

Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Pessimism and the Search for Happiness

Flemarie Magne G. Medida

Abstract: Is it possible to find happiness in pessimism? Arthur Schopenhauer was notably known as the philosopher of pessimism and also established the concept of the "will". His philosophy of the will focuses on the individual motivation wherein man is easily motivated by the basic desires in life. Furthermore, Schopenhauer was also one of the great philosophers who criticized the philosophy of Kant. Compared to Kant's concept of ethics that morality first starts with reason alone, Schopenhauer on the other hand proposed the concept that reason alone is not enough. For him, instead of reason, he concluded compassion as the basis of his ethics. This paper will be focusing on the Ethics, the purpose of the 'will' and how the notion of pessimism comprehended in his philosophy is. The idea of satisfaction in a pessimistic world seems to be almost impossible, but by assimilating it to the concept of compassion, which is undeniably present in Schopenhauer's philosophy, it could be possible. In a word, this paper will also relate an aspect of happiness from a vehement pessimism.

Keywords: Ethics, Compassion, Happiness, Pessimism and Will

Introduction

How can life be fulfilling if a person always experiences sufferings in life? And is it possible to find happiness in the pessimistic world of Schopenhauer? We cannot deny the fact that in the world that we are living in, there is always a tendency that worst things can happen to us at any given time. But how can we engage those pessimistic people to see beyond the belief that the world is not always bad and that somehow the possibility of satisfaction might be just be grasp within our hands?

One of the prominent philosophers on the concept of pessimism is none other than Arthur Schopenhauer. Many disciples and commentators of Schopenhauer's spectacularly pessimistic philosophy had something to do to his personal life. Let us first indulge ourselves to

a brief life history of Schopenhauer. Arthur Schopenhauer was a German philosopher who was born in Danzig, Poland on 22 February 1788. Both his parents were Dutch and his father, Heinrich Schopenhauer, was an outstanding businessman and a keen traveler. He wanted his son to be experienced being educated in different foreign lands such as England and France, leading him to meticulously name his son "Arthur" because this name mostly native and popular in most European Languages.¹ His father had a very impressive personality but suffered from fits of depression and excessive anxiety in his life. Arthur's mother named Johanna, also came from an influential family of Danzig. She married Arthur's father at the age of eighteen, making him twenty years older than her.

Arthur's parents were very fond of traveling and he was always accompanied by his parents. He had animals as his playmates that could be the reason for his life-long attachment with non-human living things.² His father's insistence for his son to have worldly-wise education becomes an advantage for the young Arthur for he developed to study real life other than just dogmatic knowledge. He began to be interested in for classics and philosophy, but his father truly wanted him to be engaged in the business career. Arthur continued to travel with his parents and learned many languages along the way. He was an expert in the English language, almost like a native, and know how speak French and other European languages. Schopenhauer suffered the loss of his father, who went through a period of bankruptcy, and showed signs of deaf, anxiety, depression, and irritability. His father died when he fell from the balcony of his warehouse. The speculations about suicide have never been cleared. From then on, Schopenhauer decided to continue taking philosophy and had received his doctorate degree at the University of Jena in 1813. He had poor relationship with his mother who also convinced him to move out of their house and never to return again. He also blames his mother for his poor views on women. His academic life had never been great because of his suspicious and unfriendly nature, and was always in bad terms with his academic colleagues. Even if he had finished his book before reaching the age of 30, it become famous when he was already in his fifties to seventies. He had difficulty making friends as he compared human social relations to those porcupines, which could not maintain mutuality and cannot draw too close for the fear of freaking each other.³ Despite all that, he never abandoned his deep concern for animals, particularly to dogs which he named his French poodle "Atman" followed by another named Butt. He was able to add more wealth aside

from his inheritance from his father because of his wise investments. In return, he managed to support some of his poor relatives and often contributed to charities. He was very compassionate towards the disadvantage sections during his time. His lifestyle was almost similarly the same as with Kant. He had routines to follow every day and even had a walked in the afternoon. He never married and died peacefully seating on his couch up to his last day. He was deeply affected by the loss of his father, because he truly worshipped him as a good man. On the other hand, it was the opposite for his mother because of their mutual dislike between one another.

