

On the Vanity and Suffering of Life

Awakened to life out of the night of unconsciousness, the will finds itself as an individual in an endless and boundless world, among innumerable individuals, all striving, suffering, and erring; and, as if through a troubled dream, it hurries back to the old unconsciousness. Yet till then its desires are unlimited, its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire gives birth to a new one. No possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its craving, set a final goal to its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart. In this connexion, let us now consider what as a rule comes to man in satisfactions of any kind; it is often nothing more than the bare maintenance of this very existence, extorted daily with unremitting effort and constant care in conflict with misery and want, and with death in prospect. Everything in life proclaims that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated, or recognized as an illusion. The grounds for this lie deep in the very nature of things. Accordingly, the lives of most people prove troubled and short. The comparatively happy are often only apparently so, or else, like those of long life, they are rare exceptions; the possibility of these still had to be left, as decoy-birds. Life presents itself as a continual deception, in small matters as well as in great. If it has promised, it does not keep its word, unless to show how little desirable the desired object was; hence we are deluded now by hope, now by what was hoped for. If it has given, it did so in order to take. The enchantment of distance shows us paradises that vanish like optical illusions, when we have allowed ourselves to be fooled by them. Accordingly, happiness lies always in the future, or else in the past, and the present may be compared to a small dark cloud driven by the wind over the sunny plain; in front of and behind the cloud everything is bright, only it itself always casts a shadow. Consequently, the present is always inadequate, but the future is uncertain, and the past irrecoverable. With its misfortunes, small, greater, and great, occurring hourly, daily, weekly, and

¹This chapter refers to §§ 56-59 of volume 1. Compare with it also chapters 11 and 12 of volume 2 of the *Parerga and Paralipomena*.

yearly; with its deluded hopes and accidents bringing all calculations to nought, life bears so clearly the stamp of something which ought to disgust us, that it is difficult to conceive how anyone could fail to recognize this, and be persuaded that life is here to be thankfully enjoyed, and that man exists in order to be happy. On the contrary, that continual deception and disillusionment, as well as the general nature of life, present themselves as intended and calculated to awaken the conviction that nothing whatever is worth our exertions, our efforts, and our struggles, that all good things are empty and fleeting, that the world on all sides is bankrupt, and that life is a business that does not cover the costs; so that our will may turn away from it.

The way in which this *vanity* of all objects of the will makes itself known and comprehensible to the intellect that is rooted in the individual, is primarily *time*. It is the form by whose means that vanity of things appears as their transitoriness, since by virtue of this all our pleasures and enjoyments come to nought in our hands, and afterwards we ask in astonishment where they have remained. Hence that vanity itself is the only *objective* element of time, in other words, that which corresponds to it in the inner nature of things, and so that of which it is the expression. For this reason, time is the *a priori* necessary form of all our perceptions; everything must present itself in time, even we ourselves. Consequently, our life is primarily like a payment made to us in nothing but copper coins, for which we must then give a receipt; the coins are the days, and the receipt is death. For in the end time proclaims the judgement of nature on the worth of all beings that appear in it, since it destroys them:

And justly so: for all things, from the Void
Called forth, deserve to be destroyed:
"Twere better, then, were naught created.²

Thus old age and death, to which every life necessarily hurries, are a sentence of condemnation on the will-to-live which comes from the hands of nature herself. It states that this will is a striving that is bound to frustrate itself. "What you have willed," it says, "ends thus: will something better." Therefore the instruction afforded to everyone by his life consists on the whole in the fact that the objects of his desires constantly delude, totter, and fall; that in consequence they bring more misery than joy, until at last even the whole foundation on which they all stand collapses, since his life itself is destroyed. Thus he obtains the final confirmation that all his striving and willing was a perversity, a path of error:

² From Bayard Taylor's translation of Goethe's *Faust*. [Tr.]

Then old age and experience, hand in hand,
Lead him to death, and make him understand,
After a search so painful and so long,
That all his life he has been in the wrong.

But I wish to go into the matter in more detail, for it is these views in which I have met with most contradiction. First of all, I have to confirm by the following remarks the proof given in the text of the negative nature of all satisfaction, and hence of all pleasure and happiness, in opposition to the positive nature of pain.

