

Arthur Schopenhauer

The World as Will and Representation

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Objectives

1. An overview of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's masterpiece *The World as Will and Representation*
2. Understanding key Schopenhauerian terms, including 'representation' and 'will'
3. Understanding Schopenhauer's philosophical contributions to the fields of metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics and ethics
4. Knowledge of the influence on Schopenhauer of past philosophers and philosophical traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Plato, Kant, and others

Reading Assignment

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume 1: Preface, §§1–5, 18–19, 35–38, 56–59, 65–68, 71. Translated by Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway.

Commentary

Introduction

The World as Will and Representation by [Arthur Schopenhauer](#) (1788–1860) is a book with an unusual structure. For a start, its two volumes were published decades apart. Volume one was completed in 1818, when Schopenhauer was just 30 years old. Volume two didn't appear until March 1844. Moreover, rather than covering new ground, volume two consists of precisely 50 supplementary chapters that elaborate on the ideas already presented in volume one.

In the preface to the first edition, Schopenhauer claims to have conveyed 'a single thought' (Preface). He claims, furthermore, that this single thought has no foundation, no top and no bottom, no absolute beginning or end, but instead is an *organic unity*, like an organism which may have many parts but is nevertheless one singular integrated whole. His thought has, he says, a [metaphysical](#) aspect, an [aesthetic](#) aspect, and an [ethical](#) aspect, depending on which way you look at it, but it is, in the end, all one thought. Schopenhauer is aware that, for this reason, a book is an artificial form to impose on his single thought. Books do have a beginning and an end, a first line and a last line. Books move along in a linear direction with each thought building on the last, whereas, according to the logic of Schopenhauer's single thought, the beginning (or the part that we *call* the beginning) depends on the end just as much as the end on the beginning.

What does this tell us about Schopenhauer's style as a thinker? It tells that his thinking is all of a piece, that it fits together in a special and intricate way. Does it mean that he is a *systematic* thinker? Schopenhauer might demur from this label. Systems, Schopenhauer claims, have an *architectonic* structure; they are like buildings, with a foundation, supports, a roof. They have, that is, a bottom and a top, and so systems, too, lack the directionless organic coherence of Schopenhauer's single thought.

There is then reason to call Schopenhauer an *organic* thinker, offering us a thought that, in essence, is more like a natural organism than an artificial building.

Nevertheless, when it comes to *articulating* his thought in the form of a book, Schopenhauer is forced to adopt a systematic way of thinking after all. He must explain himself bit by bit, revealing and displaying each aspect of his thought in turn so that we can see exactly what he has in mind. Now we can appreciate why volume two of *The World as Will and Representation* is made up of chapters elaborating on volume one. Rather than erecting one structure after another, each adding a new edifice to a separate philosophical field (a philosophy of mind, a philosophy of art, a moral philosophy, and so on), Schopenhauer conceived his all-encompassing 'single thought' early in his life and spent the rest of his time carefully unfolding it.

The year before he died in 1860, Schopenhauer published a third and final edition of *The World as Will and Representation*. It remained a two-volume work, and while he did integrate some new bits and pieces over time, its 1818 core remained remarkably intact throughout its 41-year lifecycle.

Representation and Will

'The world is my representation' (§1), Schopenhauer says at the start of his great work. He doesn't mean the world is specifically *his* representation, of course; he says that this truth holds for *all* cognitive beings, that is, all beings that can know the world in some way. Why, then, does he bother saying 'my' representation at all? Why not just say, 'the world is *a* representation'? Because, Schopenhauer thinks, the world is not a representation *apart from me*, or rather, apart from *us* cognitive beings. By calling the world *our* representation, Schopenhauer means to say that it is always and everywhere an object *for a subject*. Representation is not just the *object* of our knowledge, but also inextricably includes the knowing subject too. As Schopenhauer puts it, with his helpful tendency to use vivid concrete images to make an abstract theoretical point, 'he is not acquainted with either the sun or the earth, but rather only with *an eye that sees a sun, with a hand that feels an earth*' (§1, emphasis added).

