The World as Will and Representation – Arthur Schopenhauer

This book, written in 1818, represents Schopenhauer’s complete philosophy and is a full account of his effort to continue from where he felt that Kant left off. It is written in four books each, dealing with a different aspect of Schopenhauer’s philosophy.

*The World as Representation*

*First Aspect*

The division of the world into object and subject is the most basic form of the world we see around us. Above this lie the forms of space, time and causality (collectively called the principle of sufficient reason, or PSR). This being said, everything that exists according to these forms has only a relative existence; that is, it exists only through and for another like itself. Succession is the form of the PSR in time and position is the correlative form for space. Schopenhauer also equates matter with causality at this point, stating that “its being is its acting” and it is impossible to conceive for it any other mode of being. He also unites space and time in causality holding that this structure makes matter possible. Nature is nothing more than the PSR.

Moving from the external object to the internal subject, Schopenhauer says that the subjective correlate of matter (causality) is the *understanding*. The first and simplest manifestation of understanding is perception of the world, that is to say, knowledge of the cause from the effect. The effect is the sense impression fed directly to the body of the animal and because of this, these bodies are known as *immediate objects*. Note however that despite the fact that knowledge of causality leads to perception, there is no causality relation between subject and object. This form only exists between objects. This leads us to some definitions. *Realism* posits the object as cause and puts the effect in the subject; *idealism* however makes the object the effect of the subject. Neither is true. Object and subject precede all knowledge, even the PSR, and as such can never be known through it. Schopenhauer stresses that the representation and the object are the same thing. The search for an object outside the representation of the subject is meaningless.

In summation of what has been said so far, we can know the world of perception in two conditions; the first expressed objectively, is the ability of bodies to act on each other and cause changes. Expressed subjectively, we turn to the understanding for this alone makes the law of causality possible. This subjective expression is dependent on the existence of immediate objects, in the form of bodies, for the subject. The subject of knowing is both the condition of the possibility of the whole objective world and a particular phenomenon of the will.

The world is entirely and completely representation. As such, it cannot exist without a knowing subject. However, the first knowing subject is dependent upon the long chain of causes and effects which brought it into being. So, we have an antinomy. Nothing existed until the first being but without that first being, there was no before, no time. Therefore time had no beginning but all beginning is in time. Time, with an infinity prior to and after it, is present in the first being. As Schopenhauer says, “the past, out of which the first present arises, is, like it, dependent on the knowing subject, and without this it is nothing.”

Humans can also make abstract representation (representations of representations) called concepts connected to each other by judgements. However, even these depend on the PSR (although in a different form to the ground of becoming) as the ground of knowing. These can be called *truth* in as much as they relate back to a perception for their ground of knowledge. Schopenhauer says that eventually all concepts must eventually have their ground of knowledge in perception, although this does not necessarily need to be the first instance.

Through *reason* humans are capable of this *reflection* which is the formation of concepts from perception. As opposed to animals humans live in the past and future and are capable of making plans, hoping and in general considering things beyond their mere surroundings and the present moment. “The animal feels and perceives; man, in addition, *thinks* and *knows.*”

Each concept has what Schopenhauer calls a sphere, or range. This quality represents the breadth of knowledge contained within its boundary and often this sphere overlaps with another or several other spheres. Recognising these relations is what is called *judging*. This schematism is called *logic*. Judgement is accordingly the mediator between the understanding and reason.

Rational knowledge is needed because it is only through this that intuitions can be held onto, communicated and used practically. Every continuous and planned activity obviously requires rational knowledge.

Following on from this, science is the systematic form of knowledge that descends from the universal to the particular using syllogistic proofs. This process results in truths established logically and as such, it is only a means to facilitating knowledge, not to greater certainty. It is easier (and often practical) to know something generally rather than specifically but we must remember that this concept ultimately rests on perception and as such is dependent on it. Were the perception always easily accessible it would be in every way preferable because every deduction from concepts is vulnerable to deceptions on account of the fact that many different (concept) spheres are interlocked and their content is often ill-defined and uncertain.

Humans therefore, have two lives, one in the concrete and one in the abstract. In the former, we are subject to all the whims of nature just like other animals. We are buffeted by chance and immersed in suffering but in the latter we stand in calm reflection of our lives, a kind of cold detachment that lets us stand by and watch the drama unfolding rather than participate.

