

On the Futility of Suicide: A Schopenhauerian Critique

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Abstract

This article supports the claim that even from a pessimist's perspective, suicide is futile. On this basis, I argue that to assume that suicide solves the problem of suffering is to hold two erroneous suppositions: [1] that suffering is merely an accidental aspect of existence, and [2] that suffering is a particular phenomenon. Arthur Schopenhauer, the principal philosopher in this article, opposes such suppositions by asserting that suffering is an essential aspect of existence and a universal phenomenon. Given those two key qualities of suffering, suicidethen becomes futile in dealing with the problem of suffering. This article is divided into four sections. The first section presents global statistics on suicide. The second section presents the meaning of suicide. The third section presents Arthur Schopenhauer's argument for the futility of suicide. The fourth section presents a few critical remarks about Arthur Schopenhauer's stand on suicide. Within a philosophical branch called ethics, issues on suicide are located within bioethical studies, where matters about the value of human life take centre stage. This article looks forward toyielding an extra reason against embarking on suicide as a potential solution to the experience of suffering. It is important for one to clearly understand why one ought to fight against suicide in order to mitigate its damage that silently weakens future's manpower, due to its relentless persecution of the youth of middle- and low-income countries, who, statistically, are its worst victims.

Key words: Suicide, Futile, Suffering

Introduction

Suicide, as a philosophical object of inquiry, falls within practical philosophy domain. Within practical philosophy, it is located within ethics, specifically within bioethics, where matters about the value of human life take centre stage. As characteristic of any philosophical object of inquiry, debates on suicide have indeed occupied the minds of many thinkers, especially those within the moral, legal, and psychological domains. Underlying such domains, however, is a human person, essentially distinguished from other animals through his or her capacity for rationality. It is plausible then to assert that, to understand suicide for the sake of yielding a clear and distinct response towards it, one ought to embark on the search for the rationale behind suicide, a search in sync with a human person's truest identity, rationality.

While there have been some logical arguments for the rationality of suicide, there have also been arguments against the rationality of suicide. Arguments against the rationality of suicide aim at affirming the futility of suicide. It is easier to understand why an optimist would criticise suicide. However, a pessimist's critique of suicide is rather odd. It is the latter critique that this paper intends to exhibit, despite its oddness.

Therefore, this paper aims to support the claim that, even from a pessimist's perspective, suicide is futile. To fulfil such an aim, this paper shall consist of [1] a section on global statistics on suicide, [2] a section on the meaning of suicide, [3] a section on Schopenhauer's argument for the futility of suicide, and [4] a section on a few critical remarks

about his stand on suicide, to be delivered through the paper's adoption of the critical hermeneutical method of philosophical inquiry. In rationally demonstrating the utter futility of suicide, this paper looks forward to yielding an extra reason against embarking on suicide as a potential solution to the experience of suffering. It is important for one to clearly understand why one ought to fight against suicide in order to mitigate its damage that silently weakens future's manpower, due to its relentless persecution of the youth of middle- and low-income countries, who, statistically, are its worst victims.

1.0. Global Statistics on Suicide

According to a 2019 World Health Organisation global statistical account on suicide, approximately 800,000 people die of suicide every year.¹ Just five years before then, it was recorded that after every 40 seconds, someone somewhere in the world dies of suicide, and more attempt it.² To every person who commits suicide, 20 other people attempt suicide.³ Furthermore, in that same year (2014), it was recorded that in the category of violent deaths, suicide accounts for 50% of such deaths in men and accounts for 71% of such deaths in women.⁴ It simply means that in terms of death by violence, women are likely to die of suicide than

¹World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Pesticide Registrars and Regulators*, 2019, 13.

²World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative*, 2014, 3.

³World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide*, 2019, 13.

