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The Emptiness of Existence

Arthur Schopenhauer

Translated by Rudolf Dircks

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The Emptiness of Existence.

This emptiness finds its expression in the whole form of existence, in the infiniteness of Time and Space as opposed to the finiteness of the individual in both; in the flitting present as the only manner of real existence; in the dependence and relativity of all things; in constantly Becoming without Being; in continually wishing without being satisfied; in an incessant thwarting of one's efforts, which go to make up life, until victory is won. Time, and the transitoriness of all things, are merely the form under which the will to live, which as the thing-in-itself is imperishable, has revealed to Time the futility of its efforts. Time is that by which at every moment all things become as nothing in our hands, and thereby lose all their true value.

What has been exists no more; and exists just as little as that which has never been. But everything that exists has been in the next moment. Hence something belonging to the present, however unimportant it may be, is superior to something important belonging to the past; this is because the former is a reality and related to the latter as something is to nothing.

A man to his astonishment all at once becomes conscious of existing after having been in a state of non-existence for many thousands of years, when, presently again, he returns to a state of non-existence for an equally long time. This cannot possibly be true, says the heart; and even the crude mind, after giving the matter its consideration, must have some sort of presentiment of the ideality of time. This ideality of time, together with that of space, is the key to every true system of metaphysics, because it finds room for quite another order of things than is to be found in nature. This is why Kant is so great.

Of every event in our life it is only for a moment that we can say that it is; after that we must say for ever that it was. Every evening makes us poorer by a day. It would probably make us angry to see this short space of time slipping away, if we were not secretly conscious in the furthest depths of our being that the spring of eternity belongs to us, and that in it we are always able to have life renewed.

Reflections of the nature of those above may, indeed, establish the belief that to enjoy the present, and to make this the purpose of one's life, is the greatest wisdom; since it is the present alone that is real, everything else being only the play of thought. But such a purpose might just as well be called the greatest folly, for that which in the next moment exists no more, and vanishes as completely as a dream, can never be worth a serious effort.

Our existence is based solely on the ever-fleeting present. Essentially, therefore, it has to take the form of continual motion without there ever being any possibility of our finding the rest after which we are always striving. It is the same as a man running downhill, who falls if he tries to stop, and it is only by his continuing to run on that he keeps on his legs; it is like a pole balanced on one's finger-tips, or like a planet that would fall into its sun as soon as it stopped hurrying onwards. Hence unrest is the type of existence.

In a world like this, where there is no kind of stability, no possibility of anything lasting,

but where everything is thrown into a restless whirlpool of change, where everything hurries on, flies, and is maintained in the balance by a continual advancing and moving, it is impossible to imagine happiness. It cannot dwell where, as Plato says, continual Becoming and never Being is all that takes place. First of all, no man is happy; he strives his whole life long after imaginary happiness, which he seldom attains, and if he does, then it is only to be disillusioned; and as a rule he is shipwrecked in the end and enters the harbour dismayed. Then it is all the same whether he has been happy or unhappy in a life which was made up of a merely ever-changing present and is now at an end.

Meanwhile it surprises one to find, both in the world of human beings and in that of animals, that this great, manifold, and restless motion is sustained and kept going by the medium of two simple impulses — hunger and the instinct of sex, helped perhaps a little by boredom — and that these have the power to form the *primum mobile* of so complex a machinery, setting in motion the variegated show!

Looking at the matter a little closer, we see at the very outset that the existence of inorganic matter is being constantly attacked by chemical forces which eventually annihilates it. While organic existence is only made possible by continual change of matter, to keep up a perpetual supply of which it must consequently have help from without. Therefore organic life is like balancing a pole on one's hand; it must be kept in continual motion, and have a constant supply of matter of which it is continually and endlessly in need. Nevertheless it is only by means of this organic life that consciousness is possible.