It is from this perspective only that reason has a practical component and can rightly be called *practical reason*; where action is guided by reason and motives are abstract concepts, rather than the ever-present, PSR-locked representation. Such a use of practical reason is best exemplified in the Stoic sage, whose ethics is always aimed at happiness. Virtue, enforced by reason leads to happiness in the form of peace of mind and serenity.

*The World as Will*

*First Aspect*

If the investigator was nothing more than a purely known subject (i.e. without a body) he would only know his body as a representation like any other, an object among objects. This body’s movements and actions would be as strange and unfathomable as the actions of any other object for he would only see the effects and have to infer the causes. He would also call the unseen inner motivations behind those actions ‘forces’ or ‘qualities.’ However, this is not the case. Humans have two completely different ways of knowing their bodies, one, through representation, as an object and two, through a knowledge from within which Schopenhauer calls *will*.

Every act of this will is immediately manifested as a movement of the body. The important distinction Schopenhauer makes here is that there is no causal relation between the will willing and the body acting. The two occur simultaneously and are in fact, the same thing. The action of the body is “nothing but the act of will objectified.” Schopenhauer goes one step further and claims that the body is nothing more than objectified will. Putting it another way, the will is knowledge *a priori* of the body and the body is knowledge *a posteriori* of the will. Therefore every impression on the body is also a direct impression on the will and every excessive movement of the will, that is to say, every emotion, agitates and disturbs the body.

Schopenhauer then extrapolates on this concept and says that we must look at every other object, living and non-living, and judge them in exactly the same way as we judge our own bodies as representations. This means that in as much as we recognise the will within ourselves, we must also acknowledge the will in every other object. All objects in the universe are different only in their phenomenon; according to their true inner nature all things are the same; will. Even the forces of nature manifest as nothing more than will.

The will is groundless, that is, not subject to the PSR and operates completely independently to it. It therefore makes no sense to ask why I will this or that because such a question only makes sense according to causality. Only the appearance or phenomenon of the will is subject to the PSR. This appearance of the will, i.e. everything related to the body including the body itself and all of its actions are what Schopenhauer calls the *objectivity of the will*. As examples, Schopenhauer says that the teeth, gullet and intestinal canal are objectified hunger, the genitals are objectified sexual impulse and so on.

The will is also free from plurality, although its phenomena are of course innumerable. The will is not one as an object is one but in a way that precedes and precludes division. It is like looking through a multi-faceted glass ball at the world. We see different pictures in each face but we are looking at a single object. In all our perceptions it is the one and the same will which reveals itself.

Like all phenomena, the body is subject to the PSR and is bound by strict deterministic laws which he or she is forever unable to change. This is Schopenhauer’s controversial claim that people can never change their true nature or character. We are forever bound by necessity to be the person we were born as. But, because in self-consciousness the will is known directly and in itself, we have the illusion of *a priori* freedom. Schopenhauer claims that *a posteriori* through experience everyone finds that they can never change themselves and must “play to the end the part he has taken upon himself.”

Humans actions are guided by motive and abstract thought but we can see in animal instinct and mechanical skill that the will is also active, even when not guided by any kind of knowledge. In humans as well, there are many aspects of the body which are not guided by knowledge (digestion, circulation, etc). These observations give rise to Schopenhauer’s notion that the will is a pure, blind, striving.

We then have two extremes of will manifested, first in humans, each of which has a unique character of their own and whose actions cannot be predicted from motive alone because there are many other contributing characters to their actions. And second in the forces of nature which operate according to universal laws without deviations and without individuality.

Schopenhauer says that all science is an attempt to explain the ultimate nature of things is hopeless because at the root of all their theories are the forces of nature, which are mere phenomena, not thing-in-itself. The determination of these forces reveals only the *how* but never the *what* of the phenomenon. Science has started from these forces of nature and seeks from there to work up and explain all phenomena in the universe. The problem is that they will never explain the ground of their theories by appealing to phenomena bound by the PSR. Schopenhauer starts from the other end, taking what is immediately known to us (the inner workings of the human mind), although the most complex and works backwards down to the most simple (the forces of nature). This makes sense because the body is the *only* object we know as more than just representation, we also know it as will.

