

SCHOPENHAUER: an evaluation of his *theory of will*

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Abstract

The aims of this paper are twofold: firstly, to give the reader a comprehensive- but not exhaustive- understanding of Schopenhauer's theory of will, and, secondly, to elucidate certain problems inherent in this theory. Schopenhauer's epistemology, dual aspect ontology, aesthetics, ethics, and pessimism are explored. Additionally, a cursory exposition of Kant's metaphysics is presented, along with Schopenhauer's critique of this. Possible solutions to problems in his theory are expounded and subsequently critiqued. Most salient of these problems is his identification of the will with the Kantian thing-in-itself. I argue that Schopenhauer's theory of will contradicts the Kantian confines on metaphysical knowledge. Consequently, and in light of his own epistemology, there are serious, if not intractable, problems with his contentions that the will is the Kantian thing-in-itself, and it is knowable.

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Abbreviations:

Abbreviations within the text:

PSR: principle of sufficient reason

Abbreviations within footnotes (works cited):

FR: *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*

WWR: *The World as Will and Representation*

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was one of the greatest nineteenth century philosophers. Albeit still standing as an outsider in academic philosophy, he revolutionized philosophical thought and made substantive contributions to almost all divisions of philosophy. With an uncompromising honesty and profound commitment to truth, he tackled the most universal, daunting, and esoteric of human inquiries. He resolved- without making recourse to authority or convention- to understand and expound *what* precisely this world was, probing what lies beneath, and is common to, all phenomena. He endeavoured to explicate *the meaning* behind the ubiquitous and perpetual strife characteristic of the world, and of the suffering and solicitude inherent in sentient life. Furthermore, he went to great lengths in detailing the methods in which we can be liberated from this worldly 'penal colony'. His theory of the 'will', the focus of the current study, is central to all such queries, musings, and methods of liberation. Indeed, it is the dominant leitmotif subsumed in all of his thought; the all-embracing nexus of his philosophy. It proved extremely contentious and original, and influenced such great and diverse thinkers as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Erwin Schrödinger (1887-1961) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951).

It is my intention in this thesis to 1. Provide a general synopsis of Schopenhauer's epistemology and dual aspect account of reality (both requisite knowledge for a correct understanding of the will). 2. Pay special consideration to his theory of will, 3. Delineate certain problems with this theory 4. To offer possible resolutions to these problems, and, finally, 5. To examine the cogency of these resolutions themselves. As such, the main questions I undertake in this study are 1. "How do we know the world in which we inhabit"? 2. "What exactly is the will"? 2. "How do we know the will"? and, 3. "What problems (i.e. inconsistencies and contradictions etc.) are in Schopenhauer's account of it"? I will refer to other aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophy (aesthetics, ethics, etc.); such aspects being inextricably linked, and thus conducing to, a thorough understanding of the will.

In *Chapter 1*, after some prefatory remarks on pertinent terms used by Schopenhauer, I shall investigate his work *On the Fourfold Root of The Principle of Sufficient Reason*, which,

along with the knowledge of such terms, will provide a requisite backdrop to the subject matter covered in this thesis. I will then examine the world as constituted by representation.

In *Chapter 2* his theory of will shall be studied in detail, starting from its intimate relationship to Kant's noumenon. Subsequent to this I will look at how Schopenhauer deemed the will knowable through the body, and, additionally, how it is related to his notorious pessimism. Its relationship to his aesthetics, chiefly in the contemplation of Platonic Ideas, will then be expounded. Finally I will demonstrate how, through its negation, human beings can attain lasting tranquillity.

In *Chapter 3* I will examine the salient problems in Schopenhauer's theory of will and subsequently delineate possible solutions to these. I will then address the soundness of these proposed solutions.

In *Chapter 4* the main points of this study will be summarized and I shall offer some concluding statements.

Schopenhauer conceives of the world as having *two distinct aspects*. Known as the *dual aspect account of reality*, this purports that the world exists concurrently as a *representation* (the *phenomenal* world), and as *will* (the *noumenal*¹ world). We understand reality exclusively and exhaustively through these two modes. I shall firstly consider the world as representation, and then as will. Schopenhauer employs certain terms in his articulation of this dual natured aspect of the world, and all such terms are foundational to, and ubiquitous, within his works. Therefore it is prudent, by way of facilitating a coherent and lucid understanding of his thought, to briefly examine these terms.

