

M I C H A E L H A U S K E L L E R



T H E M E A N I N G

of

L I F E

and

D E A T H

Ten Classic Thinkers on the Ultimate Question



B L O O M S B U R Y

The Meaning of Life and Death

ALSO AVAILABLE AT BLOOMSBURY

*The Philosophy of Death Reader: Cross-Cultural Readings on
Immortality and the Afterlife*, edited by Markar Melkonian
Enduring Time, Lisa Baraitser

The Meaning of Life and Death

Ten Classic Thinkers on
the Ultimate Question

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are trademarks
of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2020

Copyright © Michael Hauskeller, 2020

Michael Hauskeller has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

For legal purposes the Acknowledgements on p. ix constitute an extension
of this copyright page.

Cover design by Peter Somogyi

Cover image: Friedrich Justin Bertuch, *Bilderbuch für Kinder, 1790–1830*
(Eigenbesitz), Fabelwesen © Heidelberg University Library

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior
permission in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for,
any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given
in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher
regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased
to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3500-7363-0
PB: 978-1-3500-7364-7
ePDF: 978-1-3500-7365-4
eBook: 978-1-3500-7366-1

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

*Dedicated to the memory of my father, Erich Arthur Hauskeller
(1905-74)*

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix

Prelude x

- 1 The worst of all possible worlds: Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) 1
- 2 The despair of not being oneself: Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) 23
- 3 The interlinked terrors and wonders of God: Herman Melville (1819–1891) 43
- 4 The hell of no longer being able to love: Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–1881) 65
- 5 The inevitable end of everything: Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) 91
- 6 The joy of living dangerously: Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) 113
- 7 The dramatic richness of the concrete world: William James (1842–1910) 133
- 8 The only life that is really lived: Marcel Proust (1871–1922) 155
- 9 Our hopeless battle against the boundaries of language: Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) 179

10 The benign indifference of the world:
Albert Camus (1913–1960) 201

Postlude 223

Notes 224

Sources 231

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None of the material used in this book has been published previously. However, drafts of individual chapters have been read and commented on by a great number of people. I am immensely grateful to all of them, but I would like to thank in particular those colleagues and friends whose continued interest and support has made me feel that when I was writing this book I was doing something that mattered, something meaningful: Drew Chastain, Lewis Coyne, Nikos Gkogkas, Simon Hailwood, Peter Herrison-Kelly, Daniel Hill, Kyle McNease, Jelson Oliveira and Yiota Vassilopoulou. This book is for you.

PRELUDE

What is the point of living? If we are all going to die anyway, if nothing will remain of whatever we achieve in this life, why should we bother trying to achieve anything in the first place? Why does it matter what we do or not do? Or does it? Can we be mortal and still live a meaningful life? Questions such as these are not new. They have been asked for a long time. They are part of, or versions of, what is sometimes called the ‘ultimate’ question. The ultimate question concerns the meaning of life and death and is ultimate not only in the sense that it is the most fundamental question, reaching down to the very core of our existence, but also in the sense that it is the most difficult one to answer.

In Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Universe*, it takes the supercomputer Deep Thought several million years of calculations to come up with an answer to the ‘ultimate question of life, the universe and everything’. That answer is, as many readers will know, 42. That is of course not much of an answer because it doesn’t really tell us anything. If we had received no answer at all, that would have been just as instructive as this one. In the series, the cryptic nature of the answer is explained by the fact that those who programmed the computer had no clue what the question was that it was supposed to answer, and the vagueness and uncertainty of the question is indeed part of the problem. The ‘ultimate question of life, the universe and everything’ is, after all, not really a question at all. So what exactly is it that we want to know when we raise that question? Depending on what we are asking, the answer may not always be the same. And clearly there are questions to which ‘42’ is a perfectly reasonable and indeed the correct answer, for instance, ‘How much is six times seven?’ except that it probably wouldn’t occur to anyone that *this* might actually be the ultimate question of life. So what is it then?