We feel pain, but not painlessness; care, but not freedom from care; fear, but not safety and security. We feel the desire as we feel hunger and thirst; but as soon as it has been satisfied, it is like the mouthful of food which has been taken, and which ceases to exist for our feelings the moment it is swallowed. We painfully feel the loss of pleasures and enjoyments, as soon as they fail to appear; but when pains cease even after being present for a long time, their absence is not directly felt, but at most they are thought of intentionally by means of reflection. For only pain and want can be felt positively; and therefore they proclaim themselves; well-being, on the contrary, is merely negative. Therefore, we do not become conscious of the three greatest blessings of life as such, namely health, youth, and freedom, as long as we possess them, but only after we have lost them; for they too are negations. We notice that certain days of our life were happy only after they have made room for unhappy ones. In proportion as enjoyments and pleasures increase, susceptibility to them decreases; that to which we are accustomed is no longer felt as a pleasure. But in precisely this way is the susceptibility to suffering increased; for the cessation of that to which we are accustomed is felt painfully. Thus the measure of what is necessary increases through possession, and thereby the capacity to feel pain. The hours pass the more quickly the more pleasantly they are spent, and the more slowly the more painfully they are spent, since pain, not pleasure, is the positive thing, whose presence makes itself felt. In just the same way we become conscious of time when we are bored, not when we are amused. Both cases prove that our existence is happiest when we perceive it least; from this it follows that it would be better not to have it. Great and animated delight can be positively conceived only as the consequence of great misery that has preceded it; for nothing can be added to a state of permanent contentment except some amusement or even the satisfaction of vanity. Therefore, all poets are obliged to bring their heroes into anxious and painful situations, in order to be able to liberate them therefrom again. Accordingly dramas and epics generally describe only fighting,

suffering, tormented men and women, and every work of fiction is a peep-show in which we observe the spasms and convulsions of the agonized human heart. Sir Walter Scott has naively set forth this aesthetic necessity in the "Conclusion" to his novel *Old Mortality*. Voltaire, so highly favoured by nature and good fortune, also says, entirely in agreement with the truth I have demonstrated: *Le bonheur n'est qu'un rêve, et la douleur est réelle*; and he adds: *il y a quatre-vingts ans que je l'éprouve. Je n'y sais autre chose que me résigner, et me dire que les mouches sont nées pour être mangées par les araignées, et les hommes pour être dévorés par les chagrins.*³

Before we state so confidently that life is desirable or merits our gratitude, let us for once calmly compare the sum of the pleasures which are in any way possible, and which a man can enjoy in his life, with the sum of the sufferings which are in any way possible, and can come to him in his life. I do not think it will be difficult to strike the balance. In the long run, however, it is quite superfluous to dispute whether there is more good or evil in the world; for the mere existence of evil decides the matter, since evil can never be wiped off, and consequently can never be balanced, by the good that exists along with or after it.

*Mille piacer' non vagliono un tormento.*⁴

For that thousands had lived in happiness and joy would never do away with the anguish and death-agony of one individual; and just as little does my present well-being undo my previous sufferings. Therefore, were the evil in the world even a hundred times less than it is, its mere existence would still be sufficient to establish a truth that may be expressed in various ways, although always only somewhat indirectly, namely that we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; that it is something which at bottom ought not to be, and so on. Byron's expression of the matter is exceedingly fine [*Childe Harold*, iv, 126]:

*Our life is a false nature,—'tis not in
The harmony of things, this hard decree,
This uneradicable taint of sin,
This boundless Upas, this all-blasting tree*

³ "Happiness is only a dream, and pain is real. . . . I have experienced this for eighty years. I know of nothing better than to resign myself to this and to say that flies are born to be eaten by spiders, and men to be devoured by trouble and affliction." [Tr.]

⁴ "A thousand pleasures do not compensate for one pain." [Tr.]
Petrarch.

Whose root is earth, whose leaves and branches be
The skies, which rain their plagues on men like dew—
Disease, death, bondage—all the woes we see—
And worse, the woes we see not—which throb through
The immedicable soul, with heart-aches ever new.