The will is present in all things from the lowly stone to the human but it is only one. It cannot admit of a plurality. Therefore we can conclude that there are varying degrees of objectification in different objects and the animal possesses a higher degree of this objectification than the plant or non-organic objects. From this omnipresence of the will, or thing-in-itself, we can also see that the way to investigate our world is not by attempting to know everything in it but by attempting to know just one, for if we can fathom one in its entirety then we automatically know all.

Schopenhauer continues his narration by revealing that these *grades of the objectification of the will* are nothing more than Plato’s Ideas. These grades are the eternal forms of the things-in-themselves and are themselves beyond the PSR.

Since the will that appears in all phenomena is one and the same there must be some unifying trait that appears throughout all objects. Schopenhauer locates this in the contest, struggle and fluctuation of victory that abounds in all of nature. He sees struggle within objects themselves as higher Ideas vie with lower Ideas for domination and even when the lower Ideas have been subdued, they still constantly strive so that the higher must also continually strive to maintain its position. The more successful an Idea is in subduing those lower forces that represent the lower grades of the will’s objectivity, the more perfect is its expression of its Idea. And so we see struggle everywhere as each grade of the will’s objectification fights for the matter, time and space of another. The food chain is a perfect example of the will feeding on itself in its eternal conflict to express itself. Even forces of nature reveal this, as in the way a magnet forces magnetism on iron in order to manifest its Idea in it.

In the lower grades of the will’s objectification (e.g. plants) will is manifested as a blind impulse, an obscure, dull urge without knowledge. It is also certain and infallible. It may carry out its striving without any interruption but with the advent of a second world of representation, (e.g. animals) the possibility of illusion and deception became for the first time real. As a result, mechanical and instinctual impulses developed as manifestations of will-without-knowledge. Finally, with the appearance of reason, all certainty and directness is lost as deliberation comes to the fore and causes uncertainty and indecision. Error becomes harder to guard against as in the case of superstitions which conjure imaginary motives that entail useless actions. Yet, in this we can see the root of all knowledge as hailing from the will and in general as being subservient to its aims and goals manifested in the will to live which has as its form egoism.

This constant striving of the will is a goal-less striving. It has no aims and therefore can never be satisfied. Its nature is willing, it does not will for something. This is abundantly clear in humans who can notice that as soon as one desire is satisfied another quickly rises to take its place. Or even that when a goal is attained we find it no longer looks the same as it once did or we realise it was little more than an illusion.

The will is a constant striving and any hindrance to the achievement of its goals is the root of all suffering. The attainment of these goals, however, is called satisfaction. All striving also springs from want or deficiency, therefore suffering exists as long as one is not satisfied, but even that satisfaction is never permanent. Other goals and desires always rise to take the place of the achieved goal. The will is truly insatiable and therefore there can be no end to the suffering of humanity. In fact, all life is suffering.

So it seems that every joy rests on the delusion that we have finally found something which will make us eternally happy, but this is always a lie and so the temporary joy must always be followed by a fall. In this, Schopenhauer advocates avoiding extremes of emotion, both upset and joy.

Thus the will at its nature is eternal becoming, endless flux.

*The World as Representation*

*Second Aspect*

The subject only knows as an individual, that is within the bounds of the PSR, and so can have no knowledge of the Ideas unless the individuality in the subject is somehow abolished. The Platonic Ideas are an unusual breed of thing. They are necessarily object, a representation, since they are the grades of the objectification of the will, but they have retained only this, the first and most universal of all forms, that of being object for a subject. So they exist beyond the PSR (not having entered into them, as Schopenhauer says) but are still objects.

What we want to do is raise our awareness from that of particular things to the universal things of the Ideas. This can only happen by a change in the subject. Knowledge in general belongs to the objectification of the will at its higher grades. Nerves, the brain and so on are all expressions of the will and so any representations that arise through them also serve the will as means for the attainment of its ends. The only end of this kind of knowledge is to know the relations between objects laid down by the PSR. We seek to free knowledge from this bound, something which lesser animals are forever incapable of doing.