One way of understanding the question is in terms of *purpose*. We can look at life, the universe and everything, and ask what all this is actually good for, what purpose it serves. When I recently asked my son Arthur (who is now ten years old and annoyingly smart), what he thought the meaning of life was, he did not have to think about it at all. Instead, he answered my question right away, without hesitation and with great confidence, as if he had already concluded his own personal calculations and then come up with the right answer (very much like Deep Thought, except much faster): ‘The meaning of life, Dad’, he said, ‘is death.’ When I asked why, he replied, ‘Because everything dies in the end.’ And then he added, ‘But the meaning of death, Dad, is life, because there could be no life without death.’

This really happened. (Did I mention he is a smart kid?) Needless to say, I was quite impressed. But then again, it was not quite the answer I was looking for. His answer may have been right, but it is still wrong because what it answers is not really the question I meant to ask when I asked him about the meaning of life. Let me explain: the meaning of life is indeed death if we understand meaning as the natural endpoint of an event or process. As far as we know, all life ends in death. Not only we as individuals and everything else that lives will die one day, some sooner, some later, but also life itself (or at least life on earth) will one day come to an end even if that end may still lie millions of years in the future. But my son’s answer actually suggested more than just that. There is an idea of purpose here, introduced in the second part of his response: if not only life but also death has a meaning, and if the meaning of death is life, then ‘meaning’ must mean more than just where something is headed. Death, after all, does not naturally end in life. There is, however, good reason to think that death is necessary for new life to arise. Not only do we all live off the death of others (the plants and animals we have to consume to be able to continue living); it is also difficult to see how there could ever be new life if the things that already are alive did not die at some stage. So perhaps that is *why* they die. Living beings would then come to an end to make room for new living beings. We may then answer the question ‘Why do we have to die?’ by saying that we have to die so that others can live. This would then be the *purpose* of our death, that which our death is

good for. And if the meaning of death is life in *that* sense, then we must see death as the meaning of life in the *same* sense, namely, in the sense that we live *in order to* die, that the purpose of our living is our dying.

However, even if that were true, and even if we believed it was, it would still not provide us with a satisfactory answer to that elusive 'ultimate question' about life. If we live in order to die, and die so that more like us can live, what then is that whole cycle of living and dying, and living and dying again, good for? If life leads to death, and death leads to life, where does *that* lead? What is all this living and dying about? We may now know why we live and also know why we die, but we still don't know why we live *and* die.

Yet even if we found an explanation for all of this, an explanation for why there are living and dying things in the first place, it would still not give us the answer we seek. No purpose that we can think of can do that, no matter how big and all-encompassing it is. If I am told that x happens for the sake of y, and y happens for the sake of z, then I can still, independent of what z is, wonder what *that* is good for. If everything serves, say, the glory of God, then what end does that glory serve? And once we start considering not only life, but the whole 'universe and everything', wondering what *its* end or purpose is ('Why is there something rather than nothing?'), then the question is hardly intelligible anymore because we seem to be asking for something that simply cannot exist, namely, something that is somehow more than, or outside of, everything.

Clearly, questions about purpose ('What is it good for?') can only ever lead us so far. Whatever purpose we may come up with, it is always possible for us to ask what the point of that purpose is, and to be told that we live and die for the glory of God or in order to make the universe more colourful and varied, or whatever other purpose you may want to suggest here, is not necessarily more satisfactory than if we were told the purpose is 42. The problem is that we find it difficult to look at life and death, or at any rate our own life and death and (for most of us) the life and death of our loved ones, as just another fact in the world, a fact like any other. Death certainly is widely regarded as more than that: it is *morally* objectionable, something that ought not to be and yet is. So when we ask about the meaning of death we don't really want to know what death is good for. We are looking not for an explanation but