1.2 Terminology

Schopenhauer has stringent definitions of the terms *knowledge*, *representation*, *subject*, and *object*, and all such terms are greatly interconnected. *Knowledge*, for Schopenhauer, entails the *awareness of objects*, all of which are *representations*. To know something is for *something to be present in consciousness as an object of representation*. All knowledge presupposes *something to be known*. Knowledge “is above all else and essentially representation”² Now a *representation*³ is “A very complicated *physiological* occurrence in an animal’s brain, whose result is the consciousness of a *picture or image* at that very spot”⁴. As such, all representations exist *entirely within our consciousness*; they do not possess an external reality which parallels the internal reality we are conscious of. To be a *subject* is to be “the supporter of the world, the universal condition of all that appears”⁵. Everything that exists, exists exclusively for the subject; the subject is the essential correlative of all representations. *Objects* (or phenomena) can be of *four* main kinds (to be described below), but all have in common that they are *knowledge for a subject*: “*all our representations are objects of the subject, and all objects of the subject are our representations*”⁶ Hence, subject and object- *the most fundamental epistemological*

¹ Throughout this essay the terms “noumenal world” (plural: “noumena”) and “thing-in-itself” should be understood as synonyms. I will limit my use of the former to discussions on Kant, as Schopenhauer eschews this term and only utilises the later.

² Schopenhauer, A. (1969) *The World as Will and Representation*, E.F.J. Payne (trans.), Volume 2, p. 191.

³ As the reader will gather the terms “object” and “representation” are greatly synonymous, if not identical. The later term, as far as I am aware, is only distinguished from the former by virtue of its being defined as, and entailing, a “*physiological* occurrence”.

⁴ Schopenhauer, A. (1969) *WWR*, Volume 2, p. 191

⁵ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, p. 5

⁶ Schopenhauer, A. (1974) *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, E.F.J. Payne (trans.), La Salle, IL: Open Court, pp. 41-42

distinction for Schopenhauer- are inseparable: they *mutually entail each other*; there is “No object without a subject”⁷. Thus “being subject means exactly the same as having an object, and being object means just the same as being known by the subject”⁸ These definitions will now be supplemented by an understanding of Schopenhauer’s thought with respect to the *principle of sufficient reason*.

1.3 On the Fourfold Root of The Principle of Sufficient Reason

Schopenhauer contends that for a proper appreciation of his philosophy- and his theory of will is most central to it- one must firstly understand the material contained in his essay *On the Fourfold Root of The Principle of Sufficient Reason*. Indeed, in the preface to his chief work, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer propounds that “the subject matter of that essay is always presupposed here as if it were included in the book”⁹ The subject matter of this essay also presupposes a general- not exhaustive- understanding of this text.

On the Fourfold Root of The Principle of Sufficient Reason, Schopenhauer’s 1813 doctoral dissertation, serves fundamentally as a propaedeutic; a “treatise on elementary philosophy”¹⁰ in which he undertakes a revised epistemology. It can also be viewed as an exposition of Schopenhauer’s idealism; his comprehension of the world as being wholly representative in nature. Now generally understood the PSR states that *for every fact or truth, there exists a sufficient reason why it is the case*.¹¹ Schopenhauer expresses this general understanding through his espousal of Christian Wolff’s (1679-1754) declaration that “Nothing is without a ground why it is rather than it is not”¹², and argues that this principle is known *a priori* and is foundational to *all* thought and knowledge: “the mother of all sciences”¹³. Albeit stipulating that all facts or truth are explainable, the principle *itself is*

⁷ Schopenhauer, A. (1969) *WWR*, Volume 1, p. 434

⁸ Schopenhauer, A. (1974) *FR*, p. 209

⁹ Schopenhauer, A. (1969) *WWR*, Volume 1, p. xiv

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, A. (1974) *FR*, p. xxvi

¹¹ Bunnin, N., and Yu, J. (2004) *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, p. 668

¹² Schopenhauer, A. (1974) *FR*, p. 6

¹³ *Ibid.*

unprovable; it “explains things in reference to one another, but it always leaves unexplained something that it presupposes.”¹⁴

Now in this work Schopenhauer asserts that the universe contains, or there exists, only *four classes of objects* for our cognitive faculty, all of which are *representations*. Corresponding to these four classes of objects, there are *four classes of explanation*. Each class of object is governed by a distinct class of explanation (or unique form, or ‘root’, of the PSR), and a proper explanation of objects precludes the various modes of explanation being admixed. At the *general root, the base*, of the PSR, is the subject and object division treated off above. It is general in the sense that it *is common to all classes of objects* (and all modes of explanation).