Our goal is then to cease to be individual and instead become a pure will-less subject of knowing. This entails residing in fixed contemplation of an object without any concern for any connection the object may have to other objects. We are no longer interested in the where, when and why; only the what holds any meaning for us in this state. Abstract thoughts will also need to have been silenced. We need to lose ourselves entirely in perception, giving ourselves to the object. In doing so, Schopenhauer says we are no longer able to separate perceiver from perceived and thus the two become one, since the entire consciousness of the subject is filled with the single image of perception. When this state is reached the particular thing becomes the Idea, for we are seeing beyond the forms of the PSR. In this way, the observer, as pure will-less subject, knows himself as the supporter of the whole world and draws nature into himself so that he feels it to be only an accident of his own being.

The essential in every object is the thing that exists for all individuals of the species while the unfolding or development of the individual is merely the inessential belonging to the phenomenon.

The kind of knowledge that considers the universe as Idea resides in the work of genius, art. Art pauses at a particular thing and reproduces it independently of the PSR, embodying only the essential, the Idea. The artist then, is blessed with the gift of complete objectivity for he or she can see beyond the subjective tendency of the mind according to the will. Genius is nothing more than the capacity to remain in a state of pure perception for an extended time and be able to reproduce this through art. Curiously, the artist must also make good use of imagination to see through the individual thing to what nature intended to form before the various grades of the will fought amongst themselves marring the Idea. Since the artist extracts, as it were, the Idea from the object so that it is clearly perceptible for the ordinary person, it is often easier to see the Idea in art than in nature itself.

The ordinary person, in contrast to the genius, sees things for but a moment, just long enough to extract the concept that is relevant to the will. In this way, they are soon finished with everything.

Schopenhauer then detours a little as he looks closer at genius. He finds genius has often been regarded as an inspiration which takes possession of the individual only periodically. The genius often tends to be irrational and unreasonable on account of their subdued reason and active perceptions. He also notes that genius often produces behaviour closely akin to madness.

When we enter into perception as a pure subject of knowing, Schopenhauer claims it matters not “whether we see the setting sun from a prison or from a palace.” This inward state can occur in any external circumstance. The occurrence of will-less perception also explains why events in the past seem rosier than they were in actuality. Schopenhauer says that from our position now, we recall only the objects in our imagination and not the subject of will that was present at the time with its incessant striving and sorrows. These have been left behind to make way for others.

The *beautiful* is that which draws us into pure perception without struggle and freely gives up its Idea for our contemplation. The *sublime* is that whose Idea is only obtained through struggle and a violent tearing away from the relations of the object which the will sees as unfavourable. The sublime is accompanied by a feeling of exaltation. Objects manifest several degrees of the sublime which are in fact, the markings of the transition from the beautiful to the sublime. Nature in turbulent and tempestuous motion would be considered sublime.

The sublime can also arise in a different way; through our imagining a magnitude in time and space, whose immensity reduces the individual to nothing. The first kind is the *dynamically sublime* while the second is the *mathematically sublime*.

Sometimes the source of aesthetic enjoyment does not come from the perception of the Idea, but rather from the bliss and peace of mind of pure knowledge free from all willing. Natural beauty in the inorganic and vegetable kingdoms tends to produce this kind of enjoyment while contemplation of animals and human beings, by virtue of the higher grade of the objectification of the will, yield enjoyment from becoming aware of the Idea.

Schopenhauer discusses all forms of art (from architecture to water arrangement to artistic horticulture) and finds value in all of them according to the way they show the Ideas and represent the conflict between them in the object. Below are some notes on what Schopenhauer has to say about these various forms of art.

Architecture can be considered art in as much as it shows the lower Ideas such as gravity, cohesion, rigidity, hardness, etc, especially the conflict between gravity and rigidity. It also reveals the nature of light, whose qualities are intercepted and impeded by the large, opaque structure.

The artistic arrangement of water has as its goal the illumination of the Ideas of fluidity, formlessness, transparency and so on. Waterfalls, fountains, lakes, etc are all useful for this purpose.

Artistic horticulture and landscapes depend for their beauty on the natural objects found in them and the way they are clearly separated and defined yet exhibit themselves together in harmony and association.

Beauty is the manifestation of the will in general through space while grace is the manifestation of the will through time. Beauty can be attributed to plants but in animals and humans, both beauty and grace are apparent. Schopenhauer defines grace as the movement performed with perfect economy achieving the desired aim in the easiest and most convenient fashion.