If the world and life were an end in themselves, and accordingly were to require theoretically no justification, and practically no compensation or amends, but existed, perhaps as represented by Spinoza and present-day Spinozists, as the single manifestation of a God who, *animi causa*, or even to mirror himself, undertook such an evolution of himself, and consequently its existence needed neither to be justified by reasons nor redeemed by results—then the sufferings and troubles of life would not indeed have to be fully compensated by the pleasures and well-being in it. For, as I have said, this is impossible, because my present pain is never abolished by future pleasures, since the latter fill up their time just as the former fills its own. On the contrary, there would have to be no sufferings at all, and of necessity there would also not be death, or else it would have no terrors for us. Only thus would life pay for itself.

Now since our state or condition is rather something that it were better should not be, everything that surrounds us bears the traces of this—just as in hell everything smells of sulphur—since everything is always imperfect and deceptive, everything agreeable is mixed with something disagreeable, every enjoyment is always only half an enjoyment, every gratification introduces its own disturbance, every relief new worries and troubles, every expedient for our daily and hourly needs leaves us in the lurch at every moment, and denies its service. The step on to which we tread so often gives way under us; in fact, misfortunes and accidents great and small are the element of our life, and in a word, we are like Phineus, all of whose food was contaminated and rendered unfit to eat by the Harpies. All that we lay hold on resists us, because it has a will of its own which must be overcome. Two remedies for this are tried; firstly *εὐλάβεια*, i.e., prudence, foresight, cunning; it does not teach us fully, is not sufficient, and comes to nought. Secondly, stoical equanimity, seeking to disarm every misfortune by preparedness for all and contempt for everything; in practice, this becomes cynical renunciation which prefers to reject once for all every means of help and every alleviation. It makes us dogs, like Diogenes in his tub. The truth is that we ought to be wretched, and are so. The chief source of the most serious evils affecting man is man himself; *homo homini lupus*.⁵ He who

⁵ "Man is a wolf for man." [Tr.]

keeps this last fact clearly in view beholds the world as a hell, surpassing that of Dante by the fact that one man must be the devil of another. For this purpose, of course, one is more fitted than another, indeed an archfiend is more fitted than all the rest, and appears in the form of a conqueror; he sets several hundred thousand men, facing one another, and exclaims to them: "To suffer and die is your destiny; now shoot one another with musket and cannon!" and they do so. In general, however, the conduct of men towards one another is characterized as a rule by injustice, extreme unfairness, hardness, and even cruelty; an opposite course of conduct appears only by way of exception. The necessity for the State and for legislation rests on this fact, and not on your shifts and evasions. But in all cases not lying within the reach of the law, we see at once a lack of consideration for his like which is peculiar to man, and springs from his boundless egoism, and sometimes even from wickedness. How man deals with man is seen, for example, in Negro slavery, the ultimate object of which is sugar and coffee. However, we need not go so far; to enter at the age of five a cotton-spinning or other factory, and from then on to sit there every day first ten, then twelve, and finally fourteen hours, and perform the same mechanical work, is to purchase dearly the pleasure of drawing breath. But this is the fate of millions, and many more millions have an analogous fate.

We others, however, can be made perfectly miserable by trifling incidents, but perfectly happy by nothing in the world. Whatever we may say, the happiest moment of the happy man is that of his falling asleep, just as the unhappiest moment of the unhappy man is that of his awaking. An indirect but certain proof of the fact that people feel unhappy, and consequently are so, is also abundantly afforded by the terrible envy that dwells in all. In all the circumstances of life, on the occasion of every superiority or advantage, of whatever kind it be, this envy is roused and cannot contain its poison. Because people feel unhappy, they cannot bear the sight of one who is supposed to be happy. Whoever feels happy for the moment would at once like to make all around him happy, and says:

*Que tout le monde ici soit heureux de ma joie.*⁶

If life in itself were a precious blessing, and decidedly preferable to non-existence, the exit from it would not need to be guarded by such fearful watchmen as death and its terrors. But who would go on living life as it is, if death were less terrible? And who could bear even the mere thought of death, if life were a pleasure? But the former still always has the good point of being the end of life, and

⁶"May everyone here be happy in my joy." [Tr.]

we console ourselves with death in regard to the sufferings of life, and with the sufferings of life in regard to death. The truth is that the two belong to each other inseparably, since they constitute a deviation from the right path, and a return to this is as difficult as it is desirable.

