Introduction: Schopenhauer in the Time of Pandemic

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We proposed this collection in 2018, which seems in retrospect (although certainly not at the time) like a very innocent year. By the time we were collecting essays from the contributors at the beginning of 2020, the coronavirus was spreading internationally. At the end of February 2020, we held a workshop at the Central Division conference of the American Philosophical Association in Chicago, and a number of contributors met to trade drafts and ideas. Cities started closing down a couple of weeks later. We look back with pleasure and relief at our time in Chicago and the intellectual conviviality of that face-to-face event: pleasure at the lively conversation and new acquaintances, and relief that it took place at all, just before the shutdown, and that none of us became sick at the conference. Who knows what state the world will be in when this volume is published?

Nobody can know, but Schopenhauer might have had a canny guess. Indeed, there is something darkly ironic about producing a volume on *The World as Will and Representation* (WWR) – a book that treats optimism with undisguised contempt, indeed as something not just "absurd" but downright "*wicked*" (WWR 1, 352; SW 2, 385) – during a global pandemic. Nor would the gap of (almost exactly) 200 years between the appearance of his volume and the appearance of ours leave any scope for historical progress or even historical novelty, according to Schopenhauer. A deeply ahistorical thinker, he expected nothing to change. His own special combination of profound nihilism, Anglophilia, and love of poetry is on display as he quotes Byron:

> *Our life is a false nature, – 'tis not in*
> *The harmony of things, this hard decree,*
> *This ineradicable taint of sin,*
> *This boundless Upas, this all-blasting tree*
> *Whose root is earth, whose leaves and branches be*
> *The skies, which rain their plagues on men like dew –*

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> *Disease, death, bondage – all the woes we see –*
> *And worse, the woes we see not – which throb through*
> *The immedicable soul, which heart-aches ever new.*[1]

Schopenhauer often uses the verb "plague" as a metaphor, but we might be tempted to read the term more literally and seriously at this historical moment, when a (currently) "immedicable" plague is indeed being rained upon us. Schopenhauer expected nothing less; he formulated his system to confirm that "disease, death, bondage" constitute our acknowledged and "ineradicable" (and equally "immedicable") state of affairs, and to guide us in the question of how to think through our place in this desperate world.

One of the themes that this volume brings out is the endurance and contemporary relevance of some of Schopenhauer's most pressing concerns. In a sense, he is right to be ahistorical: Is it not this reaching out of its time that makes a work a classic, eternal even? Principal among these concerns of course is the question of how to respond as plagues overwhelm us (which is Schopenhauer's description of existence in a normal state, the plague *of* existence rather than a plague within existence). His famous answer involves the negation of the will, the ascetic denial and rejection of desire. Of course, this response is more striking than it is clear, and several of the essays in this volume tackle the question of what is meant, entailed, and achieved by negation of the will.

In Chapter 1, **Christopher Janaway** takes this question up directly, arguing that Schopenhauer's theory of negation of the will is problematic: How can you will not to will? If will is the basis of all reality, who would remain to experience the satisfaction that negation of the will supposedly generates? Janaway responds to these apparent paradoxes by arguing that negation of the will is best thought of as negation specifically of the will to life, and that this is compatible with the existence of other kinds of willing. Will to life is *egoistic* willing; and the negation of this kind of willing is consistent with *nonegoistic* willing and, in particular, with moral action.

This more constrained interpretation of the doctrine of negation of the will not only makes more sense of the text (for instance, when Schopenhauer distinguishes between self- and other-directed willing), it also helps clarify Schopenhauer's account of the relation between virtue and holiness. The morally righteous person has other-directed desires at least some of the time, but not necessarily all of the time, while the saint no longer has any self-directed desires at all. Finally, Janaway shows that this

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[1] Schopenhauer gives a prose translation into German. The verse is from *Childe Harold*, IV, 126.

interpretation of negation of the will brings Schopenhauer closer to the Buddhist models he cites in support of his theory.

