

## **A Reconciliation of Arthur Schopenhauer's Notion of Human Suffering and the Nature of Human Existence**

<sup>1</sup>Egboka, Okanandu James, <sup>2</sup>Aleke Matthew

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Philosophy,

Kogi State University Ayigba Kogi State

Email: [egbokajames2016@gmail.com](mailto:egbokajames2016@gmail.com), [toogood4god@gmail.com](mailto:toogood4god@gmail.com)



### **Abstract**

This paper examined Arthur Schopenhauer's notion of human suffering in relation to the nature of human existence. Schopenhauer's attempt to analyze the cause of human suffering and finding means of escape from it held that the insatiable blind acting of the Will is the cause of human suffering. Schopenhauer preferred non-existence to existence arguing that human existence is a meaningless enterprise that is totally immersed in endless suffering, pain and despair with no value. The only means of escape from suffering is by negating desires. Adopting analytic method, the paper examined the incessant striving of humans which is the bedrock of human suffering and preference of non-existence rather existence as portrayed by Schopenhauer vis-à-vis the nature of human existence. The paper revealed that man is by nature an open and unfulfilled project. That the desire to always move beyond what already is, to surpass what has already been acquired is an inborn tendency in man. It is a tension-like tendency, an insatiable drive in human beings. This tension gives human the idea of their unfulfilled nature which pushes them to continue to strive for perfection in all that they do. This paper, therefore, concludes that human beings' incessant drive or self-transcending effort is not a hopeless striving as Schopenhauer would want us to believe; otherwise suicide could have been the bane of every human. Given that everyday life of human existence is geared towards striving beyond every situation he finds himself, the striving is indicative of man's transcendence nature and hence dissatisfaction with the present. Thus, human suffering is not hopeless and meaningless venture but necessity for existence.



### **Introduction**

Suffering in human life is indubitable. It is conspicuous because everyone is directly or indirectly ineluctably bound to get a pinch of it irrespective of color, race or religion. Different people at different places are faced with different kind of suffering. Some are artificial while others are natural. Taking to the contemporary events in various parts of Nigeria as an example, the effect of suicide bombing by the *Boko Haram* sect is no longer news to us. Herdsmen driving people away from their ancestral and domicile homes kidnap and ransom paid to secure their release. Sometimes these kidnapped persons are killed and beheaded after ransoms have been paid; advertising that more will still be kidnapped and beheaded. The news of rape, maiming, and killing of innocent people occupy the pages of daily newspapers.

Think of those born blind, the crippled, those born into families that cannot even be sure of two square meals a day, people working on daily basis under high intensity of sunshine and rainfall, at the end of the day, nothing tangible will come out of the long-lasting struggle, et

cetera. Because of these facts, in our sojourn in this perilous and inscrutable world, one will begin to ponder over some fundamental questions about life: What is life? Why is there suffering? Can suffering be eradicated? Of what value is human life with this incessant strive to live and suffering that characterizes human existence? Arthur Schopenhauer in his analysis of the cause of human suffering and the possible ways out of the chokeholds, opined that the "Will – blind emotional desires causes suffering and can never be fulfilled; consequently, he favored a life style of negating desires, similar to the teachings of Buddhism and Vendata as means of escape from Human suffering" (Nwagbala 2015:19). He sees the world, especially human life as, nothing but endless desire and striving without any hope of getting satisfied. Schopenhauer declared that "man is a creature of pain. His Will drives him constantly to attain the object of his desire, and when he attains them, what then? A terrible boredom and empty void in the end fills him. So he keeps on desiring and striving, and complaining and desiring again. This is an endless and vicious circle of

emptiness and pain. In such a world, asked Schopenhauer, is there any place for hope? (Schopenhauer 1987:115), he concludes that “unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life; our existence must entirely fail of its aim” (1987:121). It is in the light of the above notion that this paper sets out to examine humans suffering as portrayed by Schopenhauer and the nature of human existence to see if it has any meaning or not.

### **The Meaninglessness of Existence**

Schopenhauer is of the view that the world is a place of endless strife, conflict and suffering. Thus, he laments: “life is a continual deception in small matters as well as in great. If it has promised, it does not keep its words unless to show how little desirable the desired object was; hence, we are deluded now by hope, now by what was hoped for; if it has given, it did so in order to take” (1987:573). He believes that no matter what we do in life, all our struggle is destined to be frustrated and hopeless; “all our struggle to make, life better and feel good, is often an illusion even when we seem to be hopeful that something good will happen in the future; at the end, we see the very opposite” (Russell 1977:315).

