CHAPTER TWO

ASPECTS OF PESSIMISM

Pessimism is a philosophical theory. The theory attempts to show that evil preponderates over good. Suffering, disappointment, despair and death become the cardinal issues of pessimism. For an avowed pessimist, existence is fundamentally and essentially evil. To him the future holds no promise. The various aspects of pessimism are discussed in this chapter in order to show how Hardy and Schopenhauer are not pessimists.

To begin with, the pessimistic mood can be traced to early Babylonian and Egyptian scriptures. The Greek conception of life as being lived in the shadow of a fate from which death itself fails to offer a complete escape is a clear proof of this mood.

Even the healthy-minded Homer acknowledged that 'there is nothing more wretched than man, of all things that breathe and are'. In a matching manner Sophocles wrote in Oedipus at Colonus, "Not to be born is the most to be desired; but having seen the light, the next best is to go whence one came as soon as may be." In the Old Testament, The Book of Job and Ecclesiastes reflect the same struggle with the meaninglessness of life.
In Hellenistic and Roman thought, the nature of evil was a persistent problem that was shared by Epicureans, Stoics, Skeptics and Eleatics. Skepticism was often regarded as the intellectualistic counterpart of pessimism, but it also has often been the basis for an optimistic fideism.

In the East, in India, in particular, when the Brahmanic tradition emerged from the earlier Vedic religious forms, it partly concealed an underlying pessimism with the doctrine of Māyā. The world in which man suffers is the world of illusion.

The Renaissance in Europe during the 17th and 18th Century paved its way for changes in every walk of life, ushering in new vistas in the life of the people. In consequence, Europe freed itself from feudal and ecclesiastical shackles, and awoke to freedom of thought. Two departments of investigation engaged the attention of thinkers. The physical world with its manifest wealth of interest attracted many. Some of the great philosophers of this period were also men of high scientific attainment.

The echoes of the Reformation were heard in the rationalism of Descartes and Spinoza. Untrammelled by traditional presuppositions, people began to discuss afresh the origin, limits and credibility of knowledge. On the other hand, from Bacon to Hume, the history of modern philosophy is a long
record of efforts to reach the ultimate elements of knowledge.

All this slowly led to a new standpoint in philosophy which
owes its indebtedness to Kant. "Despite their endless
doctrinal differences, pre-Kantian thinkers were agreed
that human faculty, unaided by other powers, could arrive
at true knowledge". The chief objects of philosophical
investigation - God, freedom and immortality, were guaranteed,
not by a confession of faith vouched for by authority, but by
the exercise of reason.

"Curse God and die", "Pity God - who is a miserable
devil - and live to lessen his eternal wretchedness".

Startling as they may appear, these slogans of modern possi-
mism are no products of capricious self dissatisfaction.
They do not necessarily bear witness to broken ideals, to
adverse fortunes, or to embittered lives. They are rather
the results of mature reflection on the graver problems of
metaphysics, ethics and religion. 'The still sad music of
humanity' has indeed lost none of its sadness, but it is no
longer still.

"The Middle Ages have been regarded as having been
clouded with pessimism while Renaissance and 17th Century
have been regarded as comparatively optimistic, culminating
in L'Orrore exubérance. The discussions on the dominance of
good and evil were affected by the new perspective on human
life that evolved in the Renaissance - notably the emphasis upon individualism.3

When the relevance of religion came into prominence for any thinking, different tenets emerged within the religious teaching. Most religions combine a certain form of joyous response to divine Grace with a sense of anguish and guilt at man's failures. Most advanced religions reflect the deeply rooted intuition of natural and historical evils and of the human limitations.4

In the later part of the 19th Century there was a mild reaction and attack on the whole concept of pessimism. Some regarded it as a condition of the mind. "Pessimism is a modern malady", writes Tsanoff. "Man's life is an exhausting pursuit of sublime phantoms and illusory goods, from the attainment of which he expects what he never does and never can get felicity. Life is essentially self-deceiving, a vanity and futile misery."5 Whatever views the philosophers may express on pessimism, there is one unanimous opinion that the more actively conscious an individual is the greater will be his disappointment.