for a *justification*. And since it is hardly possible for us to think of life and not also think of death, because we are well aware that there is no (or at least has never been so far) life without death, when we ask about the meaning of life we also want more than just an explanation in terms of an efficient or final cause of its existence. How it is possible that at some stage in the history of Earth life emerged from inanimate matter is an interesting scientific question, but answering it would not answer our ultimate question. Whether life has some purpose other than itself is also an interesting question, but answering it would not answer the ultimate question either, *unless* that purpose is so clearly worth all that was needed to realize it that the follow-up question ‘And what is *that* good for?’ simply no longer arises. In other words, we would need something that is not good for anything but itself (which means that it is not good *for* anything, but still undoubtedly *good*). Only such an intrinsic purpose (a means that is its own end) could conceivably allay or diffuse the moral scandal of our mortal lives. It would be something that helps us make sense of it all.

However, even if there were no death, even if we lived forever, we would probably still be asking the question, wondering what the point of life is. In any case, given how difficult it is even to figure out what exactly the questions is, it is hardly surprising that nobody seems to have found a conclusive answer yet. Many have tried, however, among them being some of the world’s greatest writers and philosophers. It is their work that this book is about: Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, Marcel Proust, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Albert Camus. In the philosophical and literary work of these writers, the connection between death and meaning has taken centre stage. This book explores their ideas, weaving a rich tapestry of concepts, voices and images, helping the reader to understand the concerns at the heart of their work and uncovering common themes and stark contrasts in their understanding of what kind of world we live in, what role death plays in it and what really matters in life.

The reader should, however, not expect to get an ultimate answer to the ultimate question here or anywhere else. Perhaps it is just not the kind of question that somebody else can answer for us. Such answers can only ever be tentative, to be read and understood as

suggestions how one might look at the world and our own place in it. The answers or viewpoints given in the following chapters are as deeply personal as the question is. What we find in these writers' work is not abstract theories: we find actual people, breathing, vulnerable individuals who when they reflect on life and death always also reflect on their *own* living and dying. We must see them as participant observers, fully immersed in the very reality they seek to understand. They did not merely have a theoretical, philosophical interest in the questions they explore, but an existential interest. They all lived, knowing that they were going to die. They all experienced the joys of living and the pain of living. And they are all dead now, just as we will be dead one day. *The Meaning of Life and Death* is just as much about those people as it is about their ideas and the way they expressed them.

For me, writing this book has been an extraordinary literary and intellectual adventure. Some of the authors featuring in it I hardly knew when I set out to write it. Others I hadn't read in a long time. But I knew enough to know that they all were likely to have interesting and important things to say about life and death, and I was not disappointed. I found reading their works and writing about them immensely rewarding. Here, there were whole worlds to discover, and for a little while I lived in these worlds, mining and savouring their hidden riches. Death should be a gloomy subject to read and write about, but it hasn't been for me. On the contrary, I felt uplifted by my engagement with all those wonderful writers. In their words, in the way they wrote about it, even death became a thing of beauty. Words matter. Thoughts cannot be fully abstracted from them. They not only reveal meaning but also create it. Words matter because they evoke images and tell stories that help us make sense of the world. That is why for me philosophy and literature seamlessly blend into one another. Words matter because the right words can capture and mirror the fragility and beauty of life, the tragedy of it and the comedy of it. And we all know there is plenty of both to be found in it. This book is about death, but it is also meant to be a celebration of life.

Note that the chapters that follow are exploratory, not critical. I do not engage with any of the vast literature that exists about the work of the authors I introduce and discuss. The reason for this is that I wanted to avoid all distractions, keeping my mind open for

what I would find in their work, letting them speak for themselves. I do not try to assess their contribution either, only occasionally pointing out inconsistencies or worrisome implications, and being in any case more interested in *what* they have to say than in whether they are 'right' or 'wrong'. In fact, I strongly suspect there is no right and wrong when it comes to the ultimate question(s).