If the world were not something that, *practically* expressed, ought not to be, it would also not be *theoretically* a problem. On the contrary, its existence would either require no explanation at all, since it would be so entirely self-evident that astonishment at it and enquiry about it could not arise in any mind; or its purpose would present itself unmistakably. But instead of this it is indeed an insoluble problem, since even the most perfect philosophy will always contain an unexplained element, like an insoluble precipitate or the remainder that is always left behind by the irrational proportion of two quantities. Therefore, if anyone ventures to raise the question why there is not nothing at all rather than this world, then the world cannot be justified from itself; no ground, no final cause of its existence can be found in itself; it cannot be demonstrated that it exists for its own sake, in other words, for its own advantage. In pursuance of my teaching, this can, of course, be explained from the fact that the principle of the world's existence is expressly a groundless one, namely a blind will-to-live, which, as *thing-in-itself*, cannot be subject to the principle of sufficient reason or ground; for this principle is merely the form of phenomena, and through it alone every why is justified. But this is also in keeping with the nature and constitution of the world, for only a blind, not a seeing, will could put itself in the position in which we find ourselves. On the contrary, a seeing will would soon have made the calculation that the business does not cover the costs, since such a mighty effort and struggle with the exertion of all one's strength, under constant care, anxiety, and want, and with the inevitable destruction of every individual life, finds no compensation in the ephemeral existence itself, which is obtained by such effort, and comes to nothing in our hands. Therefore, the explanation of the world from the *νοῦς* of Anaxagoras, in other words, from a will guided by *knowledge*, necessarily demands for its extenuation optimism, which is then set up and maintained in spite of the loudly crying evidence of a whole world full of misery. Life is then given out as a gift, whereas it is evident that anyone would have declined it with thanks, had he looked at it and tested it beforehand; just as Lessing admired the understanding of his son. Because this son had absolutely declined to come into the world, he had to be dragged forcibly into life by means of forceps; but hardly was he in it, when he again hurried away from it. On the other hand, it is well

said that life should be, from one end to the other, only a lesson, to which, however, anyone could reply: "For this reason, I wish I had been left in the peace of the all-sufficient nothing, where I should have had no need either of lessons or of anything else." But if it were added that one day he was to give an account of every hour of his life, he would rather be justified in first himself asking for an account as to why he was taken away from that peace and quiet and put into a position so precarious, obscure, anxious, and painful. To this, then, false fundamental views lead. Far from bearing the character of a *gift*, human existence has entirely the character of a contracted *debt*. The calling in of this debt appears in the shape of the urgent needs, tormenting desires, and endless misery brought about through that existence. As a rule, the whole lifetime is used for paying off this debt, yet in this way only the interest is cleared off. Repayment of the capital takes place through death. And when was this debt contracted? At the begetting.

Accordingly, if man is regarded as a being whose existence is a punishment and an atonement, then he is already seen in a more correct light. The myth of the Fall of man (although probably, like the whole of Judaism, borrowed from the *Zend Avesta: Bundahish*, 15), is the only thing in the Old Testament to which I can concede a metaphysical, although only allegorical, truth; indeed it is this alone that reconciles me to the Old Testament. Thus our existence resembles nothing but the consequence of a false step and a guilty desire. New Testament Christianity, the ethical spirit of which is that of Brahmanism and Buddhism, and which is therefore very foreign to the otherwise optimistic spirit of the Old Testament, has also, extremely wisely, started from that very myth; in fact, without this, it would not have found one single point of connexion with Judaism. If we wish to measure the degree of guilt with which our existence itself is burdened, let us look at the suffering connected with it. Every great pain, whether bodily or mental, states what we deserve; for it could not come to us if we did not deserve it. That Christianity also looks at our existence in this light is proved by a passage from Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*, ch. 3, which I have before me only in Latin: *Sumus autem nos omnes corporibus et rebus subjecti Diabolo, et hospites sumus in mundo, cujus ipse princeps et Deus est. Ideo panis quem edimus, potus quem bibimus, vestes quibus utimur, imo aër et totum quo vivimus in carne, sub ipsius imperio est.*⁷ An outcry has been raised about the melancholy and cheerless

⁷ "In our bodies and circumstances, however, we are all subject to the devil and are strangers in this world, of which he is prince and lord. Hence everything is under his rule, the bread we eat, the beverage we drink, the clothes we use, even the air and everything by which we live in the flesh." [Tr.]

nature of my philosophy; but this is to be found merely in the fact that, instead of inventing a future hell as the equivalent of sins, I have shown that where guilt is to be found, there is already in the world something akin to hell; but he who is inclined to deny this can easily experience it.