At the same time, there is another truth, according to Schopenhauer: 'The world is my will' (§1). We will put this aside for now, but what it means is that, as the very title of *The World as Will and Representation* suggests, Schopenhauer has a two-fold worldview to offer us: on the one hand, the world is something he calls will, and on the other, it is representation. He considers the world as representation first because this side of his thinking he owes in large part to philosophers who went before him, especially [Immanuel Kant](#) (1724–1804) but also, notably for his time, the [Vedānta school of Hindu philosophy](#). He considers the world as will later because this is his own innovation in the history of philosophy.

Schopenhauer and Kantian Philosophy

Schopenhauer was deeply impressed by Kant's revolutionary idea that the subject that experiences the world plays an active role in determining the appearance of the object of their experience. This is as opposed to it being the other way around: the subject being passively determined by the object, deriving everything about experience from impressions that are made upon it. Instead, the subject is always organizing the form of its experience, and indeed experience would not be possible without what the subject brings to it.

In his book [Critique of Pure Reason](#) (1st ed, 1781; 2nd ed, 1787), Kant had elaborated on this idea in painstaking detail. Schopenhauer, in his first published work, [On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason](#) (1st ed, 1814; 2nd ed, 1847), attempted to streamline it. For this he revived and reconsidered 'the principle of sufficient reason', a principle most associated with two earlier German philosophers, [Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz](#) (1646–1716) and [Christian Wolff](#) (1679–1754), although Schopenhauer traces it back even further to [René Descartes](#) (1596–1650) and [Benedict de Spinoza](#) (1632–1677).

It is, roughly speaking, the principle that for any fact there must be an explanation. Schopenhauer thinks of it, more specifically, as the principle by which every object of representation 'stands in a necessary relation to other objects, on the one hand as determined and on the other hand as determining' (§2), meaning that any given state of affairs can be traced back to another state of affairs that explains why the first is the case. This arrangement is not an accidental feature of representation; following Kant, Schopenhauer argues that the reliable and lawlike interconnectedness of the objects of representation can't just be an expectation we *learn from* experience, but rather must be something that we *bring to* it. The success of any 'why?' question we might ask about the world assumes the principle of sufficient reason (i.e. that the fact in question has an explanation); the *a priori* nature of the principle – that it is a *prior condition of* experience, rather than something *derived from* experience – is the only way to ensure the universality of that assumption (i.e. that all facts necessarily have an explanation). In other words, we can only be sure that the world connects up in this way, not because we experience it so, but because, in some sense, we make it so. And without the assumption of the principle of sufficient reason, it's hard to imagine what experience would be like, or even to say that experience would be possible at all.

One thing Schopenhauer carries over from Kant is the idea that space, time, and causality are among the things that the subject brings to representation. The law of causality, in fact, is one of the forms of the principle of sufficient reason (§4). The spatio-temporal causal order of things is, then, a feature of their appearance in representation, not as they are in themselves.

Does this mean that space, time, causality, and the objects of representation determined by them, are *unreal*? This has a complex answer in Kantian philosophy. On the one hand, as Schopenhauer says, they are 'completely real' (§5). They are completely real *as representations*, that is – remembering Schopenhauer's opening line, 'the world is *my* representation' (emphasis added) – as objects of knowledge for a knowing subject. Kantians call this the world's 'empirical reality' (§5). On the other hand, Schopenhauer says, *without* the knowing subject, 'the world is nothing' (§5). The world as an arrangement of knowable things in a spatio-temporal causal order depends upon the knowing subject and is not real apart from that subject. This is what Kantians call its '[transcendental ideality](#)' (§5). This mixture of [empirical realism](#) and [transcendental idealism](#) is a highly Kantian trait of Schopenhauer's philosophy.

It's all very highfalutin, but it can be put in a way that sounds eminently sensible, almost trivial: first, the world that we know is the world *as we know it*, and second, we can't know the world in any other way than as we know it. This recasts the position in [epistemological](#) terms, that is, in terms of *knowledge*, rather than in the *metaphysical* terms of *reality*. And, indeed, the Kantian view has important epistemic consequences for the study of metaphysics. Specifically, it identifies the limits of what can be known about reality: we can know it *as representation*, but we can't know it *as it is in itself*.