In sculpture beauty and grace are important.

The real character of the mind, visible in emotion, passion and so on, is best depicted on the face and is therefore most suited to painting.

In historical painting, the nominal significance must be distinguished from the real. The former is mere concept attributable to the particular scene while the latter is the universal Idea recognisable in many times and places.

A work of art chosen to express a concept is called an *allegory*. An allegory signifies something different from what it depicts and must therefore be interpreted through reason. True art should be immediately apparent and perceptible. Although allegory is permissible in poetry because poetry takes the subject from the realm of concepts (words) to the perception through the imagination of the reader. Plastic and pictorial art however, starts and ends with perception and concepts have no relevance at all.

Poetry as mentioned above necessarily relies on reason and the imagination of the reader who must connect the abstract concepts relayed in the poetry on their own. Rhythm and rhyme are partly a means of holding the reader’s attention.

Music is the final art Schopenhauer considers and it is this, he says, that stands apart from all other art forms. Music is not a copy of the Ideas. Rather, it passes over them and is to be considered independent of the phenomenal world. Music is a copy of the will itself, it is like another objectification of the will. This makes the effects of music so powerful and moving. Deep tones represent the lowest grades of the will’s objectification, higher tones the higher grades. The melody contains the highest grade of the will’s objectification, humanity.

*The World as Will*

*Second Aspect*

The will itself is devoid of knowledge and is nothing more than a blind, irresistible urge. Through the world as representation the will obtains knowledge of itself, its own willing and what it wills.

Neither the will (the thing-in-itself in all phenomena) nor the subject of knowing (the spectator of all phenomena) is in any way affected by birth and death. These changes only affect the phenomenon. In fact, birth and death are inseparable from the phenomenon and only represent the extreme cases pertaining to normal phenomenal occurrences. Nourishment and renewal differ only in degree from generation and the same holds for excretion and death.

The only form of the will is the present. Past and future are meaningless. It doesn’t matter at all, how individuals arise and pass away in time. The animal lives like this, totally locked into the present. Only humanity, through reason, has the ability to step beyond the confines of this temporal prison and into great pain. In fact, almost all of humanity’s pains and pleasures are caused by our abstract thoughts. As Epictetus says, “It is not things that disturb men, but opinions about things.”

Despite the fact that death and time mean nothing to the will this is not immortality precisely because permanence and transitoriness mean nothing to it. The ego of the individual can therefore take no refuge in this fact because it is subject to death and time.

Death is merely the end of the illusion that the individual consciousness is separate from the will and therefore from all other consciousnesses but since this illusion is all the individual has, it fears and struggles against death.

The phenomenon has its roots in reason and consequence and as such it is determined with absolute necessity and cannot be other than it is. On the other hand the will is not subject to the PSR and so it is therefore free. Schopenhauer says that this concept is therefore a negative one, that is, the denial of necessity. Because the root of all objectivity lies in the will (which is free), the individual object itself might not exist or might exist as something quite different but once the will has exercised its freedom and entered the series of cause and effect, it is completely determined and cannot be otherwise.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As such, humans are never free because they are mere phenomenon, despite the fact that they are the phenomenon of a free will. Every person considers themselves *a priori* free because every action seems possible to them, but *a posteriori* we realise that our every action in fact follows necessarily from our character and motives.

Schopenhauer here discerns between the intelligible and empirical characters. The former is the act of will as thing-in-itself (therefore outside time and divisibility) and the latter is the phenomenon of the act of will in time, space and subject to the PSR manifested over a human’s whole life. The intelligible character sees only one possible action in a given circumstance while the empirical character comes to know this only possible decision of the will through its individual acts, after the fact. Schopenhauer draws an analogy with a vertical pole thrown off balance hesitating over which way to fall. It seems that it could fall in any direction but actually there is only one way it will fall. The reason it seems otherwise is from lack of information. The will is undetermined only to the intellect, the spectator, the subject of knowing. It is the intelligible character which makes all decisions (according to complete necessity through the interaction of the character itself with given motives), but these decisions are only communicated to the subject through the empirical character which is always one step behind. Schopenhauer argues that if a person could act in one way and then in another, they would have had to change their will but since the will lies outside of time this is impossible. Schopenhauer is in complete agreement with Kant that if a person’s empirical character and motives were fully known, their future actions would be completely predictable. The character is just as consistent as nature.