⁴ World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide*, 2014, 7.

any other violent means; however, in terms of the global suicide rate, men are twice as much as women.⁵

Given such statistics, suicide has secured a top ten spot in a list of common causes of death worldwide.⁶ Among youths aged 15–29, however, suicide is the second leading cause of death, just behind road accidents.⁷ Among the most common means of suicide are the use of highly hazardous pesticides, hanging, and the use of firearms.⁸ 79% of deaths by suicide, that is, three-quarters of deaths by suicide, occur in middle- and low-income countries.⁹ Factors leading up to such an undesirable statistic include [1] limited preventive support and resources¹⁰, [2] the stigma attached to the mentally challenged and to those struggling with suicidal attempts which makes it harder for such individuals to seek for immediate aid and, more generally, [3] the non-priority regard of suicide by some governments and policy-makers which makes suicide seem unsolvable, while it is otherwise.¹¹

2.0. The Meaning of Suicide

Death is a natural phenomenon attached to living creatures. All living creatures eventually die. However, how such creatures die varies. Death may be natural, accidental, undetermined, suicidal, and possibly of any other form. A natural death is a form of death resulting from natural factors, such as health factors due to old age. An accidental death is a form of death resulting from an unplanned injury. An undetermined death is a form of death whose manner is yet to be affirmed due to the insufficiency of evidence.¹² A suicide is a form of death often consisting of four main conditions: [1] agency (for a death to be by suicide, that death must be self-initiated), [2] knowledge of a potentially fatal outcome, [3] intent, and [4] outcome.¹³ In other words, suicide is described as a deliberate act of embarking on a fatal act against oneself, knowing its outcome, and succeeding in the actuation of that outcome.¹⁴

3.0. Arthur Schopenhauer: On the Futility of Suicide

Before exploring Schopenhauer's arguments for the futility of suicide, two important points must be touched on. These important points are: [1] a brief biographical account of Arthur Schopenhauer, and [2] a brief account of his metaphysics. Significantly, these two points are touched on

because they provide the context through which the novelty of Schopenhauer's argument against suicide is noticed.

3.1. His Biography

Arthur Schopenhauer was born in Danzig—a modern-day city port of Gdańsk.¹⁵ He was the son of a prominent international businessman named Heinrich Floris Schopenhauer and a talented literary writer and salonnière, Johanna Schopenhauer. Intellectually, Arthur Schopenhauer is revered for his 1818 masterpiece titled *The World as Will and Representation*, in which his metaphysics takes residence. Among the more notable life experiences attached to Arthur Schopenhauer was his struggle with neglect, depression, anxiety, and acute melancholy.¹⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer's father, a man who also struggled with acute melancholy, suffered a tragic death in 1805 as his body was found floating in an ice-cold waterway behind the family compound.¹⁷ His wife, Johanna, and his son, Arthur, viewed Heinrich's death as suicidal despite the final published funeral note denoting otherwise.¹⁸ The hurtful experience of the death of his father by a supposed suicide is perhaps a reason why Arthur Schopenhauer perceived one who commits suicide with a compassionate eye.¹⁹

3.2. His Metaphysics

A sufficient account of Arthur Schopenhauer's metaphysics inevitably draws one back to Immanuel Kant, specifically, on his account on the unknowability of the *noumena* or thing-in-itself. Such a stand is justified in Kant's acceptance of the active engagement of human cognitive operations in the generation of that which one can call knowledge as such.²⁰ To Immanuel Kant, each sensibly perceived thing is a mere creative product of the mind's cognitive prowess, a mere representation, phenomena, of the unknowable thing-in-itself.²¹ Schopenhauer features in correcting Kant's acceptance of a plurality of things-in-themselves. He criticises such a position by positing that plurality is a feature of the domain of phenomena. It is in that domain where distinctness featured in the likes of space and moments (time) reside.²² If one dismisses these two *a priori* forms of sensibility, space and time, then plurality is dismissed. Therefore, Schopenhauer, as opposed to Kant, proposed a singularity of the underlying reality, the thing-in-itself.

⁵World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide*, 2019, 13.

⁶World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide*, 2019, 13.

⁷World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide*, 2019, 13.

⁸World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide*, 2014, 7.

⁹World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide*, 2019, 13.

¹⁰World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide*, 2014, 3.

¹¹World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide*, 2014, 7.

¹²Olson, Robert, "The Accuracy and Reliability of Suicide Statistics: Why it Matters?" *Centre for Suicide Prevention*, no. 25 (2006): 4.