Since representation just is objects of knowledge for a knowing subject, along with the necessary conditions that the knowing subject brings to the objects of knowledge, all this means is that *we can't know the world in the absence of the conditions of knowing it* (of course we can't). Here, then, for true Kantians, is where metaphysics and epistemology meet: when we try to philosophize about the nature of reality *as it is in itself*, that is, *beyond* representation and *apart* from the conditions that the knowing subject brings to representation, we necessarily go wrong. It is just not something we can know about. Our philosophizing about reality, if it is to count as knowledge at all, must stay *within* the boundaries we ourselves impose on knowledge.

And yet... There is always the temptation to go beyond these boundaries. Schopenhauer diagnoses one source of this temptation, which he thinks leads philosophers even further down a wrong road. Philosophers might make the error of thinking that representation itself must be caused by something that stands outside of representation. We could therefore, first, deduce *that there is* something beyond representation, namely the thing that causes it, and second, deduce *what it is*, that

is, some further knowledge of its nature. This would be a mistake, according to Schopenhauer, because, remember, the principle of causality only properly applies *to* and *between* the objects of representation, not to anything 'beyond' it.

On the other hand, Schopenhauer himself gives in to the temptation to go beyond representation, but for a different reason. First, he notes, philosophers would not have fixated on the question of reality as it is in itself if there were not a deeper source of this fixation than the mistake of misapplying the causal principle (§5). This misapplication may be *how* some philosophers have tried to get at reality as it is in itself, but it doesn't explain *why* philosophers don't just stick with reality as they find it, that is, as it appears to them. Second, Schopenhauer thinks he's *found* this deeper reason for going beyond representation. This brings us, finally, to the world *as will*.

Willing and Suffering

The enquiry into the world as will is initiated by the insight that – contrary to what we've seen in the Kantian picture so far – we are not *just* knowing subjects. We are not, as Schopenhauer puts it, '[Engelskopf](#)' (§18) – a winged angel's head, without a body, hovering above experience, always at some distance. We are, instead, also 'rooted in this world' (§18). We experience ourselves in a twofold way: on the one hand, we experience ourselves as representation, that is, as an object arranged like any other object in the spatio-temporal causal order. In a word, we are bodies. On the other hand, we experience ourselves in a way that we don't experience any other object of representation: the motions of our body are also experienced by us, and us alone, from the inside. We have privileged and unique access to what it is that moves our own bodies. In a word, we are *will*.

Lucky for us. For it means that we do, after all, know one object in the world – namely ourselves – not as just another representation but also as something completely different. This, according to Schopenhauer, is both the source of metaphysical thinking about reality as it is in itself *and* it provides the essential clue to solving the riddle at which all this thinking aims. If we experienced ourselves as nothing more than a representing being (a subject) and an object of representation (a body), we wouldn't wonder whether there was anything more to the world than representation. But we do wonder, because through the case of ourselves as *willing* beings, we have been tipped off that there is more to the world than meets the eye. We have, as it were, backstage access. Moreover, if the world as it is in itself is anything like we are in ourselves, then we have also been tipped off about its *inner nature*, that is, what it is *beyond* representation. Why, you might ask, assume that the inner nature of other objects of representation is anything like our own inner nature? Well, one might reply, what other option is there? As Schopenhauer says, 'We do not know anything – we cannot even think of anything – besides will and representation' (§19). We can only go off what we have.

Schopenhauer proceeds, then, by interpreting the world on the analogy of our twofold experience of ourselves (§19) – hence, *the world as will and representation*. For any object of representation known only from the outside – that is, anything other than ourselves – he will interpret its inner nature in terms of will. He is aware that this may lead to confusion. With the word 'will', it sounds like he is attributing *volitional states* (e.g. deliberating, choosing) to inanimate objects like rocks and stones. If he just means the thing that moves all of nature, why not pick a word like 'force' or 'energy' to avoid confusion? Because, Schopenhauer says, those other concepts are derived from the outer world as representation, whereas the word we choose should remind us of the *origin* of this key metaphysical insight – that it came from within, from reflection on the case of ourselves as willing beings (§22).

