

## A FEW REMARKS ON SCHOPENHAUER'S WILL

Doru ENACHE

---

### *Abstract*

*This article focuses on Schopenhauer's masterpiece – *Viața, amorul, moartea* – analysing the author's view on some essential aspects of human existence. The center of his approach relies on the famous concept of "will". The will to live appears as the only motivator of our existence, the only trigger of our actions. Also, while all things have their reasons, existence is the only one lacking motivation. Thus, the only way we can reach serenity is by accepting the absurd of our own life.*

---

**Keywords:** purpose of existence, absurd, pessimism, struggle, motivation

---

---

### *Introductory remarks*

---

In his work *Viața, amorul, moartea* (1994), Arthur Schopenhauer presents his point of view on some issues he finds essential to the existence of a human being. "The purpose of philosophy is to know and explain the existence of the Universe. The expression of this existence is the Will to live. Aspiring to exist is manifest in the organization, life being one of the possible directions of development. In animals, the Will to live, a fundamental principle of being, is immutable and unique." (Schopenhauer, 1994: 3) Therefore, an animal lives solely out of inertia, with a view to procreating, so that life should go on. The painful question arises: is man different from the animal? Is in man's case the Will to live also the only trigger of our existence? Is man's life so important as to be considered more than a simple trip between two equally meaningless points? Is it possible that we take each episode we go through too seriously? We blindly move forward, without having a clue as to what awaits us, we work our entire life to make a meaningless living, we suffer constantly to accomplish useless things, we lead a life whose only certainty is death. "Everything is work, carried out with a view to ensuring an unknown future. Therefore the questions: what is the reward of the activity, what is its purpose?" ( Schopenhauer, 1994: 4).

---

***The will to live – the only trigger of existence?***

---

Involved in a huge common effort which has led to current progress, man forgets that, individually, he cannot attain fulfillment. All he accomplishes serves the species, which uses the poor individual like a beast of burden, after which he lets him rot in peace, with only a few photos remaining after him, a few lines written of a few meters of film, reminding the successors that this man has once been alive.

*In times of peace, trade and industries prosper, personal relations grow, everyone participates, some think, others work, the rumble produced by these beings caught in social networking is indescribable. The final purpose? For the lucky ones, a bearable life, relatively shock-free. Result? Huge boredom. This disproportion between effort and reward objectively reduces the will to live to simple madness, while subjectively it reduces it to a dream. (Schopenhauer, 1994: 5)*

This will to live takes us forward, it needs no noble purpose, in fact, it needs no purpose at all, it is self-sufficient. When we choose to end our life, it is because we understand that to continue to live the same thing is the same as to not continue, and then, out of apathy, we choose the easier option. Paradoxically, though, our will to live is not reason enough to live. “If we analyze the will to live, it appears like a blind, reckless impulse, deprived of motivation; since any manifestation of a natural force has a cause, the force of nature itself has none; if each voluntary act has a reason, will finds no justification in itself, will and motivation being one and the same thing” (Schopenhauer, 1994: 5). All other things have their reason, a more or less obvious one; existence itself has none. Numerous allegories were created which attempted to grasp the essence of existence; maybe closest to this essence came Camus, in Sisyphus’ myth. The conclusion that Sisyphus must be happy tells us we can only reach happiness, or at least serenity, if we accept the absurdity of our own life. “Any human being that carries out a motivated activity realizes they are aware of this activity; however, the same being, when confronted with the reality of their existence, will find no motivation for it. The question: “why do we exist?” appears as meaningless.” (Schopenhauer, 1994: 5) Nothing defeats the will to live. Although it takes us nowhere, its strength overpowers us, and poor man cannot place himself above an insect in his powerlessness. He is incapable of fighting this will. “The will to exist itself is an endless ambition, for which the physical law of gravity is the most prominent example. The impossibility of this will to attain its final purpose is evident.” (Schopenhauer, 1994: 5) Life is nothing but a string of endless purposes. Man himself, caught in this string, loses the notion of the final purpose. He is consumed in attaining the minor purposes eating at him. Thus, he no longer realizes that he does not accomplish anything. He only lives a huge illusion, the illusion of surpassing his own condition.