CHAPTER ONE

The worst of all possible worlds

Arthur Schopenhauer
(1788–1860)

The misery of life

What is the nature of the world in which we find ourselves? Is it, at its very core, a good place or a bad place, friendly or hostile, orderly or chaotic, controllable or uncontrollable, rational or irrational? And where should we look for an answer? Traditionally, philosophers have tended to emphasize the rational, human-friendly side of the world, arguing that there is a good reason for why the world is as it is, and that part of that reason is that it needs to suit our desires and needs. The world has a purpose, and we are, in one way or another, but always in a rather good way, at the centre of it. There is someone or something out there that makes sure of this, some kind of cosmic director or playbook that intends us to be the heroes of the story that is the history of the universe: a god perhaps, or a world spirit, or our own pure and transcendental, world-building self or 'I'. Yet if that is so, why do we have to encounter so much adversity and suffer so much? Why are there so many horrible diseases, epidemics and natural disasters that blight so many by all accounts innocent

people's lives? Why do we keep fighting wars that maim and kill millions? Why can we not stop hurting each other? And why do we have to age and die? In short, why is there so much evil in the world, physical and moral, and how does all that fit into the alleged general purpose?

There is of course always a way to *make* things fit. Apparent contradictions are rarely so irreconcilable that a philosopher's speculative ingenuity cannot resolve them. Take for instance the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) who, in his *Theodicy* (1710), defended the common theological conception of God as a benevolent being whose power has no limits against the not unreasonable charge that if he really were both all-powerful and all-good, then the world could not possibly be as bad as it appears to be. The fact that there is so much evil and so much suffering in the world, much of it quite clearly undeserved, strongly suggests that either God is too weak to do anything about it (in which case he is not all-powerful) or he does not care (in which case he is not all-good). Leibniz, however, argued that such a conclusion would be unwarranted. For one thing because we know very little about why certain things are happening and what good may result from them, and for another because it stands to reason that even the most powerful being is constrained by what is logically possible. In other words, not even God can have his cake and eat it. He could not, for instance, have created a world whose inhabitants are both free and incapable of doing wrong, or a world in which people can prove their worth by overcoming their fears and resisting temptation if there is nothing to fear and nothing to be tempted by. Certain defects are simply necessary to allow the realization of certain greater goods, and since our understanding is limited it may not always be obvious to us *which* greater good an apparent evil serves. Accordingly, the reason why there are various evils in this world does not have to be that God could not have prevented them or did not want to prevent them. Perhaps the reason is simply that there was no other world possible that would have been *better*, all things considered, than the world we actually live in. We are, therefore, justified to continue to assume that God always wills the best and does the best, because even though this world is clearly not perfect, it may in fact be the best of all *possible* worlds. Some tough choices clearly had to be made, but even though we may not always be able to understand the

rationale behind those choices, we can be sure that God made them with our best interest at heart. This means that we cannot reasonably expect a better world and therefore have no reason to complain, because all is well, or at least as well as things can possibly be.

The problem with Leibniz's optimistic interpretation of the world's obvious imperfections is that it requires a lot of faith to be persuaded by it. Clearly, if we begin our inquiry with the *assumption* that God is all-good and all-powerful, then we must indeed conclude that this world, despite its many flaws, has to be the best of all possible worlds, because nothing else makes sense. However, the world is such that we cannot really *infer* from what we know about it that it must have been created by an all-powerful and infinitely good being. Perhaps the world's evils can be reconciled with the existence of such a God, but nobody in their right mind could contemplate the various evils that plague our lives and the extent of human (and other creatures') suffering and then honestly conclude, *on that basis*, that an infinitely powerful and infinitely good being is responsible for it. This has to be assumed or inferred from something other than experience. Yet if we make no such faith-based assumptions and choose as the starting point of our inquiry into the nature of the world our *experience* of it, then a very different conclusion suggests itself: that this world is not at all the best of all possible worlds. Very far from it: it is, instead, in many ways a truly horrible place.

