

Schopenhauer's metaphysics of appearance and Will in the philosophy of art

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INTRODUCTION

The essays collected in this volume are previously unpublished writings by some of the most respected contemporary scholars of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy and the history and philosophy of art. The idea of the collection is to highlight three aspects of Schopenhauer's aesthetics: his metaphysics and psychology of artistic creativity, his theory of the appreciation of beauty and the sublime, and his influence on the development of the philosophy and practice of the fine arts.

I hope that while engaging the specialist the book will also serve as a friendly introduction for those who have not yet looked into Schopenhauer's pages, and for whom no prior knowledge of Schopenhauer is assumed. The reader will find here a stimulating selection of detailed, comprehensive, but highly accessible studies in Schopenhauer's aesthetics, in the history and theory of art from Plato to major thinkers of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in the evolution of idealism, symbolism, and romanticism in music, literature, painting, and architecture.

Schopenhauer's impact on such diverse thinkers as Nietzsche, Freud, and Wittgenstein is widely recognized, and his insights into the metaphysics of the human condition have been touchstones for generations of philosophers, social-psychological theorists, and others in search of a personal philosophy. The idealism set forth in Schopenhauer's system serves as a counterpoise to the post-Kantianism of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, against whom Schopenhauer reinterprets Kant's critical idealism as its self-proclaimed only legitimate heir.¹ But Schopenhauer's thought also influenced a surprising number of musicians, writers, and artists, including

Dale Jacquette

Richard Wagner, Thomas Hardy, Emile Zola, Edgar Allan Poe, Joseph Conrad, Eugene Delacroix, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, and William Butler Yeats.

In his monumental treatise, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer offers a simply conceived but powerful metaphysical distinction between the world as it appears to mind in *idea*, and as it exists outside of thought behind the world of appearance as *Will*. The theory is presented with remarkable élan and conviction, interwoven with a marvelously eclectic learning that combines the teachings of Plato, Immanuel Kant, J. Wolfgang Goethe, the Upanishads, and other sources, into an extraordinary grand synthesis. The exposition is enlivened with sharp criticism and bitterly sardonic polemics, and served up in an elegant aphoristic prose that takes the best English and French writing as its literary model in preference to the breathless, often deliberately enigmatic *geisteswissenschaftlichen* philosophical paradigms of nineteenth-century German idealism.²

The essays to follow are arranged under these headings: “The work of art: Schopenhauer on the nature of artistic creation,” “The experience of beauty: Schopenhauer’s theory of aesthetic encounter,” and “Schopenhauer’s enduring influence on the arts: idealism and romanticism.” Parts I and II examine Schopenhauer’s thesis of the subject-object symbiosis as it relates to his analysis of creative artistry and art appreciation within the framework of his ontology of appearance and Will. Part III explores Schopenhauer’s impact on the history of the fine arts, and the influence of his aesthetics on a formidable array of philosophers, artists, and art critics. To better understand the problems our authors address, we must begin with an account of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics as background to the principal themes of his philosophy of art.

APPEARANCE AND WILL

The world for Schopenhauer has two aspects. One side is shown to us, the other kept hidden. The fundamental metaphysical distinction of Schopenhauer’s system divides the world as Will from the world as idea or representation (*Wille* and *Vorstellung*). Schopenhauer invokes the Vedic myth of the veil of Maya that conceals reality from mortal eyes as an emblem of the distinction between the world as it appears to the mind and as it is in itself.

Metaphysics of appearance and Will

The world we experience in sensation as the object of empirical science is a mere fabric of appearance. The world in reality, as it is independently of how it subjectively appears to mind or as it would exist even if there were no minds, is referred to by Schopenhauer as the *thing-in-itself* (*Ding an sich*). Schopenhauer adapts the distinction between appearance and thing-in-itself from Kant's transcendental philosophy. The thing-in-itself is the world as it is intrinsically or in itself, apart from its apprehension by thought. Kant claims that the thing-in-itself is strictly unknowable, since it exists without the mind. Schopenhauer, however, speaks metaphorically of the thing-in-itself as Will, by which he means monstrous blind urging, unindividuated force or power, or endless undirected striving. To explain why Schopenhauer interprets thing-in-itself as Will, and his thesis that we can look beyond the world of appearance to discover the world as Will, we must consider his proposal for overcoming the impenetrability of Kant's thing-in-itself.³

