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Introduction

Arthur Schopenhauer lived from 1788 to 1860. His thought took shape early in his life, in the decade from 1810 to 1820, yet until the 1850s he was virtually unknown, and the period in which he became a powerful influence began only in the second half of the nineteenth century. He admired Rossini and Bellini but inspired Wagner, knew Goethe, and met Hegel, but was an influence after his death on Thomas Mann, Nietzsche, and the young Wittgenstein. His vision of the world is in some respects more bleak and cynical than we might expect for its period, more akin to that of existentialism or even of Samuel Beckett. Schopenhauer's world is neither rational nor good, but rather is an absurd, polymorphous, hungry thing that lacerates itself without end and suffers in each of its parts. None of us is in control even of our own nature; instead, we are at the mercy of the blind urge to exist and propagate that stupefies us into accepting the illusion that to be a human individual is worthwhile. In truth it would have been better had nothing existed. Although this philosophy originated in a pre-Darwinian and pre-Freudian age, it has a prescient cutting edge that can make the later time of evolutionary theory, psychoanalysis, and the 'Great' War seem the more truly Schopenhauerian era. 'By what mere blind propulsion did all these thousands of human creatures keep on mechanically living?' wrote Edith Wharton in a war novel of 1923,[1] sounding, perhaps unknowingly, a Schopenhauerian note.

Yet Adorno's irresistible description of Schopenhauer as 'peevish ancestor of existential philosophy and malicious heir of the great speculators'[2] has some justice to it. If Schopenhauer can appear antiquated, it is at least in part because his philosophy aspires to give a unitary metaphysics of the whole world, in something of the old

spirit of Spinoza or Leibniz, albeit with reversed value polarity. In his day and ours he has always had the air of an outsider among philosophers, and it is safe to say that little twentieth-century philosophy has arisen from close engagement with his work. It is hard for analytical philosophy to claim him as a forerunner. One reason for this, conventionally, is that he is too literary and rhetorical a writer, too much prone to metaphorical effusion and dogmatism, too little exercised by rigour and argument. In fact Schopenhauer argues constantly, debates with all the major and some minor figures in philosophy's past, and is as committed as any thinker has been to the goal of truth. A more profound reason for his appearing alien to analytical philosophers may lie in his assumption about the role and prime subject matter of philosophy. Analytical philosophy has tended to claim as its own those who give some priority to questions about scientific enquiry and the philosophy of logic. If a thinker places art and aesthetic experience at the pinnacle of human achievement, assigning them a higher cognitive value than the sciences, and has as his driving pre-occupation the struggle for significance in a life riven by suffering, he is less amenable to co-option. And the grand metaphysical aspiration makes him an unsympathetic figure to the likes of scientific naturalists and logical positivists.

The German philosophical tradition in which Hegel has a central place is also unlikely to look favourably on Schopenhauer. This is not just because of his contempt for the career academics, Hegel and Fichte, whose tedious vocabulary and, as he thought, wrongheadedness and intellectual dishonesty prevented him from serious argumentative engagement with the idealist mainstream of his early years. The rift is deeper than that: to anyone brought up in a more or less Hegelian way, the brazenly ahistorical and apolitical cast of Schopenhauer's thought must also place him beyond the pale. Schopenhauer's deepest concerns are with what it is to be a human individual anywhere at any time, how one relates to one's body, what suffering is, what happiness is and is not, whether one is free, how life can become bearable, how to regard one's own death, what in the individual is unconscious and uncontrollable, and what it is for the individual to make and experience art. History is quite literally an irrelevance for him. This made him, as Nietzsche said, 'un-German to the point of genius'.[3] And for the so-called continental philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century Schopenhauer's place at

or beyond the margins of sight is probably over-determined by his metaphysical conservatism and commitment to timeless truths, his anti-Hegelianism, his neglect by formative figures such as Heidegger or Levinas, and the apparent readiness of today's readers to take at face value (wrongly, I would argue)[4] the rude and dismissive remarks made about him by the later Nietzsche.