This world is the battle-ground of tormented and agonized beings who continue to exist only by each devouring the other. Therefore, every beast of prey in it is the living grave of thousands of others, and its self-maintenance is a chain of torturing deaths. Then in this world the capacity to feel pain increases with knowledge, and therefore reaches its highest degree in man, a degree that is the higher, the more intelligent the man. To this world the attempt has been made to adapt the system of *optimism*, and to demonstrate to us that it is the best of all possible worlds. The absurdity is glaring. However, an optimist tells me to open my eyes and look at the world and see how beautiful it is in the sunshine, with its mountains, valleys, rivers, plants, animals, and so on. But is the world, then, a peep-show? These things are certainly beautiful to *behold*, but to *be* them is something quite different. A teleologist then comes along and speaks to me in glowing terms about the wise arrangement by virtue of which care is taken that the planets do not run their heads against one another; that land and sea are not mixed up into pulp, but are held apart in a delightful way; also that everything is neither rigid in continual frost nor roasted with heat; likewise that, in consequence of the obliquity of the ecliptic, there is not an eternal spring in which nothing could reach maturity, and so forth. But this and everything like it are indeed mere *conditiones sine quibus non*. If there is to be a world at all, if its planets are to exist at least as long as is needed for the ray of light from a remote fixed star to reach them, and are not, like Lessing's son, to depart again immediately after birth, then of course it could not be constructed so unskilfully that its very framework would threaten to collapse. But if we proceed to the *results* of the applauded work, if we consider the *players* who act on the stage so durably constructed, and then see how with sensibility pain makes its appearance, and increases in proportion as that sensibility develops into intelligence, and then how, keeping pace with this, desire and suffering come out ever more strongly, and increase, till at last human life affords no other material than that for tragedies and comedies, then whoever is not a hypocrite will hardly be disposed to break out into hallelujahs. The real but disguised origin of these latter has moreover been exposed, mercilessly but with triumphant truth, by David Hume in his *Natural History of Religion*, Secs. 6, 7, 8, and 13. He also explains without reserve in the tenth and eleventh books of his *Dialogues on Natural Religion*,

with arguments very convincing yet quite different from mine, the miserable nature of this world and the untenableness of all optimism; here at the same time he attacks optimism at its source. Both these works of Hume are as well worth reading as they are at the present time unknown in Germany, where, on the other hand, incredible pleasure is found patriotically in the most repulsive drivel of native, boastful mediocrities, who are lauded to the skies as great men. Nevertheless, Hamann translated those dialogues; Kant looked through the translation, and late in life wished to induce Hamann's son to publish them, because the translation by Platner did not satisfy him (see Kant's biography by F. W. Schubert, pp. 81 and 165). There is more to be learnt from each page of David Hume than from the collected philosophical works of Hegel, Herbart, and Schleiermacher taken together.

Again, the founder of systematic *optimism* is Leibniz, whose services to philosophy I have no wish to deny, although I could never succeed in really thinking myself into the monadology, pre-established harmony, and *identitas indiscernibilium*.⁸ His *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement* are, however, merely an excerpt with a detailed yet weak criticism, with a view to correction, of Locke's work that is justly world-famous. He here opposes Locke with just as little success as he opposes Newton in his *Tentamen de Motuum Coelestium Causis* directed against the system of gravitation. The *Critique of Pure Reason* is very specially directed against this Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy and has a polemical, indeed a destructive, relation to it, just as to Locke and Hume it has a relation of continuation and of further development. That the professors of philosophy are everywhere engaged at the present time in setting Leibniz on his feet again with his humbug, in fact in glorifying him, and, on the other hand, in disparaging and setting aside Kant as much as possible, has its good reason in the *primum vivere*.⁹ The *Critique of Pure Reason* does not permit of one's giving out Jewish mythology as philosophy, or speaking summarily of the "soul" as a given reality, as a well known and well accredited person, without giving some account of how one has arrived at this concept, and what justification one has for using it scientifically. But *primum vivere, deinde philosophari!*⁹ Down with Kant, *vivat* our Leibniz! Therefore, to return to Leibniz, I cannot assign to the *Théodicée*, that methodical and broad development of optimism, in such a capacity, any other merit than that it later gave rise to the immortal *Candide* of the great Voltaire. In this

⁸ The principle of Leibniz, according to which two indistinguishable things are identical. [Tr.]