*Man's endurance is the manifestation of the will's existence. Human ambitions could appear as the ultimate purpose of will. Still, after the purpose is attained, one forgets. The purpose becomes a thing reached in the past, extinguished with each moment taking us into the future. The purpose becomes illusion, the illusion vanishes, tomorrow becomes today, then yesterday... Fortunately, there is always something left to want, to fight for, the spirit being thus spared confusion and boredom. Each particular act has a purpose; will alone is unique, without purpose, being present in all things.* (Schopenhauer, 1994: 5)

The vanity in our souls often prevents us from seeing that all is vain. Life is vain and all is vain. Deep inside of us, as well as around us, vanity has the lead. You have to step on everything else, or let everything else step on you. Hard choice. Only a few people understand this.

*When the fact becomes obvious that people's ultimate purpose, pursued relentlessly throughout their lives, in spite of danger and difficulty, is to rise in other people's eyes; when you notice that not only high office, titles and decorations, but also the wealth of science and art are primarily desired in order to obtain the respect of others, all of these show how much insane exaggeration we have in our nature.* (Schopenhauer, 1994: 35)

Forced to associate, to belong to an organized social structure, poor man comes to be dependent on his fellow human beings, he comes to rely on them and he will never regain his freedom. Being excluded from society equals death; those who exclude themselves lose their human condition in the process of regaining their freedom.

*Paying too much attention to someone else's opinion is a common mistake, originating either in human nature or in man's relation to civilization and society. Anyway, it exerts a strong influence on all our actions, an influence contrary to our happiness. Fear, permanent dependence on the opinion of keens, pushes people into reckless actions. For their future glory they sacrifice rest, health and even life. This madness becomes a strong means in the hands of those who want to lead, a means aimed at making dominated people move on, in spite of their own will.* (Schopenhauer, 1994: 35)

---

### ***Love – yet another form of deception***

---

Very much like Emil Cioran (Cioran, 1990), Schopenhauer believes that love, the sole purpose of life for some, is nothing but a deception of our own will to live.

This deception makes us think that this noble feeling may be more than a simple strategy of life, aiming at continuing in an undisturbed, secure way.

*Love is nothing more than the will of the species to survive, the need to perpetuate in detriment of the transient joys and illusions man feels. It is only then that the species profits from the union of two beings; the individual does not even realize who wins and who loses. Lured by the species genius, he enforces all sacrifices upon himself without even suspecting that the real purpose of love is often completely different from his own. Animals are also deceived by this hoax of nature which, by inventing pleasure, makes them believe it works towards individual satisfaction. In reality, all that matters is the perpetuation of the species.* (Schopenhauer, 1994: 45)

We do not know due to what final, irrevocable decision, life must continue on earth; faced with this greater interest, the individual is clearly sacrificed. He can only obey and play the game of nature, carrying the illusion that he really matters in this game. Individual interests are meaningless compared with species interests. By inventing pleasure, nature deceives man, allowing him to indulge in the satisfaction of a few dull desires, allowing for vice and capital sin, only to attain its own purpose and to make man believe this purpose is also his own. However, the purpose of nature is completely different from the purpose of the individual; therefore, it instantly eliminates those who are incapable of meeting her needs. Only the strong are allowed to survive, and even they are eventually replaced. "The will of the species is more important than the individual's and it turns a blind eye on all vices, staying united with the object of its passion. As soon as the will of the species is satisfied, it disappears. The individual's pleasure vanishes, bringing him back to the harsh reality" (Schopenhauer, 1994: 49). Thus, manipulated by nature, all man can do is declare himself satisfied with what he gets and submit to the greater power of the gods working for the species. Even more so, he has to believe he is now fulfilled!

*The protective geniuses of the individual are always at odds with the species genius, who ruthlessly works to destroy personal happiness on the way to reaching its goals. Our ancestors embodied the species in Cupid, they made him a cruel god in spite of his childish appearance. He is portrayed as a moody, despotic master of gods and humans, a god armed with poisonous arrows, blindfold and winged. The wings symbolize his instability, a consequence of desire fulfilled.* (Schopenhauer, 1994: 53)

Once his desire fulfilled, man is left with the same questions: what do I do now? Do I start over? Until when? Why? Repeating the act of pleasure takes man just where the species genius intends. What about man's desires?