¹³Benjamin Goodfellow, Kairi Kølves, and Diego de Leo, "Contemporary Definitions of Suicidal Behaviour: A Systematic Literature Review," *The Official Journal of the American Association of Suicidology* (2018): 1. DOI: 10.1111/sltb.12457

¹⁴Diego De Leo et al., "International Study of Definitions of English-Language Terms for Suicidal Behaviours: A Survey Exploring Preferred Terminology," *BMJ Open*, (2021): 1. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2020-043409

¹⁵Robert Wicks, "Arthur Schopenhauer," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (2024), 1.

¹⁶Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 537.

¹⁷Paolo Stellino, *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide: Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53937-5>

¹⁸David E. Cartwright, *Schopenhauer: A Biography* (New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 88.

¹⁹David E. Cartwright, *Historical Dictionary of Schopenhauer's Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), 167; Dale Jacquette, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Chesham, UK: Acumen, 2005), 140.

²⁰Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. F. Max Muller, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan & Co. LTD, 1922), 52–237.

²¹Kant, 15–39.

²²Kant, 192–211.

This underlying reality, though unknowable, presents itself at best as Will, “an unconscious striving, a striving after existence, life, self-assertion, an ultimate force or energy.”²³ This ‘Will’ is a self-devouring energy, the essence of the suffering and vanity witnessed in existence. It is a unifying characteristic of all existence. As a response to that appalling state of existence, Schopenhauer proposes a solution. This solution is a denial of the Will-to-Live.²⁴ To deny the Will-to-Live, according to Schopenhauer, refers to a purposeful denial of the pleasures of the world; this would be equal to vowing to eject oneself from becoming an active participant in Will’s self-devour. Schopenhauer calls for a moderate sense of asceticism, directed to the suffocation of one’s tendency towards worldly passions.²⁵

3.3. Schopenhauer’s Stand on Suicide: The Futility of Suicide

One question that one can be justified in asking is this: Since the world is as horrendous as Schopenhauer presents it to be, will not the desire to rid oneself of such a state of affairs be a reasonable response? It must be recalled that Schopenhauer proposes that asceticism is a solution to the appalling state of the world.²⁶ Asceticism can metaphorically be described as a ‘dying to the world.’²⁷ Since asceticism is a metaphorical sense of dying to the world, will not suicide be a quicker, efficient, and literal version of the proposed solution to the grievous state of affairs?

There is evidence of his favour of suicide presented in one of his essays titled “On Suicide”. In that essay, he gives at least five points in favour of suicide. First, neither the Biblical Old nor New Testament condemns suicide.²⁸ This is a view also held by Hume in his essay titled “On Suicide.”²⁹

Second, arguments gathered up by religious teachers are not based on any biblical authority, rather, are based on shaky philosophical grounds.³⁰ Schopenhauer points out this assertion being aware that St. Augustine and Lactantius judged suicide to be sinful basing their judgement on a statement by Socrates in Plato’s dialogue named *Phaedo* where Socrates asserts that “the gods are our guardians and that men are one of their possessions,” thus one cannot take away his or her life, lest instructed by the gods.³¹

Third, to criminalise suicide is an absurdly ineffective response. What punishment can deter the actions of one who

is not scared of death itself?³² Furthermore, if one is asked to compare his or her emotive reactions to, on one side, one who has been convicted of murder or theft or a cruel act, and on the other side, one who has met a voluntary death, how would one emotively react? Schopenhauer responds by asserting that the former will be reacted to with a sense of resentment and indignation, whereas the latter will be reacted to with a sense of sorrow and sympathy, sometimes admiration of the person’s courage.³³ Also, if the Church illegalised suicide based on such a verdict, not only is such a verdict weak, but also not ecclesiastically founded.