In Chapter 2, **Bernard Reginster** provides a different perspective on some of these themes, deepening our understanding of Schopenhauer's pessimism. This pessimism is rooted in the idea that there is something systematically delusive about desire, since fulfilling our desires does not give the lasting satisfaction we would want. But Schopenhauer holds out the possibility that we can detach from our desires through resignation. How is such detachment possible? Reginster confronts the same problem we saw in Janaway, that the act of denial of the will cannot itself be an act of will; but Reginster looks to a solution Janaway rejected, namely, Schopenhauer's appeal to a secularized version of the Christian concept of grace.

In probing the structure of resignation, Reginster argues that it must involve some "incentive" in the form of cognitive insight into "the will's inner conflict and its essential nothingness" (WWR I §68, 424; SW 2, 470), which leads one to voluntary asceticism (i.e., mortification of the will), which in turn leads to resignation. Reginster shows that Schopenhauer provides two mechanisms for this. In the first, knowledge of the necessity of suffering motivates ascetic self-deprivation, which brings indifference to it. In the second this knowledge directly and of itself brings about indifference.

Reginster ends with a puzzle – Schopenhauer describes resignation as causing not merely relief, as we would expect, but joy. It is a suggestion that, while inconsistent with the picture of resignation and abnegation most obviously on offer in the text, hints at broader possibilities for Schopenhauer's philosophy.

In Chapter 3, **Sandra Shapshay** pushes in this same direction – the seemingly anomalous presence of joy in Schopenhauer's system – now, however, in the context of his aesthetic theory, looking at the joy Schopenhauer acknowledges us to feel in the presence of natural beauty in general, and plant life, in particular. Many commentators try to minimize this question of pleasure, subordinating it to the cognitive aspect of Schopenhauer's aesthetic, the insight it gives us into the Platonic Forms or Ideas of things. Shapshay resists this interpretation. But she also resists its opposite but still reductive or unifying strategy that minimizes the cognitive for the sake of the hedonic. In fact, she discards the notion that Schopenhauer had a unified aesthetic theory as not only false but undesirable; she argues not only for the hybridity of Schopenhauer's theory, but for the explanatory strength of this rich and multidimensional aesthetics.

She shows that Schopenhauer develops two mutually irreducible spectrums of aesthetic value, based on two different criteria. The spectrum that commentators acknowledge in Schopenhauer is the hierarchy of the arts, which puts architecture and fountainry at the bottom (as revealing the lower Ideas) and literature at the top, as a display of the higher, more complex Ideas. The spectrum that is overlooked, but becomes visible if we take his more formalist views of natural aesthetics seriously, is the spectrum of the beautiful and sublime, where the beautiful – and botanical beauty in particular – lends itself more readily than experiences at the sublime pole to a state of mind that is not only tranquilizing but (in a departure from his usual attitude) positively joyful.

In Chapter 4, **Cheryl Foster** also takes up themes in Schopenhauer's theory of art and finds not just aesthetic and affective but cognitive and political value in it. Specifically, she examines not aesthetic contemplation but the active aspect of Schopenhauer's aesthetics, the theory of genius, which she situates within a politics of knowledge. Many of our dominant social institutions tend to value (and fund) science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education over arts education and promote a technocratic conception of genius. This is at the expense of the arts, which are devalued, defunded, and overlooked as potential sources of knowledge. Foster argues that Schopenhauer (despite his own strong resources of bigotry) is in a position to address this injustice by making an argument for the distinction between talent and genius, or conceptual and intuitive understanding, and giving a strong argument for the significance and specificity of aesthetic, intuitive cognition.

Foster looks carefully at Schopenhauer's description of the experience of artistic inspiration, the receptivity characteristic of genius that enables artists to create aesthetically significant works. She shows that Schopenhauer finds unexpected confirmation in the account Edith Wharton gave of her own artistic process, unexpected, not least because Schopenhauer thought that women could not be geniuses. To realize the potential of Schopenhauer's analysis, we need to free him from some of his reactionary investments, such as his anti-Semitism, misogyny, elitism, and mystifications. Foster carefully reconstructs a theory of genius and intuitive cognition that is both free from these elements and consistent with the phenomenology of artistic experience as reported by practicing artists. The result is a unique account of a vital source of nonconceptual knowledge.