Thus, the world is completely meaningless because there is nothing we can do to escape this act of suffering in existence. The present is always inadequate and the future is uncertain. So, thinking that happiness will come is only an illusion. Happiness for Schopenhauer “lies always in the future or in the past and the present may be compared to a small dark cloud driven by the wind over the sunny plain, in front of or behind the cloud, everything is bright only if it always casts a shadow” (1987:73). Thus, all our calculations and deluded hope that things will get better turns to be wrong because of misconception in wrong perception. For this reason he says: ‘life bears so clearly the stamp of something which ought to disgust us, that it is difficult to conceive how anyone could fail to recognize this and be persuaded that life is here to be thankfully enjoyed and that man exists in order to be happy (1987:74).

Schopenhauer pities man because everything man does or labours in order to survive seems to be in vain, disappointed, disillusioned, fascinated, worried and perplexed. No matter your strength, you cannot pay all the debt you owe to human existence. Thus he says:

...the general nature of life,  
present themselves as intended  
and calculated to awaken the

conviction that nothing, whatever is worth our exertions or efforts and our struggle, that all good things are empty and fleeting, that the world in all sides is bankrupt and that life is a business that does not cover the losses so that our will may then turn away from it (1987:77).

Moreover, no matter how far we think we are successful, eventually, everything will come to naught. Schopenhauer recognizes the role of time in human existence when he says that “the way in which the variety of the object of the will makes itself known and comprehensible to the intellect that is rooted to the individual, is primarily time” (1969:577). So, it is the form by which variety of things appears as their exit, since by virtue of this, “all pleasure and enjoyment come to naught in our hands, and afterwards we ask in astonishment where they have remained” (1969:579). Hence, that variety itself is the only objective element of time, in other words, that which corresponds to it is the inner nature of things and so that of which it is the expression. Therefore, “time is the a priori necessary form of all our perceptions; everything must present itself in time, even we ourselves. Consequently, our life is just like a payment made in nothing but copper coins for which we must then give a receipt, the coins are the days, and the receipt is death” (1969:574).

Schopenhauer also stated that “the Will contributes to the variety of existence” (1969:532). Sometimes, what we will often frustrates us, that is, that which we crave for our happiness becomes our ruin. That means that this Will is a striving desire that is bound to frustrate itself.

Therefore the instruction afforded to everyone by his life consists on whole in the fact that the objects of his desires constantly delude, totter and fall; that in consequence they bring more misery than joy, until at last even the whole foundation on which they all stand collapses, since his life itself is destroyed. Thus he obtains the final confirmation that all his striving and willing was a perversity, a part of error (1969:574).

Schopenhauer's belief is that human existence is a meaningless enterprise that is totally immersed in endless suffering, pain and despair. Hence he said: "Life is all miseries, it is better not to live, the worse thing one can do is to propagate human race, because it only bring into being more sufferer" (1969:576).

### **Existence and Suffering**

It is evident therefore that no condition has been found where man finds a total shield against suffering in the world. Schopenhauer sees human existence as full of suffering. Hence Schopenhauer says:

We painfully feel the losses of pleasures and enjoyments and as soon as they fail to appear, but when pains cease even after being present for the first time, their absence is not directly felt, but at most they are thought of intentionally by means of reflection. For only pain and want can be felt possibly; and therefore they proclaim themselves, well-being, on the contrary, is merely negative (1987: 313).

According to him, "striving after the existence is what occupies all living things and keeps them in motion and the element responsible for man's continuous striving after existence is the Will" (1972:212). He contends that each individual thing, is an objectification of the will to live strives, to assert its own existence at the expense of other things. Hence, "the world is a field of conflict, a conflict which manifests the nature of the Will as being at variance with itself, as a tortured will" (Copleson 1994:274). To show how man has been destined to continuously suffer, he says, in an analogy, that "we are like entrapped elephants which rage and struggle fearfully for many days until it is fruitless and then suddenly offer their necks tamed to the yokes forever" (Schopenhauer 1969:306).

### **Non-Existence and Existence**

Schopenhauer is of the view that "the happiest moment of the happy man is that of his falling asleep just as the unhappiest moment of an unhappy man is that of his awakening" (1969:578). He went further to say that "our existence is happiest when we perceive it least; from this, it follows that it will be better not to have it" (1969:575). For him, all human effort to achieve happiness while he lives in this world seems

fruitless and even when we think we have achieved it, it turns out to be short lived; thus, non-existence is preferable.

