not entertain anything that tells him about the will. In this experience the striving of the will stands still but only momentarily, but it is soon terminated by boredom and so the will goes back to the old game again.

The most permanent way of escaping from the thralldom to the will is through asceticism. Thus one would move from virtue to asceticism realizing that he cannot abolish all the evil in the world. Asceticism for Schopenhauer consists in renouncing the will itself and all its manifestation leading to the eventual deliverance from the will, which is the misery of existence. He explains, "By the expression asceticism... I understand in the narrower sense this deliberate breaking of the will by refusing the agreeable and looking at the disagreeable, the voluntary chosen way of life of penance and self-chastisement, for the constant mortification of the will."<sup>20</sup>

By practising asceticism, one eventually frustrates one's own willing i.e. turning the will against itself in a voluntary fashion. This form of self-mortification by seeking

the undesirable through fasting, poverty, denial of any pleasure leads the ascetic to a clearer vision of the vanity of existence. The ultimate result of renunciation, the denial and quieting of the will is calm, tranquillity, peace of mind and indifference to the affairs of one's life. This is not suicide which, for him, is an affirmation of the will-to-live rather than a denial of it. Asceticism leads to the extinguishing of the venom of the will, which is that cause of man's restlessness. This is the kind of repose the saint is able to achieve. Schopenhauer himself explains his position thus:

*The ascetic reaches a state in which he looks back calmly and with a smile on the phantasmagoria of this world which was once able to move and agonize even his mind, but now stands before him as indifferently as chessmen at the end of a game, or as fancy dress cast off in the morning, the form and figure which taunted and disquieted us on the carnival night.*<sup>21</sup>

Having performed this great feat, the ascetic has denied the will-to-live even though he is a phenomenal manifestation of that will. The saint or ascetic in this sense has achieved a form of salvation for Schopenhauer himself described asceticism as the "path to Salvation". Even though he goes on living, he has severed all his ties with the will and so, he is, in sense, a non-being. For the ascetic therefore, the world has come to an end even though he is still alive. The strangulation of the will has prepared man for death which brings a total dissolution to everything. Hence he says, "for him who ends thus, the world has at the same time ended".<sup>22</sup> Asceticism having led man to a state of nirvanic will-lessness concludes within the limit of human knowledge the diabolical machinations of the will, making man to attain, "voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure and complete will-lessness".<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The fitting conclusion to this paper is that Schopenhauer is truly a pessimist and that his pessimism is consistent with the nature of will in his philosophy. His pessimism cannot be an invasion of his philosophy as Nietzsche and others have said. It is rather deeply rooted in how he perceived life. A careful look into Schopenhauer's philosophy would reveal that his position on pessimism is in tandem with his general system. I agree with Julian Young when he says: "there can be no doubting either that the Schopenhaurian case for this view is extremely formidable. One looks in for a comparably sustained case for optimism."<sup>24</sup> Schopenhauer's entire system especially his arguments in favour of pessimism must be admitted on

his own terms. His pessimistic views should not discourage anyone who wants to see the world from an optimistic perspective. The entire Schopenhauerian pessimistic system may not be the only picture of reality as it is but only a reflection of his philosophical views about it.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Enoch Stumpf, Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), Fifth edition, P.349
- <sup>2</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The world as will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 2. Vols. Art. 23.
- <sup>3</sup> Schopenhauer, *The world*, Vol. 1, p. 351.
- <sup>4</sup> Collins' Birmingham University International Database, *English language Dictionary*, Edited by John Sinclair, (London: HarperCollins 1992) p.072.
- <sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Translated by Walter Kaufmann (Random House: New York Inc., 1966), P.99.
- <sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *On Arthur Schopenhauer*, edited by Gerd Hoffmanns, (urich: Diogenes Verlag, 1977), P.209. This could not have been the claim of a pessimist according to Kierkegaard for a pessimist is not qualified to say he is the first to have done something monumental. Only optimist could have made this claim.
- <sup>7</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1945) P.758.
- <sup>8</sup> Frederick Copleston, *S.J. Arthur Schopenhauer: Philosophy of Pessimism*, (London: Burn and Oates, 1949), Bellarmine Series XI, P. 75.
- <sup>9</sup> Schopenhauer, *The world*, Vol. 1, P.298.
- <sup>10</sup> David. E. Cartwright, *Schopenhauerian and an Alternative to Resignation?* Schopenhauer Jahrbuch (1985), P.155.
- <sup>11</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E.J. Payne, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc. 1965), P.46.
- <sup>12</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World*, Vol. 1, p. 315
- <sup>13</sup> Patrick Gardener, *Schopenhauer*, (Baltimore: Penguin 1963) P.181
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 350.
- <sup>15</sup> Arthur Hubscher, *Denker gegen den Strom*, (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1973), P. 297.
- <sup>16</sup> Copleston, op.cit. p. 74
- <sup>17</sup> Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, Vol.1, p. 312.
- <sup>18</sup> Schopenhauer's reasoning that suicide of despair is not to be found in conjunction with pessimism, but with, rather, a facile optimism; an assessment of life as a blessing and

of happiness as the birthright of every human being. This position which was extensively discussed in, *World as Will and Representation* Vol. I. Is very instructive about the seriousness of Schopenhauer's pessimism.