By its very nature, Kant's *Ding an sich* is descriptively unknowable. Knowledge of the world is necessarily limited to the phenomena of appearance in the mind's conception. Kant, in the section of the *Critique* on "The Refutation of Idealism" (the so-called B-edition deduction or B-deduction), claims nevertheless to prove the existence of the thing-in-itself. Kant argues that the thing-in-itself must exist, since otherwise it would not be possible to experience consciousness as determined in time. There must be something external to mind, a reality that transcends the flow of consciousness, by reference to which the events of consciousness can be fixed. Whatever determines the times of conscious occurrences will be like the signs posted along a river to mark our place, that cannot show distance if they are drifting with us in the boat. The reference point for the occurrence of thought must be something other than thought, a thing unto itself, if thought is to be determined in time. Yet as a bare existence claim, Kant's proof tells us nothing about what the thing-in-itself is like. We do not know, and cannot even intelligibly imagine, whether the thing-in-itself is one or many, nor whether it resembles or fails to resemble the world of appearance. To know the thing-in-itself would be to place it under what Kant calls the pure forms of intuition or categories of understanding, whereas the thing-in-itself by definition stands entirely outside the mind's conceptual apparatus.⁴

Schopenhauer accepts a modified version of Kant's distinction between the world as appearance and as thing-in-itself. He agrees

Dale Jacquette

with Kant that in the ordinary sense the thing-in-itself is unknowable. But unlike Kant he acknowledges two nonrepresentational modes of access to the insight that the world beyond appearance, the Kantian *Ding an sich*, is Will. It is in the phenomenology of the individual empirical will that we experience in everyday wanting and desiring, and particularly in the frustration of our wants and desires, that we acquire some inkling of the world as Will. We can gain an understanding of the world without the mind through ascetic (and moral) suffering and self-denial, or by aesthetic contemplation, because suffering and aesthetic contemplation in suppressing individual willing reveal nonrepresentational aspects of the world as it is in reality. Schopenhauer admits that we cannot strictly *know* even this about the thing-in-itself. But we can characterize Will metaphorically in terms borrowed from our experience of the world as idea. Thus, Schopenhauer thinks that we can speak with a hefty grain of salt about the world as Will, and of Will as pure blind urging or striving, energy or activity, or what the Greeks called *eros*. This for Schopenhauer is the unchanging metaphysical substance of the world. Schopenhauer insists that we cannot thematize Will representationally by offering a discursive scientific account of its properties. The world as Will is beyond description, outside of Kant's categories of space, time, and causation, and of quantity, quality, relation, and modality. We cannot know what the world is in reality, because we cannot know anything concrete about Will. But in unscientific nondiscursive ways we can at least come to recognize that the world in reality is Will.⁵

The world as Will does not literally cause the world as it appears to thought, because causation strictly speaking obtains only within the world as idea. The world as Will is rather the underlying *transcendental ground* of the world as idea. Schopenhauer claims:

the objective world, the world as representation, is not the only side of the world, but merely its external side, so to speak . . . the world has an entirely different side which is its innermost being, its kernel, the thing-in-itself. This we shall consider in the following book, calling it “[W]ill” after the most immediate of its objectifications. (WWR 1, 30–31)

In WWR 2, Chapter XVIII, “On the Possibility of Knowing the Thing-in-Itself,” 191, Schopenhauer declares: “In 1836, under the title *Über den Willen in der Natur* (second edition, 1854), I already published the really essential supplement to this book, which contains the most characteristic and important step of my philo-

Metaphysics of appearance and Will

sophy, namely the transition from the phenomenon to the thing-in-itself, given up by Kant as impossible.” The difference, which in Schopenhauer’s view constitutes his principal innovation over Kant’s critical philosophy, is that whereas Kant claims that the thing-in-itself is necessarily unknowable, Schopenhauer holds that we can at least nonrepresentationally arrive at an understanding of the world as Will.

