

Arthur Schopenhauer

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was a contemporary of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, and for a period taught alongside Hegel at the University of Berlin. Schopenhauer vehemently opposed the German idealist project, developing a theory of the will profoundly indebted to Kant and later to influence the early Nietzsche. In the following excerpt from his best-known work,

The World as Will and Representation, first published in 1818, Schopenhauer analyzes the will as an unfathomable “will-to-live,” a “thing in itself” whose “mirror” is our objective representation of the phenomenal world and whose only form is the present. In this perspective, the individual appears as merely a phenomenon, individuated through space, time, and causality.

The World As Will and Representation

The first three books will, it is hoped, have produced the distinct and certain knowledge that the mirror of the will has appeared to it in the world as representation. In this mirror the will knows itself in increasing degrees of distinctness and completeness, the highest of which is man. Man’s inner nature, however, receives its complete expression above all through the connected series of his actions. The self-conscious connexion of these actions is rendered possible by the faculty of rea-

son, which enables him to survey the whole in the abstract.

The will, considered purely in itself, is devoid of knowledge, and is only a blind, irresistible urge, as we see it appear in inorganic and vegetable nature and in their laws, and also in the vegetative part of our own life. Through the addition of the world as representation, developed for its service, the will obtains knowledge of its own willing and what it wills, namely that this is nothing but this world, life, precisely as it exists. We have therefore called the phenomenal world the mirror, the objectivity, of the will; and as what the will wills is always life, just because this is nothing but the presentation of that willing for the representation, it is immaterial and a mere pleonasm if,

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instead of simply saying "the will," we say "the will-to-live."

As the will is the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world, but life, the visible world, the phenomenon, is only the mirror of the will, this world will accompany the will as inseparably as a body is accompanied by its shadow; and if will exists, then life, the world, will exist. Therefore life is certain to the will-to-live, and as long as we are filled with the will-to-live we need not be apprehensive for our existence, even at the sight of death. It is true that we see the individual come into being and pass away; but the individual is only phenomenon, exists only for knowledge involved in the principle of sufficient reason, in the *principium individuationis*. Naturally, for this knowledge, the individual receives his life as a gift, rises out of nothing, and then suffers the loss of this gift through death, and returns to nothing. We, however, wish to consider life philosophically, that is to say, according to its Ideas, and then we shall find that neither the will, the thing-in-itself in all phenomena, nor the subject of knowing, the spectator of all phenomena, is in any way affected by birth and death. Birth and death belong only to the phenomenon of the will, and hence to life; and it is essential to this that it manifest itself in individuals that come into being and pass away, as fleeting phenomena, appearing in the form of time, of that which in itself knows no time, but must be manifested precisely in the way aforesaid in order to objectify its real nature. Birth and death belong equally to life, and hold the balance as mutual conditions of each other, or, if the expression be preferred, as poles of the whole phenomenon of life. The wisest of all mythologies, the Indian, expresses this by giving to the very god who symbolizes destruction and death (just as Brahma, the most sinful and lowest god of the Trimurti, symbolizes generation, origination, and Vishnu preservation), by giving, I say, to Shiva as an attribute not only the necklace of skulls, but also the lingam, that symbol of generation which appears as the counterpart of death. In this way it is intimated that generation and death are essential correlatives which reciprocally neutralize and eliminate each other. It was precisely the same sentiment that prompted the Greeks and Romans to adorn the costly sarcophagi, just as we still see them, with feasts, dances, marriages, hunts, fights between wild beasts, bacchanalia, that is with presentations of life's most powerful urge. This they present to us not only through such diversions and merriments, but even