<sup>19</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World*, Vol. I, P. 179

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 392

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 390

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. P. 380

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Julian Young, *Schopenhauerian Solution to Schopenhauerian Pessimism*, Schopenhauer Jahrbuch, (1987), p. 63

# HEGEMONY, IDENTITY AND THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

BY PHILIP OGO UJOMU

## INTRODUCTION

*The African who has understood  
us is the one who, after reading  
our works, would have felt a birth  
in him, of another person, impelled  
by an historical  
conscience. (Diop, 1991)*

This essay focuses on the contributions of African philosophy in relation to recent discussions on the future of philosophy. It challenges some recent views on the future of the philosophical discipline, and on the use of philosophy in an African environment. It confronts the problem of the source of the current crisis of African philosophy. It contends that central to this crisis is the current form of the internal contradictions within the discipline. In focusing on the issue of philosophy and cultural identity, and the impact of these on human survival in Africa, the essay challenges some of the conditions for liberation and transformation as set up by some scholars. We argue that there is a need for more novel and adequate theoretical formulations of the problematic of hegemony and identity in ways that can provide the conditions for African cultural rejuvenation and ascendance in the new millennium. We argue that there is a need to create and sustain more viable alternative forms of social and intellectual action and appreciation and interpretation of social realities.

A background for this essay can be provided by emphasizing the need to review the African philosophical experiences in the context of recent discussions on the future of philosophy and the current state of the philosophical discipline. More so, we can examine the implication of the above for the future use of philosophy in Africa. To put it more concretely, a central question can be: what opportunity does the future hold for the ascendancy of the African tradition(s) in philosophy? This question can be posed in a methodological way by asking: whether it will be possible in the future to discover some philosophical system that would universally be regarded as the ultimate solution of the great problems? (Schlick, 1964:647-648). The question can also be posed in an existential manner by requesting that "those who are engaged in philosophical inquiry in the African continent should

review the relevance of their pursuit to a continent bedeviled by apparently endless and intractable problems" (Oguejofor, 2001:13). It is the context of raising questions about the viability of existing discourses on the future of philosophy, exposing the nexus between past and new forms of culture humiliation, as well as, highlighting the pitfalls of hegemony and syncretism among others, that our essay can retain greater capability for theoretical insight. We can no longer overlook the fundamental issue of the role of philosophy in the reconstruction of the political and moral consciousness of the very society that we live in. Indeed, we must face in a conscious and direct manner the pressing question of "what is one's responsibility as a philosopher?" (Chomsky, 1968:2-4). What has been the role of the philosopher himself in engendering the current crisis of African philosophical theory or practice.

## ECLIPSING THE THEORETICAL SPACE: NEGLECTED ISSUES IN THE ANALYSIS OF THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY

Most scholars in recent times have presumed that it is easy to discuss the future of a contentious discipline such as philosophy. Of course, problems have arisen which jolt us and humble us to reconsider the realities before us. One of the scholars (Leaman 1998) has tried to discuss the future of philosophy without even a mention of African philosophy. He only succeeded in acknowledging the existence of the philosophies of the east, and the lessons for western philosophy that it does not deserve and mention. We are then faced with the types of dilemmas that will pervade the discursive arena and which our essay shall seek to overcome theoretically.

From the above, the initial question is; to what extent can we talk about the future of philosophy in a systematic manner. Leaman (1998:1-3) argues that the "trouble with predicting what is going to happen in philosophy is that the history of philosophy is rather like old-fashioned history with its fascination with outstanding individuals. When we link philosophical ideas with history, we tend to expect the future to mirror the past or at least follow a comprehensible pattern". This could simply mean that things will be the way that they have been, or that at best, any changes that occur will not constitute any significant departure from the status quo. This implies that philosophers remain interested in the views and problems highlighted by the ancient philosophers. But is this all there is to the question of the future of the discipline? Korner (1969:278) argues differently that "the future of philosophy is, like its past, inextricably bound up with the whole of man's intellectual life. Philosophy develops by giving birth to new disciplines or acting as Socratic midwife, by internal criticism, by reacting to changes in its social and intellectual environment and by the independent exploration of new possibilities of thought. There is no reason to assume that philosophy has lost the power to produce alone or with already existing disciplines- new forms of systematic inquiry."