The world according to will is, however, not a pretty picture (see §§56–59). The will is not just the source of meaningful metaphysical thinking; it is also the source of meaningless, endless [suffering](#). Apart from the first-hand experience of how willing leads to suffering, which is available to all of us, Schopenhauer deduces this from a string of connections going from willing, to needing, to lacking, and

finally to suffering: 'All *willing* springs from need, and thus from lack, and thus from suffering' (§38). To will something (e.g. a glass of water) implies both a lack of it and a need for it (thirst), and this needful lack is typically a painful experience, either in a minor way (the waiter will be bringing it over shortly) or a major way (you are dying of dehydration). Moreover, satisfaction upon fulfillment (finally, here's the waiter!) is short-lived because another need quickly takes the place of the previous one (now, where are those starters?).

Aesthetic experience

For this reason, much of Schopenhauer's thinking about *value* revolves around ways of escaping this kind of suffering. There are two main domains in which he considers this kind of value. The first is the value of *aesthetic experience* of natural beauty and works of art. According to Schopenhauer (§38), there are two sides to aesthetic experience, each of which involves a certain kind of transformation.

One side is the transformation of the *object* of aesthetic experience from a *particular* into a *universal*. From the rosy dawn and rolling countryside in front of you, you take not just the view from your specific location (say, how the land looks from the hilltop in your local woodland), but something deeper, something that all glorious scenes of this kind have shared throughout time. From [Homer's](#) epic poem *Illiad*, you take not just a history lesson about the Trojan War, but something timelessly true about wars, why human beings enter them, what elements of fate and fortune decide their outcome, and so on. Schopenhauer names the object of aesthetic experience the *Idea*, after [Plato's](#) (427–347 BC) word for the eternal [forms](#) in which all temporal things participate, and which philosophers aim to contemplate.

The other side is the transformation of the *subject* of aesthetic experience from an *individual* into what Schopenhauer calls '*pure, will-less, subject of cognition*' (§38). Instead of knowing the world with an interest (e.g. locating food), we as the subject of aesthetic experience are radically *disinterested*. We become, Schopenhauer says, 'a clear mirror of the world' (§27), simply reflecting back representation, rather than having our focus narrowed by our interests (e.g. ignoring anything that cannot be eaten). This transformation of the subject is a condition of the transformation of the object into the Platonic Idea – we attend to particulars when we have a specific interest in them – but it is also a source relief from the will, that is, relief from suffering. 'It is the painless state that [Epicurus](#) prized as the highest good and the state of the gods,' Schopenhauer says, 'for that moment we are freed from the terrible pressure of the will, we celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing, [the wheel of Ixion](#) stands still' (§38).

Both transformations, on the objective side and the subjective side, involve *de-individuation*. The object is temporarily plucked from the stream of life and instead stands for all things of its kind, while the subject temporarily forgets its daily needs and cares. Both are also a source of value: on the side of the object the value is *cognitive* (we know the world more deeply), while on the side of the subject it is *psychological* (we feel better). Note that despite Schopenhauer's adoption of Platonic language, his views on art are deeply un-Platonic. For a start, [Plato was critical](#) of the cognitive value of art; philosophy, instead, would be a better way to deepened one's knowledge, he thought. Moreover, Plato thought indulgence in the arts could give license to harmful emotions, rather than it being, as Schopenhauer thinks, a source of peace and calm.

Ethical transformation and ascetism

But even for Schopenhauer, aesthetic experience is only a *temporary* solution. For a permanent solution, or close to it, Schopenhauer looks to a certain kind of *ethical* transformation. It starts when an individual 'takes as much interest in the suffering of other individuals as he does his own (§68). Another way to put this is that they go beyond self-interested [egoism](#). This ethical transformation is conditioned by a transformation of consciousness and led by a metaphysical insight into the nature of reality:

namely, that the distinction between oneself and another is metaphysically superficial, and that deep down we are all different manifestations of one of the same thing – the will. One comes to care about the suffering of another because, really, there is no ‘one’ and ‘another’; their suffering is as much yours.