Freedom of will came about through the postulation of man’s inner nature as a knowing soul first and foremost and only a willing entity as a consequence of this. Under this view man is only what he is according to his knowledge. Schopenhauer takes the exact opposite view. Knowledge merely illuminates the will.

And yet, we often see people’s behaviour changing from one circumstance to the other. Why is this? Schopenhauer says that the motives which determine the appearance of the character influence this character through knowledge. Knowledge is changeable and can be subject to error. A person’s changing behaviour is attributable to fluctuations in knowledge and not an actual change in their character. Motives affect the will but never change it. They therefore alter the direction of the will’s effort but don’t change the goals themselves. A part of each circumstance is how well a person knows the motives which influence them and so even though two circumstances may look identical externally, a change in the subject’s knowledge will render them different.

According to this interpretation, repentance is also nothing more than a change in knowledge facilitating a regret about an action that was actually different from what the will desired. Pangs of conscience are more than this. If conscience had the same form as repentance and the will actually changed then the past would no longer cause pain because the will which acted that way would cease to exist. Conscience is pain at the knowledge of one’s own will and the fact that it cannot be changed. When we look back on our deeds we feel either satisfaction or agony because we it is in this way that we recognise the true man or woman within us. Pangs of conscience are also a hidden presentiment that there is only one will and therefore when we harm another we are ourselves both tormenter and tormented, so conscience is two pronged.

Compared with animals, humans do have something Schopenhauer calls an elective decision which is the possibility of a conflict between several competing motives, the strongest of which will however determine the will with complete necessity.

There is also a third type of character called the acquired character and this obtained in life, through contact with the world. This kind of character relates to how well a person knows what he or she wills and knows what he or she can do. In this way acquired character is just the most complete knowledge of our own individuality. The person with (acquired) character is always completely him or herself with full awareness. With this awareness comes a satisfaction with life because all suffering (i.e. all life) is endured with indifference because both inner and outer necessity, leave no room things to be otherwise. Although this implies a stoic equanimity which Schopenhauer believes requires a control of reason over suffering which is never actually seen in fact.

We have already seen how the will is a constant striving but if it lacks objects to will, perhaps its desires are sated too easily, then it will be overcome by a terrible boredom. Its existence again becomes an intolerable burden. Life swings between pain/suffering and boredom.

The first aim of the will is care for the maintenance of this existence. The second is the propagation of the species. Once existence is assured the next thing that sets all living things in motion is the effort to get rid of the burden of this existence, in other words, to escape from boredom. Boredom is the source of sociability.

All satisfaction or happiness is really negative. It is not a gratification which comes to us but always the satisfaction of a wish, that is to say, the ending of a suffering, the deliverance from pain of wanting. This is the reason why we are never satisfied by our current situation because it only brings happiness in contrast with the privation suffered beforehand which quickly fades after the realisation of the goal. Hence we do not value things until we lose them and once more feel the keenness of lack. A spinoff effect of this from the perspective of egoism is that the awareness of other people’s pain can cause us satisfaction.

The futility of this life of continual, never ending striving and suffering is best summed up by Schopenhauer’s comment that rather than this man would much prefer to choose complete non-existence and would never wish to go through it a second time.

The affirmation of the will is the persistent willing itself, undisturbed by any knowledge and can be reduced to maintenance of the individual existence and the propagation of the species. Of course, motives of many kinds bring their influence upon the will but in light of our current discussion these are unimportant. The affirmation of the will is just that willing which becomes visible in the motives.

Maintenance of the body only requires a small degree of the will’s affirmation but the satisfaction of the sexual impulse goes well beyond the affirmation of one’s own existence as it tries to ensure a much longer lasting life for itself beyond the mere individual. Schopenhauer sees a certain shame in the act of procreation because it is in actuality reinforcing the cycle of birth and suffering and death. From this, springs the Church’s dogma concerning the act of sex.

The genitals are subject merely to the will and not at all to knowledge. They are therefore the opposite pole to the brain, the representative of knowledge or the world as representation.

