

## An Introduction to Schopenhauer's Metaphysics *Adrian Samuel*

### *Background*

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was an irascible German who became fascinated by philosophy. His father, not seeing philosophy to be an acceptable career, offered the young Arthur a choice: give up philosophy for a career in business and have a three-year international tour or remain a penniless philosopher for the rest of your life. Arthur understandably chose the tour, but on his father's death, he abandoned business to explore the truth of the human condition. Schopenhauer set himself up as an original thinker, opposing his ideas to the philosophical giants of his day, and even timetabling his lectures to coincide with those of Hegel. Virtually no-one turned up to Schopenhauer's lectures however. In middle life, his anger got the better of him, and when his maid made too much noise he threw her down the stairs, seriously injuring her. Towards later life however, the importance of Schopenhauer's thought was recognised, and he has since been hugely influential. Many of Nietzsche's insights, for example, are developments from Schopenhauer's work. And Schopenhauer was the first Western philosopher to draw upon Eastern thought in an essentially sympathetic way.

### *Schopenhauer's Thought*

Seven years before Schopenhauer's birth, Immanuel Kant published the Critique of Pure Reason. This transformed the philosophical landscape by exploring the interdependency between what there is [the ontological] and how we know it [the epistemic]. Kant's philosophy opened up a more complex understanding of the relation between mind and reality by critiquing rationalism and empiricism. Simply put, rationalism took the mind as its starting-point, insofar as it appealed to ultimate grounds for consciousness in deciding what is real (e.g., Descartes' clear and distinct ideas). Empiricism, by contrast, took as its starting-point our experiences of reality, seeing the mind to merely catalogue those experiences (e.g., Hume's seeing the mind's causal insights to be merely generalisations based upon items of experience).

In place of these two extremes, Kant allows for both the starting-points of rationalism and empiricism within his philosophy. That is, he agrees with the empiricist in taking experiences as his starting-point, but at the same time he agrees with the rationalist in taking the mind's power of discrimination as his starting-point. He bridged these two starting-points by arguing for a revised understanding of knowledge – what he termed 'empirical realism', perceived through a 'transcendentally ideal' framework of understanding.

Kant distinguishes such a position from 'transcendent' knowledge (knowledge of reality which has no dependency upon the mind) and pure 'idealism' (where knowledge is merely a creation of minds). In place of these two extremes, Kant argues for 'transcendental idealism', which attempts to explore reality in terms of how it reveals itself *through* our minds. That is, in Kant's thought, the epistemic (how we

know something) and the ontological (the reality known) come to be seen as autonomous and yet interdependent.

Schopenhauer adopted Kant's transcendental idealism wholeheartedly. But unlike Kant, whose principal aims in his three Critiques were to critically delimit the pretensions of description, moral intuition and our powers of judgement respectively, Schopenhauer's aim was to systematically think through a philosophy which takes the interdependency of the ontological and the epistemic as its starting-point. To understand how Schopenhauer attempts this, it is firstly important to consider his doctoral thesis, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*.

In this work, Schopenhauer attempts to explore the preconditions of our particular experiences through the principle of sufficient reason.<sup>1</sup> For this principle is meant to allow us to go beyond the idiosyncracies of particular experiences so as to explore how they were caused. Or in the language used above, it allows us to go beyond individual instances (such as seeing a rabbit) so as to properly understand it (recognise all the causes that led up to our experiencing such a rabbit). The cosmological argument for the existence of God, which attempts to trace all particular experiences back to 'God' as ultimate cause, is the clearest example of such an appeal to the principle of sufficient reason. It should be noted however, that Schopenhauer rejects the cosmological argument. As he writes:

'A first cause is just as inconceivable as is the point where space has an end or as a moment when time had a beginning. For every cause is a change and here we are necessarily bound to ask about the change which preceded it, and by that which it had been brought about, and so on *ad infinitum, ad infinitum*. The law of causality is therefore not so obliging as to allow itself to be used like a cab which we dismiss after we reach our destination.' (OFW)

Against the attempt to simply use the law of causality as a tool for tracing reality back to an alleged causal origin, Schopenhauer argues that we need to adopt a more sophisticated approach. For the principle of sufficient reason is plural, involving irreducible types of explanation. There are explanations in terms of 'being' (e.g., mathematical or geometrical explanations), 'becoming' (i.e., causal explanations of interaction), 'acting' (i.e., explanations appealing to direction such as the growth of a seed) and 'knowing' (i.e., explanations appealing to the agent's recognition of something such as danger). Philosophers, in their attempts to give straightforward explanations, typically reduce certain of these aspects of explanation to others, since this allows them to explain all reality in terms of a limited set of concepts.<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer rejects such conceptual reductions, claiming that we need to hold on to the independence of each of these ways of acknowledging reality if we are to have a properly comprehensive understanding of what we experience.