Fourth, several thinkers throughout history propose the prospect of perceiving suicide in a different light. For example, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle agrees that suicide is an offence against the State but not against the person.³⁴ A Byzantine writer named Stobaeus asserts that in excruciating misfortunes, it is permissible for good people to escape life.³⁵ Stoics, such as the likes of Seneca, accredited nobility and bravery to suicide, and express an emphatic approval of it.³⁶ Pliny, in his *Natural History in Ten Volumes*, perceives the ability to end one’s own life, suicide, as a gift from the gods who themselves could not do so even if they wished. Mortality is not a weakness, but rather a strength in disguise.³⁷

Fifth, there are religions, such as Hinduism, that permit suicide.³⁸ Such a religious act of sacrifice occurs in various forms. It can be in a form of self-immolation done by widows, casting oneself under the wheels of a moving chariot, or by surrendering oneself to hungry crocodiles of the river Ganges.³⁹

Despite the reasonableness of the five points presented above, those points were not intended to directly affirm Schopenhauer’s support of suicide. His direct aim was to point out the weakness in the basis on which the clergy had condemned suicide. In other words, such a condemnation, according to Schopenhauer, was unsubstantiated. And the gruesome effect of holding such a verdict on suicide—suicide perceived as “an act of cowardice, a consequence of madness, a morally wrong act or, even worst, a crime”—not only denied the deceased a dignified burial but it also left the families of those who committed suicide in a state of utter shame.⁴⁰

Thus, in a non-direct way, he was calling the clergy to defend their stand against suicide. Apart from the call,

²³Bryan Magee, *The Great Philosophers: An Introduction to Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 218.

²⁴Julian Young, *Willing and Unwilling: A Study in the Philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer* (Dordrecht: MartinusNijhoff Publishers, 1987), 123.

²⁵Young, 125.

²⁶Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York, USA: Dover, 1966), 391.

²⁷Young, *Willing and Unwilling*, 126.

²⁸Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 276.

²⁹David Hume, *David Hume: Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1996), 394.

³⁰Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 276.

³¹Plato, *Dialogues of Plato*, vol 1, 3rd ed., trans. Benjamin Jowett (London: Oxford University Press 1960), 200.

³²Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 279.

³³Arthur Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (London: George Allen & Company Ltd, 1913), 44.

³⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101.

³⁵Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 277.

³⁶John M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 233–255.

³⁷Pliny, *Natural History in Ten Volumes*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 187.

³⁸Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism*, 46.

³⁹Schopenhauer, 46.

⁴⁰Stellino, *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide*, 78.

Schopenhauer developed a possible explanation for the clergy's "extraordinary energy and zeal" against suicide.⁴¹ Perhaps, he thought, it was because in accepting suicide one is ultimately contradicting the assertion that everything from God is good, as presented in the Biblical book of Genesis.⁴² Suicide is the last active response of anyone who concludes that life is evil. The embrace of such a response is to accept that there is at least one gift from God, life, that is not good. Therefore, to accept suicide is to accept that there is at least one instance in which that which God gave is not good. This, then, is a contradiction. So, according to Schopenhauer, the war featuring the clergy and suicide was simply a pragmatic agenda by the clergy to defeat the enemy before the enemy defeated it.⁴³

Apart from the clarification posed, there are other instances in which Schopenhauer chips in some accounts offering the rationale for embarking on suicide. The following are three such instances. The first instance draws one to reflect on moments of great bodily pain. Schopenhauer invites one to imagine a moment of great bodily pain and the immediate reaction to such a moment. The most likely reaction will be a genuine focus on how to resolve such an excruciating experience. It is as though one becomes indifferent to any other trouble insofar as the bodily pain persists. When mental suffering is too strong compared to any other pain, the desperation to escape from such torture makes one indifferent to any other pain. When the intensity of mental suffering becomes too much to bear, one could find his way to substitute such an experience with a single moment of escaping from it. Suicide becomes a rational option when an individual in intense mental suffering is drawn to perceive the bodily pain resulting from the termination of one's own life as a break from the tormenting torture of mental suffering. This is what makes suicide easy for individuals who suffer intense mental suffering, sometimes, long overdue.⁴⁴

The second instance draws one to reflect on dreams. He draws one to recall what happens when one falls asleep and is driven into a nightmarish dream. What often happens is that at the moment the horror touches its peak, then all of a sudden, we are awake! Such is the experience of life. Life is likened to dreaming. If it is a dream free from the scares of the night, we tend to remain asleep. Sometimes, being awakened by someone or something from such dreams is highly discouraged. However, when life drastically incorporates persistent encounter with horrific experiences, then such experiences are likely to be reacted to as how a dreamer would react to a nightmare; one is compelled to end the dream; a self-initiated termination of life, suicide.⁴⁵