Yet there are reasons to think that twentieth-century philosophy has more in common with Schopenhauer than it realizes. As the history of modern philosophy becomes more intensively and more responsibly studied by philosophers, the fact that Schopenhauer – widely read, scholarly, and fiercely argumentative – locates himself in continuity with Hume, claims to solve problems initiated by Descartes, debates the relation of Kant to Berkeley, criticizes the Leibnizian tradition, and appropriates some ideas from Spinoza should alert us to the extent of the common inheritance we share with him. He belongs in any narrative of how modern philosophy developed from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. One feature uniting many kinds of recent philosophy is an increasing recognition that we are working within the legacy of Kant, and interest in retrieving what happened in the intellectual world immediately after Kant is steadily growing. Schopenhauer is a comparatively early and unique inhabitant of this post-Kantian landscape, relating to his admired predecessor both as critic and as revisionary follower. Then again, looking forward, if Schopenhauer was an influence on Wittgenstein, Freud, and Nietzsche, he may have played a significant, if concealed, part in the development of twentieth-century philosophy itself.

Sometimes Schopenhauer is treated piecemeal by contemporary philosophy. In aesthetics we might recognize him as the prototypical 'aesthetic attitude' theorist (one who believes that aesthetic value attaches to objects when we experience them in detachment from desire and conceptualization) and as a proponent of one of the most striking theories of musical expression. In ethics we find him claimed as an early anti-Kantian virtue ethicist. In feminist studies he is the arch-misogynist. In the philosophy of psychoanalysis he is an adumbrator of the conception of the unconscious, in Nietzsche studies the old enemy to be exorcised and castigated, and in studies of Kant's epistemology the sharp critic who takes Kant to task over his conception of causality and much besides.

All these angles reveal genuine facets of Schopenhauer, but in summing up his own philosophy, as presented in his major work, *The World as Will and Representation*, he himself attributes to it a peculiar and extreme unity. It is, he says, the expression of a 'single thought' and should be approached as such:

> *A single thought*, however comprehensive, must preserve the most perfect unity. If, all the same, it can be split up into parts for the purpose of being communicated, then the connexion of these parts must . . . be organic, i.e. of such a kind that every part supports the whole just as much as it is supported by the whole; a connexion in which no part is first and no part last, in which the whole gains in clearness from every part, and even the smallest part cannot be fully understood until the whole has first been understood. But a book must have a first and a last line, and to this extent will always remain very unlike an organism. . . . Consequently, form and matter will here be in contradiction. (*W1* xii–xiii/H. 2, viii)

So the best advice to the reader is to read his book through twice so that the beginning can be illuminated by the middle and the end. This organic conception should warn us not to make too premature a judgement about the nature of Schopenhauer's philosophy. The would-be Kantian line presented in the first quarter of the book, a transcendental idealist account of the world of objective experience, will gain its proper (and quite un-Kantian) significance only when we have learned how limited this objective experience is for Schopenhauer, how he hopes it may be supplemented by philosophical reflection and finally revoked in favour of certain superior modes of consciousness.

But what is *der einzige Gedanke*, the single thought? Schopenhauer does not explicitly tell us. But unless literally the whole book is needed for any expression of the thought, we should be able to state it in abbreviated, provisional form. Rudolf Malter has proposed that the thought is 'the world is the self-knowledge of the will',[5] and Schopenhauer himself says in the *Manuscript Remains* that this expression summarizes his whole philosophy.[6] The world is what is represented in experience by the subject – it is the world as representation – but the subject itself is in and of the world it represents, and the 'inner essence' of this subject is will. The self that knows is given to itself in self-consciousness as identical with the self that wills, and this allows the will, via its manifestation in a representing intellect,

to become conscious of itself as will, and from there conscious of the whole world of representation as will.[7] Such a summary is correct as far as it goes, though its drawback for the purposes of exposition is that before one has read Schopenhauer, it is fairly opaque. A further problem is that, while the First Book of *The World as Will and Representation* presents the world as representation and the Second Book the world as will, there remain two substantial books concerning aesthetics, ethics, and salvation, books which Schopenhauer labels respectively the 'Second Aspect' of the world as representation and the 'Second Aspect' of the world as will. If we are to take the talk of a 'single thought' seriously, we must be able to incorporate the Third and Fourth Books in it – indeed, they should supply its culmination.