Furthermore, Arthur Schopenhauer was notably known as a pessimistic philosopher. It was probably because of his concepts of the blind will and the endless suffering of man. In the first place, his tragic life leads him to write a pessimistic philosophy and even become a pessimist himself. His starting point in philosophy was Plato and Kant and their influences were heavily evident throughout all of his works. His philosophy was deeply based on Kant's works, with the concept of the principle of sufficient reason, the intuitive notions of time, space, and causality and in the categorical imperative. He was also heavily influenced by eastern philosophical thoughts such as the Vedanta, Upanishads, and Buddhism philosophy. Their tenet that life is suffering becomes the basic groundwork of Schopenhauer's philosophy. His contributions lies mostly on his criticisms on Kant and one example is his critique on Kant's categorical imperative, in which he argued that reason is not enough to be ethical.

Moving on, this paper will expose Schopenhauer's concept of the human will, the will to live, pessimism and his ethical principles. In his book entitled *The World as Will and*

Representation, in which he provided a solution for Kant's mysterious concept of the noumena as Schopenhauer connects it to his concept of the body. Furthermore, he also criticizes Kant's radical categorical imperative, making the concept of compassion as the basis of his ethics. The thesis statement of this paper would be that with the assistance of compassion towards the other, happiness is possible.

Schopenhauer's Concept on Human Will

A. *The Philosophy of Will*

"The world is my idea": this is a truth which holds good for everything that lives and knows, though only man can bring it into reflected, abstract consciousness. If he really does this, philosophical discretion has evolved in him. It then becomes clear to him, and certain that he knows not a sun, and not an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth; that the world which surrounds him exists only as idea- that is, only in relation to something else, the one who conceives the idea, which is himself."⁴

This is the opening passage in Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* that expresses the thought that the world is a representation. All the things that exist in the phenomenal world are just representations of will. It means that the world is just an idea, a representation of a represented being, and this being is man himself.

We must remember that Schopenhauer's philosophy comes from the Kantian background. He uses some of his major works and picked up some terms that could become important for his criticism on Kant. In his dissertation entitled *On the Fourfold Root of Sufficient Reason*, Schopenhauer explains that all objects that can be perceived in the phenomenal world are governed within this fourfold principles of sufficient reason. Namely, the

physical form which abides the principle of becoming, the mathematical form which is the principle of being, the logical form that is the principle of knowing, and the moral form as the principle of acting. These fourfold principles of reason manipulate all the subjects in the phenomenal world. It was the ground basis of all subjects, including man.

His first book was deeply rooted to Kant's phenomenal world, wherein the things that a person can know are just its appearances, never the thing as it is in itself, which is the noumenon. Also for Kant, we can never experience the noumenon, only the things that the phenomenon represents. Schopenhauer with the use of his philosophy of will claim that the things in itself can be known. The world of appearances and the world as it is in itself are the same reality that is witnessed in two different ways. The relationship is an identity in a sense that it is not influenced by causality.

There is only one thing in the world that can be discovered from the inside, and that is our own body. The body is the starting point of all perceptions. I perceived that my body is a representation of an object in the world. I can see my body in the external physical world, but I can also know about it in another way. When I reached for a glass of water to quench my thirst, I would have known that my hand is moving for the glass of water even if I did not see it. Aside from the fact that my hand is an example of an object in the world of representations, I have an immediate awareness of it and its movement.⁵ So while I was moving my hand, I also felt my desire to quench my thirst by drinking the water. This example states that I can know my body not only from the outside (as an object of representation), but also from the inside (my desire to quench my thirst). And from the inside, what I find there is will. "The hand and the will are two aspects of the same reality. In Schopenhauer's language, the hand is

the objectified will.”⁶ The hand then signifies the world as representation that is due to motivation, and the desire to the immediate and direct quenching of the thirst is the will. All human beings have the knowledge of their own phenomenon which is also known as feelings.⁷ But the will is not only limited to human beings; every living thing has a will on its own. Even plants have its will to seek sunlight when growing, and even an amoeba has its own will. What separates us from animals and plants is our possession of abstract ideas. Man’s bodily actions are objectified will, and the will is also physical because of the intuitive representations of time, space, and causality.