Material objects (natural objects in time and space i.e. trees, tables, etc.) (“*intuitive, perceptive, complete, empirical, representations*”¹⁵) are governed by the *law of causality* (The Principle of Sufficient Reason of *Becoming*). Specifically, the law of causality pertains to *changes* in material objects. The faculty of mind working here is *the understanding*. *Concepts or abstract representations*, which when joined together constitute *judgements*, are understood through *logical explanation* (The Principle of Sufficient Reason of *Knowing*). The faculty of mind functioning here is the *faculty of reason* (the faculty exclusive to human cognition). A judgement constitutes true knowledge only if it is grounded upon something else, i.e. another judgement, a law of logic etc. Space and time, both *a priori* intuitions, constitute *mathematical objects* (space constitutes the foundation of geometry, and time, that of arithmetic), and are governed by *mathematical explanation (geometrical demonstration)* (The Principle of Sufficient Reason of *Being*). The faculty of mind effective here is known as *pure sensibility*. Finally, *individual wills* (“*the subject of willing*”¹⁶), the most pertinent class of objects with respect to this paper, are explained through *the law of motivation* (The Principle of Sufficient Reason of *Acting*). Any action performed by an individual is to be understood *in terms of a motive*, thus motivation equates to “*causality seen from within*”¹⁷ The faculty of mind operative here is *self-consciousness*. The individual

¹⁴ Schopenhauer, A. (1969) *WWR*, Volume 1, p. 81

¹⁵ Schopenhauer, A. (1974) *FR*, p. 45

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 207

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 214

will “is given only in time not in space”¹⁸ A diagrammatic representation of Schopenhauer’s principle can be expressed thus:

<u>Object</u>	<u>Root</u>	<u>Faculty/Subjective Correlate</u>
1. Material objects	The Principle of Sufficient Reason of Becoming (The Law of Causality)	Understanding
2. Concepts (abstract representations)	The Principle of Sufficient Reason of Knowing	Reason
3. Space and time	The Principle of Sufficient Reason of Being	Pure Sensibility
4. Individual wills	The Principle of Sufficient Reason of Acting (The Law of Motivation)	Self-consciousness

Figure 1:
The PSR

1.4 The world as representation

Schopenhauer starts his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation*, with the intrepid declaration “The world is my representation”¹⁹ He regards this as an apodictic truth which pertains “to every living and knowing being, although man alone can bring it into reflective abstractive consciousness”²⁰ His understanding of the world as being a representation, only a mere *appearance* of reality, has its genesis predominately in *three* sources: the *Upanishads*, and the doctrines of his two philosophical heroes’, *Plato* (approx. 427-347 B.C.) and *Immanuel Kant* (1724-1804). Indeed, he concedes: “I do not believe my doctrine could have come about before the Upanishads, Plato and Kant could cast their rays simultaneously into the mind of one man”²¹ In postulating the world as a representation, Schopenhauer denounces realism²² and espouses a radical form of idealism known as *subjective or dogmatic idealism*²³. This form of idealism promulgates that the external

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 207

¹⁹ Schopenhauer, A. (1969) *WWR*, Volume 1, p. 3

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Schopenhauer, A. (1988) (ed. Arthur Hübscher) *Manuscript Remains in Four Volumes*, E.F.J. Payne (trans.), *Volume 1: Early Manuscripts (1804-1818)*, Oxford, Berg Publishing, p. 467

²² Realism should be understood here as the conviction that *the external world exists independently of the subject*.

²³ Distinguished from *sceptical idealism*, (as propounded by Rene Descartes (1596-1650)), *objective idealism*, *Absolute Idealism* (based on ‘the absolute’) etc., but most predominately from *partial idealism*. This form of idealism, which Schopenhauer relates predominately to John Locke (1632-1704), regards only *secondary qualities* of an object (taste, sound, colours etc.) as residing within the mind. *Dogmatic, subjective idealism* regards both secondary and *primary qualities* (weight mass, temporality, and spatial extension) as existing

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