*Passion relies on the illusion of pleasure, of personal happiness, to the benefit of the species. This illusion disappears once man's tribute to nature and his species has been paid. Once rid of the arrow that kept driving him, he regains his freedom, his self-awareness, he falls again within the narrow borders of his poverty and finds himself surprised that, after so much effort, perseverance and passion, all he is left with is the sickening satisfaction of the senses. He had thought that possession would make him happy; in reality, his condition has remained the same. He admits that he has been misled by the will of the species and, happy like Theseus, he abandons Ariadne. Had Petrarch fulfilled his passion, he would have stopped singing, like the bird after she has laid her eggs in the nest.* (Schopenhauer, 1994: 53)

When someone gets married, he or she is warmly congratulated by all friends and acquaintances. The event is celebrated luxuriously, everyone has fun and enjoys themselves, thinking that the couple has finally found their purpose. "Marriages for love are made to the benefit of the species, not of the individual. True, the lovers think they have found their own happiness, but the real purpose is out of their reach; the real purpose is the procreation of the individual, which is only possible with their help" (Schopenhauer, 1994: 53).

At a certain point, Schopenhauer imagines a dialogue between man and the spirit of the world. The former tries to find his meaning, the latter tries to conceal it. The conclusion is always the same – inexorable and merciless:

*Spirit of the world: This is the reward for all your troubles: you exist, just like any object exists.*

*Man: What does existence give me? If I am busy, I get tired; if I am not busy, I get bored. How can you offer me such a deplorable reward?*

*Spirit of the world: Still, all of this is the equivalent of all your troubles and turmoil; it is their reason to exist.*

*Man: Really? This goes beyond my comprehension.*

*Spirit of the world: Oh, I know that. (aside) Should I tell him that the price of life is learning it is worthless? (Schopenhauer, 1994: 68)*

---

### ***The only conceivable answer – acceptance of the absurd***

---

Schopenhauer's pessimism as to existence is only a sound assessment of the essence of being. He reveals a truth that few people have the courage to admit. The fact that the German philosopher offers no solution is only a general failure of philosophy, which, just like most other sciences, is satisfied with merely becoming aware of a state of fact. In fact, there may be no final solutions to this problem. We may have no more than transient answers. Maybe one of these answers would be accepting the absurd.

*Life must be considered a perfect, everlasting lie, in all things – big or small. It has made a promise? It will only keep it to show us that once the goal attained, it is not worth the effort. Sometimes we are deceived by hope, sometimes by the things we hope for. It has given something to us? Only to have something to take back. The magic of emptiness unfolds a paradise in front of our eyes; once reached, it disappears. Happiness is always in the future, whereas the present is only a small black cloud over a sunny plain. Everything is bright around it, except for the shadow it casts.* (Schopenhauer, 1994: 88)

The show the world deploys does not represent, for Schopenhauer, a successful performance. Being an actor is as deplorable as being a spectator, while pain represents the only purpose of existence. It looks as if the director of this absurd comedy may be the only one content with his production.

*Unhappiness and pain are overwhelming in the world. The immediate purpose of our existence is pain, since we cannot accept that infinite pain, arising from the inherent misery of life, is but an accident instead of the very end. No one should be envied, and too many should be pitied.* (Schopenhauer, 1994:89)

Man, this pathetic creature, in his infinite arrogance, has proclaimed himself master of the universe, forgetting that the slightest gust of wind can forever put an end to his existence. We should open our eyes, love our neighbor dearly, our companion in suffering, as Schopenhauer refers to him, since we see ourselves in our neighbor. We see someone who is equally abused by a cruel fate. Of course, the world has many beauties to offer, life has its good moments, which man enjoys to the fullest and wishes to prolong for as much as he can. There are many a moment when man sits and delights himself in the beauty of the world, he feels intoxicated with so much perfection and he feels that life really is worth living, if only to taste for a minute this transient sweetness. However, this is a simple view of the world, the philosopher warns us. In reality: “In this world, it is absurd and useless to be optimistic. Being optimistic is the simple outlook on the world, the universe, in its resplendent aspects: the exquisite mountains, the diversity of plants and animals, the sun’s brilliance. All of these are a magic lamp, pleasant to the eyes. Genuinely living our life is a completely different story!” (Schopenhauer, 1994: 91).

Man’s permanent struggle with life – a struggle he knows is a losing battle – is proof that the absurd is present in all his actions. Nothing he ever does will spare him the turmoil; difficulties will always surround him, making his existence ever bitter. As life goes on, as time passes by, things will only get worse.