The grounds for that conclusion were laid by the French philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778), who in 1762 published his novel *Candide: Or, the Optimist*, which shows its naive hero stumbling from one calamity to the next, witnessing a broad spectrum of human misery that puts his belief in the essential goodness of the world to a very severe test. *Candide* relentlessly parodies Leibniz's attempt to rationalize away the very evilness of evil by declaring it to be necessary for the realization of the greater and indeed greatest good. In Voltaire's view it was preposterous, even dangerous, to believe that the world was basically fine, and even more so that it cannot possibly be any better than it is. Doing so just invites complacency and amounts to complicity with evil, since its existence is assumed to be necessary and hence inalterable. Voltaire refused to believe that things cannot be any better than they are. He believed in the possibility and desirability of improvement, of

the human ability to make this world a better place. In that sense at least, Voltaire too was an optimist.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer on the other hand, whose work we will now turn to, was not an optimist. Not only did he despise and loathe those who attempt to persuade their reader that, ultimately, all is well, be it Leibniz with his best of all possible worlds or the post-Kantian German idealists of his own time, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, who thought that reason – or what they took it to be, namely, some kind of autonomous, self-sufficient agent (Reason with a capital R) – was present and active in everything there is. He also did not, as Voltaire did, believe that we can actually change the world for the better. For Schopenhauer, the world was a very bad place indeed, but there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. The suffering and misery that people experience in their lives is, after all, not an accidental feature of life: it is all-pervasive and part of its very essence (which shows us very clearly what life really is, namely: something that ought not to be). Even if we are lucky enough to avoid major catastrophes in our life, even if we are not hit by disease, the death of loved ones, natural disasters, human exploitation or destitution, as so many are, our life will still be only marginally better than theirs. Living does not accidentally and avoidably involve suffering, but essentially and necessarily. All life is, by its very nature, suffering (W1, §56, 405) because it is characterized by permanent striving, a constitutional restlessness that is fuelled by the mechanics of human need and desire. Our existence is a constant wanting. Living is desiring, and all desires mark absences that are felt as such. As long as we do not get what we want we suffer from that absence, and once we do get it, we desire something else. The more and the more intensely we desire, the more we suffer. Yet not desiring is not a viable option either, first of all because it is not normally in our power not to desire and secondly because the absence of specific desires comes with its own kind of suffering. If there is nothing left to desire, then boredom sets in, which is even more painful than desires (which are always unfulfilled since a fulfilled desire is no longer a desire) because it confronts us with the emptiness of our existence, which we find unbearable. Ironically, although we desire nothing more than to exist and to continue to exist, as soon as we have managed to fully secure our existence so that there is nothing left wanting, we find that we don't really know what to do with our existence.

So we try to kill time, find distractions, for no other end than to make our existence, once again, *unfelt* (W1, §57, 408). Boredom is even worse than desire: it can easily lead to despair, even suicide. Between the pain of desire and the pain of boredom, the best we can hope for is a temporary, always very short-lived reprieve from any marked degree of suffering. This brief reprieve is what we call happiness, and all that happiness can ever be: the momentary comparative absence of suffering.

Since this is the situation we find ourselves in, the world really is a pretty bad place. One could even say that far from being the best of all possible worlds, as Leibniz would have us believe, the world is in fact the *worst* of all possible worlds, for if it were any worse than it already is, it would not be able to exist at all (W2, ch. 46, 678). Our existence is, after all, so precarious, dependent on so many conditions, that it would just take a few small changes (such as a few more degrees of global warming) to push us over the edge and make us disappear. We can only survive for a while by constantly fending off death. Life is always a struggle, a permanent fight against non-existence. Most importantly, it is a fight we cannot win. In the end, non-existence awaits all of us (although given what life is the fact that it will eventually end, and quite soon too, might actually be the best thing about it) (W1, §59, 422).

Because things are in fact so bad, it would be downright bizarre to fall in line with a common idealistic presumption and to claim that life is a desirable condition and that the purpose of human life is happiness. For Schopenhauer, it is quite obvious that we are not here to be happy. If we are here for anything at all, if there is a purpose to our life, then it is much more likely, and much more in accordance with our own personal experience of life and with what we know about it, that we are here to suffer as much as possible, and then die (W2, ch. 46, 680). The question is why.