⁹ "First live, then philosophize!" [Tr.]

way, of course, Leibniz's oft-repeated and lame excuse for the evil of the world, namely that the bad sometimes produces the good, obtained proof that for him was unexpected. Even by the name of his hero, Voltaire indicated that it needed only sincerity to recognize the opposite of optimism. Actually optimism cuts so strange a figure on this scene of sin, suffering, and death, that we should be forced to regard it as irony if we did not have an adequate explanation of its origin in its secret source (namely hypocritical flattery with an offensive confidence in its success), a source so delightfully disclosed by Hume, as previously mentioned.

But against the palpably sophistical proofs of Leibniz that this is the best of all possible worlds, we may even oppose seriously and honestly the proof that it is the *worst* of all possible worlds. For possible means not what we may picture in our imagination, but what can actually exist and last. Now this world is arranged as it had to be if it were to be capable of continuing with great difficulty to exist; if it were a little worse, it would be no longer capable of continuing to exist. Consequently, since a worse world could not continue to exist, it is absolutely impossible; and so this world itself is the worst of all possible worlds. For not only if the planets ran their heads against one another, but also if any one of the actually occurring perturbations of their course continued to increase, instead of being gradually balanced again by the others, the world would soon come to an end. Astronomers know on what accidental circumstances—in most cases on the irrational relation to one another of the periods of revolution—all this depends. They have carefully calculated that it will always go on well, and consequently that the world can also last and go on. Although Newton was of the opposite opinion, we will hope that the astronomers have not miscalculated, and consequently that the mechanical perpetual motion realized in such a planetary system will also not, like the rest, ultimately come to a standstill. Again, powerful forces of nature dwell under the firm crust of the planet. As soon as some accident affords these free play, they must necessarily destroy that crust with everything living on it. This has occurred at least three times on our planet, and will probably occur even more frequently. The earthquake of Lisbon, of Haiti, the destruction of Pompeii are only small, playful hints at the possibility. An insignificant alteration of the atmosphere, not even chemically demonstrable, causes cholera, yellow fever, black death, and so on, which carry off millions of people; a somewhat greater alteration would extinguish all life. A very moderate increase of heat would dry up all rivers and springs. The animals have received barely enough in the way of organs and strength to enable them with

the greatest exertion to procure sustenance for their own lives and food for their offspring. Therefore, if an animal loses a limb, or even only the complete use of it, it is in most cases bound to perish. Powerful as are the weapons of understanding and reason possessed by the human race, nine-tenths of mankind live in constant conflict with want, always balancing themselves with difficulty and effort on the brink of destruction. Thus throughout, for the continuance of the whole as well as for that of every individual being, the conditions are sparingly and scantily given, and nothing beyond these. Therefore the individual life is a ceaseless struggle for existence itself, while at every step it is threatened with destruction. Just because this threat is so often carried out, provision had to be made, by the incredibly great surplus of seed, that the destruction of individuals should not bring about that of the races, since about these alone is nature seriously concerned. Consequently, the world is as bad as it can possibly be, if it is to exist at all. *Q.E.D.* The fossils of entirely different kinds of animal species which formerly inhabited the planet afford us, as proof of our calculation, records of worlds whose continuance was no longer possible, and which were in consequence somewhat worse than the worst of possible worlds.

