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978-1-107-57025-2 - Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic Standpoint: Philosophy as a Practice of the Sublime

Sophia Vasalou

Excerpt

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Introduction

Wonder: a starting point – a category for investigation?

There are many different senses in which one might talk of a philosopher's starting point, and of what it means to look for it. But surely one of the most important senses is that in which Aristotle spoke of wonder as the beginning of all philosophy – “it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize” – picking up in his *Metaphysics* on Plato's earlier remarks in the *Theaetetus*: “this feeling – a sense of wonder – is perfectly proper to a philosopher: philosophy has no other foundation.”¹

Both remarks were set to reverberate throughout later philosophical tradition and become a staple in its self-understanding. Yet there is clearly no one kind of wonder from which philosophy begins, any more than there is one single question with which philosophy would rightly be occupied. This is already evident from the contrast between the wonder on which Aristotle's and Plato's remarks are respectively focused – the one a wonder characterising men's outwardly turned gaze to the cosmos and unexplained natural phenomena, the other a wonder provoked by conceptual phenomena and arising through the complex manoeuvres of Socratic dialogue (and thus, we may remark, one already internal to philosophical activity). Aristotle's, it has been said more generally, is a wonder that seeks to explain, and after supplying inquiry with its beginning seeks its own dissolution; Plato's a wonder that also accompanies inquiry as its affective tone and indeed stands not only at its beginning but at its end, informing the reverential vision it seeks out.²

¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 982b13–15, and Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. R. A. H. Waterfield (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 155d.

² See the discussion in Sylvana Chrysakopoulou, “Wonder and the beginning of philosophy in Plato,” in S. Vasalou, ed., *Practices of Wonder: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012); and for further nuance Andrea W. Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical*

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That philosophy can take its beginning from a wonder belonging to different kinds, similarly, is a proposition to which Schopenhauer, who was familiar with the remarks of both of his predecessors, would extend his own support when qualifying the motivating passion of inquiry in his main work. For the “more specific character ... of the astonishment that urges us to philosophise,” he would write in the *World as Will and Representation*, is “at bottom one that is dismayed and distressed.” And the reason for this, Schopenhauer would suggest, is that it receives its fundamental provocation from the spectacle of suffering, and human evil.³ Here, indeed, we may no longer be comfortable speaking of wonder, and like Schopenhauer’s translator E. F. J. Payne – who exhibited some vacillation, translating the same word (*Verwunderung*) now as “wonder,” now as “astonishment” – we may need to talk, with Schopenhauer, of an astonishment; an estrangement; a kind of horror.

Yet even if we recognise that particular philosophies and individual philosophers take their starting point and are carried forward within their inquiry by responses of wonder, or astonishment, or perplexity that are different in kind and object, it might now be queried whether anything substantial could be gained by posing a systematic question concerning the type of astonishment at work in a particular philosopher’s undertaking. For passions might stimulate inquiry, and passions might sustain it, but an investigation of these passions would seem vacuous or otiose, deflecting our attention from the content of the inquiry itself, which ought to form the real object of our investigation. It might thus appear doubtful that a concern with the specific character of a thinker’s astonishment – whether the astonishment he begins from, the astonishment he seeks to produce, or indeed the false astonishment he seeks to dispel – could function as a meaningful handle for investigation.

That an explicit concern with wonder can, however, serve in such a meaningful role is a view that has begun to receive growing support in recent times, through a variety of works that have taken wonder, and a concern with the different kinds of wonder, as a category for approaching their subjects. One thinks of Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park’s magisterial history, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (1998), which plots the changing place of wonder in science and philosophy between

Greek Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 2004), Epilogue, esp. 257ff. See also on this point Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), ch. 1.

³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), II:171 (hereafter cited as *WWR*).

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the High Middle Ages and the Enlightenment, and in doing so tracks important intellectual transformations, notably in the practice of scientific inquiry. In philosophy, one thinks more recently of Mary-Jane Rubenstein's *Strange Wonder* (2008), which focuses on the renegotiation of wonder by Heidegger and his successors, and shows the renegotiation of the grounding mood of philosophy to be twinned to a deeper reconsideration of its task.