The third instance draws one to reflect on experimentation. Schopenhauer compares suicide to an experiment. This experiment is in the form of a question that a human person demands nature to respond to. This question posed is: "What change will death produce in a man's existence and his insight into the nature of things?"⁴⁶ In other words, suicide may be perceived as a human person's experiment, a quest to understand death's nature, and the possibility of a better form of existence thereafter. This experiment, however, is an awkward one. It is awkward because it involves the loss of the very consciousness which was responsible for posing of the question, and through which the understanding of the answer—assuming nature responds—is possible.⁴⁷

As it is probably noticed, the question posed at the beginning of this subsection is yet to be answered. This question is: Since asceticism is a metaphorical sense of dying to the world, will not suicide be a quicker, efficient and literal version of the proposed solution to the grievous state of affairs? According to Schopenhauer, suicide is not a solution. He condemns suicide. He not only condemns it but also calls for the necessity of any philosophy to react to suicide in a negating manner.⁴⁸

Before offering his central argument for the futility of suicide, one should understand what exactly it is about suicide that Schopenhauer was condemning. There are two objects of Schopenhauer's condemnation: [1] the immorality and the criminality of suicide, and [2] suicide as an expression of personal misery.

In the first object, Schopenhauer does not condemn suicide because it is immoral or a crime or a psychopathic tendency. As pointed out earlier, to claim, for example, that suicide is a crime and an attempt at it is worth legal punishment is to fall within absurd non-effectiveness, since no punishment can deter the actions of one who is not scared of death itself. Even if such an individual is punishable by law, to reach a point of choosing to embark on a suicidal attempt shows that mental agony has numbed the possibility of being swayed by any form of bodily agony.⁴⁹ In that condition, no punishment can shake the one with suicidal struggles.

In the second object, Schopenhauer condemns a suicidal act that exhibits a belief that, in self-destruction, the universal sense of suffering is done away with.⁵⁰ According to Schopenhauer, one does not solve the problem of suffering in the world by running away from the world rather by embarking on living such that his or her hunger for the annihilation of the world's horrific state of affairs is exhibited. Suicide performed as an act of personal redemption is an illusion. It is merely a demonstration of one's defeat to the appalling nature of existence.

⁴¹Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism*, 48.

⁴²Gen 1:31.

⁴³Schopenhauer, 48–49.

⁴⁴Schopenhauer, 49–50.

⁴⁵Schopenhauer, 50.

⁴⁶Schopenhauer, 50.

⁴⁷Schopenhauer, 50.

⁴⁸Young, *Willing and Unwilling*, 126.

⁴⁹Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism*, 49.

⁵⁰Young, *Willing and Unwilling*, 127.

Since that which is being condemned has been pointed out, what then is Schopenhauer's central argument for the futility of suicide? What difference is there between the denial of the Will-to-Live, concretised in asceticism, and suicide, that causes him to propose asceticism and oppose suicide? It is because Schopenhauer views suicide as a cognitive error. As paradoxical as it may seem, he views asceticism as denying life and views suicide as affirming life.⁵¹ But how does suicide affirm life? To respond to this question, one ought to understand two aspects of the life-affirming character of suicide.

The first aspect is that while asceticism denies life through a rejection of imposed pleasures and their gluttonous satisfaction, suicide affirms life through an embrace of these pleasures.⁵² Asceticism is the turning of a human person's entire self against this sort of life. Suicide is the turning of a human person's entire self towards life in a passionate want for a better life for himself or herself. Asceticism embraces that life is essentially characterised by suffering. Suicide involves a human person's erroneous understanding that the suffering that he or she is experiencing is both accidental to the world and is limited to him or her alone. This is an error in cognition. Suicide as an expression of personal or private despair is irrational since it does not solve the problem of annulling the suffering characteristic of the nature of existence. One does not effectively solve the problem of suffering in the world by running away from the world, but rather by embarking on living in a manner that exhibits a hunger for the termination of that unpleasant quality of existence. That hunger's concrete instantiation is in the denial of worldly fleeting pleasures. Such a denial is what Schopenhauer calls Denial of the Will-to-Live, asceticism.