In fact happiness itself is related to and conditioned by desire. The multiplicity and intensity of our desires, when fulfilled, make up the sumtotal of our happiness.
Loss of contentment usually accompanies reflection, and then heart-searchings. While this might be true of epochs, its application to individuals carries greater conviction, chiefly because more evidence can be had. Similar ages do not recur so frequently as similar men, and the particular seems easier to understand than the general. Even the happiest times have seldom lacked a Diogenes.

History amply furnishes a succession of prophets, saints and poets for whom the prevalence of pain and sin was an insoluble or overwhelming mystery. For the writer of Job 'days are swifter than weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope', and the author of Eclesiastes, who saw 'no profit under the sun', had a fellow plaintiff or a contemporary, perhaps in the farther East. Kapila, the Sāṃkhya philosopher in India, announced that 'the complete cessation of pain, which is of three kinds, is the complete end of man'. At a later time under widely different circumstances, Stoic and Epicurean optimism gave way beneath the pressure of events.

It has been argued that pessimism has objective, no less than subjective, validity; as such it cannot be surpassed or mitigated by political caprice. Expanding a system is not to reduce the world to moral and spiritual impotence, but to 'set in motion a new order.'
Belief in fate has been branded as pessimism. Those who believed in fate, which is supposed ultimately to shape the human life, have come to be called pessimists.

The question whether man is free or not, to mould his own destiny is one which has exercised the minds of the philosophers since Greek mythology conceived of the fate as weaving a web of destiny from which no man can free himself. Socrates maintained that man could through knowledge influence his destiny whilst ignorance makes him the plaything of fate. Plato believed that man can, and does, defeat the purposes of the universe and its divine Creator. It is our duty to lead a good life, but we can live a foolish and wicked one by choice or accident. Aristotle considered virtue as 'a disposition or habit involving deliberate purpose or choice'.

The concept of Fate is found also in the Teutonic religion. Though the process of nature here is combined with the ethical process which terminates in the "Gotterdammerung", 'the twilight of the Gods', yet guilt and impermanence - to which Gods themselves are subject - operate as a tragic doom hanging over the world. The cosmic process, in short, comes to its consummation as something destined.

The last of the great philosophers of antiquity and of the great influences in moulding catholic theology was Plotinus (c.204-270). According to him soul is free to turn
away from sensuality and towards God. Even when incarnated in matter the soul does not entirely lose the ability to rescue itself.

Pelagius (c. 355-425), a Welsh priest, not only believed in free will but questioned the doctrine of original sin. Augustine believed in predestination that God had chosen those who in all future would be saved and who damned. This represents one faith in Christianity. St. Thomas Aquinas (1227-74) the greatest figure of Scholasticism and one of the principal saints in the Roman Catholic church, compromised between the two positions, believing man to be free. He yet held that Adam's sin was transmitted to all mankind and only divine grace could bring salvation.

The Renaissance thinkers viewed the world objectively and freely without any pre-conceptions. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) separated the fields of religion and science but left man subject completely to the will of God.

The Brahmanic tradition in India exemplified at best in the Upanishads and the non-dualism (Advaita) of Sankara, partly concealed an underlying optimism with the doctrine of mâyā. Accordingly the world in which men suffer is a world of illusion. Release from this follows from recognising this and the supplementary truth that men's true nature is one with the Brahman. Hence man is free essentially though he is very often caught up in the mesh of mâyā. However, the fatalistic doctrine of the eternal cycle of rebirth, together with the doctrine of Karma, in all forms of popular
Hinduism reflects a mood of pessimism. This element of pessimism is prevalent in the early Indian literature too. The famous Sanskrit poet Bhavabhuti (A.D.700) regards pathos (Karuna) as the only rasa and calls all other rasas the variation of the same called by different attributes. This theme is not the joys of a pleasure-loving great king or the vicissitudes of a Pururavas, but the bitter woes of Rama and Sita.

In fact, the belief in fatalism became prominent in Eastern religions. The Hindu doctrine of Karma entails the inevitable results of human actions and is supported by the idea of transmigration: a man will live more than one life, benefiting or suffering according to the good or bad deeds committed in all his forms of previous existence.