Accordingly this is a finite existence, and its antithesis would be an infinite, neither exposed to any attack from without nor in want of help from without, and hence [Greek: *aei hosautos on*], in eternal rest; [Greek: *oute gignomenon, oute apollymenon*], without change, without time, and without diversity; the negative knowledge of which is the fundamental note of Plato's philosophy. The denial of the will to live reveals the way to such a state as this.

The scenes of our life are like pictures in rough mosaic, which have no effect at close quarters, but must be looked at from a distance in order to discern their beauty. So that to obtain something we have desired is to find out that it is worthless; we are always living in expectation of better things, while, at the same time, we often repent and long for things that belong to the past. We accept the present as something that is only temporary, and regard it only as a means to accomplish our aim. So that most people will find if they look back when their life is at an end, that they have lived their lifelong *ad interim*, and they will be surprised to find that something they allowed to pass by unnoticed and unenjoyed was just their life — that is to say, it was the very thing in the expectation of which they lived. And so it may be said of man in general that, befooled by hope, he dances into the arms of death.

Then again, there is the insatiability of each individual will; every time it is satisfied a new wish is engendered, and there is no end to its eternally insatiable desires.

This is because the Will, taken in itself, is the lord of worlds; since everything belongs to it, it is not satisfied with a portion of anything, but only with the whole, which, however, is endless. Meanwhile it must excite our pity when we consider how extremely little this lord

of the world receives, when it makes its appearance as an individual; for the most part only just enough to maintain the body. This is why man is so very unhappy.

In the present age, which is intellectually impotent and remarkable for its veneration of what is bad in every form — a condition of things which is quite in keeping with the coined word “*Jetztzeit*” (present time), as pretentious as it is cacophonous — the pantheists make bold to say that life is, as they call it, “an end-in-itself.” If our existence in this world were an end-in-itself, it would be the most absurd end that was ever determined; even we ourselves or any one else might have imagined it.

Life presents itself next as a task, the task, that is, of subsisting *de gagner sa vie*. If this is solved, then that which has been won becomes a burden, and involves the second task of its being got rid of in order to ward off boredom, which, like a bird of prey, is ready to fall upon any life that is secure from want.

So that the first task is to win something, and the second, after the something has been won, to forget about it, otherwise it becomes a burden.

That human life must be a kind of mistake is sufficiently clear from the fact that man is a compound of needs, which are difficult to satisfy; moreover, if they are satisfied, all he is granted is a state of painlessness, in which he can only give himself up to boredom. This is a precise proof that existence in itself has no value, since boredom is merely the feeling of the emptiness of life. If, for instance, life, the longing for which constitutes our very being, had in itself any positive and real value, boredom could not exist; mere existence in itself would supply us with everything, and therefore satisfy us. But our existence would not be a joyous thing unless we were striving after something; distance and obstacles to be overcome then represent our aim as something that would satisfy us — an illusion which vanishes when our aim has been attained; or when we are engaged in something that is of a purely intellectual nature, when, in reality, we have retired from the world, so that we may observe it from the outside, like spectators at a theatre. Even sensual pleasure itself is nothing but a continual striving, which ceases directly its aim is attained. As soon as we are not engaged in one of these two ways, but thrown back on existence itself, we are convinced of the emptiness and worthlessness of it; and this it is we call boredom. That innate and ineradicable craving for what is out of the common proves how glad we are to have the natural and tedious course of things interrupted. Even the pomp and splendour of the rich in their stately castles is at bottom nothing but a futile attempt to escape the very essence of existence, misery.

That the most perfect manifestation of the will to live, which presents itself in the extremely subtle and complicated machinery of the human organism, must fall to dust and finally deliver up its whole being to dissolution, is the naïve way in which Nature, invariably true and genuine, declares the whole striving of the will in its very essence to be of no avail. If it were of any value in itself, something unconditioned, its end would not be non-existence. This is the dominant note of Goethe’s beautiful song:

“Hoch auf dem alten Thurme steht

Des Helden edler Geist.”

That man is nothing but a phenomenon, that he is not-the-thing-in-itself — I mean that he is not [Greek: *ontos on*]— is proved by the fact that death is a necessity.