Schopenhauer's believe is that it is better one is left in that peaceful place where he knows nothing about existence than coming into existence that is full of pains and suffering. Hence he says: "I wish I had been left in the peace of the insufficient nothing, where I should have had no need of either of lessons or of anything else" (1969:580).

### **Causes of Human Suffering**

Schopenhauer attributes suffering to be that of the slavery of the Will – blind emotional desire which is never fulfilled. Thus, "he attributes miseries, wars, hunger, etc, to be that one single reality which is the-Will-to-live. He understands life as driven by Will which is an unceasing desire for something; we suffer in not having it" (1969:581). If we were to obtain all things we desired, "we would be overcome with boredom, a deeper and more poignant suffering" (1969:583). Experiencing the world in this way is experiencing the world as Will.

### **Any Means of Escape from Suffering?**

Schopenhauer proposed two ways to overcome suffering, namely: the way of aesthetic contemplation and the denial of the will-to-live.

### **The way of Aesthetic Contemplation**

Aesthetic contemplation means "admiring something not because of the joy of it or the pleasure it will give, but simply because of what it is" (Ome 2012:56). In the aesthetic attitude, relational viewing is completely absent and attention paid to things themselves. Aesthetic contemplation "does not have in mind abstract thought or reasoning but instead focus on the perception alone" (Schopenhauer 1972:310). Hence, we should stop looking at a particular thing and what it might do for our own end. We should stop experiencing the world as related to our wills. Instead, "we should experience the world as a representation; but this representation must be of something, and indeed they are representation of ideas, and this can release us from the circle of constant suffering since we stop experiencing our wills in any way" (1969:512). As Emmanuel Omeah would explain: "If we start to think aesthetically about the world, other people, and ourselves, then we stop being angry, resentful or sad (though we will also stop being excited or happy), we will instead see things that cause us pain as

manifestation of the idea of humanity, as nothing new or special" (2012:57).

In this aesthetic contemplation, we stop thinking about the world and the objects in it as means to our ends, that is, as object of our will. Schopenhauer believes that this aesthetic contemplation which can be active or passive involves "intense focus where the perception completely fills the mind. This helps us to know ideas, and by doing so release man from this endless suffering" (1969: 311). But because of the fact that the Will is not rational and yet controls everything, he believes that man can rightly escape those tyrannical possessions of Will only through art; and the highest of all arts according to him is music. Copleston explains it in this way:

The highest of all arts is not tragedy but music, for music does not exhibit an idea or ideas, the immediate objectification of the will. It exhibits the will itself, the inner nature of the thing-in-itself. In listening to music, therefore, a man receives a direct revelation, though not a conceptual form, of the reality which underlies his phenomena. And he intuits this reality, revealed in the form of art, in an objective and disinterested manner, not as one caught in the grip of the will's tyranny, further, if it were possible to express accurately in all concepts all that music expresses without concepts, we should have the philosophy" (1994:297).

In this way then, we do not have in mind abstract thought or reasoning, but instead focus on the perception alone. At the cause of this, the representation fills our mind and we are thus filled with calm contemplation. In this way, we stop thinking about the will and, since the perception take all up all of our mental "space", we no longer sense a difference between ourselves and the object perceived; invariably, it stops one from perceiving the world as mere presentation, that is, one no longer perceives the world as an object of perception, one can thus no longer separate the perceiver from the perception. So when a man is contemplating the beautiful or the

sublime he is temporarily freed from the servitude of the will, his mind enjoys a rest as it were, from being an instrument for the satisfaction of desire and adopts a purely objective and disinterested point of view. For Schopenhauer, "aesthetic contemplation is the intense focus on where the perception completely fills" (1972:181). Schopenhauer believed that what distinguished aesthetic experiences from other experiences is that contemplation of the object of aesthetic appreciation temporarily allowed the subject a respite from strife of desire, and allowed the subject to enter a realm of purely mental enjoyment. Therefore, aesthetic contemplation "helps us know ideas and by doing so releases us from endless suffering" (1972:183).

### **The Denial of the Will**

Schopenhauer in his description of the Will says:

The Will absolutely and for all time exhibits itself at the same time as sexual impulse which has an endless series of generations in view. This impulse does away with that unconcern, cheerfulness and innocence that would accompany a merely individual existence, since it brings into the consciousness unrest, uneasiness and melancholy, and into the course of life misfortunes and misery (1969:259).