In this first instance this might develop into a [compassionate](#) attitude towards others, as Schopenhauer explains in one half of another book, *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics* (1st ed., 1841; 2nd ed., 1860). The compassionate person regards the suffering of others as their own, acts to relieve it, and certainly refrains from causing it. In *The World as Will and Representation*, however, Schopenhauer goes into more detail about a different, rarer, and in his view more advanced ethical response to the all-pervasiveness of suffering: [asceticism](#). For this Schopenhauer takes inspiration from many of the world’s religions, especially classical Indian philosophy, where we find many examples of ascetics (not least [the Buddha](#)), but also Christianity (e.g. martyrs, monastic sects, and Christ himself).

Asceticism involves, according to Schopenhauer, *negation of the will*. The ascetic has enough insight into reality to grasp that suffering is essential to all life, because all life is willing and all willing is suffering, and so they *cease to affirm* this life with constant acts of will (§68). Just as, to the rest of us, the world appears as a *motive* to the will (it makes us want and act), to the ascetic, with their deeper knowledge, it appears as a *‘tranquilizer of all and every willing’* (§68). The rest of us go through life as if on ‘a circular path made of red-hot coals with a few cool places’, in other words, suffering for the most part and just trying to get from one small spot of relief to the next, whereas the ascetic, in their wisdom, ‘sees himself on all points of the circle simultaneously, and steps away (§68). They see the bigger picture and want (perhaps their final want) nothing to do with it.

A key marker of the life of the ascetic is *voluntary chastity*, along with abstinence from other worldly indulgences (§68). This nevertheless requires a certain amount of upkeep. While the fires of desire may have been spiritually extinguished, so long as a person lives, these desires remain manifest in bodily form. In other words, even an ascetic continues to have genitals, and probably the urges that go along with them. So, the ascetic life of inner peace that is freedom from the will also involves a constant inner battle to fight back against embodied urges (for sex, for food, for comfort). Somewhat paradoxically, it’s a life that takes some amount of effort to maintain.

Is it a *good* life, one might ask? The good life is normally the goal of ethics after all. And if we follow Schopenhauer’s line of thinking, it must be a good life. The will is a – the! – source of all suffering, so escaping it, even in a way that must be managed, can only be a good thing. On the other hand, given some things Schopenhauer says about the concept *good*, it can be hard to make sense of how this life is good for the ascetic. At one point Schopenhauer defines *good* as ‘the *suitability of an object to any particular effort of the will*’ (§65), but the ascetic has, by definition, abandoned all efforts of the will where possible (except, perhaps, those aimed keeping the will silent).

Furthermore, the life of the ascetic might not *look* like a good life to the rest of us. Parts of it might be enviable, of course: a little peace and tranquility would be nice. But the self-denial, self-flagellation, and self-mortification, perhaps not so much.

At the end of volume one of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer addresses the mutual impasse between the ascetic’s way of living and our own. ‘For everyone who is still filled with the will,’ he says in the final lines, ‘what remains after it is completely abolished is certainly nothing. But conversely, for those in whom the will has turned and negated itself, this world of ours which is so very real with all its suns and galaxies is – nothing’ (§71). That last word, the very last word of Schopenhauer’s book, is *Nichts*. The German word *Nichtigkeit* can mean absence, void, emptiness, but it can also mean (and Schopenhauer uses it this way too) vanity and pointlessness, as in, ‘It means nothing to me’. Schopenhauer is saying, on the one hand, that asceticism is unimaginable as a way of living for us who are still full of will; we draw a blank when trying to picture what it would be like (not what it looks like from the outside, but what it would be to live that way). But he is also saying we can’t see that kind of life as being valuable to us; it means nothing to us. And of course it does, because we can only

value in relation to the will, whereas they have passed beyond this mode of evaluation. Where? We cannot know.

Questions for Self-Review

1. What does Schopenhauer mean when he says he aims to convey 'a single thought'?
2. What does Schopenhauer mean by 'representation'? What does he mean by 'will'?
3. What role does 'will' play in the possibility of metaphysical thinking?
4. Why is aesthetic experience valuable, according to Schopenhauer? Do you agree?
5. What are the possible ethical responses to suffering, according to Schopenhauer? Do you agree?

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