Egoism is the source of all conflict and springs from the delusion created in the individual phenomenon that it alone exists and is separate from other phenomena. The individual as the knowing subject (which carries the world as object) cannot imagine this to be otherwise. Despite the fact that the individual is reduced to almost nothingness in this vast and boundless world, he or she considers him or herself to be the centre of that world and puts him or herself before everything else. This is egoism.

From this affirmation of the individual’s own will it is a short step to the denial of the same will appearing in another individual. In taking away the powers of this body opposed to him, he increases the power serving his will beyond that of his body affirming his own will even more. This infringement on another’s will is called wrong.

In the wrongdoer a sense of remorse can be aroused in this situation and occurs because at some level he knows that what he has done (i.e. denying the will in another) is actually a denial of the one will which he also is. In that, he has a sense of his will (the only will) tearing itself to pieces.

Slavery and theft can also be interpreted in the above way. Morality is nothing more than a categorising of actions into categories that are wrong (cross a boundary into denying another’s will) and right (not crossing that boundary). In this Schopenhauer, again identifies right as being a negative concept being derived from the wrong. Of course, this means that refusing to give aid can never be considered wrong from a moral standpoint.

Right can also be extended to those cases where an attempted wrong is warded off, even if another’s will must be denied in doing so. This defence is justified by motive.

From these considerations the State contract or law was enacted which was created as a way to spare people the pain of suffering wrong by having everyone forgo the pleasure to be obtained from doing wrong. Schopenhauer distinguished between morality and legislation here. Morality is concerned with the doing of right and wrong, while legislation is concerned with the suffering of wrong.

There is also such thing as a right to punish according to laws determined before the offence took place and as such arises from a motive to prevent or outweigh possible motives in favour of that offence. Punishment is directed towards the future as opposed to revenge which looks only to the past.

For a person who has learned to look beyond the PSR, they will realise that all wrongdoing actually affects them as well, in as much as they (as will or thing-in-itself) are the victim as well as the offender.

The satisfaction we get from seeing wrongs fairly punished indicates for Schopenhauer consciousness of an eternal justice. Eternal justice is that sense of justice that lies beyond the PSR and ensures that, because there is only one, eternal will, the tormenter is also the tormented. It is like hitting ourselves with one hand while lovingly stroking ourselves with the other.

Goodness is relative and can be defined as the fitness or suitability of an object to any definite effort of the will. The opposite (equally relative) notion is badness or even evilness. From this sprang ethical systems which sought to associate happiness with virtue. But we can immediately see a flaw in these systems; that of the concept of the greatest or absolute good. Such a thing implies a final satisfaction an end of willing, but we know that this is impossible.

From this we can identify two qualities that define the bad character, or one who is always inclined to do wrong. One is an excessively vehement will to live going far beyond the affirmation of its own body and the second is a blindness or complete deception under the illusion of the PSR. Now, clearly having such a swollen will to live, which is nothing more than suffering (remember willing springs from lack), means that the suffering in the feeling of privation is necessarily also swollen. Also, unfulfilled wishes result in suffering and with greater desire, a greater number of desires will go unfulfilled. For such a bad person, the sting of conscience is that much more painful.

Morality without reasoning (i.e. mere moralising) has no effect because it does not motivate, but morality that does motivate has no moral worth because to motivate it must appeal to self-love. True virtue therefore springs from the intuitive knowledge that recognises the same will in another as exists in them.

The problem in identifying a virtuous person (even in identifying virtue in ourselves) is that the will can be influenced by motives which are nothing more than reflections of our knowledge. That being the case, we can never know whether a good deed sprang from a truly virtuous person or from motives formed from hazy collections of knowledge, dogma, etc.

Genuine goodness of disposition, true nobility also come from knowledge but not from that of the abstract kind, only from the direct, intuitive form of knowledge that partakes not in reason at all. It therefore arises not in words, but in deeds, in conduct over a person’s life.

Since the will is free, Schopenhauer offers no law or rules of morality beyond what has been codified by people just as a means of living in harmony together; that is, nothing more than the Golden Rule of doing to others what you would have them do to you.

Schopenhauer says that despite the will, no matter how strong it is, knowledge of the real, that is, beyond the illusion of the PSR, can be claimed by anyone. This knowledge can teach a person to do right and allow him to master the blind craving of the will. This results in a person who makes less distinction than is usually made between themselves and others.