First, Schopenhauer grants Kant’s point that representational knowledge is limited only to phenomena in things as they appear:

on the path of *objective knowledge*, thus starting from the *representation*, we shall never get beyond the representation, i.e., the phenomenon. We shall therefore remain at the outside of things; we shall never be able to penetrate into their inner nature, and investigate what they are in themselves, in other words, what they may be by themselves. So far I agree with Kant.

(*WWR* 2, 195)

He admits that we experience only an ephemeral world of accidental appearance individuated by the mind’s innate categories and concepts under the fourfold root of the principle of sufficient reason, the principle that a true nontranscendental explanation or sufficient reason exists for every aspect of the world as idea.⁶

But Schopenhauer sees his main contribution to philosophy as going beyond Kant’s prohibition on knowledge of transcendental reality. This is accomplished in two ways, by specifying another sense of nonrepresentational knowledge of the thing-in-itself, and by identifying a field of application in which nonrepresentational “knowledge” can function, from which standpoint the mind can gather nonrepresentational knowledge about the nature of the real transcendental world.

I have stressed that other truth that we are not merely the *knowing subject*, but that *we ourselves* are also among those realities or entities we require to know, that *we ourselves are the thing-in-itself*. Consequently, a way *from within* stands open to us to that real inner nature of things to which we cannot penetrate *from without*. It is, so to speak, a subterranean passage, a secret alliance, which, as if by treachery, places us all at once in the fortress that could not be taken by attack from without.

(*WWR* 2, 195)

The city of forbidden knowledge of the world as Will is entered by the Trojan horse of individual willing. We can lift the veil of Maya to gain nonrepresentational knowledge of the real transcendental world through empirical experience of desire or wanting in what Schopenhauer calls the will to life.

Dale Jacquette

I admit this [the limitation of perception to phenomena excluding the thing-in-itself] of everything, but not of the knowledge everyone has of his own *willing*. This is neither a perception (for all perception is spatial), nor is it empty; on the contrary, it is more real than any other knowledge.

(*WWR* 2, 196)

Kant despairs of knowing the thing-in-itself. But Schopenhauer thinks that anyone in principle has direct access to reality through willing. The experience of individual will to life nonrepresentationally reveals the hidden nature of the transcendental world. Schopenhauer distinguishes between Will as thing-in-itself and individual will, but maintains that willing is the most immediate objectification of reality as Will.

Therefore in this sense I teach that the inner nature of every thing is [*Will*], and I call the [*Will*] the thing-in-itself. In this way, Kant's doctrine of the inability to know the thing-in-itself is modified to the extent that the thing-in-itself is merely not absolutely and completely knowable; that nevertheless by far the most immediate of its phenomena, distinguished *toto genere* from all the rest by this immediateness, is its representative for us. Accordingly we have to refer the whole world of phenomena to that one in which the thing-in-itself is manifested under the lightest of all veils, and still remains phenomenon only in so far as my intellect, the only thing capable of knowledge, still always remains distinguished from me as the one who wills, and does not cast off the knowledge-form of *time*, even with *inner* perception.

(*WWR* 2, 197–198)

This is already saying a great deal more about the thing-in-itself than Kant permits. Schopenhauer regards his continuation of the Kantian program as an important philosophical discovery precisely because he has allowed himself to draw a fine distinction between knowledge in the narrow sense, by which he admits that the *Ding an sich* is representationally unknowable, and nonrepresentational knowledge that is not acquired by ordinary cognition, but by direct phenomenological acquaintance with willing as the most direct manifestation of reality in the world of appearance.

The problem of trying to communicate what cannot be said now emerges for Schopenhauer. The experience of willing discloses the nature of reality as whatever immediately objectifies desire, striving, urging. Schopenhauer's claim that Will is unknowable does not contradict his efforts to use an ideational term ("Will") to put some flesh on Kantian transcendental bones. Schopenhauer does not say that willing as we experience it is literally thing-in-itself. It is rather that, by calling thing-in-itself Will, for want of a better word, Schopenhauer tries to express in nondiscursive metaphorical lan-

Metaphysics of appearance and Will

guage something that is only nonrepresentationally revealed, in something like a mystical experience.