A more sophisticated answer is offered by John Atwell, who finds for the single thought a formulation that does justice to more of the components of Schopenhauer's unfolding presentation and gives the first-time reader a slightly better sense of what to expect. For Atwell, the single thought of *The World as Will and Representation* is as follows:

> The double-sided world [i.e., the world as will and as representation] is the striving of the will to become conscious of itself so that, recoiling in horror at its inner, self-divisive nature, it may annul itself and thereby its self-affirmation, and then reach salvation.[8]

This single, if complex, thought stands in need of much interrogation. But its most important and most authentically Schopenhauerian feature is its idea that knowledge culminates in a kind of abnegation. Cognitive self-realization leads to conative self-cancellation. Let us approach this distinctive and difficult idea by rehearsing the stages of Schopenhauer's presentation more slowly.

First, then, the world as representation. This is the world as present to ordinary perceptual experience, a world of individual material objects which can also be investigated scientifically. Schopenhauer follows Kant's general line that in order to make a priori discoveries about the nature of this world of objects, we must renounce the attempt to know what they are in themselves. Objects are representations for the subject. We can have knowledge of empirical objects and we can know the a priori forms – space, time, and causality – contributed by the subject to the experiencing of objects. The intellect or understanding of the subject shapes experience to the extent

that there can be no objects without a subject whose representations they are. In addition to this representation of individual objects, or intuitive (*anschaulich*) representation, there is a more indirect and derivative kind of representation which distinguishes human minds from others, and that is the concept. Schopenhauer calls concepts 'representations of representations'. They are what enable human beings to reason and to have language, but it is part of Schopenhauer's aim to show that these capacities are by no means the most basic features of the human mind.

The demotion of concepts and conceptual thinking from pride of place in the description of humanity is a theme running through the whole of Schopenhauer's philosophy. He takes the capacity for reasoning to be instrumental, concerned with working out means to ends that are antecedently desired rather then being provided by reason itself. He argues that rationality confers on us no higher moral status than that of other sentient beings, that conceptual thought never makes anyone morally better, and that the concept is likewise 'unfruitful in art'; it is only from an immediate vision of the universal in the particular object of perception that genuine art can spring. Some philosophy too, according to Schopenhauer (and he has his immediate contemporaries in mind), is worthless because it wanders around in mere concepts – 'the absolute' and such like – without ever being grounded in firsthand experience of the world.[9]

The world as representation is an orderly world because the subject of experience must always connect any representation with other representations, according to a fixed set of principles. This idea provided the topic of Schopenhauer's first work, his doctoral thesis entitled *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (1813). The principle of sufficient reason, a mainstay of the Leibnizian philosophy on which the academic tradition of the German Enlightenment had been founded, says, in its simplest form, that nothing is without a reason or ground (*Grund*) for its being rather than not being. The young Schopenhauer observed quite rightly that there were different species of 'grounding' which were not always properly distinguished by the tradition. For example, a cause is the ground of its effect, but this is distinct from the way in which a conclusion has its ground in a premise or a geometrical truth has its ground in the nature of space. He claims that there are four basic modes in which the principle can be interpreted (the fourth is the

grounding of an action in its motive, which is, however, a variant of the grounding of an effect in its cause). When he published *The World as Will and Representation* in 1818,[10] Schopenhauer stated that *The Fourfold Root* was an essential prelude to it. Nor did he change his mind on that score: in 1847, following publication of the revised and greatly extended edition of *The World as Will and Representation* three years earlier, he undertook a considerable re-write of *The Fourfold Root*. This shows that he had not left it behind as a juvenile work, but saw it as integral to his mature philosophy – though it may be said that he lost much of the lightness and incisiveness of the 1813 version in making his revisions. Since he refers to the principle of sufficient reason frequently in *The World as Will and Representation* without repeating the detailed exposition of *The Fourfold Root*, it is sensible to study the latter as if it were a component of the larger work, where it belongs naturally with the First Book on the world as representation.