Hence, the inner Will to live stem from certain things we desire, and even when this desire seems to be satisfied, other things will still remain unsatisfied because the Will is a malignant metaphysical existence that controls not only the action of individual's intelligent agents, but ultimately all observable phenomena. So this Will-to-be, Will-to-have is the cause of the entire struggle and suffering in the world. The way to good life is through denial of the individual Will; self-sacrifice brings happiness and peace. As S. E Frost would say, "this (denial of the will) can be attained if we start to realize that every individual is actually part of the whole universal Will. The one against whom we struggle is actually part of the whole of which we are also members. When we reach this understanding, we will stop struggling and will develop sympathetic understanding" (1989:98). However, this Will-to-have that complicates a person's life and causes pain and

which expresses itself in the form of endless desire and produces aggressiveness, striving, destruction, and self-centeredness can be reduced, and a person can achieve at least periodic moments of happiness.

Schopenhauer sees this inner nature - Will – as the essence of all the troubles, pains, evil and miseries that abound in the world. Man therefore “renounces precisely this inner nature, which appears in him and is expressed already in the body, and his action, gives the lie to this phenomenon, and appears in open contradiction thereto... He ceases to Will anything, guards against attaching his Will to anything, tries to establish firmly in himself the greatest indifference to all things” (1969: 380).

Denial of the Will is victory over suffering because the Will-to-live, manifests itself in egoism, self-assertion, hatred and conflict, for “there really resides in the heart of each of us a wild beast which only wants the opportunity to rage and rave in order to injure others, and which if they do not prevent it, would like to destroy us” (Copleson 1994:281). This wild beast, this radical evil, is the direct expression of the Will-to-live. So, to escape from misery, “denial of the Will must be involved and as a man is an objectification of the Will, denial mean self-denial, asceticism and mortification” (1969:389).

### **Suffering and Human Nature**

Taking a look at Schopenhauer's notion about human suffering, it seems human suffering has no advantage and if you think along with him without being critical, you might possibly get convinced with his argument. He sees human existence full of pains and struggling and in as much as no one wants to suffer, invariably one may think along with Schopenhauer that every human struggling are effort in futility. Suffering is nobody's friend. No one can claim to be accustomed to suffering. Non one enjoys hunger, failing sick or to stay befallen with misfortune. Everyone deserves good health, good environment and good food etc. The question now will be: should we agree with this Schopenhauer's stance that there is no hope in suffering at all and that human existence is a meaningless and useless venture?

The endless drive to go beyond or transcend in all that human being does in – in our lives, knowledge, work, economic pursuit etc. which Schopenhauer attributes human suffering to is an existential fact about human nature. A look at human daily activities shows that the more we achieve, the more we desire to go further, an insatiable tendency. Batista Mondin called this tendency self-transcendence. Self-transcendence

indicates “the property of man which he constantly go beyond himself in all that he thinks, wills, and in all that he realizes” (1985:179). Human nature is “composed of three degrees of being” (Stumpf 1994:301). These are “vegetative, sensitive and the rational, each representing various capacities of the body for activity, the first being simply the act of living, the second both living and sensing, and the third a body that includes living, sensing and thinking” (1994:301). The rational is not only the principle of life, but also of all movements in the living organism.

Rationality pushes the human person to always go beyond every state of affairs one finds himself at every point in time. The two fundamental elements of the human person – body and rationality, though essentially different, one material and the other non-material, yet are profoundly a single being that is the human being. Although profoundly united, rationality as the vital principle is the act of being of the body. It is the act that perfects the body, determines it, and by virtue of which the human person is constituted. The body on its part assists rationality in some of its activities like in knowledge and so the essential unity of body and rationality is manifested in man's experience of his concrete being through his bodily presence and as one who thinks – body and thought” (Mondin 1985:81). If human being is a rationality entity, and the rationality is the principle of all human activities and movements, it therefore follows that the self-transcending effort of man as a movement beyond every state of affairs he finds himself is part and parcel of his being.

Self-transcendence here does not mean transcending of humans over animals and other beings of the world in thought, freedom, work, word, association, technique, etc., but transcending of man over himself in all that he does, says, thinks, wishes and desires. It is that tendency to always move beyond what already is, to surpass what has already been acquired. It is a tension-like tendency, an insatiable drive in human beings akin to Schopenhauer's 'Will-to-live'. This tension gives human the idea of their unfulfilled nature which pushes them to continue to striving for perfection in all that they do. It, therefore, portrays man as an open and unfulfilled project whose nature is geared to constant striving towards fulfilling the unfulfilled project. Since whatever act is an action toward an end; and whatever acts, acts according to its nature. This relentless striving, therefore, must be for an end, rather than a hopeless striving. It is therefore the striving of human being towards an end. Which end

then?