There are philosophers, to be sure, who have been preoccupied with the mood of their activity more strongly than others. Among recent philosophers, Heidegger is a case in point. Wittgenstein is another, for a concern with wonder would appear as a leitmotif in his later philosophy, and it would do so in the context of a similar preoccupation with the need to reorient philosophical inquiry and define its proper standpoint. The concern with wonder would thus be therapeutic in kind, aiming to heal false forms of philosophical wonder – the tendency, for example, to shroud the workings of the mind in an aura of mystique thick with its own presuppositions – and to promote a truer wonder directed to those things that are precisely “hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity” (*PI* §129), such as the phenomena of ordinary language.⁴ With Heidegger, with Wittgenstein, with Plato, an explicit thematisation of philosophical mood would seem to promise itself as a fruitful grip. What, then, of Schopenhauer?

It will be one of the main tasks of the work that follows to suggest that a concern with the specific character of Schopenhauer's philosophical wonder forms an illuminating category through which to calibrate the way we read his philosophy; and that it offers an equally important handle for deciding how to engage it. For in seeking to engage Schopenhauer's philosophy, commentators have often found themselves faced with a recurring predicament, one that no doubt mirrors a more general predicament with which the history of the philosophy confronts its readers, yet that in Schopenhauer's case seems to surface with particular tenacity. In approaching philosophers of the past, we are often naturally driven towards an effort to draw them into a conversation that will take place in our language, one that will speak to our concerns and answer to our standards. And in the context of present-day philosophy, this has often meant: standards in which the quality of argument carries the strongest privilege.

⁴ *PI* = Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and J. Schulte, rev. 4th edn by Hacker and Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

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It is this prevailing understanding of philosophical excellence that has been expressed in many of the most distinguished efforts to engage Schopenhauer philosophically in the recent past; one thinks of the work of D. W. Hamlyn, Bryan Magee, Christopher Janaway, or Julian Young, to mention but a few. The focus, within such efforts, has often fallen on core aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophical scheme, to take these critically to task and assess them for their coherence or justificatory force. Yet it is an approach that has often appeared to be brought into tension by the success of its own techniques, which reveal Schopenhauer's claims to be vulnerable to multiple stress fractures upon the lightest probing. And in placing the coherence of Schopenhauer's philosophy in doubt, such approaches simultaneously raise a question concerning Schopenhauer's claim to serious philosophical attention, and to gaining a hearing from a contemporary audience that has after all many contenders among whom it must distribute its finite energies.

This has not been the sole type of reading that Schopenhauer's works have called forth, and there has been a different body of reactions, more motley in kind and intellectual orientation, which have often shared few positive features other than attesting an attunement to Schopenhauer's philosophy in which the quality of its argument is *not* the most important concern. One thinks, here, of shorter glosses like Iris Murdoch's meditative discussion of Schopenhauer in her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, or Terry Eagleton's fiery account in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. One thinks, likewise, of some of the later works of his German readers, such as Rüdiger Safranski's compassionate biography or Arthur Hübscher's scrupulous yet wistfully admiring intellectual history. One thinks, inescapably, of the impassioned and mercurial reactions of Schopenhauer's best-known reader, Nietzsche.⁵

It is against the background of this larger question about how the philosophy of Schopenhauer should be engaged that the present study unfolds, and its task can be understood as an effort to spell out more explicitly this alternative type of attunement. Or more accurately, and more modestly: to spell out what I take to be one of the most illuminating ways of specifying it – and this, indeed, is as an attunement to a wonder of a very particular

⁵ I am referring to Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 57–80; Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 153–72; Rüdiger Safranski, *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy*, trans. E. Osers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Arthur Hübscher, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer in its Intellectual Context: Thinker against the Tide*, trans. J. T. Baer and D. E. Cartwright (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989).