The Second Book announces that the world is will. This is not supposed to be a negation of the claim that the world is representation, but rather a presentation of another aspect of the same world. Schopenhauer is not satisfied with comprehending the orderly manner in which the world of objects of experience must present itself to the experiencing subject. He asks what the essence of this world is: or, as he puts it in Kantian vocabulary, what the world is in itself. His answer, patently, is that the world in itself is will. But it is not immediately obvious what this means or even what kind of claim Schopenhauer intends to make when he says it. Will is a general principle of striving or being directed towards ends, but it does not presuppose the rationality associated traditionally with the human (and the divine) will. For Schopenhauer, creatures do not will something because they believe it to be good; rather, something is called good because it is something that some creature wills. Willing is thus more basic than rationality. Nor is will necessarily accompanied by consciousness or even by a mind. Everything in the world – humans, animals, plants, water, and stones – manifests will in Schopenhauer's new sense: no individual thing remains perpetually in a state of self-sufficiency, but everything is always – as it were – trying to be somewhere and in some state. Perhaps we should regard talk of 'willing', 'wanting', or 'trying' as ineliminable metaphors in this global picture. Schopenhauer says that 'everything presses and pushes towards

existence, if possible towards *organic existence*, i.e. *life*, and then to the highest possible degree thereof' (*W2* 350/H. 3, 399). His fundamental belief is that we can make sense of our own existence and behaviour by understanding our own inner essence as will, and that there is an imperative to understand or 'decipher' the world in the same way. This reveals an underlying assumption that my inner essence must be the same as that of the world at large, a thought he sometimes expresses as the identity of the microcosm and the macrocosm (see *W1* 162/H. 2, 193).

This goal of incorporating the self in the world – not only making it something bodily, but finding for it an essence shared by every part of the world – cuts across the Kantian programme that was initiated with the account of the world as representation. It does so because of the role of the subject in the latter account. In the account of the world of representation there is, necessarily, a subject that represents objects. But this subject is 'an eye that cannot see itself'. It never occurs as its own object, and so it cannot be located anywhere in space, time, and the causal order. It is (though Schopenhauer does not use this term) the transcendental self – the self required purely as an a priori condition of the possibility of experience. The pivotal section in the whole of *The World as Will and Representation* is §18, where Schopenhauer confronts this transcendental self, the pure subject of cognition, with the fact that each individual human subject is rooted in material reality via intimate knowledge of his or her body in action. I know myself immediately as embodied will, and were I not to do so, I would remain a detached and ghostly pure subject that comprehended the inner significance of nothing at all in the world of its experience.

From this notion of the will as the individual's inner essence cognized in bodily action, Schopenhauer travels a great distance, stretching the concept of will as he goes. The whole body is will in that it manifests the means of securing ends for the organism. The body, and each part and function within it, is an expression of the 'will to life', *Wille zum Leben*. Often this term is translated as 'will to live' (or 'will-to-live', as E. F. J. Payne has it). But that translation is misleading (a) because it implicitly excludes the drive to reproduce life, and hence towards sexual behaviour, to which Schopenhauer gives great prominence and (b) because it lets in the wrong assumption that Schopenhauer is talking about a conscious *desire* to live,

whereas *Wille zum Leben* primarily operates to originate and shape the organism prior to any question of its having desires. (Sometimes contributors to this volume use 'will to life', even to the extent of altering the wording when quoting from Payne's translation.)