Similarly, in Chapter 5, **Matthias Koßler** shows how Schopenhauer's philosophy has the potential to enhance our epistemic resources; specifically, he argues that Schopenhauer's theory of character is relevant to the

recent revival of the concept of character in the social sciences. Koßler argues that the theory of character Schopenhauer presented in his later essays is at best radically simplified, and at worst inconsistent with the theory developed in *The World as Will and Representation.* In the late prize essays (published in 1841), for instance, Schopenhauer develops the Kantian distinction between intelligible and empirical character, treating the former as an innate, unchangeable metaphysical entity, while in the earlier WWR (published 1819), Schopenhauer emphasizes the importance of empirical evidence, even for his metaphysics, so that intelligible character must be thought of in relation to experience.

Furthermore, reason itself is an essential component of being human, and rationality involves the possibility of partly resisting the effect of a motive on the will, hindering it from achieving expression in action. Thus, human species character cannot just be a set of fixed properties (as in the early account), but rather a general field of possibilities which our rationality uses to individualize us. Koßler uses this supple account of WWR to present a more compelling account of character than the empirical determinism of the prize essays allows. In conclusion, Koßler goes so far as to recommend avoiding the Kantian terminology of intelligible versus empirical character that achieves prominence in the prize essays. Instead, we should talk of a general concept of personhood that is necessarily specialized into an individual character.

While Koßler looks at the originality of Schopenhauer's approach vis-à-vis Kant, in Chapter 6, **Manja Kisner** stresses the continuity between Schopenhauer and his contemporaries, in particular, Fichte and Schelling. Kisner focuses on a concept that first appeared in Fichte – the intelligible subject as a nexus of ethical drives that tend toward an ethical world order. There is so much about this conception that Schopenhauer rejected (mocking the notion of an ethical world order) that we often miss the positive influences. Kisner points, for instance, to the fact that Fichte was discussing agency in terms of drives and responding to the problem (from Kant) of illicitly positing a causal relationship between the intelligible and empirical registers. Fichte resolved that latter problem with something like a double-aspect theory similar to the one that Schopenhauer also adopted in claiming that the world is both will *and* representation.

Schopenhauer, however, disagrees with Fichte's idea that the intelligible world is a sort of moral destination, his moral fatalism. Kisner sees WWR as a reply to Fichte on this account. Schelling furthers the development toward Schopenhauer by abandoning moral fatalism, and seeing the possibility of moral action as well as immoral action as contingent (not

fatalistic) and rooted in an irrational, amoral ground. Here we are on recognizably Schopenhauerian territory, although Schelling thinks that this ground provides a path to the possibility of a moral world order, albeit not a fated one.

Schopenhauer's relation to this tradition is not the more or less blank rejection he says it is but can be seen as continuing and radicalizing it. He accepted Schelling's notion of an amoral ground of being but viewed it as an occasion for a negative rather than a positive morality. Freedom comes not from grounding oneself in the will and acting rationally but from resisting the will altogether. This characteristically Schopenhauerian theoretical move, however, presupposes the philosophical tools developed by his contemporaries.

In Chapter 7, **Dennis Vanden Auweele** also looks at Schopenhauer's relation to his contemporaries, but this time in terms of the philosophy of religion. Schopenhauer, Vanden Auweele argues, is very much a product of his (romantic) age, and in dialogue with contemporary scholars of Asia such as Creuzer who were actively researching Asian religions and developing philosophies of myth. According to Vanden Auweele, Creuzer had a great, though unacknowledged, influence on Schopenhauer's thought, in particular, with his view that global systems of myth are related and originated in South Asia. Schopenhauer parts ways with Creuzer, however, in developing a theory that systems of myth are rooted in intuitive rather than conceptual understanding. Myth is not a clear and abstract system of meaning, but rather an allegorical expression of basic metaphysical truths that the originators of mythology grasp intuitively.