The ascetic life comes with suffering experienced at the level of the individual.⁵³ It is never easy to deny oneself that which has become part of what establishes a sense of meaning in life, regardless of the truth value of that meaning. This suffering experience at the level of the individual is effective in the yielding of a dramatic life transformation, which happens through a change in the manner in which such an individual assesses life and the world in general; this is a gift in disguise that asceticism grants one who chooses to endure appalling life circumstances. Suicide, then, is a denial of a chance to experience this redemptive potential that suffering brings. Schopenhauer compares one who chooses suicide to a "sick man who, after the beginning of a painful operation that could completely cure him, will not allow it to be completed but prefers to retain his illness."⁵⁴

The second aspect is that suicide not only affirms life, it does so fervently.⁵⁵ Schopenhauer posits that the stronger the affirmation of life, the clearer and more vivid the experience

of suffering would be.⁵⁶ In other words, the stronger the desire to experience life's falsely-assumed unmet pleasures—a tendency practised by one who embraced suicide as a solution to worldly suffering—the more excruciating the pain from unfulfilled desires would be. One who commits oneself to a suicidal attempt is experiencing an intensity of suffering compared to one who is not committed to that choice. The former is experiencing that intensity due to a passionate belief that the world offers pleasures too significant to miss out—an aspect of the life-affirming quality of suicide—hence, in perpetual missing out of those pleasures, extreme vivid storms of mental and physical agony emerge.

It is in the context of the second aspect that Schopenhauer delivers the advantage that a pessimist enjoys.⁵⁷ In adopting a pessimistic view of life, one adopts a weakened attachment to the pleasures of the world. In adopting a weakened attachment to the pleasures of the world, one is likely not to fall into suicide, since suicide is a product of a vehement attachment to the pleasures of the world. It must be pointed out that a pessimist's detached outlook on life comes from the understanding that the suffering he or she is undeniably experiencing is an experience universally shared. It is not an exclusively personal experience. Suffering is characteristic of life itself.

One criticism against this point, however, is that by accepting the universality of suffering, one implies the acceptance of suicide.⁵⁸ If all life is suffering, then, as a particular instance of that universal proposition, my life is suffering. Suffering is a problem. Since it is a problem, it must be solved. Since a human person is naturally inclined towards happiness then the best concrete instantiation of that natural inclination is to flee from suffering altogether. In this context, then, self-destruction is the best possible way of fleeing from suffering altogether. But self-destruction is suicide. Therefore, suicide is a solution acceptable to anyone accepting the universality of suffering.

Schopenhauer responds to that criticism by positing that a genuine philosophical pessimist—one who has internalised the understanding of existence's suffering—is one who excellently understands that suffering is an essential quality of existence.⁵⁹ In that, if one is to be asked to give one quality of existence, one would excellently respond by positing that existence is suffering, rationally and phenomenologically justified as such. Thus, an attempt to perform self-destruction, suicide, as a response to the suffering of the world, is not the solution to the universal problem of suffering. It is not the solution to the problem of suffering, or it is a futile or absurd, or toothless approach to solving a cosmic problem of suffering, because by

⁵¹Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vols. 1 and 2, 398-399.

⁵²Young, *Willing and Unwilling*, 127.

⁵³Young, 127-128.

⁵⁴Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vols. 1 and 2, 399.

⁵⁵Schopenhauer, 399.

⁵⁶Schopenhauer, 395.

⁵⁷Schopenhauer, 315.

⁵⁸Young, *Willing and Unwilling*, 128.