At bottom, optimism is the unwarranted self-praise of the real author of the world, namely of the will-to-live which complacently mirrors itself in its work. Accordingly optimism is not only a false but also a pernicious doctrine, for it presents life as a desirable state and man's happiness as its aim and object. Starting from this, everyone then believes he has the most legitimate claim to happiness and enjoyment. If, as usually happens, these do not fall to his lot, he believes that he suffers an injustice, in fact that he misses the whole point of his existence; whereas it is far more correct to regard work, privation, misery, and suffering, crowned by death, as the aim and object of our life (as is done by Brahmanism and Buddhism, and also by genuine Christianity), since it is these that lead to the denial of the will-to-live. In the New Testament, the world is presented as a vale of tears, life as a process of purification, and the symbol of Christianity is an instrument of torture. Therefore, when Leibniz, Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, and Pope appeared with *optimism*, the general offence caused by it was due mainly to the fact that optimism is irreconcilable with Christianity. This is stated and explained by Voltaire in the preface to his excellent poem *Le Désastre de Lisbonne*, which also is expressly directed against optimism. This great man, whom I so gladly commend in the face of the slanders of mercenary German ink-slingers, is placed decidedly higher than Rousseau by the insight to which he attained in three respects, and which

testifies to the greater depth of his thinking: (1) insight into the preponderating magnitude of the evil and misery of existence with which he is deeply penetrated; (2) insight into the strict necessitation of the acts of will; (3) insight into the truth of Locke's principle that what thinks may possibly be also material. Rousseau, on the other hand, disputes all this by declamations in his *Profession de foi du vicaire Savoyard*, the superficial philosophy of a Protestant pastor. In this very spirit he also attacks, in the interests of optimism, Voltaire's fine poem just mentioned. This he does with distorted, shallow, and logically false reasoning in his long letter to Voltaire of 18 August 1756, which was devoted simply to this purpose. Indeed, the fundamental characteristic and *πρῶτον ψεῦδος*¹⁰ of Rousseau's whole philosophy is that he puts in the place of the Christian doctrine of original sin and of the original depravity of the human race an original goodness and unlimited perfectibility thereof, which had been led astray merely by civilization and its consequences; and on this he then establishes his optimism and humanism.

Just as in *Candide* Voltaire in his facetious manner wages war on optimism, so has Byron done the same, in his serious and tragic way, in his immortal masterpiece *Cain*, and for this reason he too has been glorified by the invectives of the obscurantist Friedrich Schlegel. If in conclusion, to confirm my view, I wished to record the sayings of great minds of all ages in this sense, which is opposed to optimism, there would be no end to the citations: for almost every one of them has expressed in strong terms his knowledge of the world's misery. Hence at the end of this chapter a few statements of this kind may find a place, not to confirm, but merely to embellish it.

First of all, let me mention here that, remote as the Greeks were from the Christian and lofty Asiatic world-view, and although they were decidedly at the standpoint of the affirmation of the will, they were nevertheless deeply affected by the wretchedness of existence. The invention of tragedy, which belongs to them, is already evidence of this. Another proof of it is given by the custom of the Thracians, first mentioned by Herodotus (v, 4), and often referred to later, of welcoming the new-born child with lamentation, and recounting all the evils that face it, and, on the other hand, of burying the dead with mirth and merriment, because they have escaped from so many great sufferings. This runs as follows in a fine verse preserved for us by Plutarch (*De audiend. poët., in fine*):

Τὸν φόντα θρηνεῖν, εἰς ὃσ' ἔρχεται κακά
 Τὸν δ' αὖ θανόντα καὶ πόνων πεπαυμένον

¹⁰ "First false step." [Tr.]

Χαίροντας εὐφημῶντας ἐκπέμπειν δόμων.
 (*Lugere genitum, tanta qui intrarit mala:*
At morte si quis finiisset miserias,
Hunc laude amicos atque laetitia exsequi.)¹¹

It is to be attributed not to historical relationship, but to the moral identity of the matter, that the Mexicans welcomed the new-born child with the words: "My child, you are born to endure; therefore endure, suffer, and keep silence." And in pursuance of the same feeling, Swift (as Sir Walter Scott relates in his *Life of Swift*) early adopted the custom of celebrating his birthday, not as a time of joy, but of sadness, and of reading on that day the passage from the Bible where Job laments and curses the day on which it was said in the house of his father that a man-child is born.

Well known and too long to copy out is the passage in the *Apology of Socrates*, where Plato represents this wisest of mortals as saying that, even if death deprived us of consciousness for ever, it would be a wonderful gain, for a deep, dreamless sleep is to be preferred to any day, even of the happiest life.