Buddhism also propagated the same doctrine, the basis of which is the doctrine of universal suffering in an infinite cycle of rebirth. Deliverance is possible for those who renounce all life, all desire; they may enter Nirvana.

The concept of destiny is also closely associated with pessimism. It is found in Greek tragedies. The Greek tragedy was basically serious and oriented towards religious problems - the nature of divine and man's destiny. The subject matter of a tragedy was drawn usually from some mythical legend of past. The treatment was serious and the
action often involved a reversal of fortune to stress some religious or ethical significance. Every Greek tragedy maintained a serious tone and it dealt with the relations of men and the gods and illuminated the problems of man and his destiny.

The Greek tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides became great masters, because they alone combined mastery of dramatic technique, poetic language and significant conceptions of man's life and fate in an artistic whole which still has deep emotional and intellectual appeal.

It is represented in the plays of Aeschylus that the furies are the subordinate instruments of vengeance, the general administration of the laws of justice and Destiny in the hands of Zeus. No man can escape from Destiny, or transgress the mighty inexorable will of Zeus. In Prometheus this position is represented in a somewhat different light, and that he is there depicted as subject to the decrees of Fate. 3

Euripides, like Sophocles, is often supposed to have taken a pessimistic view of human destiny. For him 'life is but a calamity' and that it is better for a man 'never to have been born'. (The Hippolytus, 190. The Alcestis, 802). Above all, there are pathetic lines in which he says that 'we should weep when a man is born into the world.'
because of the sorrows that await him: but when he dies and rests from his labours, we should bear him forth to burial with joy and gladness. A tragic poet regarded himself as an instrument of instruction, and the teacher of wisdom to the common people, observes A.E. Haigh.

The concept of destiny quite foreign to Romans entered into Roman literature around 239-94 BC through Greek literature. Though initially it appeared to some new and rare, the flood of translations of Greek literature by those like Livius and Andronicus made the concept popular which found its way to the Roman literature.

Two themes, destiny and human suffering are combined in the character of Aeneid himself. The Aeneid ends with the tragedy of Turnus and one aspect of the inner cohesion of the poem is the tension and balance between the triumphant notes of Rome's heaven-sent destiny, and the feelings of pathos and sorrow which Virgil constantly expresses for the suffering which accompanies men's life on earth. Virgil sought to make his epic significant for the whole destiny of men.

Even in Greece and Rome destiny is spoken of as the 'decrees of Zeus'. In the hands of tragedians like Sophocles and Homer, it acquires an ethical significance.

Christianity differs in its belief of fate. It repudiates on principle all belief in fate. Christianity regards
the Supreme Power of the world as rational will by which all things are made to promote the ends of the Divine Kingdom. Augustine believed in the loss of free will while Pelagius believed in it. Pelagius was declared a heretic for this reason. Only when freedom and necessity are recognised as being one in the Deity is it possible for Destiny to give place to Providence.

Only when man realises his freedom as that which lays upon him the obligation of self-determination in the sphere of conduct does he cease to resort to the occult arts; and only as he knows that all things can be utilised for the highest ends does he finally resign to the concept of fate. These beliefs constitute in essence, the Christian point of view. Nonetheless, it cannot be ruled out that Christianity is not totally free from belief in fate. The later Christianity shows its drift towards belief in fate in one form or another.

This panoramic survey indicates that fatalism takes root whenever men regard themselves as subject to an irresistible power, thought or as compelled or regulated by some other

"Whether the all-controlling force is figured as immanent or as transcendent, whether it is regarded as a mechanical, physical, unconscious necessity, or is credited with a volition
which, though conscious, is absolute and arbitrary in the working - in every case it is to be recognised as inevitable fate.\textsuperscript{11} In the wide diffusion of belief in fate among mankind and the multiforms it assumes, we see that vestiges of the belief persist even where a radically different view of the Universe prevails.

Whatever may be the belief one has in fate, that fate can be dissipated and destroyed only by the recognition of a rational good will determining the natural order with reference to an end and harmonizing therewith the law of necessary physical causality. Of course it is impossible to trace the purposive relations of every phenomenon in the world. It might therefore appear as if there were a place for Fate in one or other of its forms.