in sensual groups, to the point of showing us the sexual intercourse between satyrs and goats. The object was obviously to indicate with the greatest emphasis from the death of the mourned individual the immortal life of nature, and thus to intimate, although without abstract knowledge, that the whole of nature is the phenomenon, and also the fulfilment, of the will-to-live. The form of this phenomenon is time, space, and causality, and through these individuation, which requires that the individual must come into being and pass away. But this no more disturbs the will-to-live – the individual being only a particular example or specimen, so to speak, of the phenomenon of this will – than does the death of an individual injure the whole of nature. For it is not the individual that nature cares for, but only the species; and in all seriousness she urges the preservation of the species, since she provides for this so lavishly through the immense surplus of the seed and the great strength of the fructifying impulse. The individual, on the contrary, has no value for nature, and can have none, for infinite time, infinite space, and the infinite number of possible individuals therein are her kingdom. Therefore nature is always ready to let the individual fall, and the individual is accordingly not only exposed to destruction in a thousand ways from the most insignificant accidents, but is even destined for this and is led towards it by nature herself, from the moment that individual has served the maintenance of the species. In this way, nature quite openly expresses the great truth that only the Ideas, not individuals, have reality proper, in other words are a complete objectivity of the will. Now man is nature herself, and indeed nature at the highest grade of her self-consciousness, but nature is only the objectified will-to-live; the person who has grasped and retained this point of view may certainly and justly console himself for his own death and for that of his friends by looking back on the immortal life of nature, which he himself is. Consequently, Shiva with the lingam is to be understood in this way, and so are those ancient sarcophagi that with their pictures of glowing life exclaim to the lamenting beholder: *Natura non contristatur*.¹

That generation and death are to be regarded as something belonging to life, and essential to this phenomenon of the will, arises also from the fact that they both exhibit themselves merely as the higher powers of expression of that in which all the rest of life consists. This is everywhere nothing but a constant change of matter under a fixed

permanence of form; and this is precisely the transitoriness of the individuals with the imperishableness of the species. Constant nourishment and renewal differ from generation only in degree, and only in degree does constant excretion differ from death. The former shows itself most simply and distinctly in the plant, which is throughout only the constant repetition of the same impulse of its simplest fiber grouping itself into leaf and branch. It is a systematic aggregate of homogeneous plants supporting one another, and their constant reproduction is its simple impulse. It ascends to the complete satisfaction of this impulse by means of the gradation of metamorphosis, finally to the blossom and the fruit, that compendium of its existence and effort in which it attains in a shorter way what is its sole aim. It now produces at one stroke a thousandfold what till then it effected in the particular case, namely the repetition of itself. Its growth up to the fruit is related to that fruit as writing is to printing. In the case of the animal, it is obviously exactly the same. The process of nourishment is a constant generation; the process of generation is a higher power of nourishment. The pleasure that accompanies procreation is a higher power of the agreeableness of the feeling of life. On the other hand, excretion, the constant exhalation and throwing off of matter, is the same as what at a higher power is death, namely the opposite of procreation. Now, if here we are always content to retain the form without lamenting the discarded matter, we must behave in the same way when in death the same thing happens at a higher potential and to the whole, as occurs every day and hour in a partial way with excretion. Just as we are indifferent to the one, so we should not recoil at the other. Therefore, from this point of view, it seems just as absurd to desire the continuance of our individuality, which is replaced by other individuals, as to desire the permanence of the matter of our body, which is constantly replaced by fresh matter. It appears just as foolish to embalm corpses as it would be carefully to preserve our excreta. As for the individual consciousness bound to the individual body, it is completely interrupted every day by sleep. Deep sleep, while it lasts, is in no way different from death, into which it constantly passes, for example in the case of freezing to death, differing only as to the future, namely with regard to the awakening. Death is a sleep in which individuality is forgotten; everything else awakens again, or rather has remained awake.²

Above all, we must clearly recognize that the form of the phenomenon of the will, and hence the form of life or of reality, is really only the *present*, not the future or the past. Future and past are only in the concept, exist only in the connexion and continuity of knowledge insofar as this follows the principle of sufficient reason. No man has lived in the past, and none will ever live in the future; the *present* alone is the form of all life, but it is also life's sure possession which can never be torn from it. The present always exists together with its content; both stand firm without wavering, like the rainbow over the waterfall. For life is sure and certain to the will, and the present is sure and certain to life. Of course, if we think back to the thousands of years that have passed, to the millions of men and women who lived in them, we ask, What were they? What has become of them? But, on the other hand, we need recall only the past of our own life, and vividly renew its scenes in our imagination, and then ask again, What was all this? What has become of it? As it is with our life, so is it with the life of those millions. Or should we suppose that the past took on a new existence by its being sealed through death? Our own past, even the most recent, even the previous day, is only an empty dream of the imagination, and the past of all those millions is the same. What was? What is? The will, whose mirror is life, and will-free knowledge beholding the will clearly in that mirror. He who has not already recognized this, or will not recognize it, must add to the above question as to the fate of past generations this question as well: Why precisely is he, the questioner, so lucky as to possess this precious, perishable, and only real present, while those hundreds of generations of men, even the heroes and sages of former times, have sunk into the night of the past, and have thus become nothing, while he, his insignificant ego, actually exists? Or, more briefly, although strangely: Why is this now, his now, precisely now and *was* not long ago? Since he asks such strange questions, he regards his existence and his time as independent of each other, and the former as projected into the latter. He really assumes two nows, one belonging to the object and the other to the subject, and marvels at the happy accident of their coincidence. Actually, however, only the point of contact of the object, the form of which is time, with the subject that has no mode of the principle of sufficient reason as its form, constitutes the present (as is shown in the essay *On the Principle of Sufficient Reason*). But all object is the will, insofar as the