A saying of Heraclitus ran:

Τῷ οὖν βίῳ ὄνομα μὲν βίος, ἔργον δὲ θάνατος.
 (*Vitae nomen quidem est vita, opus autem mors. Etymologicum magnum, s.v. βίος; also Eustathius ad Iliad., i, p. 31.*)¹²

The fine lines of Theognis are well known:

Ἄρχῃν μὲν μὴ φῦναι ἐπιχθονίοισιν ἄριστον,
 Μῆδ' εἰσιδεῖν αὐγὰς ὀξέος ἡελίου
 Φύντα δ' ὅπως ὤκιστα πύλας Ἄϊδαο περῆσαι,
 Καὶ κῆσθαι πολλὴν γῆν ἐπαμησάμενον.
 (*Optima sors homini natum non esse, nec unquam*
Adspexisse diem, flammiferumque jubar.
Altera jam genitum demitti protinus Orco,
Et pressum multa mergere corpus humo.)¹³

In *Oedipus Colonus* (1225) Sophocles has the following abbreviation of this:

¹¹ "Pity him who is born, because he faces so many evils; but the dead are to be accompanied with mirth and blessings, because they have escaped from so many sufferings." [Tr.]

¹² "Life has the name of life, but in reality it is death." [Tr.]

¹³ "Not to be born at all would be the best thing for man, never to behold the sun's scorching rays; but if one is born, then one is to press as quickly as possible to the portals of Hades, and rest there under the earth." [Tr.]

Μὴ φῶναι τὸν ἅπαντα νι-
κᾶ λόγον · τὸ δ' ἐπεὶ φανῆ,
βῆναι κείθεν, ὅθεν περ ἦκει,
πολὺ δεύτερον, ὡς τάχιστα.

(*Natum non esse sortes vincit alias omnes: proxima autem est, ubi quis in lucem editus fuerit, eodem redire, unde venit, quam ocis- sime.*)¹⁴

Euripides says:

Πᾶς δ' ὀδυνηρὸς βίος ἀνθρώπων,
Κ' οὐκ ἔστι πόνων ἀνάπαυσις.
(*Omnis hominum vita est plena dolore,
Nec datur laborum remissio. Hippolytus, 189.*)¹⁵

And Homer already said:

Οὐ μὲν γὰρ τί πού ἐστιν ὀϊζυρώτερον ἀνδρὸς
Πάντων, ὅσσα δε γᾶϊαν ἔπι πνεῖσι τε καὶ ἔρπει.
(*Nom enim quidquam alicubi est calamitosius homine omnium,
quotquot super terram spirantque et moventur. Iliad, xvii, 446.*)¹⁶

Even Pliny says:

*Quapropter hoc primum quisque in remediis animi sui habeat, ex omnibus bonis, quae homini natura tribuit, nullum melius esse tem- pestiva morte. (Hist. Nat. 28, 2.)*¹⁷

Shakespeare puts into the mouth of the old King Henry IV the words:

O heaven! that one might read the book of fate,
And see the revolution of the times
. . . how chances mock,
And changes fill the cup of alteration
With divers liquors! O, if this were seen,
The happiest youth,—viewing his progress through
What perils past, what crosses to ensue,—
Would shut the book and sit him down and die.

¹⁴ "Never to be born is far best; yet if a man lives, the next best thing is for him to return as quickly as possible to the place from which he came." [Tr.]

¹⁵ "All the life of man is full of misery, and there is no end to affliction and despair." [Tr.]

¹⁶ "Of all that breathes and creeps on earth there is no more wretched being than man." [Tr.]

¹⁷ "Therefore may everyone acknowledge first of all, as a means for saving his soul, the view that, of all the good things meted out to man by nature, none is more valuable than a timely death." [Tr.]

Finally, Byron [*Euthanasia*]:

Count o'er the joys thine hours have seen,
Count o'er thy days from anguish free,
And know, whatever thou hast been,
'Tis something better not to be.

Balthasar Gracián also brings before our eyes the misery of our existence in the darkest colours in the *Criticón*, *Parte 1*, *Crisi 5*, at the beginning, and *Crisi 7* at the end, where he presents life in detail as a tragic farce.

But no one has treated this subject so thoroughly and exhaustively as Leopardi in our own day. He is entirely imbued and penetrated with it; everywhere his theme is the mockery and wretchedness of this existence. He presents it on every page of his works, yet in such a multiplicity of forms and applications, with such a wealth of imagery, that he never wearies us, but, on the contrary, has a diverting and stimulating effect.