1818

The World as Will and Representation

"The world is my representation: this is a truth valid with reference to every living and knowing being, although man alone can bring it into reflective, abstract consciousness. If he really does so, philosophical discernment has dawned on him. It then becomes clear and certain to him that he does not know a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth; that the world around him is there only as representation … If any truth can be expressed a priori, *it is this."*

"[T]he objective world, the world as representation, is not the only side of the world, but merely its external side, so to speak, and … the world has an entirely different side which is its innermost being, its kernel, the thing-in-itself."

In a nutshell

The advanced person tries to live less according to the blind urges of their will (or ego) and more in attunement with whatever is eternal and beyond the self.

In a similar vein

Henri Bergson *Creative Evolution* (p 56)
Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* (p 126)
Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* (p 156)
Plato *The Republic* (p 232)
Ludwig Wittgenstein *Logical Investigations* (p 300)

CHAPTER 45

Arthur Schopenhauer

At the start of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, Arthur Schopenhauer includes a quote from Seneca: "Paucis natus est, qui populum aetatis suae cogitat." (Whoever in his thinking takes note of his own age will influence only a few.) Though he later had a large influence on Richard Wagner, Nietzsche, Freud, Einstein, and Wittgenstein, for most of his life Schopenhauer was an independent scholar who received little recognition. The big-name German philosopher of his day was Hegel, and the cantankerous Schopenhauer despised him and his ideas. The message of the quote above is: "Don't be led by philosophies such as Hegel's which may seem right now, but will be discredited in time. Instead, I give you a worldview that is both correct and timeless."

Remarkably, Schopenhauer wrote *The World as Will and Representation* while still in his twenties. In 1844 he published an extended version of it, twice the length of the original, and continued to tinker with it for the rest of his life, though his basic ideas remained the same. Ever forthright, he told readers to go through the work twice, noting, "What is to be imparted by it is a single thought. Yet in spite of all my efforts, I have not been able to find a shorter way of imparting that thought than the whole of this book."

Though heavily influenced by Plato and Kant, what set Schopenhauer apart among Western philosophers was his deep knowledge of the ancient Hindu and Buddhist texts, and his thinking provides an early, valuable bridge between East and West. He was a brilliant writer who made his ideas intelligible to the nonacademic reader, and almost 200 years after publication the book remains both accessible and richly rewarding, mixing academic rigor with very personal thoughts on the world.

Representation and reality

To understand Schopenhauer we must first go back to Kant, who believed that there is the phenomenal world, which we can perceive with our senses, and then there are "things in themselves," which have an eternal reality existing separate to our perception. Given that we are restricted to our senses, we can never actually know this "world in itself." Schopenhauer accepted this, but thought that through reason we could work out the true reality (the "nouemenon").

In contrast to our multifarious world of many things and many perceptions, the nouemenon had to have a unity and be beyond space and time. What we take to be so real, Schopenhauer argues, is in fact merely a representation or projection of the mind. In a total inversion of common sense, the world that we barely intimate does have a permanent reality and, logically, the phenomenal, conditional, or representational world (the "real" world) lacks any permanent reality or substance, for everything in it either dies or changes form.

However, Schopenhauer says that the phenomenal world is not chaos but operates according to "sufficient reason," or the laws of cause and effect. As long as we admit that we live in a world of causality, it makes perfect sense, even if it is one that has been projected by our minds. Indeed, the principle of sufficient reason is what stops a world of representation from being a hopeless illusion. Even the laws of time and space are part of the conditional world, he notes, and have no eternal verity themselves – they are not things-in-themselves, but simply a good way of explaining the phenomena of time and space. Time does not really exist, but it seems to do so to us observers, who must construct a world of representation along the dimensions of time and space. For Schopenhauer, Kant's notion of "things-in-themselves" was strongly similar to Plato's "Forms," expressed in the allegory of the cave.

Everything in time and space is relative. That is, one moment in time only has reality in relation to the moment coming just after or before it. In space, one object only has reality in relation to another one. From the Western tradition, Schopenhauer invokes Heraclitus' observation that things are in eternal flux and have no fixed reality, and from the East he refers to the Hindu concept of "Maya," that the world is simply a projection or a dream, very open to misinterpretation by the observer. Not only is space, or the world of objects, a representation of who views it, but so is time. Taking an indirect dig at his nemesis Hegel, Schopenhauer argues that history is not an objective account of what happened, or some process leading to a particular goal or aim, but is simply a story told in the eye of the perceiver: "Past and future are as empty and unreal as any dream."

Schopenhauer's will

For Schopenhauer, "will" is the innermost being of the phenomenal world, and expresses itself as a sort of blind and purposeless striving of all kinds – a will to life. Rather than the traditional meaning of the term as conscious willing, will is best seen as a kind of energy constantly looking for an outlet. It explains not only the striving of humans, but the life force in animals, plants, and even the inanimate world.

In the prize-winning *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer examined the question of free will, writing:

> *"Subjectively … everyone feels that he only does what he wills. But this means merely that his actions are the pure manifestation of his very own essence."*

What we will is merely the expression of what we are, our character, and we cannot have any actions that are not consistent with that character. Our motives are not freely chosen, and therefore we cannot be said to have free will. Indeed, many of our actions are taken without really knowing why. For the average person, "consciousness keeps him always working steadfastly and actively in accordance with the aim of his willing … This is the life of almost all men."

It is easy to see how Sigmund Freud, who depicted humans as creatures driven by subconscious urges, was influenced by Schopenhauer. Freud's conception of "ego" clearly resembles Schopenhauer's will.