And how different the beginning of our life is to the end! The former is made up of deluded hopes, sensual enjoyment, while the latter is pursued by bodily decay and the odour of death.

The road dividing the two, as far as our well-being and enjoyment of life are concerned, is downhill; the dreaminess of childhood, the joyousness of youth, the troubles of middle age, the infirmity and frequent misery of old age, the agonies of our last illness, and finally the struggle with death — do all these not make one feel that existence is nothing but a mistake, the consequences of which are becoming gradually more and more obvious?

It would be wisest to regard life as a *desengaño*, a delusion; that everything is intended to be so is sufficiently clear.

Our life is of a microscopical nature; it is an indivisible point which, drawn out by the powerful lenses of Time and Space, becomes considerably magnified.

Time is an element in our brain which by the means of duration gives a semblance of reality to the absolutely empty existence of things and ourselves.

How foolish it is for a man to regret and deplore his having made no use of past opportunities, which might have secured him this or that happiness or enjoyment! What is there left of them now? Only the ghost of a remembrance! And it is the same with everything that really falls to our lot. So that the form of time itself, and how much is reckoned on it, is a definite way of proving to us the vanity of all earthly enjoyment.

Our existence, as well as that of all animals, is not one that lasts, it is only temporary, merely an *existencia fluxa*, which may be compared to a water-mill in that it is constantly changing.

It is true that the form of the body lasts for a time, but only on condition that the matter is constantly changing, that the old matter is thrown off and new added. And it is the chief work of all living creatures to secure a constant supply of suitable matter. At the same time, they are conscious that their existence is so fashioned as to last only for a certain time, as has been said. This is why they attempt, when they are taking leave of life, to hand it over to some one else who will take their place. This attempt takes the form of the sexual instinct in self-consciousness, and in the consciousness of other things presents itself objectively — that is, in the form of genital instinct. This instinct may be compared to the threading of a string of pearls; one individual succeeding another as rapidly as the pearls on the thread. If we, in imagination, hasten on this succession, we shall see that the matter is constantly changing in the whole row just as it is changing in each pearl, while it retains the same form: we will then realise that we have only a quasi-existence. That it is only Ideas which exist, and the shadow-like nature of the thing corresponding to them, is the basis of Plato's teachings.

That we are nothing but phenomena as opposed to the thing-in-itself is confirmed, exemplified, and made clear by the fact that the *conditio sine qua non* of our existence is a continual flowing off and flowing to of matter which, as nourishment, is a constant need. So that we resemble such phenomena as smoke, fire, or a jet of water, all of which die out or stop directly there is no supply of matter. It may be said then that the will to live presents itself in the form of pure phenomena which end in nothing. This nothingness, however, together with the phenomena, remain within the boundary of the will to live and

are based on it. I admit that this is somewhat obscure.

If we try to get a general view of humanity at a glance, we shall see everywhere a constant fighting and mighty struggling for life and existence; that mental and bodily strength is taxed to the utmost, and opposed by threatening and actual dangers and woes of every kind.

And if we consider the price that is paid for all this, existence, and life itself, it will be found that there has been an interval when existence was free from pain, an interval, however, which was immediately followed by boredom, and which in its turn was quickly terminated by fresh cravings.

That boredom is immediately followed by fresh needs is a fact which is also true of the cleverer order of animals, because life has no true and genuine value in itself, but is kept in motion merely through the medium of needs and illusion. As soon as there are no needs and illusion we become conscious of the absolute barrenness and emptiness of existence.

If one turns from contemplating the course of the world at large, and in particular from the ephemeral and mock existence of men as they follow each other in rapid succession, to the detail of life, how like a comedy it seems!

It impresses us in the same way as a drop of water, crowded with infusoria, seen through a microscope, or a little heap of cheese-mites that would otherwise be invisible. Their activity and struggling with each other in such little space amuse us greatly. And it is the same in the little span of life — great and earnest activity produces a comic effect.

No man has ever felt perfectly happy in the present; if he had it would have intoxicated him.