According to Schopenhauer, the will is the key to know the representations of the world and the things in themselves. It shows itself in the voluntary movements of the body. “These movements are the individual acts of will that have become visible. The acts of will which are invisible and the movements of the body which is visible occur simultaneously together.”⁸ The will abides not only in animals and in humans, but to all existing things and forces of nature.

Another example of the will as representation and the world as will is the scenario of the public affection of a couple. We can see here that the couple’s sweet gestures like hugging and kissing represents that they are a sweet loving couple based on what we have seen in the external reality. That is the will as representation. Maybe the guy is hitting his beloved in private, or maybe the girl is having an affair to somebody else. This feeling of anxiety can only be identified through the will of the guy and the girlfriend that could become the world as will.

Therefore, the phenomenal world represents the will as representation and the thing in itself is the will. Whenever the man reflects in himself inwardly or tries to understand what is it as its

core, we will encounter the drive to life, which can also be known as the will to live.

B. The Will to Live

As the will evolves, it develops consciousness in order to attain what it wants in life. It was developed to help the will achieve its needs. This consciousness can also be known as knowledge. Knowledge is only a subordination of will, without will, knowledge is not possible for that particular entity.

“For Schopenhauer, human beings are not essentially rational, they are desiring, emotional animals whose rationality was developed to serve and maximize the will to life.”⁹ It means that for Schopenhauer, the will of human beings is not totally rational, it is based fully on desires, and rationality was just developed to heighten up the will to life. Unfortunately, the will is devoid of anything that is rational. It is blind, mindless and has a meaningless impulse. It does not have a particular goal and is just a common want that drives to everything.

Therefore, destined originally to serve the will for the achievement of its aims, knowledge [what I’ve called consciousness] remains almost throughout entirely subordinate to its service; this is the case with all animals and almost all men.¹⁰

In the paragraph above, it expresses that knowledge will always come second when it comes to the will. It is because the will is the underlying essence of all the subjects in the world. Certainly, the consciousness or the knowledge becomes secondary because of the will’s desire to life. The ‘will’ manifests itself blindly, and it does not have a definite end or goal, that is why the consciousness of knowledge is necessary, because it engages the satisfaction of what the will desires. This ‘will’ also symbolize the principle of misery for Schopenhauer. It is mainly because of the fact that the will is the drive in everything.

Whenever we aim for something, the 'will' will not be able to stop until it reached its satisfying ends.

Life for Schopenhauer is an existence of being who is always striving towards some end or in a direction. For him, "life is not about happiness or satisfaction, but about desiring, striving, longing, and craving. Hence, comes the suffering."¹¹ Life then is about struggling and striving for what one wants in life. It is a cycle of continuous sufferings and only a moments of satisfactions and happiness appears once the will found what it was striving for all along. The will is the principle that organizes us to strive for something that we still do not have, and while we are striving, we experience suffering.

On Pessimism

Schopenhauer was strongly influenced by the Buddhism and Hinduism philosophies that have the same underlying tenets: that life is full of suffering. He was known for his philosophy of pessimism, because the primary goal of the will is striving for endless desires. According to him, humans who are more conscious than any other living thing are constantly seeking for a certain goal, and as long as we continuously seek for that goal, we cannot be satisfied and this unfulfilled desire drives us forward to that particular satisfaction. However, if we do not satisfy our desires, the will is unfulfilled and suffering will continue, and if we win the goal and satisfy the striving of the will for this satisfaction, it will certainly lead to lack of motivation and in the end, pure misery and for this reason the will to live is a cycle of unending desires. Therefore, the world as will is the underlying reason why life is considered suffering. Whenever we are willing to do something, we also conduct the act of desiring. Just like what this paragraph intended to show to us:

Secondly, life is an unchosen goal of our striving. Later we rationally choose to live- or perhaps embrace an allegiance to life by some less explicit process- but the will to life already inhabits us prior to any understanding or deliberation. In a sense the primary will to life 'in' me is not *my* will. Schopenhauer would rather say the will to life manifests itself as me (among other things). Georg Simmel puts it well in his classic lectures of 1907: 'I do not will by virtue of values and goals that are posited by reason, but I have goals because I will continuously and ceaselessly from the depth of my essence.'¹²

According to Schopenhauer, our life is a cycle. It is composed of an endless series of desire, satisfaction, and boredom. The life of every person is always striving for satisfaction which in the end is only momentary. Once the satisfaction is achieved, another problem occurs, and that is the dreading boredom. This boredom was the effect to the person who lost his motivation to continue to strive, or in short to suffer for another momentary satisfaction. In this case as Schopenhauer argued that the will to life is necessarily aggressive.¹³ Everything is striving to realize and develop its nature. The attainment of the temporary goal is defined by Schopenhauer as satisfaction and happiness. For Schopenhauer, the more knowledge you attain, the more suffering you will experience.

Now that the purpose of the will-to-live have been established, Schopenhauer finds a way to end all sufferings permanently, and unlike the other academics, he does not consider suicide as a solution to the aforesaid, because for him it was only an act of the affirmation of the will. Instead of suicide, the act of denying the will itself was considered by Schopenhauer as a possible cure to the sufferings we experience in life.

The concept of denying the will is based on the Buddhist' concept of the cessation of suffering and this is possible through the method of asceticism. On the other hand, it was also

Schopenhauer who stated that we can momentarily escape from the will through the objectification of art. However, the difference of asceticism and through looking at art in relation to denying the will is that the method of asceticism lasts a more permanent escape from the will than looking at art. It is because by indulging ourselves to the works of art, there would always be a wake-up call moment to come back from the reality and follow what the will of the person desires. For him, unlike what the optimistic philosopher Spinoza, who perceives the world as “the best of the entire possible world”, Schopenhauer held that the world we are living in is not the best rather it is the worst of all possible worlds. It expresses here how Schopenhauer’s pessimism affects all life forms and even the way we interpret and live life in accordance to the will.

Schopenhauer’s “On The Basis of Morality”

Moving on from the world of sufferings in the world of representation and the will, enters another work of Schopenhauer that was also grounded on the works of Immanuel Kant. However, this time, it focuses on a criticism to Kant’s conception of ethics that is popularly known as the, “Categorical Imperative”. In this prize essay of Schopenhauer entitled “*On the Basis of Morality*”, centers on the ethics of compassion based on his metaphysics of the will. He criticized Kant with his rational notion of morality and ethics, and suggested to use compassion instead of reason. He stated that Kant’s categorical imperative is based on the theological doctrine of duty, where rewards and punishments are implemented for actions.¹⁴ The categorical imperative was made to be framed as legislative, or in short a law. However, for Schopenhauer, this kind of view in ethics limits the person and his abilities to comprehend one’s action, understanding the reasons behind these rules and refutes the act of interpretation.¹⁵ He said that natural laws can

become an a priori. With that being the case, the metaphysics of nature can also be a law of motivation.

Schopenhauer claims that since Kant has not furnished the moral imperative with the proof demanded of it, it cannot subsist as a law of absolute necessity. This being the case, it is impossible to proceed from the perspective that such laws demand of us the same adherence as the natural laws. Without proof, we are not required to follow such laws, because without proof, no necessity in the sense of causality or something to that effect, can be realized. If this is the case, then the law loses authority, and is demoted to mere suggestion or encouragement.¹⁶

The paragraph above expresses the thought that for Schopenhauer, suggestions are empty and useless if the intended people were not even forced to act in that way. He also said that ethics should not be enclosed purely in terms of absolute legislation, because it might follow the Christian doctrines that defended it selves through the use of duties and laws. In like manner, Schopenhauer explains that if ethics is just purely based on duties, then every action might resort to be only based on punishments and rewards, making the concern person to be more concern for only him instead. In other words, there is a possibility of selfishness if ethics would only be based on duties and theological doctrines. The disadvantage of this kind of moral law is its lack of effectiveness. According to Schopenhauer, neither reason nor understanding can be able to fully capture the moral behavior without compassion or love or any intuitions. Acting with only reason alone could be dangerous for its moral outcomes.