Can the will be transcended?

Whereas most philosophers would see such a life force or will in neutral or positive terms, Schopenhauer envisages it as a negative power that must be transcended if we are to get anywhere. He notes that "great intensity of willing" inevitably causes suffering, because all willing comes from want. Whereas the good and wise person identifies with the formless and the true, viewing themselves as simply a corporeal expression of timeless spiritual substance, the uncultured or wicked person identifies totally with their body and their will. Such a person believes fully in their sovereignty as an individual; by contrast, everyone and everything else is less important. Yet individual will is of less import than the general will that drives everyone and everything, so too much belief in oneself entails a life of illusion, never perceiving that the phenomenal world is merely a big construction, behind which lies something real:

> *"In this form he sees not the inner nature of things, which is one, but its phenomena as separated, detached, innumerable, very different, and indeed opposed."*

Such a person tends to see things in opposites, makes strong judgments all the time, and seeks pleasure to avoid pain, without realizing that its pursuit in fact causes pain. Eventually they may come to see that the *principium individuationis* by which they live is the source of their dread.

Those who perceive the world in a less separate way find a path toward freedom. We comprehend that what we do to others, we do to ourselves. Only at the point where we see that there is no "I," and our actions reflect this, do we free ourselves from the cycle of birth, old age, sickness, and death, as well as

from imprisonment within the bounds of time, space, and causality. The wise person sees good and bad, pleasure and pain as mere phenomena, various expressions of Oneness. They know that the denial of their personal will (or ego), and the realization that they are not separate from others, leads to peace.

Means of transcendence

Moving beyond the "I" was for Schopenhauer the key to transcending the will, and the obvious way to this was through the ascetic or monastic life, which enabled a person to turn away from the brute forces of will, desire, and the body. Thankfully, though, there was another route through the experience of nature or art.

The normal human state of mind is constant analyzing, reasoning, or evaluating, but it is possible to give our whole mind to the present moment. When looking at a landscape, for instance, we can lose ourselves in the object, such that "we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist as a pure subject, as clear mirror of the object … and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception, but the two have become one."

What is left, Schopenhauer notes, is not simply an object existing in relation to other objects, but the very "Idea" of the thing, its eternal form. Lost in seeing it, the viewer is no longer an individual, but is one with the idea. The world suddenly seems clearer and more meaningful, because we have penetrated beyond obvious appearances to the essence. Art can isolate one crucial idea or thing and by presenting it in a certain way illuminate the Whole, which lies beyond reason or causality. Science, on the other hand, being only concerned with the phenomenal world, is a never-ending quest that cannot ever give us complete satisfaction.

Schopenhauer defines genius as "the capacity to remain in a state of pure perception," forgetting the individual self and existing for a time in state of imagination only, seeing the timeless Ideas of the universe. When, inevitably, we come back to the experience of being an individual self, we will have compassionate sympathy for all living things. This feeling for others is a means for us to remain beyond the grasp of the will or ego, because in living a compassionate life we hardly have time to worry about ourselves.

Final comments

Writing at a time when European missionaries were fanning out across Asia to convert people to Christianity, *The World as Will and Representation* offered Schopenhauer's well-known prophecy that such efforts would be as effective as firing "a bullet at a cliff." Rather, he believed, Eastern wisdom would flow back to Europe to "produce a fundamental change in our knowledge and thought."

He was right. Though Christianity has had more success on the subcontinent than he expected, Eastern religion and mysticism have had a big, and growing, impact in the West, particularly concepts of the Whole compared to the atomizing, categorizing outlook of the Western mind.

The conventional view of Schopenhauer is that he was the "supreme pessimist." Because the will had no positive goal, obviously the human experience had to be one of constant challenge, at its best, or meaningless pain, at its worst. He did not try to pretend that the world and people's motivations were something they were not, and this impressed pessimistic writers like Joseph Conrad and Ivan Turgenev, as well as the existentialists. And yet, Schopenhauer's conclusion is not actually dark at all, but rather uplifting: it is only our dependence on the world of phenomena (the "real world") as the source of truth that always proves to be such a painful dead end. Though we are beings who exist in time and space, paradoxically it is only in moving beyond these constructs that we are liberated.

Arthur Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer was born in 1788 in what is now the Polish city of Gdansk. When he was 5 the family left for Hamburg, because Gdansk was about to be taken over by Prussia. It was expected that he would follow in his father's merchant footsteps, taking over the family firm. Between 1797 and 1799 he spent a long period living in France with his father, and he also lived in England, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Austria. But in 1805 his father committed suicide, which opened the way for his son to follow his own wishes and attend university.

At Gottingen Schopenhauer enrolled in medicine, but also attended philosophy lectures and studied Plato and Kant. He spent two years in Berlin, where he went to lectures by Fichte, and his dissertation for the University of Jena was "On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason." After writing The World as Will and Representation, *Schopenhauer returned to Berlin, where he became a freelance lecturer. Hegel was also at the university and Schopenhauer scheduled his lectures to coincide precisely with Hegel's, expecting to draw students away, but in fact they deserted Schopenhauer and his academic career stalled. He was only able to survive thanks to an inheritance from his father.*

His mother Johanna was a novelist and a socialite, and for most of his life she was more famous than him. Though his relations with her were rocky, her literary circle allowed him to meet Goethe (with whom he corresponded) and other writers and thinkers.

Fleeing the cholera epidemic that claimed Hegel, in 1831 Schopenhauer fled Berlin and settled in Frankfurt. The prize-winning Parerga and Paralipomena *(1851) finally brought him the fame he craved. He died in 1860.*