AESTHETIC GENIUS: SUFFERING AND SALVATION

The two noncognitive channels through which Schopenhauer contends we can learn about the world as Will are ascetic (and moral) suffering and aesthetic contemplation. Sainly self-denial and the overwhelming experience of beauty and the sublime offer the ascetic and aesthetic genius a momentary nonrepresentational encounter with the thing-in-itself. Our concern is primarily with Schopenhauer's views on aesthetic contemplation, but his discussion of saintly suffering provides a useful introduction and point of departure.

Why are suffering and aesthetic contemplation able to offer a glimpse of reality, of the world as Will? Suffering is nonrepresentational, according to Schopenhauer, in the sense that it does not depict the phenomenal world. When we suffer pain or frustrations of desire, the experience of suffering by itself, unlike perception, is not a representation of the phenomenal world. To suffer is therefore to experience nonrepresentational reality as intimately as possible within the confines of empirical psychology. What individual suffering reveals about reality is that it is a force necessarily at odds with itself, in essential self-conflict. If this were not so, reality could not move the world from within through its restless activity, but would be at peace. What ascetic experiences reveal in breaking-down subjective consciousness of the distinction between subject and object is something Schopenhauer, if he is to use language at all for the representationally unknowable, chooses to call Will. For Schopenhauer, Will objectifies itself most nakedly as individual suffering, because it is in these experiences that willing encounters the harshness of an uncontrollable personally unaccommodating reality. The suffering of will in the world of appearance is also the basis for Schopenhauer's much-misunderstood romantic moral pessimism, which he regards as a consequence of the most profound truth of metaphysics, that there can be no harmony of individual wills in a world that manifests Will as reality in essential self-conflict.

Any acute suffering may reveal to the sufferer the world as Will. Ecstasy and other emotions of like intensity do not have the same effect, because they necessarily involve the will's attachment to

Dale Jacquette

objects of desire. Schopenhauer believes that individual willing is more often an obstacle to attaining insight into the thing-in-itself, because the will persists in seeking objects in the phenomenal world (alleviation of pain, victory over an adversary) that may temporarily satisfy its frustrated desires. The best route through suffering to an understanding of the world as Will for Schopenhauer is therefore more specifically suffering induced through deliberate efforts at suppressing the will. This involves the disciplined self-denial of asceticism, leading by degrees from deprivation of the will's longing for such bodily necessities as food, water, companionship, and sleep, to the experience of a mystical loss of individuality and dissolution of the subject-object distinction. If desire intrudes, the spell is broken, and individual will is no longer effectively suppressed, disengaging the ascetic's nonrepresentational access to the world as Will.

With important differences, much the same is true of aesthetic contemplation. Aesthetic experience is like suffering in that it involves a brief but pregnant suppression of the individual will. What Schopenhauer means by this is that in contemplating nature or art, the aesthetic genius stands so enraptured in an encounter with beauty or the sublime that there occurs something like a mystical union of the subject with the object in a dissolving of the subject-object distinction. The desires of individual will are overruled by absorption in the moment of aesthetic appreciation, and genius thereby passively receives the Platonic Ideas instantiated as perceptible grades of the Will's objectification in the world as idea.

Schopenhauer distinguishes between Platonic Idea (*Idee*) and idea or representation (*Vorstellung*), just as he distinguishes between Will as thing-in-itself and individual will. Platonic Ideas are the archetypal forms of nature, whereas ideas or representations are their superficial appearances. Schopenhauer holds that the Ideas are acquired by sensory experience of ideas. But since they are imprinted on genius during episodes of will-suppressed perceptions of ideas, something more is needed to make sense impressions into abstract Platonic Ideas. Genius also requires imagination, according to Schopenhauer, by which it generalizes perceived natural forms into typified abstract Ideas. The philosophical and aesthetic genius for Schopenhauer does not merely report on the Platonic Ideas received from nature in moments of will-suppressed aesthetic contemplation, but completes and perfects the forms in imagination, and then finds ways to represent them in philosophy and art. The

Metaphysics of appearance and Will

genius finishes what nature attempts but fails to achieve because of the inevitable conflict of forms in the world as idea resulting from the essential self-conflict of the world as Will. Genius is a collaboration between the passive reception of Platonic Ideas and the active role of imagination in completing and perfecting the forms nature reveals.