To understand Schopenhauer's position, consider the attempt to explain a person's behaviour – for example, his lifting his arm to bring down some marmite from the top shelf. We might explain that person's behaviour simply in terms of 'being' – in terms of the location of the marmite and how other products (e.g., honey) were not there. Alternatively, we might explain his behaviour in terms of what Schopenhauer terms 'becoming' or causality – physicalist explanations. For example, patterns of brain activity caused a desire to eat which caused a reaching for the marmite. We might

also explain his behaviour in terms of 'acting' – as a human growing, he needs food and so is naturally led to satisfy his needs by reaching for the marmite. And finally, we might explain his behaviour in terms of knowing – his seeing the marmite on the top shelf, suggesting that some marmite on toast would be quite attractive. Schopenhauer's claim is that all four ways of interpreting this event are necessary if we are to properly understand it, and so an adequate understanding of the principle of sufficient reason must recognise all four forms of explanation (sufficient reason) as conceptually distinct, even if practically related.

One conclusion we might draw from this is that there are irreducible forms of explanation, and that no comprehensive understanding of our world is available to us.<sup>3</sup> In many ways, this is Kant's conclusion, insofar as he thought that naturalistic and moral explanations relied upon incommensurable conceptual frameworks. Schopenhauer however, breaks decisively here from Kant's thought, which insists that we can have no knowledge of the ultimate nature of reality – or what Kant terms the 'thing-in-itself'. This is because for Kant, knowledge is always refracted through the structure of the mind, and any appeal to direct knowledge of the 'thing-in-itself' fails to recognise this. In other words, we never know reality directly – we always know reality as it is for us, framed by the structure of our consciousness.

Schopenhauer's move is to agree with Kant that all knowledge is refracted through our powers of reason and understanding, but at the same time insist that the disclosure of the 'thing-in-itself' through our thought processes is the precondition of all knowledge. As such, Schopenhauer is challenging Kant's insistence upon incommensurable epistemic frameworks by insisting that all such explanatory frameworks need to be understood in terms of their revealing the shared reality (ontology) under investigation.

Schopenhauer thinks through this revision of Kant's thought by seeing the distinct epistemic frameworks to all reveal distinct aspects of being. In other words, the philosophical ideal of a comprehensive understanding of being requires, for Schopenhauer, going beyond the Kantian limits of human understanding so as to explore how all its distinct aspects illuminate a shared concept of being. This might be clearer by analogy. Consider someone's behaviour – we might analyse this in terms of its revealing distinct and incommensurable motivations (e.g., to be both liked and to be thought superior). If we are to have a sense of the person as a whole however, we need also explore how these different motivations fit together in revealing that person's character. Schopenhauer is attempting something similar for the world – to go beyond Kant's limits of analysis so as to explore the character of the world.

We are now in a position to understand what Schopenhauer means by the 'fourfold root of the principle of sufficient reason'. It means that there are four distinct ways of understanding ontology, each with their own basic concepts of interpretation (principally being, becoming, acting and knowing), but at the same time these all illuminate a shared understanding of reality. If this is the case however, it raises the question of which standpoint can we adopt to allow us to bridge the distinct epistemic frameworks so as to explore their interdependency in disclosing a shared reality.

Schopenhauer's response is to claim that all our different epistemic frameworks are of a single world, and that they are best understood as different ways of belonging to that

world. That is, things might belong to the world merely as geometrical shapes (i.e., under the aspect of being) as causally efficacious (i.e., under the aspect of becoming, taking their part within a causal chain), as directional (i.e., under the aspect of acting) or as motivated by recognition (i.e., under the aspect of knowing). Nevertheless, whatever aspect of reality they disclose, these aspects all reveal the same world – the world that we belong to and engage within.

In a nutshell then, Schopenhauer revises Kant's transcendental idealism as follows. Kant takes the fields of human understanding as his starting-point, and explores the basic concepts that structure them. Schopenhauer takes the world as his starting-point, and explores how our different fields of human understanding all belong together in illuminating that world.