For Schopenhauer, systems of myth (and by extension religions) agree to the extent they share a grounding (pessimistic) intuition. Vanden Auweele finds resources in WWR for Schopenhauer to develop a theory of myth-making that accounts not only for myths that accurately depict reality (pessimistic systems of myth, for Schopenhauer) but also for myths and religions that get it wrong and stray into optimism. The result is a sophisticated philosophy of religion and a useful and original intervention into the contemporary debate over the origin of myths, an aspect of Schopenhauer's philosophy that is too often overlooked or undervalued.

In Chapter 8, **Stephan Atzert** turns our attention from Schopenhauer's *theory* of religion to his *use* of religion, and specifically to the Asian traditions from which he drew two of his central ideas – *Nieban* (Nirvana) and *Maja* (Maya). Although Schopenhauer connected these ideas systematically in his philosophy, the concepts themselves emerge from quite distinct traditions: Maya is central to the Vendanta schools in

India while Nirvana is Buddhist. According to the former, Maya is the manifestation but also the veil of the absolute, God-consciousness; but according to the latter, there is no essence of things, or the essence of things is nothing. The two traditions use the concepts almost independently while Schopenhauer blends them into a whole.

Schopenhauer's source for his concept of *Maja* is the *Oupnek'hat*, an influential Latin translation of a Persian translation of a selection of the *Upanishads*, which presents a quite specific interpretation of Maya as not only a passive source of delusion, but an active life force. As a result, Maya becomes connected not just with representation, but also with the world as will. Schopenhauer appears to make use of this interpretation in his doctrine of denial of the will, where we have to pierce through not just the world as representation (the obvious understanding of Maya) but also the will itself.

Schopenhauer's access to the Buddhist conception of *Nieban* was also circuitous, and he does not use the term (Nirvana) with anything like the frequency that he uses Maya; even when he does use it, he sometimes treats it as an unhelpful euphemism for "nothingness." Atzert argues that this philosophical ontologization of *Nieban* is misleading. Schopenhauer's sources, in fact, reject the identification of *Nieban* with nothingness as well as its identification with divinity (Brahmen). What is most basic both to his sources and to Schopenhauer's own account is Nirvana as release from suffering.

In Chapter 9, **Robert Wicks** takes up the theme of Schopenhauer's engagement with Eastern thought and suffering and uses it to shed additional light on one of the themes Janaway and Reginster introduced earlier in the volume: the question of whether the thing-in-itself can be accurately described as "will." Schopenhauer admits that, although our inner experience of our body as will leads us to generalize the will as the in-itself of other phenomena, this is not yet an accurate depiction of the thing-in-itself, as it is still subject to the form of time. Yet he persistently describes the in-itself of reality as "will," and it is hard to see how anything other than an endlessly striving will could underwrite his well-known pessimism.

By looking at the distinctive way Schopenhauer draws on various religious traditions of mysticism, Wicks argues that Schopenhauer's use of Christianity appears in his vocabulary of universal guilt, which is key to understanding the manner in which suffering is universal. However, a Christian interpretation of the mystical experience would tend to push Schopenhauer in the direction of saying that there is more to the thing-in-itself than will, since the mystical experience is experience of something,

and if will is negated something must remain to be experienced. Wicks, however, argues that Schopenhauer's pessimism is incompatible with any interpretation of the thing-in-itself that denies it to be will; and this puts him in touch with a more Buddhist form of mysticism, and explains the enthusiasm with which he accepted Buddhism when he finally encountered it.

In Chapter 10, **Alistair Welchman** turns to Schopenhauer's epistemology, arguing that Schopenhauer was a direct perceptual realist and then drawing out the possible interpretative consequences of this in two areas: the theory of compassion and Schopenhauer's theory of meaning. In a direct theory of perception, perception is not mediated by a representation, but directly involves the object of perception itself; and this can be seen in Schopenhauer's epistemology, not because he eschews representation but because he identifies the object *with* representation.