⁵⁹Young, 128-129.

embarking on suicide, the problem of suffering will surely persist.⁶⁰

One may say, well, it is true that suffering will persist, however, it will persist without me: I have escaped from it. The response to that would be, what do you mean by 'I' have escaped it? Does the 'I' persist? By dying, the 'I' no longer exists. It must be said that the 'I' has been consumed by the suffering that the 'I' willed to escape from. Hence, if at all one is to judge who the victor is between one who commits suicide and suffering, a fair judge must affirm the victory of suffering since, in the final analysis, the 'I' has been consumed by the storms of suffering. Had one chosen to persist in suffering, despite the evidential pangs of it, such an individual could have been on course for a better chance at winning. Furthermore, the futility in embarking on suicide, an illusory solution to suffering, may be compared to an attempt to cure a cancer that has already affected the whole body by removing a minute section of the affected tissue.⁶¹ Such a solution will not solve the problem. Thus, within Schopenhauer's metaphysical system, it follows that suicide is a futile response to the universal problem of suffering.

4.0. Critical Remarks

After the completion of the exploration of how Schopenhauer defends his stance that suicide is essentially futile, what follows is a brief exploration of some criticisms against Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimistic stand against suicide.

The first criticism is associated with his views against religious and philosophical arguments against suicide. Recall that his main criticism against religious arguments, for example, is that these arguments are baseless. The clergy fails to provide doctrinal-logical justifications against suicide. He accuses these arguments as mere weak sophisms, baseless, inadequate and worn out. However, apart from such pejorative comments, Schopenhauer likewise does not offer solid counterarguments against the religious stand on suicide. Perhaps, his zealous criticism against the religious stand was itself prejudice-backed.⁶²

The second criticism is affiliated with his acceptance of the universality of the Will and, consequently, the universality of suffering. It had been pointed out earlier that suicide is intrinsically a personal or private solution against universal suffering. Suicide is likened to an act of removing a small part of a cancer-affected tissue, for the goal of healing a person who has had cancer affect his entire body. In other words, it is a useless, empty, futile act. However, it must be recalled that the Will is an intelligible aspect of the single underlying thing-in-itself. This means that the universe and I are Will. This is why Schopenhauer also embraced the idea of universal compassion as a temporal antidote to existential suffering.⁶³ He embraced the idea that harm done to another

is a harm done to me, but not only to me, but to the entire Will. Likewise, a good deed done on someone is also a good deed done on me, and the entire Will. Thus, the best way one can relate to another person, is by way of compassion, because the errors I observe in another person, speak volumes concerning errors in oneself.

If that is the case, that is, I am Will and Will is I, does that not mean that an individual's act of suicide is no longer considered a personal act rather an act done by the universal Will? Indeed, it must be accepted as so. If it is an act of universal action, then Schopenhauer is compelled to recant his claim that suicide is futile. It cannot be futile because it is an act done by Will, since I am Will. While that criticism qualifies as a purely logical one, it fails in the experiential end. It fails because suicide is performed by someone, and the loss of life is not literally or directly experienced by the entire fabric of existence. Furthermore, even if [hypothetically positing] for some reason suicide performed by one person promotes the universal loss of life, such a loss will not be perceived as a victory against suffering rather as suffering's cosmic triumph.

The third criticism, often raised against Schopenhauer's opposition to suicide, is affiliated with his sense of benevolence toward some forms of suicide. In his 1995 book titled *The Ethics of Suicide*, Victor Cosculluela posits that when asked to give Schopenhauer's view of suicide, one would be better off asserting that he affirms one form of suicide but not refuting all forms of suicide.⁶⁴ There is a cause of death that Schopenhauer identifies as suicide. This cause of death is self-induced starvation.⁶⁵ Schopenhauer views death by self-induced starvation as an acceptable form of suicide. He defends such a form of suicide because he perceives it as a mark of the ultimate degree of asceticism. Since asceticism is a concrete form of one's denial of the Will-to-Live, henceforth, suicide by self-induced starvation is a plausible end to one's life. It may be compared to a side-effect of an ultimate end. This ultimate end is the emancipation from the temporal pleasures of the world.

Despite the undeniable criticisms that come with Schopenhauer's argument for the futility of suicide, his thoughts must not be disregarded for several reasons. First, his views, in a way, aimed at eliminating common prejudices and false beliefs concerning suicide. By rationally dissecting the issue of suicide, he shed some light on what exactly suicide is, and provided the room for the restoration of the dignity of one who committed suicide. By virtue of one being human, one's dignity persists, regardless of the act of self-destruction.