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kind. My main argument rests in the simple claim that Schopenhauer's philosophical practice, to be adequately characterised, needs to be located within the framework that his own aesthetics makes available, and more specifically, within that particular aspect of his aesthetics that consists in the experience of the sublime. Schopenhauer's philosophical standpoint can be understood as an exercise in vision that Schopenhauer's own analysis of the sublime – with its peculiar configuration of the terrible and the exulting, and its peculiar constitutive insight – provides us with the best structure for approaching.

Locating Schopenhauer's standpoint in this context, I will argue, allows us to place his philosophical undertaking in clearer light on many levels. It allows us to understand the philosophical subject that Schopenhauer's work constructs for itself, and to thematise revealingly the relationship between the subject and the content of its philosophical representation. It allows us to grasp the task of philosophy more distinctly and to rewrite it as one that has a therapeutic of wonder at its heart – a therapeutic of the passions that is simultaneously a therapeutic of the subjectivity that underpins them. It allows us, similarly, to recognise the dialectic of pride and vulnerability as the subtext and affective backbone of Schopenhauer's philosophical undertaking. And it allows us, finally, to understand our own reactions to Schopenhauer's philosophy, despite or indeed because of its terrible content.

With this reading of Schopenhauer's philosophical vantage point in place, one may confront in new terms the question concerning how this vantage point stands to be constructively engaged. My proposal will be that for this to be done, Schopenhauer's standpoint needs to be anchored in a broader context, and to be aligned with an epistemic ideal boasting a longer philosophical lineage. More specifically, the vantage point *sub specie aeternitatis* that Schopenhauer constructs in his work needs to be connected to a privileged notion of ascent that had been etched deeply in the thinking of ancient philosophers – among Platonists, Stoics, and Epicureans – and had found direct expression in the imaginary of “flights of the soul” and in the more programmatic cultivation of what Pierre Hadot has described as a “view from above” or “cosmic consciousness.” Connecting Schopenhauer's standpoint to this history, however, involves connecting it to a strongly *ethical* context, given the profound ethical significance and indeed transformative power with which the occupation of this standpoint was vested in ancient philosophy.

Yet it is more specifically, I will argue, the thick ligaments tying this standpoint to one particular element of the ancient ethical

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outlook – namely, to the virtue of greatness of soul or *megalopsychia* – that provide us with the richest resources for approaching Schopenhauer’s standpoint. It is an approach that would offer itself as an appropriation conditioned by critique, seeking to place Schopenhauer in a kind of dialogue with the ancient ethical tradition that responds to Alasdair MacIntyre’s understanding of the “continuities of argument” that constitute traditions in general. Locating Schopenhauer’s vantage point within this longer tradition enables us, on the one hand, to articulate the value of this standpoint more clearly and thus find the motives for its appropriation, tying its value to its capacity as a location of self-knowledge. At the same time, it enables us to critically approach Schopenhauer’s specific articulation of this standpoint as an expression of ethical choice, and of a specific kind of character – a character for whom self-knowledge is sterile, for whom the “view from above” is constituted as a “view from nowhere,” for whom ascent fails to lead to redescent and re-engagement. And to the extent that Schopenhauer’s modification of the ancient standpoint is in great part our own – a modified standpoint expressing, it has often been said, the “homelessness” of a newly disenchanting, freshly secularised world – to critique its character is to open the possibility of asking how this peculiarly modern space can be differently negotiated. My own proposal, located against MacIntyre’s revisionary account of the virtues, will take the form of an argument (or an adumbration of one) that the ancient philosophical understanding of greatness of soul, taken as a character trait that regulates the attitudes of hope and despair with which we respond to epistemic uncertainty, offers itself precisely as an ethical ideal for negotiating that space.