In summation of this section Schopenhauer offers that seeing through the PSR in the lesser degree causes justice while in the higher degree creates real goodness, a pure disinterested affection towards others.

To continue on, what goodness does for others is to reduce their suffering and so depends on knowledge of the suffering of others, directly intelligible from one’s own suffering and on a par with it. This therefore means that pure affection (love) is at root, sympathy or compassion. All love that is not sympathy is selfishness, but combinations of the two often occur.

Schopenhauer then turns to weeping which he identifies ultimately as sympathy with ourselves. We never weep directly over pain but over its repetition in reflection. Thus, in viewing the representation we find our own state so deserving of sympathy that if another were the sufferer we would be full of sympathy and love for him or her. But since it is actually us in the situation, we weep… for ourselves. Weeping is therefore conditioned by the capacity for affection and sympathy, and by the imagination.

When other people’s plight causes us to weep, even this is still weeping for ourselves because we either imagine ourselves vividly in their place or we recognise in the person’s fate the lot of the whole of humanity and therefore ours as well. We always weep for ourselves.

Now, a being who recognises in all beings his own true self must also regard the endless sufferings of all those beings as belonging to him as well. In this way, he takes on the pain of the whole world. With this kind of awareness, how could he continue to affirm life through constant acts of the will and in doing so tie himself to it even more closely? Indeed he can’t. Instead this knowledge becomes the quieter of all and every willing. The will now turns away from life and retires to a state of complete renunciation and resignation.

Nothing more than phenomenon of the will, this person ceases to will anything, doesn’t attach his will to anything and maintains the greatest indifference to all things. Naturally, he also denies the sexual impulse. If this maxim became universal, the human race would die out, and as the highest phenomenon of the will, with it would go all the lesser manifestations for there can be no object without a subject.

Asceticism is just this state of denial of the will to live. It also occurs in voluntary poverty. Such a person who denies his own will, will also not prevent others from denying his will, but will rather welcome their abuse. He nourishes the body sparingly resorting to things such as fasting, self-castigation and even self-torture to break down and eventually kill the will. With death, our ascetic severs the last feeble bond attaching him to existence so for him, truly the world has ended at the same time.

This is the abstract explanation of asceticism which until Schopenhauer had only been revealed cloaked in myth, religion, dogma and folklore. Despite these sources of knowledge and the information that the faculty of reason accepted, the reason behind everything was first laid out clearly by Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer also cautions us against expecting that once the denial of the will has appeared through knowledge, such denial no longer wavers or falters. It must always be maintained through constant struggle. As long as the body lives, the whole will to live burns within always striving to reach actuality.

We must also be careful not to think we are denying the will when all we are denying is the particular conditions that have befallen this individual. Only seeing through the veil of Maya can lead to true denial of the will.

There are two paths to this denial of the will. The first is through knowledge acquired by suffering which is merely known and which pierces the veil of Maya. The other is through suffering immediately felt by ourselves leading to the knowledge which sees through the PSR.

Suicide, on the other hand, is actually a phenomenon of the will’s strong affirmation. Denial denies both the pleasures and the suffering of life. Suicide merely gives up the suffering and as such, still wills life, just not the one with the present conditions that have come to him or her. He does not give up the will to live, but merely life, since he destroys the individual phenomenon. Suicide denies the individual not the species.

Denial of the will causes a contradiction. The mere phenomenon continues to exist in the PSR as a manifestation of the will but through this phenomenon, the will on one hand denies what it expresses on the other. The whole body is the visible expression of this will to live and yet the motives corresponding to this will no longer act.

The key to reconciling the contradiction lies in the fact that the state in which the power of the motives has been reduced to nothing comes not from the will, but from a changed form of knowledge.

Finally, after our knowledge has acted as a quieter of our will, we are left without a will which means no representation which means no world. Before us there is nothing. Only knowledge remains, the will has vanished. And yet we can console ourselves in this when we realise that with the will also comes inseparable suffering and misery. Perhaps as Schopenhauer says earlier non-existence would in fact be preferable to the only alternative.

1. Humans however, are different from all other phenomena in the sense that freedom may yet appear even in them (the phenomenon) as a contradiction of the phenomenon with itself. We will return to this later. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)