Against Schopenhauer's starting-point of the world, it might be thought that the existence of the world can be doubted and so this starting-point is philosophically inadequate. But it should be noted that any philosophical position involves a starting-point that provides the framework of doubt itself. For example, Descartes' philosophy takes the 'subjective' powers of judgement as its starting-point. It is from this assumed standpoint that Descartes can doubt the existence of the world. In Schopenhauer's favour, it is arguable that the existence of *our* 'world' is a more intuitively attractive starting-point than an appeal to subjective powers of judgement. For we properly seem to belong to our world – we arise from it and return back into it at death. Schopenhauer recognises this, and tries to think through our belonging to our world, rather than merely treat the world as if it were an object of knowledge about which the subject of knowing can doubt. Properly speaking then, Schopenhauer's starting-point is not the world as object of knowledge, but our belonging to the world – or as Schopenhauer puts it himself, his starting point is 'this world in which we live and have our being'.

If Schopenhauer is right to take our 'world' as his philosophical starting-point however, he still owes us an account of how the distinct conceptual frameworks of explanation all belong to that world and contribute towards our knowledge of it. Schopenhauer addresses this question in his major work, *The World as Will and Representation*. In this work, Schopenhauer argues that we recognise our belonging to the world in two distinct ways – firstly, in our willing, since in this we recognise the continuity of our own experience of acting with action as a whole. Secondly, we recognise our belonging to the world in representation, since all the ideas of consciousness are to be understood as reflections of the world's reality. This includes our concepts as well, since for Schopenhauer these are 'representations of representations' – reality not only refracted through the limits of experience, but also through limits of conceptual identification.

To properly appreciate Schopenhauer's position, it is important to understand what he means by 'will'. 'Will' is typically used just to describe our ability to freely decide – i.e., I willed something means I decided that it should be done. Schopenhauer is not using the term in this restricted way. Rather, he sees causality and decision-making to be part of the same reality but at different levels of complexity.

To identify with this, it might be helpful to consider what Schopenhauer means by free will. Free will does not, for Schopenhauer, involve a 'spontaneous causality',

distinguishing it from the causal interactions of nature. Free will rather describes a causal movement that has come into consciousness, and where the character of that conscious agent is not impeded. As such, the actions of such an agent can be called free since they are not oppressed. On such a model then, willing is nothing more than the expression of the character of an agent, and that agent has been causally shaped by the world around them. The will is therefore not opposed to causality – it is the event which allows us to directly experience the character of causality.

As such, Schopenhauer's position has similarities with naturalism, which also sees causality and decision-making to be different descriptions of the same essential process. Naturalism however, tends to interpret all acts of willing as merely a species of force – forces manifested through brain structures giving rise to their particular characteristics. Schopenhauer's position, by contrast, does not start with the generic concept of 'force', understanding all our intuitions of acting in terms of this. Rather he starts with the consciousness of acting, and uses this concrete experience as his guide in interpreting the more abstract concept of 'force'.

'Hitherto, the concept of will had been subsumed under the concept of force. I, on the other hand, do exactly the reverse, and intend every force of nature to be conceived as will.' (WWRI, 111)

Recall our discussion of the fourfold root of the principle of sufficient reason and our discussion of the marmite jar. Decision-making can be understood to integrate all four 'folds' of reasoning within itself, since it involves being, becoming, acting and knowing. Schopenhauer terms the continuum of causality and decision-making 'will' since it is in willing that we have our most direct intuition of it – it is through our willing that we immediately know and identify with that continuum. That is, it is through the 'will' that we identify with the root of the principle of sufficient reason, understood here in terms of our world's ontological genesis – how we came to be and act. As Schopenhauer writes:

'But this word "will", which like a magic word, is to reveal to us the innermost essence of everything in nature. It by no means expresses an unknown quantity, something reached by inferences and syllogisms, but something known absolutely and immediately, and that so well that we know and understand what "will" is better than anything else, be it what it may.' (WWRI, 111)

We can therefore see that the fourfold root of the principle of sufficient reason plays at least two roles in Schopenhauer's thought. Viewed under the aspect of the epistemic, it identifies distinct fields of conceptual explanation. Viewed under the aspect of the ontological, it identifies four distinct features of how the genesis of reality is structured. The structure of explanation and the structure of reality can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The 'will' describes reality viewed in terms of its ontological genesis.