What follows is a brief overview of the stages of the argument chapter by chapter. The main task of the first chapter is to set the stage by providing an overview of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, focusing on the characterisation of Schopenhauer’s standpoint as “subjective” or “inward-looking,” and singling out Schopenhauer’s account of aesthetic experience for special attention. Chapter 2 launches into the main argument, taking as a point of departure Schopenhauer’s discussion of the fear of death and his proposal for resolving it. A closer examination of Schopenhauer’s discussion reveals the presence of an “objective” or “outward-looking” standpoint within his account, one that is rich in visual elements and carries more positive valence than Schopenhauer’s programmatic avowal of the subjective standpoint of philosophy prepares us to assume. Studied more carefully, this objective standpoint turns out to be affiliated to the privileged

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mode of surveying that Schopenhauer understood as aesthetic in kind. The conclusion that Schopenhauer's philosophical standpoint participates in the aesthetic is supported by a more systematic survey of the evidence, including the so-called "argument" from analogy that plays a pivotal role in Schopenhauer's development of his metaphysical position.

Chapter 3 picks up where the previous chapter left off to qualify its reading further, focusing on a narrower set of "physiognomic" features within Schopenhauer's work that construct a philosophical standpoint offering a holistic representation of the world in its infinite vastness from a location seemingly outside it. This standpoint, I argue, stands to be linked with Schopenhauer's discussion of the sublime, and participates in its basic structure, in which the mind overcomes the world through an act of understanding that reveals the world in its dependence, and the mind as the true object of sublimity. In the double act of cognising the world and pronouncing judgement on it – "it ought not to be" – the mind asserts its dominion over the world to which it had formerly appeared vulnerable. This understanding of Schopenhauer's standpoint, which meshes with a privileging of the notions of "height" and "ascent" pervasive in Schopenhauer's outlook, reveals the philosophical subject in a transformed identity in which the embedded viewpoint of individuality has been transcended.

Chapter 4 turns to confront the question how Schopenhauer's philosophy stands to be most fruitfully approached. Having placed this question in the framework of a larger concern with the way we approach philosophers of the past, I offer a conspectus of some of the most important recent efforts to engage Schopenhauer philosophically for an English-speaking audience, and of the challenges these have faced given the limitations of Schopenhauer's arguments and of his positions considered as rationally justified claims. Yet these limitations, I suggest, on the one hand need to be located against Schopenhauer's own disavowal of argument in his philosophical method and conception of philosophical excellence. On the other hand, they point us to another way of reading Schopenhauer's claims, namely as expressive in nature, both in the narrower sense of an expression of personal character, but also in the broader sense of an expression of far-reaching social and spiritual conditions that still define our present. A closer critical examination of the content and grounds of Schopenhauer's pessimism provides further evidence in this regard.

With this ground covered, Chapter 5 restates the question – how (why) read Schopenhauer? – and proposes to look for an answer specified in ethical

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terms. After considering some prominent ethical readings Schopenhauer's philosophy has received in the past and addressing their peculiar challenges, I suggest that a more promising way of approaching Schopenhauer ethically can be identified by looking towards the aesthetic reading of Schopenhauer's philosophy offered, and more specifically towards its "sublime" vantage point. Yet this requires that we connect this vantage point to one receiving wide expression in ancient philosophy, where the notion of "ascent" had carried a similar privilege, surfacing in the works of Plato and his successors among the Stoics and Epicureans with varying degrees of distinctness and strength as an imaginary of cosmic flight or holistic representation. This imaginary, and the capacity for moral and intellectual transcendence revealed in it, was in turn linked to the ethical ideal of grandeur or greatness of soul. It is this ideal, I suggest, that provides us with the resources for a critique of Schopenhauer's standpoint, one that presents itself as a critique of its ethical character.

It is the task of Chapter 6 to place this critique within the horizon of an appropriation, and to articulate an alternative ethical proposal in positive terms. This proposal rests on taking the core tension to lie in the notion of dignity or self-esteem, and to centre on a dialectic between mastery and vulnerability that is a dialectic between pride and humiliation. Schopenhauer's philosophical decisions, in such terms, can be read as expressions of a desire for mastery that involves an intolerance of vulnerability and its enforced passivity. An alternative decision would lie in a different negotiation of vulnerability, and of the dialectic of dependence and transcendence, and would include an embrace of epistemic vulnerability directly opposed to the intellectual closure typifying Schopenhauer's philosophy. Opened up by such an act of intellectual humility, the philosophical vantage point *sub specie aeternitatis* becomes a space in which different responses are possible. Looking to the tradition of greatness of soul can enable us to articulate more distinctly the notion of hope – a hope for the good that I follow MacIntyre in understanding as a quest for the good – as the content of an alternative way of responding, and as a virtue whose exercise might allow this vantage point to fully regain its ancient character as a location for "questing" and self-knowledge.