Furthermore, Schopenhauer then suggested a more Confucian or an Eastern way of thought in exchange to the radical system of duties and laws of Kant. According to him, each moral system should follow these doctrines: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”¹⁷

He views egoism and self-interest as a deterrent to act morally. Therefore, he suggested a solution for a more ethical moral action through his explanation of compassion and the role of the will.

A. The Concept of Compassion

Now the concept of compassion was emphasized by Schopenhauer as the basis of morality and also the circumstances wherein it refers that the actions without any trace of egoism are moral. He stresses the thought that ethics can be explained more through metaphysics.

There are actually three fundamental incentives that motivate human actions. One is the egoism that refers to the desire to one's own well-being. The second one is the malice or the desire to another's suffering. And lastly the third one is the compassion which refers to the desire for another's well-being.¹⁸

Compassion happens whenever another individual becomes the ultimate object of the will. This means that egoism and malice are both actions of immoral. The reason and understanding of Kant's categorical imperative is possible to be included in the realm of egoism, because of the absolute duties and laws, and he also regarded compassion as the "greatest mystery of ethics."

Morality for him does not originally come from human rationality; rather it was inspired by a Latin quote from Schopenhauer that says: *Neminem laede, imo omnes quantum potes, juva* ("Injure no one; on the contrary, help everyone as much as you can").¹⁹ In like manner, the Latin phrase also signifies the meaning of the notion of compassion.

B. Happiness in Schopenhauer's Pessimism

After exposing the importance of the world as will and representation, how Schopenhauer developed his pessimism, and a brief background about his ethical theories, let us now go back to the main questions that were stated in the introduction. Is happiness possible in Schopenhauer's pessimism? How do we engage pessimistic people to see way beyond their belief that life is full of suffering? With this in mind, Schopenhauer does have a concept of happiness in his philosophy. But he was not regarded as the pessimistic philosopher without any sufficient reason. The major meanings of his happiness are stated in the following sentences: First, is that happiness goes together with the term satisfaction, second both of them are what the will desires, and third, the catch is that happiness and satisfaction are only momentary moments in life. Now Schopenhauer emphasizes that the world is full of suffering and satisfaction would always lead you into two ways: First, is that happiness is just a temporary goal and it's not at all permanent, and second, once this satisfaction is achieved, the next burden of the will is the suffering from boredom and lack of motivation.

Moreover, Schopenhauer acknowledges the saints as heroes firmly because they are the ones who succeeded in denying their own wills. Therefore, for him, the saints have the highest form of happiness. His solution to escape the sufferings brought by the will is art and asceticism, although art can only serve as a momentary escape from the will, asceticism is Schopenhauer's key to escape the blindness and desires of the will.

However, there is actually a way for happiness to be reached Schopenhauer's pessimistic view in life. Aside from his given meaning of happiness and satisfaction, the notion of happiness is also

possible to be found in Schopenhauer's basis of morality, and that is in compassion. Let us recall Schopenhauer's background where he managed to support some of his poor relatives and often contributed to charities. That is one of the great examples of compassion as the basis of morality. It is because despite of promoting pessimism in life, he somehow created goodness that is not for him, with this goodness comes happiness, and this kind of happiness can be found in serendipity. A happiness that is based on serendipity can be found by means of helping to others, or in Schopenhauer's term, the compassionate desire for another's well-being.

To further clarify what I have said, we should not overlook the pattern where the will is striving for its desires, and when it does attain the satisfaction and happiness, even if it is only momentary, happiness still exists in his philosophy, and through compassion, it seems to be the same as attaining happiness not just for the self, but also for the other. Moreover, according to the study of Rozemarijn Schalkx and Ad Bergsma in relation to Schopenhauer's happiness, social interaction is a key determinant for happiness.²⁰ It means that isolation will not lead someone to happiness, our compassionate concerns and interaction towards the other is the key.