*The never ending effort to chase away the suffering will only trigger a superficial change. Initially, it takes the shape of necessity, of everyday needs. If, by means of work and extraordinary effort, we manage to eliminate it under this form, the pain is transformed into sexual instinct, jealousy, passion, envy, hatred, fear, disease, meanness and so on, depending on one's age and on other circumstances. If pain finds no other embodiment, then it appears under the dark mask of boredom and, once again, it has to be chased away. We have managed to remove it after painstaking efforts; now it takes its first appearance and the game starts all over again.* (Schopenhauer, 1994: 92)

Man's mistake comes from the fact that he lets himself be lured into the pleasures of life; too busy chasing after happiness, he forgets about his own mortality. He believes that, if he succeeds in having a good life, a comfortable existence, if he also does some good deeds or charity, he will be known and appreciated, and he will have met his purpose. However, this is a false purpose, since it does not serve him; at best, it serves the species, if at all. When, finally, man realizes that death is the only meaning of life, man submits to his fate; in doing so, he finds serenity, so good for his soul, living his last years at peace with himself, with life, with the world. Those who do not reach true awareness of death still fight to the last moment and die in bitterness, unable to understand their own destiny.

*When, out of the great ingratitude of fate, the will is shattered, man wishes for nothing more, he becomes compliant, he is sad, noble, he has resigned himself to destiny. If thinking loses its object, this announces a gradual disappearance of will. Man looks for his own escape from the ties binding him to the earth, he has the sweet feeling of death, revealing that time will break away from the imperious command of will.* (Schopenhauer, 1994: 109)

---

### **Concluding remarks**

---

Driven into a huge general effort which has led to the current progress, man forgets that he cannot progress individually, he cannot fulfill himself; all that he achieves benefits the species, which used the poor individual like a beast of burden; then, it lets him rot in peace, with only a few pictures left behind or a few written lines, to remind his descendants that this man was once alive.

All other things have their motivation, more or less clear, except for existence. Numerous allegories were created to grasp the essence of existence, out of which the closest to this essence was captured by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The conclusion that Sisyphus must be happy tells us we will only be happy, or at least serene, when we accept the absurdity of our own life.

Life is nothing but a series of purposes with no final purpose. In this alignment we lose track of the final purpose; therefore man, trapped in the achievement of the minor purposes eating away at his existence, no longer realizes that he does not accomplish anything. He only lives a grand illusion, that of surpassing one's condition.

Schopenhauer also notices that love, the sole purpose of existence for many, is nothing but a deception created by the will to live. This deception makes us believe that such a noble feeling must be more than a simple strategy of life, aiming at a safe, undisturbed continuation.

Schopenhauer's pessimism as to existence represents only a sound outlook on the essence of the act of being; this reveals a truth that few people have the courage to admit. The German philosopher offers no solutions; this is a general drawback of philosophy. Like most other sciences, it only draws conclusions. Maybe there are no solutions to this problem, maybe there are only temporary answers. One of these may be accepting the absurd.

---

### *References and bibliography*

---

- “Arthur Schopenhauer”. Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia.  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur\\_Schopenhauer#Philosophy\\_of\\_the\\_will](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Schopenhauer#Philosophy_of_the_will).22>
- “Arthur Schopenhauer”. Wikipedia. Enciclopedia liberă.  
<[http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur\\_Schopenhauer](http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Schopenhauer)>
- Balotă, N. 1971. *Lupta cu absurdul*. Bucharest: Univers.
- Camus, A. 1994. *Fața și reversul/ Nunta/ Mitul lui Sisif/ Omul revoltat/ Vara*. Bucharest: RAO.
- Cioran, E. 1990. *Pe culmile disperării*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
- Cornwell, N. 2006. *The Absurd in Literature*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Schopenhauer, A. 1994. *Viața, amorul, moartea*. Oradea: Antet.

*The author*

**Doru Enache** is a Lecturer in English Literature at Spiru Haret University, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Bucharest. His domains of interest include universal literature, literary theory, English literature, drama, the theory and practice of translation. He is currently a PhD student at the University of Bucharest, having completed the final dissertation (*The Meaning of the Absurd, as Illustrated in the Works of Urmuz and Daniil Kharms*). He is the author of several articles and books in the domain, among which *A Performance-Oriented Course in English Drama*.