Second, his views invited a multi-perspective on suicide through borrowing thoughts from different historical periods and cultures. He invited views from the ancient philosophical period, the medieval period, the Hindu and

⁶⁰Young, 128.

⁶¹Young, 128.

⁶²Stellino, *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide*, 117.

⁶³Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism*, 29.

⁶⁴Victor Cosculluela, *The Ethics of Suicide* (New York, USA: Garland Publishing, 1995), 118.

⁶⁵Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vols. 1 and 2, 428.

Buddhist perspective and even Chinese literary works, so that in their unity, they may provide one with a sufficient understanding of suicide.

Third, within Schopenhauer's analysis of suicide, one finds a rich domain of knowledge encompassing a psychological and phenomenological account of suicide, a defence of autonomy over one's life, the human condition, the meaning of life, the consciousness of death, and more.⁶⁶ The summation of such significances presents Arthur Schopenhauer as a thinker whose account of suicide is worth one's attention.

Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to support the claim that, even from a pessimist's perspective, suicide is futile. This task was then fulfilled within the four main sections of the paper: [1] a section on global statistics on suicide, [2] a section on the meaning of suicide, [3] a section on Schopenhauer's argument for the futility of suicide, and [4] a section on a few critical remarks about his stand on suicide.

Before wrapping up, let us reiterate the justification of the central claim. If one is asked to point out the rationale behind suicide, one is likely to assert that a person embarks on suicide as a reaction to the persistent, grievous nature of his life. Perhaps, such a person has tried several ways to end such an excruciatingly agonising experience, or at the very least, mitigate it. However, such attempts have proven to be ineffective. It is only natural for a human person to tend towards a state of tranquillity, and if such a state is not achieved, then one dedicates most of his or her attention towards the establishment of that desired state, by whatever means possible. The persistent presence of an abnormally high state of lack of tranquillity leaves one with no choice but to end his or her life. He or she ends his or her life because he or she holds a presupposition that as long as life persists, suffering's torment persists. Therefore, to rid himself or herself of that torment, he or she must rid himself or herself of the *substratum* of that torment, which is life itself. Hence, he or she chooses suicide as a rational antidote to his or her justifiably agonising experience of life.

Schopenhauer comes into the discussion, first, positing that such a rationale is erroneously grounded. The erroneous ground on which such a rationale inheres is that life should not be like that. By the assertion 'life should not be like that', one means that life should not be tainted by suffering, at least essentially. Since it should not be tainted by suffering, then there is an assumption that life is supposed to be otherwise, that is, pleasurable, essentially so. It is from that ground that frustration against life itself begins—for life is delivering what it is not supposed to deliver, and it is doing so with outstanding proficiency. A reaction to such a frustration, erroneously grounded, is ultimately self-destruction, suicide, as a means of escaping life's accidental and unpleasant character of suffering. Schopenhauer is attacking the erroneous supposition that life is essentially

pleasurable. His pessimism has brought him to an affirmation that life is essentially full of suffering, a suffering brought forth by a constant willing or tendency towards futile or illusory pleasures. The best way to live, then, despite such a reality, is to constantly denounce these illusions through an ascetic lifestyle.

Furthermore, Schopenhauer perceives one who performs suicide as one who accepts a presupposition that the excruciating agony that he or she is experiencing is personal or private. Since it is so, then it demands a personal solution. This personal solution is suicide. This presupposition, posits Schopenhauer, is also erroneous. It is erroneous because suffering is a universal phenomenon. Since it is a universal phenomenon, yet experienced individually, it demands a universal solution. Suicide is a particular [non-]solution. Since it is both particular and not a solution, it is a futile approach to solving the problem of universal suffering. Schopenhauer likens the proposal of suicide as a solution to universal suffering to an attempt to treat a cancer that has affected the entire body by treating only a small section of the affected tissue. Given these brief accounts, Schopenhauer concludes by asserting that suicide is a futile solution to the problem of universal suffering.

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⁶⁶Stellino, *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide*, 72.

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