Schopenhauer's direct perceptual realism sheds light on two difficulties elsewhere in his thought. The first difficulty is in his theory of compassion. Schopenhauer's official view is that in compassion we see through the veil of maya into our essential identity with all other beings as will. Many commentators find this extravagant and suggest a psychological account instead, in which we imagine ourselves in the situation of the other. However, this is contradicted by Schopenhauer's own account of a similar contemporary theory, in which he appears to suggest that we directly perceive the other's emotions. Schopenhauer's independent commitment to direct realism makes this alternative more attractive than the standard psychological account.

The second area is the shift in Schopenhauer's metaphysics from a transcendent claim about the constitution of the in-itself of appearances to an "immanent" hermeneutical claim about the *meaning* of the world. This shift is less significant than often thought because Schopenhauer has a direct realist picture of our access to semantic meaning, in general. Applying this model to Schopenhauer's metaphysics commits the hermeneutical model to an appearance-transcendent meaning to which we have direct access, something that is not far distant from the original transcendent metaphysics.

Like Welchman, but using very different means, **Marco Segala** argues, in Chapter 11, that the tight seal Schopenhauer wanted to maintain between ordinary experience along with its investigation in the natural sciences on the one hand, and metaphysics on the other, is more porous than Schopenhauer can acknowledge in WWR 1. However, Segala goes on to argue, Schopenhauer's continuing engagement with this issue prompted a revision to his metaphysics by the time of WWR 2.

Segala begins by noting that, in Book 2 of WWR 1, Schopenhauer argues that the will as thing-in-itself is ultimately prior to representation. Will must therefore "split" itself, and this "splitting" of the will (which Schopenhauer mentions has its phenomenal correlate in polarity) positions the text in something like the tradition of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, giving an ultimate philosophical account of scientifically irreducible fundamental forces. Ontologically, the first move in splitting is that the will posits the Platonic Forms or Ideas, a graded hierarchy of mutually irreducible natural forms starting with fundamental forces and culminating in humanity. But a scientific perspective reveals several problems here; for instance, that of accounting for this splitting in the first place, and especially the paradoxical role of the Ideas, nonspatiotemporal denizens of a Platonic realm that are nevertheless supposed to ground scientific explanations. Segala shows how grappling with these issues caused Schopenhauer to rethink parts of his metaphysical project in WWR 2.

Segala first proposes a rethinking of Schopenhauer's philosophy of nature, conceiving it less as an "explanation" of science and more as a conceptual space in which metaphysics (Ideas) and science (natural forces) can interact. But ultimately, he argues, Schopenhauer abandoned the Ideas completely as having any role in scientific explanation, supplementing his philosophy of nature with a philosophy of natural science that anticipates modern approaches.

Rounding up the collection in a very different vein, **Judith Norman** takes up the complicated question of feminism in WWR in Chapter 12. Political critiques of the history of philosophy frequently accuse philosophers of illegitimately universalizing a particular view of subjectivity – unwittingly normalizing a parochial conception of human nature, for instance. Although this critique can undoubtedly be extended to Schopenhauer, it is striking that Nietzsche, drawing largely on metaphysical resources derived from Schopenhauer, was one of the first to really recognize and contest this illegitimate philosophical strategy. Norman looks at the extent to which Schopenhauer anticipated Nietzsche in this project of tracing a genealogy of the subject within a metaphysics of will, closely examining Schopenhauer's fraught discussion of sexual difference in the "Metaphysics of Sexual Love." This leads her to the question of the ontological status of sexual difference, and whether this cleft in nature registers at the level of transcendental subjectivity, and the consequences for Schopenhauer's view of the subject, the question of women readers of the text, and women subjects of philosophy, in general.

Altogether, these essays showcase not simply the vast diversity and sophistication of Schopenhauer studies, but the extraordinary versatility and philosophical longevity of the WWR. It is one of the last great texts in the European tradition that has implications for contemporary understandings of issues and disciplines from feminist politics to philosophy of art, from epistemology to mysticism, from ethics to philosophy of science. These essays are a testament to its enduring scholarly interest and relevance.