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CHAPTER I

*A riddle and its answer***The inward turn of philosophy and the metaphysics of the will**

He has come to be known to us as the philosopher of pessimism; the philosopher who brought up life for question only to utter a “No” as his adamant response. But for Schopenhauer, it all began with a look inward. My aim in this chapter will be to consider that inward look, taking it as an opening to Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Having called up Schopenhauer’s philosophy in broad outlines, the stage will be set for the narrower questions about its character that will form the heart of my concern.

In what sense might one then speak of an inward look in considering Schopenhauer’s philosophy? To this question, seasoned readers of this region of philosophical history would no doubt respond by pointing to Schopenhauer’s immediate context, and to those of Schopenhauer’s predecessors to whom he himself would be most vocal in professing his intellectual debts. For it was Kant’s philosophy that had provided Schopenhauer with his most formative apprenticeship, and it would be as an heir and claimant to Kant’s legacy that Schopenhauer would persist in presenting his own work. And among the most potent elements in this intellectual bequest would be the “Copernican revolution” that Kant had effected in proclaiming that, contrary to traditional philosophical understanding, it was not our knowledge that conformed to objects, but objects to our knowledge. Properties that had formerly been ascribed to things themselves and to realities outside our minds – such as time and space – in fact constituted nothing but the forms of our knowledge and the conditions of our experience.

This ground-shaking thought would form the kernel of Kant’s transcendental idealism, and it was linked to a revised understanding of what the task of philosophy was, and what it could hope to be. Traditional metaphysics, blind to this insight, had used the categories of understanding

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to investigate matters that lie outside our experience, aspiring to answer questions about God, the soul, or immortality. Kant's notion of critical or transcendental philosophy counterposed the claim that the sole ambition of philosophy must henceforth lie in investigating the forms conditioning our experience, of which we have *a priori* knowledge. This inversion of philosophical focus – setting the ground spinning by redirecting inquiry away from objects of knowledge to their representing subject – was in turn linked with a distinction counting equally among Kant's most significant and indeed provocative conceptual bequests, namely, the distinction between phenomena and noumena.

For while we may be confined to the phenomenal realm, and while we can never get past the way things appear to us in order to discover the reality of how things are in themselves, we still possess such a notion – a notion of “how things are in themselves,” and not *merely* how they appear relative to the forms of our knowledge. The very notion of the phenomenal seems to presuppose the notion of the noumenal as its non-intuitable basis and as the ground against which it is possible to distinguish it. Or as Kant put it in his second Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, without such a notion of the noumenal, “we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears.” Hence, although we may not “*know* ... objects [of experience] as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to *think* them as things in themselves.”¹ It was a distinction that would occupy a crucial place in Kant's account of practical reason and his view of human freedom and the possibility of moral agency.

Schopenhauer hailed this distinction as “Kant's greatest merit” (*WWR* 1:417), and embraced wholeheartedly Kant's inversion of philosophical standpoint and its central insight that “the beginning and the end of the world are to be sought not without us, but rather within” (*WWR* 1:420–21). This thought was the cornerstone of transcendental or critical philosophy, which Schopenhauer defined as “every philosophy that starts from the fact that its nearest and immediate object are not things, but only man's *consciousness* thereof” (*PP* 11:9),² and whose beginnings – the first blossoming of an “*inwardly* directed philosophy” that starts “from the subject as that which is immediately given” – he located as early as Descartes (*PP* 11:17; cf. *WWR* 11:4).

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1929), Bxxvi.

² *PP* = Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).