Schopenhauer finally suggests that the whole world in itself is will. There are serious questions concerning the status of this theory. If the thing in itself is supposed to be unknowable, how can Schopenhauer claim to know what it is? If 'will' need not connote rationality, consciousness, or even mentality, what does it connote? What does it mean to say that every object is the phenomenal manifestation (or 'objectification') of will? However, the chief importance of the theory of will as essence is its impact upon the human self-image. We have to regard ourselves as driven by something at our core which presses us to prolong our lives and to have sexual intercourse, and to pursue myriad goals that arise from our nature as living creatures, often for purposes that are hidden from our conscious view. The individual's idealization of a singular object of sexual desire, for instance, masks the fact that he or she is being 'used' by the will to life in order to perpetuate itself. And in general, the individual's willed actions are not free. His or her willing is fixed not only by the general human character, will to life, but also by an individual unchangeable character which Schopenhauer calls the individual's essence or individual will.

Schopenhauer's pessimism is closely linked with his account of the will. There is no absolute good because good exists only relative to some particular strand of willing manifest somewhere in the world of phenomena. Willing can never cease in the universe and can never be satiated. It has no ultimate point or purpose. And it opens each individual to suffering which is not redeemed by any positive benefit. Schopenhauer appears to believe that the sheer existence of suffering shows everything to be invalid: because of it 'we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world' (*W*2 576/H. 3, 661). By the end of the Second Book, following the initial clue that we cannot be merely the transcendental self which represents objects, and that our essence is will, we have descended into a disturbing picture of a world that is will, manifesting itself in millions of individuals, and through them inflicting on itself pointless and unredeemed suffering, a 'world of constantly needy creatures who continue for a time merely by devouring one another, pass their

existence in anxiety and want, and often endure terrible afflictions, until they fall at last into the arms of death' (*W2* 349/H. 3, 398). The notions of a benevolent creator and a world of perfection so prevalent in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and in philosophical rationalism would never have occurred, claims Schopenhauer, to anyone who had looked at the evidence.

The tide turns with the Third Book of *The World as Will and Representation*, where Schopenhauer presents a theory of art and aesthetic experience that gives them an almost unparalleled positive value. In aesthetic experience, willing temporarily ceases and the subject is blissfully free from striving and the suffering associated with it. If ordinary existence is restless torment, aesthetic experience is repose and release. But in addition to this palliative dimension, it has high value as a species of cognition. Throwing off the a priori subjective forms of experience the intellect uses when it is an 'instrument' of the will and abandoning the principle of sufficient reason, the subject of aesthetic experience can perceive more objectively 'what really is' – a series of Ideas (*Ideen*) or Forms that constitute a timeless aspect of reality. The producer of genuine art is a genius, whose defining characteristic is the propensity to let the intellect work at perceiving objects independently of the underlying will. This vision of a timeless objectivity achieved in art by leaving behind ordinary consciousness was one of the earliest parts of Schopenhauer's philosophy to develop, as his early *Manuscript Remains* testify. Having begun philosophy by reading Plato as well as Kant, he conceived the notion of a 'higher consciousness'[11] that elevated the subject above the mundane, ephemeral, and painful reality presented in ordinary empirical consciousness. He retained ever after the thought that the subject in intense aesthetic contemplation loses its sense of bodily individuation and attains the status of a 'pure subject of knowing', while its object is transformed from the spatio-temporally individuated empirical thing into an Idea or, as he often says, a '(Platonic) Idea'. Art gains its unusually high value as temporary escape into timeless purity, away from an ordinary existence to which Schopenhauer has assigned an exceptional lack of worth.

Schopenhauer's final Fourth Book contains some of his most moving and profound writing. It concerns ethics, in both a broad and a narrow sense. The latter comprises issues such as right and wrong, moral motivation, egoism and justice, the virtues and moral judgement,