Conclusion

This paper had presented how happiness can be found in Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy through the process of exposing the main ideas of his major works and prized essay. In his book entitled "*The World as Will and Representation*", it exposes Schopenhauer's Kantian background and how he meticulously expound, criticize, and contribute his original thoughts in Kant's work. It was done first by introducing us to the functions of his philosophy of the will that is shown as the

world as representation and the world as will. Likewise, the will's connection to the suffering in life is also the contribution of Schopenhauer to open up the minds of his reader about the realistic interpretation in life. We had also discussed that Schopenhauer himself was heavily influenced by Plato's world of ideas and the world of the senses, which can be seen through his work on 'will'. The same goes with Kant, wherein Schopenhauer adapted most of Kant's terms such as the principles of sufficient reason, the categories, the phenomenal world, the noumena or the thing in itself, and his criticism on Kant's categorical imperative. It also focuses on how 'will' works as an idea, or representation in the world and how 'will' function as the thing in itself with reference to one's own body.

By the same token, we had also seen that the tragic life of Schopenhauer was also deeply rooted to his philosophy. This was probably the reason why he got strongly influenced by the tenets of the Eastern traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism that mainly focus about the struggles of suffering in life, that was also reflected in the will to live, wherein the blindness will continue to seek for the satisfaction of desires and along the way comes the suffering to acquire the temporary goal of happiness and satisfaction. The paper also exposes the method on the endless cycle of the will's life. Starting from the persistent desire then of momentary satisfaction which brings us to boredom, because of the lack of motivation and then it will go back to seeking something new than before. It shows the incessant cycle of suffering in life and how little the space is for the happiness. The denial of the will was created as a solution for the inevitable sufferings that man can experience in the world.

Additionally, the paper also exposed a brief background on Schopenhauer's prized essay entitled "*On the Basis of Morality*", which

discusses his criticism on Kant's ethical theory and proposed an ethical theory that is based on the emphatic feeling of compassion towards the others. He was opposed to Kant's radical absolute laws because human rationality is not an ideal basis for morality.

Moreover, the paper also discussed that the happiness in Schopenhauer's pessimism can also be known in momentary goal and promoting goodness for the others. It is through the compassion's desire for another well's being that we can experience serendipity. The happiness in serendipity does not only come from the others, rather it can also be found through the social interaction. Social interaction may be the key element for happiness.

Overall, we cannot deny the fact that in life, sufferings will always be present. It can be in any forms depending on what the will of one's person desires. But it is also important not to forget that in those temporary satisfactions and happiness that we can achieve after striving for it, enters the urge to seek more, but not because of boredom, we seek more in order for us to grow and develop into a compassionate being in the end.

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² Singh, R. Saj. *Schopenhauer: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010. P. 3

³ Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Idea*.

⁴ Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*. Edited by David Berman. Translated by Jill Berman. Orion Publishing Group, 1995. P. 3

⁵ James Garvey. *the Twenty Greatest Philosophy Books*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006. p. 98.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 99.

⁷ R. Saj Singh. *Schopenhauer: A Guide for the Perplexed*. p. 32.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Idea*. p.15.

¹⁰ Kerns, Dr. Tom. *Arthur Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Representation*. <http://philosophycourse.info/lecsite/lec-schop-will.html> (accessed May 1, 2015).

¹¹ Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Idea*. p.18.

¹² O'Hear, Anthony, ed. *The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the Contributors: German Philosophy Since Kant*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999. p.49.

¹³ Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Idea*. p. 31

¹⁴ *How Should We Think*. March 4, 2010. <https://philophysis.wordpress.com/2010/03/04/a-brief-description-of-schopenhauers-ethic-of-compassion/> (accessed May 2, 2015).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Dr Timothy J. Madigan. *Philosophy Now*. 2005. https://philosophynow.org/issues/52/Schopenhauers_Compassionate_Morality (accessed May 02, 2015).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Rozemarijn Schalkx Bergsma and Ad. "Arthur's Advice: Comparing Arthur Schopenhauer's Advice on Happiness with Contemporary Research." *Springer Science*, February 28, 2007: 1-17.

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