will has become representation, and the subject is the necessary correlative of all object; only in the present, however, are there real objects. Past and future contain mere concepts and phantasms; hence the present is the essential form of the phenomenon of the will, and is inseparable from that form. The present alone is that which always exists and stands firm and immovable. That which, empirically apprehended, is the most fleeting of all, manifests itself to the metaphysical glance that sees beyond the forms of empirical perception as that which alone endures, as the *nunc stans* of the scholastics. The source and supporter of its content is the will-to-live, or the thing-in-itself – which we are. That which constantly becomes and passes away, in that it either has been already or is still to come, belongs to the phenomenon as such by virtue of its forms which render coming into being and passing away possible. Accordingly, let us think: *Quid fuit? Quod est. Quid erit? Quod fuit*,³ and take it in the strict sense of the words, understanding not *simile* but *idem*. For life is certain to the will, and the present is certain to life. Therefore everyone can also say: "I am once for all lord and master of the present, and through all eternity it will accompany me as my shadow; accordingly, I do not wonder where it comes from, and how it is that it is precisely now." We can compare time to an endlessly revolving sphere; the half that is always sinking would be the past, and the half that is always rising would be the future; but at the top, the indivisible point that touches the tangent would be the extensionless present. Just as the tangent does not continue rolling with the sphere, so also the present, the point of contact of the object whose form is time, does not roll on with the subject that has no form, since it does not belong to the knowable, but is the condition of all that is knowable. Or time is like an irresistible stream, and the present like a rock on which the stream breaks, but which it does not carry away. The will, as thing-in-itself, is as little subordinate to the principle of sufficient reason as is the subject of knowledge which is ultimately in a certain regard the will itself or its manifestation; and just as life, the will's own phenomenon, is certain to the will, so also is the present, the sole form of actual life. Accordingly, we have not to investigate the past before life or the future after death; rather have we to know the *present* as the only form in which the will manifests itself.⁴ It will not run away from the will, nor the will from it. Therefore whoever is satisfied with life as it is, whoever affirms it in

every way, can confidently regard it as endless, and can banish the fear of death as a delusion. This delusion inspires him with the foolish dread that he can ever be deprived of the present, and deceives him about a time without a present in it. This is a delusion which in regard to time is like that other in regard to space, in virtue of which everyone imagines the precise position occupied by him on the globe as above, and all the rest as below. In just the same way, everyone connects the present with his own individuality, and imagines that all present becomes extinguished therewith; that past and future are then without a present. But just as on the globe everywhere is above, so the form of all life is the *present*; and to fear death because it robs us of the present is no wiser than to fear that we can slip down from the round globe on the top of which we are now fortunately standing. The form of the present is essential to the objectification of the will. As an extensionless point, it cuts time which extends infinitely in both directions, and stands firm and immovable, like an everlasting midday without a cool evening, just as the actual sun burns without intermission, while only apparently does it sink into the bosom of the night. If, therefore, a person fears death as his annihilation, it is just as if he were to think that the sun can lament in the evening and say: "Woe is me! I am going down into eternal night."⁵ Conversely, whoever is oppressed by the burdens of life, whoever loves life and affirms it, but abhors its torments, and in particular can no longer endure the hard lot that has fallen to just him, cannot hope for deliverance from death, and cannot save himself through suicide. Only by a false illusion does the cool shade of Orcus allure him as a haven of rest. The earth rolls on from day into night; the individual dies; but the sun itself burns without intermission, an eternal noon. Life is certain to the will-to-live; the form of life is the endless present; it matters not how individuals, the phenomena of the Idea, arise and pass away in time, like fleeting dreams. Therefore suicide already appears to us to be a vain and therefore foolish action; when we have gone farther in our discussion, it will appear to us in an even less favorable light.