If the 'will' for Schopenhauer is properly understood as the unfolding of reality or its ontological genesis, this raises the question of how he understands history, for history describes how the 'will' unfolds. Schopenhauer addresses this question by arguing for a circular model of history. That is, he rejects a teleological model of history, for

which the world is seen to be progressing towards a final standpoint – a model that characterises many of his German contemporaries, such as Hegel, who are typically termed German Idealists since their philosophies assume an ideal standpoint towards which thought is progressing. Against the optimism of a purposeful reality, Schopenhauer defends a ‘pessimistic’ ontology of there being no purpose to existence.

‘In fact, the absence of all aim, of all limits, belongs to the essential nature of the will-in-itself, which is an endless striving.’ (WWRI, 164)

Although Schopenhauer’s pessimistic outlook is intuitively less attractive, it is more in line with ‘naturalism’, which typically sees reality to be a self-contained system of interacting elements without any ultimate purpose. Furthermore, if Schopenhauer is right that ontology is the starting-point of philosophy, the philosophical aim seems not to be about achieving any goal beyond recognising being for what it is.

On Schopenhauer’s approach then, the world’s movement has only the aim of being restored to itself. The activity of the world is therefore presented as a blind striving for which aims are illusory and for which all achievement is ultimately a return back to its own striving. Looked at from the standpoint of psychology then, human hopes are constructs that lack any substantial reality – and looked at essentially, they are merely distractions from addressing the root cause of our striving. That is, they are merely excuses for the ‘will’ to express its blind striving. The only essential satisfaction open to us therefore lies not in achieving our goals, but in addressing the reasons why we are driven beyond our ontological dependency to embrace illusory aims so that we might avoid these. Ultimate satisfaction lies only in ‘stilling’ the ‘will’.

With this, we have considered our belonging to the world in terms of our ontological dependency. This still leaves the question of how the world opens on to our thought so as to reveal reality to consciousness. Schopenhauer addresses this second, basic question through his discussion of ‘representation’. His approach to ‘representation’ mirrors his approach to the ‘will’. For just as the experience of willing afforded a standpoint from which to identify with all forms of agency (including causal agency), so the experience of insight affords a standpoint from which to appreciate all forms of representation (perception).

This experience of insight involves our no longer simply recording what we experience and categorising it appropriately. It rather involves dwelling upon the character of what we experience so that its meaning might be more manifest to us. It is in great art, Schopenhauer claims, that this attending to the true character of our experiences takes place, and so it is to Schopenhauer’s account of art that we turn in next edition’s article - *Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic*.

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### *References and Further Reading*

Schopenhauer, A. (1974) *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, LaSalle Illinois: Open Court

Schopenhauer, A. (1969) *The World as Will & Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, New York: Dover [Volumes 1 & 2]  
[Volume 1 contains the essence of Schopenhauer's argument. Volume 2 is a series of supplements to the 4 'books' of Volume 1.]

Schopenhauer, A. (1999) *Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, Cambridge: CUP

Schopenhauer, A. (1995) *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. Oxford: Berghan

Schafranski, R. (1989) *Schopenhauer & the wild years of philosophy*, trans. E. Osers, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press  
[an accessible introduction to the life of Schopenhauer which also deals with his thought]

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<sup>1</sup> Leibniz characterised the principle of sufficient reason as follows: 'there can be found no fact that is true or existent, or any true proposition, without there being a sufficient reason for its being so and not otherwise, although we cannot know these reasons in most cases.' Schopenhauer simply characterises it as follows: it 'authorises us everywhere to search for the *why*'. One of the simplest examples of this principle is the cosmological argument for the existence of God, where the chain of sufficient reasons is ultimately seen to point back to God.

<sup>2</sup> e.g., Plato's theory of Forms focuses on the truth of 'being' and so fails to do justice to the truths of 'becoming'. Physicalism focuses on the truths of becoming (causality) and so fails to do justice to the truths of 'acting' and 'knowing'.

<sup>3</sup> 'Comprehensive' is here being used in a way to distinguish it from 'monistic' and 'disjunctive' understandings. A monistic understanding interprets all reality in terms of its restricted set of concepts (e.g., all reality can be captured by naturalistic concepts of causal interaction). A disjunctive understanding sees reality to involve incommensurable frameworks of understanding, meaning that no overall understanding is available to us (e.g., Kant's position of contrasting causal and moral laws). A comprehensive understanding interprets reality in a way that holds on to the bigger picture of our world while at the same time acknowledging the uniqueness of different aspects of reality (e.g., the physical and the mental).