the knowledge of genius would be restricted to the ideas of objects actually present to his own person, and would be dependent on the concatenation of circumstances that brought them to him, did not imagination extend his horizon far beyond the reality of his personal experience ... the man of genius requires imagination, in order to see in things not what nature has actually formed, but what she endeavoured to form, yet did not bring about, because of the conflict of her forms with one another ... (WWR 1, 186)

In its efforts to grasp and communicate the Ideas received from its experience of nature, genius also suffers more acutely than ordinary persons. Like the prisoner released from Plato's cave, the philosophical or aesthetic genius, having caught sight of the forms of reality, is compelled to share nonrepresentational knowledge with those still left behind in darkness.⁷ To undertake such a thankless labor is to be condemned to inevitable misunderstanding by those who have not experienced the revelation. It is also to incur additional suffering in acquiring specialized skills and applying every energy of mind and body to harness nondiscursive representational media for the expression of nonrepresentational concepts. Schopenhauer explains:

genius is the ability to leave entirely out of sight our own interest, our willing, and our aims, and consequently to discard entirely our own personality for a time, in order to remain *pure knowing subject*, the clear eye of the world ... (WWR 1, 186–187)

the *punctum saliens* of every beautiful work, every great and profound thought, is an entirely objective perception. But such a perception is absolutely conditioned by a complete silencing of the will which leaves the person as pure subject of knowing. The aptitude for the prevalence of this state is simply genius. (WWR 2, 370)

the most excellent works of any art, the noblest productions of genius, must eternally remain sealed books to the dull majority of men, and are inaccessible to them. They are separated from them by a wide gulf, just as the society of princes is inaccessible to the common people ... [The *Idea*] is never known by the individual as such, but only by him who has raised himself above all willing and all individuality to the pure subject of knowing. Thus it is attainable only by the man of genius, and by him who, mostly with the assistance of works of genius, has raised his power of pure knowledge, and is now in the frame of mind of the genius. (WWR 1, 234)

Dale Jacquette

It is this connection, understanding suffering and aesthetic contemplation as an opaque nonrepresentational window on Will as thing-in-itself, that Schopenhauer regards as his greatest triumph. He sees it as a direct continuation of Kant's critical idealism that takes the next vital step forward by nondiscursively presenting privileged knowledge of natural forms and the thing-in-itself as Will. To have determined that the world in reality is Will, representationally unknowable in itself, but discernible in individual willing, is to have far outstripped Kant's colorless concept of the *Ding an sich*. Schopenhauer restricts knowledge in the ordinary sense to the world of appearance, but admits nonrepresentational ascetic and aesthetic insight into the supersensible world as Will.⁸

These two kinds of experience moreover offer the only hope of salvation from the inevitable sufferings of individual will. As beings of empirical psychology, Schopenhauer maintains, we are never fully at peace, except insofar as we can suppress individual willing. Salvation, dimly perceived in its true terms by popular religions, requires ascetic self-denial or loss of individuality in aesthetic contemplation. It is in these epiphanal moments that the self paradoxically is most free from itself, from the mental perturbations by which individual will as the direct phenomenological objectification of Will is otherwise tormented. To live is to will, and hence to suffer, and no one more so for Schopenhauer than the aesthetic genius. The artist suffers extraordinarily, according to Schopenhauer, because genius experiences the greatest frustrations of creative activity in its compulsion to represent nonrepresentational knowledge.

If the purpose of art were merely to escape from the strivings of individual will, the aesthetic genius could simply bury itself in phenomena, in the world as idea. This is what most of humanity does, disregarding the thing-in-itself or world outside the mind and thinking only of the evanescent world of appearance. Schopenhauer remarks this aesthetic mediocrity sometimes with a pitying sigh, sometimes with a contemptuous sneer. He believes that genius can never be satisfied with such a vulgar solution having once grasped the fundamental distinction between reality and appearance, the world as Will and idea. Schopenhauer considers immersion in and exclusive concern with phenomena naive and intellectually demeaning, an attitude fit only for humans who have barely risen above the condition of animals. He concludes it is the mark of greater intellect to devalue phenomena and embrace the hard truth of the inescapable turmoil of the world as Will.⁹