The world as a problem

In my 17th year, lacking all scholarly education, I became as deeply moved by the misery of life as Buddha in his youth, when he caught sight of disease, old age, pain, and death. The truth that the world so very clearly revealed to me soon overcame the

Jewish dogmas that I too had engrained, and I concluded that this world could not be the work of an infinitely good being, but might very well be that of a devil who brought creatures into existence so he could revel in the spectacle of their agony. (HN IV/1, 96)

Schopenhauer believed that a keen sense of the misery of life (which, in its extent and relentlessness, seems almost purposeful) had turned his younger self, the son of a well-to-do merchant first in Danzig (now Gdansk) and then in the buzzing commercial town of Hamburg, into a philosopher. The initial plan had been that he follow in his father's footsteps and eventually take over his company, but when he was seventeen his father died (possibly through suicide), and Schopenhauer broke off his apprenticeship and went on to study philosophy instead, first in Göttingen with the Kant critic 'Aenesidemus' Schulze and then in Berlin with Johann Gottlieb Fichte – whom he later denounced as a 'windbag' (W1, Preface to second edition, 18) – and the theologian and the founder of hermeneutics Friedrich Schleiermacher. In 1818, at the age of thirty, he published his magnum opus, the magnificent *The World as Will and Representation*, one of the truly great books in the history of philosophy. Schopenhauer himself knew it, too. Unfortunately, nobody else did at the time: the splash its confident author fully expected the book to make failed to materialize. It took thirty years and a second volume of supplements, published in 1844, before people started to take notice. The public appreciation of his work and his genius came late for Schopenhauer. When it eventually did he was already a bitter, unsociable, self-opinionated and misanthropic old man. Yet being finally vindicated and revered by a new generation of thinkers, those last ten years or so may still have been the happiest period of his life because he no longer had to suffer from the lack of recognition that he had been craving in vain for such a long time.

In almost all other respects, Schopenhauer's life had not been at all a bad one. He inherited a large chunk of his father's money, which lasted him a lifetime and allowed him to spend his time as he pleased. He never had to work for a living, which was just as well because his repeated attempts to gain a paid academic position all failed. He made it unscathed through the Napoleonic Wars that ruined and destroyed so many. He survived the cholera epidemic that ravished Berlin in 1831 and that killed his arch nemesis Hegel,

driving him away from Berlin to Frankfurt, where he spent the rest of his life quite comfortably. He may have occasionally feared for his life or his possessions, but in the end he always came out on top. Happy, however, he was not, which is a good thing because if he had been, *The World as Will and Representation* would never have been written. There would simply have been no reason to write it. According to Schopenhauer, all true philosophy starts with the knowledge of our mortality and the experience of suffering (W2, ch. 16, 180), either one's own or, if we are affected by it, that of others. The ones who are happy, those who take no issue with life and are largely oblivious to all the suffering in the world and the finiteness of our existence, do not philosophize. They do not ask why things are as they are. They just live their life without thinking much about it. There are certainly plenty of so-called philosophies out there that show little sign of any awareness that not all is well with the world, that some things, and indeed too many things in this life, are not as they ought to be, and for Schopenhauer such 'philosophies' are not really philosophies at all, but mere verbiage. 'A philosophy in which you cannot hear between the pages the tears, the wailing and gnashing of teeth, and the terrible uproar of the general mutual murder is not a philosophy' (Gespr, 337). Accordingly, philosophical wonder is at its core not a mere intellectual curiosity, but moral outrage. It stems from an awareness that things are not as they should be. All that suffering that people and indeed everything that is alive has to endure, not just occasionally, but on a regular basis, and all that killing and dying that never ends, blindly and stupidly repeated with every new generation, is not something we can just let stand. As philosophers, we must acknowledge the problem and seek to understand what is going on and what the *point* of all this is. Not to do so and instead to pretend that there is no problem, that all is well, is not only intellectually dishonest but also morally corrupt. The whole state of affairs is especially perplexing since most people's lives seem to be so banal and pointless that it is difficult to see how they should be worth all the trouble that it takes to live them.