An irredeemable feature is that so long as men regards his position and his lot as something given, to which he must adapt himself, he cannot rise above the notion of fate; nor is there any deliverance possible. "Life is not a series of tig lamps symmetrically arranged, but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end," contends Virginia Woolf.\textsuperscript{12}

Some philosophers regarded the world as the operation of Will. Spinoza reduces to a question of degree the difference between intellect and Will. "There are no
Illing is but the outer side of thinking.

It is believed that the individual who acts must will; indeed not will in order to contemplate. Schopenhauer, as shall see, regards the primary Will as an impersonal and unconscious force. One positive aspect it has is that it is pregnant with indeterminate desire. Accordingly Will is neither God nor devil: it contains no principle nor is it subject to any law. It is in a way like Aristotle's soul, will follows the ascending scale of plant, brute and human life, attaining self-consciousness at length in man.

In one way or other, all these philosophers ask men to keep their desires in check, finding their chief good first in contemplation and then in ultimate nescience. The concept of Will aims to realize the purpose of the universe in one's own life. To this instinct there corresponds a feeling of the total environment of life: it may properly be called the sense of reality. "At various stages in our growth, we may discover built-in limitations to our knowledge; but not to our curiosity, not to our craving to improve form and order on the flux of which we are ourselves a part," observes Reuben Abel.14

"The world is partly malleable", according to him and "so are the human species"; and the society; and the person. Each is what has come to be, but the constraints
imposed by the past are not irresistible.\(^{15}\)

On the whole it has been viewed that the existence in this world is not a happy one. These philosophers believed that life is condemned because it does not yield balance of pleasure. "Pain is the positive, and pleasure is but the temporary alleviation of pain" observes Andrey A. Trofimov in his lecture on 'Pessimism and Immortality'. But most of these philosophers have faith in Immortality. For them it is a hope and also it is the vision of the spirit dissatisfied but works itself in total despair. For man demands assurance of unlimited scope in his striving after the Beyond.

According to Dr. Radhakrishnan, Indian thought is not altogether pessimistic as is sometimes made out to be. In his lecture on 'Indian Philosophy' he observes,

The emphasis on sorrow is sometimes interpreted as indicating an extravagant pessimism on the part of the Indian mind. It is not so. The religion of Vedas certainly was more joyful, but it was a lower form of religion, where thought never penetrated beneath the husk of things. It was a religion expressing the delight of men at being in a world full of pleasures. The gods were feared and also trusted. Life on earth was simple and sweet innocence. The spiritual longing of the soul rebukes light-hearted joyousness, and provokes reflection on the purpose of man's existence. Discontent with the actual is the necessary precondition of every moral change and spiritual rebirth. The pessimism of the Upanishads is the condition of all philosophy. Discontent prevails to enable man to effect an escape from it.
If there is no way of escape, if no deliverance is sought after, then dissatisfaction is mischievous. The pessimism of the Upanishads has not developed to such an extent as to suppress all endeavour and generate inertia. There was enough faith in life to support all genuine search for truth.17 "Within the limits of Upanishads there are indeed few explicit references to the misery of life caught in the ceaseless cycle of death and birth. And its authors are saved from pessimism by the joy they feel at the message of redemption they proclaim.18

Dr. R. C. Bhattacharjee maintains that "Life is a stage in spiritual perfection, a step in the passage to the infinite. It is time for preparing the soul for eternity. Life is no empty dream and the world is no delirium of spirit." Similarly existentialists regarded that our life is a 'nothingness' but the individual must find renewed meaning within himself.

To Heidegger ontologically 'dread' reveals Nothing to us and is afraid of Nothing. In 'dread' we see 'what is' shaking on the very precipice of annihilation against the infinity of Nothing at all. Life ends ultimately in death. Death, which is annihilation helps to constitute our nature. Mind is brought against not being in its most striking form. Man tries to conceal this horror of death by welding it with ceremony.

To Sartre the world is a mass of solid brute facts. The world weighs heavily upon man. The world is slimy. This has led some to characterise Sartre as dismal and depressing.
CHAPTER III
LIFE: THE PHILOSOPHER'S VIEWPOINT: SCHOPENHAUER