The end could be “horizontal or vertical, that is, historical or metaphysical. It is horizontal (historical) when the effort is just within the confines of space and time; and vertical (metaphysical) when it is geared beyond space and time” (Ezeanyino 2009:82). The horizontal end “consist of a simple going forward, towards the future, but remaining within the horizon of space and time, and therefore of history. The latter is the one that pushes higher, and tends to exceed the limits of space and time towards infinite” (Mondin 1985:197). As a movement however, it must have a destination or an end towards which it is geared. The end or significance of beyond self-movement has been interpreted differently by different schools of thought, each failing within either the historical or metaphysical interpretation. Some school of thoughts believes that this effort is geared towards the perfection of the individual and the society respectively, while some are of the view that it is an effort geared towards the contingent being re-uniting itself with the necessary being, the Absolute being or Supreme being.

Yes, human being's endeavours within the space and time are for the betterment of the individual and society at large. The truth of this fact is within the reach of every reasonable individual, when we look around one's environment, the incredible human and technological development around us. But the fact remains that no matter how personally or socially developed, human beings never rest on their oars as far as striving is concerned – the struggle continues. Although this is very far from Schopenhauer's Will “without knowledge and merely blind incessant impulse” (Copleson 1994:272), yet the striving remains incessant an indication that its ends lies somewhere else; having seen that no human achievement had ever quenched this desire. This leads to search beyond space and time into the vertical or metaphysical sphere. Therefore, human being is naturally a bearer of a tendency to always transcend all the possible vital values that is directed towards moving beyond every state of affairs they finds themselves. The hitches associated with the always striving nature of human existence is what is regarded as suffering.

### **Conclusion**

Suffering in most cases makes one to collapse into anger, self-pity, or skepticism. Even the religious gurus are not exceptional, sometimes, amidst suffering some have deviated from their faith in God by questioning God's kindness and all-powerfulness. Jesus Christ,

thinking about the suffering that awaits him prayed so to God to take it away from him. Most instances regarding self-murder are due to suffering. Thus, suffering has a fascicle over existential implications. The incessant drive or self-transcendence that characterizes human existence is not a hopeless striving as Schopenhauer would want us to believe, otherwise suicide could have been the bane of every human being. Since every movement is towards an end, the striving is indicative of man's transcendental nature and hence dissatisfaction with the temporal.

It is a search for his proper goal, the source of his being. Man's life therefore is not a hopeless one but life with a purpose of always attempting to go beyond every state of affairs of his life, hence the need to live it in such a way to eventually achieve that purpose. Human being “does not only exists but is infinitely interested in his existence, takes a stance towards it and moulds it in accordance with the fruits of his reflection” (Copper 1995:3). Francis J. Lescore said that “man certainly cannot have a perfect joint or pride regarding every point of his existence, because he is naturally configured to transcend beyond every state of affairs he finds himself, with hope that happiness resides beyond his state of affairs of any point of his life”(1991:13). According to Victor Yarden, “our main concern in life should not be to gain pleasure and avoid pain; rather our primary motivational force should be in a manner that should lead us to find meaning in our life” (2001:172).

One important way to achieve this is to accept the challenge of unavoidable suffering. If one takes on bravely the challenge to suffer, then life has meaning up to the last moment, and one actualizes the highest value. The important thing to remember is that each day we are questioned by life our duty is to answer responsibly. No matter how great the suffering that confronts us, we are still free to find a meaning from it or to refuse to see it as a challenge but a chance to grow.

This means that suffering should not be viewed from a pessimistic point of view but, rather we should be optimistic that we have opportunity to grow and make life less troublesome and then take this challenge of unavoidable suffering. As Nietzsche would say; “many of us can become stronger and more versatile people after going through some kind of hardship” (1998:115). Durant Wilson, against Schopenhauer, believes “that human beings naturally wish to experience life keenly and deeply, even at the cost of pain. We wish to venture into its innermost secret even at the cost of disillusionment” (1958:261), therefore, suffering is not a hopeless and meaningless venture as Schopenhauer

would want us to believe. Suffering is a necessity for human existence.

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