Dogmas change and our knowledge is deceptive, but nature does not err; her action is sure and certain, and she does not conceal it. Everything is entirely in nature, and she is entirely in everything. She has her center in every animal; the animal has certainly found its way into existence just as it will certainly find its way out of it. Meanwhile, it lives

fearlessly and heedlessly in the presence of annihilation, supported by the consciousness that it is nature herself and is as imperishable as she. Man alone carries about with him in abstract concepts the certainty of his own death, yet this can frighten him only very rarely and at particular moments, when some occasion calls it up to the imagination. Against the mighty voice of nature reflection can do little. In man, as in the animal that does not think, there prevails as a lasting state of mind the certainty, springing from innermost consciousness, that he is nature, the world itself. By virtue of this, no one is noticeably disturbed by the thought of certain and never-distant death, but everyone lives on as though he is bound to live for ever. Indeed, this is true to the extent that it might be said that no one has a really lively conviction of the certainty of his death, as otherwise there could not be a very great difference between his frame of mind and that of the condemned criminal. Everyone recognizes that certainty in the abstract and theoretically, but lays it on one side, like other theoretical

truths that are not applicable in practice, without taking it into his vivid consciousness. Whoever carefully considers this peculiarity of the human way of thinking, will see that the psychological methods of explaining it from habit and acquiescence in the inevitable are by no means sufficient, but that the reason for it is the deeper one that we state. The same thing can also explain why at all times and among all peoples dogmas of some kind, dealing with the individual's continued existence after death, exist and are highly esteemed, although the proofs in support of them must always be extremely inadequate, whereas those which support the contrary are bound to be powerful and numerous. This is really in no need of any proof, but is recognized by the healthy understanding as a fact; it is confirmed as such by the confidence that nature no more lies than errs, but openly exhibits her action and her essence, and even expresses these naively. It is only we ourselves who obscure these by erroneous views, in order to explain from them what is agreeable to our limited view. . . .

Notes

- 1 "Nature is not grieved." (Trans.)
- 2 The following remark can also help the person for whom it is not too subtle to understand clearly that the individual is only the phenomenon, not the thing-in-itself. On the one hand, every individual is the subject of knowing, in other words, the supplementary condition of the possibility of the whole objective world, and, on the other, a particular phenomenon of the will, of that will which objectifies itself in each thing. But this double character of our inner being does not rest on a self-existent unity, otherwise it would be possible for us to be conscious of ourselves *in ourselves and independently of the objects of knowing and willing*. Now we simply cannot do this, but as soon as we enter into ourselves in order to attempt it, and wish for once to know ourselves fully by directing our knowledge inwards, we lose ourselves in a bottomless void; we find ourselves like a hollow glass globe, from the emptiness of which a voice speaks. But the cause of this voice is not to be found in the globe, and since we want to comprehend ourselves, we grasp with a shudder nothing but a wavering and unstable phantom.
- 3 "What was? That which is. What will be? That which was." (Trans.)
- 4 *Scholastici docuerunt quod aeternitas non sit temporis sine fine aut principio successio, sed NUNC STANS; i.e. idem nobis NUNC esse, quod erat NUNC Adamo: i.e.*

inter NUNC et TUNC nullam esse differentiam. Hobbes, *Leviathan* [Latin ed, 1841], c. 46.

- [“The scholastics taught that eternity is not a succession without beginning and end, but a permanent *Now*; in other words, that we possess the same *Now* which existed for Adam; that is to say, that there is no difference between the *Now* and the *Then*.” (Trans.)]
- 5 In Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe* (second edition, Vol. I, p. 154), Goethe says: “Our spirit is a being of a quite indestructible nature; it acts continuously from eternity to eternity. It is similar to the sun which seems to set only to our earthly eyes, but which really never sets; it shines on incessantly.” Goethe took the simile from me, not I from him. He undoubtedly uses it in this conversation of 1824 in consequence of a (possibly unconscious) reminiscence of the above passage, for it appears in the first edition, p. 401, in the same words as here, and also occurs there again on p. 528, and here at the end of § 65. The first edition was sent to him in December 1818, and in March 1819 he sent me in Naples, where I then was, a letter of congratulation through my sister. He had enclosed a piece of paper on which he had noted the numbers of some pages that had specially pleased him. So he had read my book.