It is really unbelievable how, looked at from the outside, empty and meaningless, and, felt from the inside, dull and unconscious the life of most people goes by. It is a weak longing and dragging oneself along, a dreamy tumble through the four stages of life towards death, accompanied by a series of trivial thoughts.

Those lives are like clockworks that have been wound up and that move without knowing why; and each time a human is conceived and born, the clock of human life is wound up anew, to repeat once again the same old story that has already been told countless times before.

And yet, each of those lives has to be paid for with many pains and a bitter death that has long been feared (W1, §58, 419). None of this makes any sense. Why invest so much in something that seems so utterly pointless? Such a sorry, nonsensical state of affairs certainly does not suggest that at the root of it all there is a wise and benevolent God or any other kind of rational conception and design. But if not that, what else can it be? What does the fact that all life is, by its very nature, condemned to suffering and death without offering much in return, tell us about the true nature of the world?

The true nature of the world

Schopenhauer starts his inquiry into the nature of the world with an endorsement of Immanuel Kant's critique of pure reason and what he sees as Kant's fundamental insight: that the world never appears to us the way it is in and by itself, but always in a mediated form. We are never directly with the things we perceive. The way we perceive things is determined by the way our perception and cognition works, so that what we end up perceiving is as much a reflection of our own nature as it is a reflection of the nature of things. In order for us to have knowledge of the world, it must appear to us in some way, so all we can ever be aware of and all we can ever talk and think about is the world *as it appears to us*. We can, therefore, never know what the world *really* is, beyond all appearance, except that it is something that appears to us the way it does. The thing-in-itself, as Kant called it, must remain unknown.

Schopenhauer seems to fully commit to this Kantian position in the very first sentence of *The World as Will and Representation*:

'The world is my representation:' – this is a truth that holds for every living and world-aware being, even though it is only man who can bring it to reflected abstract consciousness, and if he actually does, he has attained philosophical wisdom. He will

then realize that he knows no sun and no earth, but always just an eye that sees the sun, a hand that feels the earth, and that the world surrounding him only exists as representation, that is, always just in relation to something else, that which represents, which is he himself. (W1, §1, 31)

Now if we look at the way the world presents itself to us, we can easily see that there are some features that are so pervasive that they are common not only to all actual but also to all possible representations of the world: whatever we look at, it is always in time, in space and in some way causally connected to other objects and events, and we cannot even imagine an object that is not. Kant argued, and Schopenhauer fully agrees with him, that we must therefore assume that those most general features of our experience are not really *objects* of our experience at all, but rather the subjective conditions that allow those objects to appear in the first place. In other words, time, space and causality are not part of the *content* of our experience, not things or aspects of things that we find ‘out there’, in the supposedly external world. Instead, they pertain to the *form* of experience. This means, however, that we must assume that whatever the world really is, in and by itself, it is not subject to those conditions. Accordingly, the real world must be considered free of all causal relations, not spatially extended and, most importantly, timeless. Kant, of course, would not have put it this way. For him the world of appearances *was*, for all theoretical and most¹ practical purposes, the real world. It is, after all, the only knowable world and hence the only world that needs to concern us. In contrast, Schopenhauer makes it very clear that how the world appears to us is not how the world really is. Appearances deceive us; they foster an illusion. Our life – the life we *think* we live – is very much like a dream, except it is one we do not usually wake from.

Yet once we have understood that the world is our representation, once we have understood that it is not the ultimate reality, we quite naturally want to know what the *meaning* of the whole spectacle is. Kant, apparently, was not very much interested in that question. Schopenhauer certainly was. In fact, for him it was the only question that really mattered. And we have good reason to ask that question, not only because of the unsatisfactory nature of our lives, all the pain and suffering, but also because we feel that this cannot possibly be the last word about what the world is. If what we used