**Schopenhauer on the Role of the Intellect in Human Action**

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Despite his acknowledgement of its role in our agency, Schopenhauer often writes of the faculty of cognition (*Erkenntnisvermögen*) – or, as he increasing comes to call it, the “intellect” (*Intellekt*) – as if it plays no role in determining *what* we do. This is apparent in his claim, for example, that “any action of a human being is a product of two factors: his character along with the motive” (*SW* III: 623; *TFP*, p. 113). By this, he does not mean only that an action of ours is the product of our character and some motive, but that an action of ours *of a particular kind* is the product of our character and a motive *of a particular kind*. For him, “not only must the individual act in the same way in the same situation, and not only must every bad deed be the guarantee of innumerable others that the individual *must* do and *cannot* leave undone, but, as Kant says, if only the empirical character and the motives were completely given, a human being’s future actions could be calculated like an eclipse of the sun or moon” (*SW* I: 402; *WWR* 1, p. 292).[[1]](#endnote-1) Following Kant, Schopenhauer regards our character as determined by an act of the will outside of time, an act which is preconscious and yet free. From the empirical point of view, our character is fixed “like a crab in its shell.” At a moment in time, something (or some set of things) is determined as a motive (or a set of motives) for us by our character on the one hand, and we are caused by the motive (or the strongest of the set of motives) to act from our character on the other. In this way, the entire course of our actions in time unfolds from our character. There is no such thing as a *liberum aribitrium indifferentiae*, and all our actions in time are fully determined as part of a seamless chain of grounds and consequents. We act no less from our nature than everything else from theirs: *operari sequitur esse*.

Since a motive can be effective only insofar as it is cognized, we cannot act in time except through cognition. For Schopenhauer, the intellect enters the picture as a “medium of motives.” But while the intellect cognizes, it is the will that determines what it does and does not cognize *to be a motive*. The cognized motive in turn causes us to act, leaving the intellect with no role in determining *what* we do. However, Schopenhauer also concedes that “a human being’s manner of acting [*Handlungsweise*] can be noticeably changed without our being justified to infer a change in his character from this” (*SW* I: 405; *WWR* 1, p. 294). But how can this be? If our character is fixed in such a way that a particular kind of action always follows from a particular kind of motive, how can we ever fail to act in the same way as we have acted before? Two kinds of explanations are available in the literature, both of which imply that the intellect does make a difference to *what* we do after all. Relying on Schopenhauer’s concept of *intellectual freedom*, Atwell explains our behavioral inconsistencies in terms of some intellectual disarrangement or misleading circumstances which prevent the intellect from functioning as it normally would. For example, if we were suffering from chronic psychosis or under the false impression that no one can be trusted, we would not act as we would otherwise. Our actions follow from our character (and thus express it) only on the condition that “the intellect was functioning properly upon the occasion of the willed action” (Atwell, 1990, p. 52). By contrast, Hamlyn explains the possibility of a change in the way we act in terms of Schopenhauer’s concept of an *acquired character*. We can change in the way we act upon obtaining “a clearer insight into what [we] really will.” We do not at an early stage of our lives know what we will and do not will, and can only discover it by committing ourselves to various pursuits and observing how we respond to each of them. But once we do so, we come to act more consistently with our nature – a change “in respect of knowledge, and not in respect of will” (Hamlyn, 1985, p. 128).

Both Atwell and Hamlyn explain the possibility of our changing in the way we act in terms of our ceasing to act either in (or out of) character. As it turns out, however, Schopenhauer also admits the possibility of our changing in the way we act *without ceasing either to act in (or out of) character*. In what follows, I present Schopenhauer’s conception of the intellect’s role in determining *what* we do with the aim of clarifying the full extent to which he recognizes the possibility of our changing in the way we act: first, I will distinguish cases which involve our ceasing to act in (or out of) character from those which do not; and second, among the cases which involve our ceasing to act in (or out of) character, I will distinguish those owing to the intellect’s *overcapacity* from those owing to its *incapacity*.

But we must first consider Schopenhauer’s concepts of the will, character, motive, and the intellect, in greater depths. For Schopenhauer, “the will” is the “thing in itself” which lies behind the whole of the world of appearances. It as an unconscious striving or willing which is comparable with the striving or willing of our own of which we are immediately conscious. It is supposed to be indivisible and unalterable insofar as it stands outside of space and time, and free insofar as it is not subordinate to the principle of sufficient reason. Janaway has observed that Schopenhauer seems to see the will as a striving or willing activity which operates at different levels of generality (Janaway, 1999, pp. 151, 153). At the most general level, it operates as (a) *the original will* (*Urwille*) which underlies everything in nature. At a more specific level, it operates as (b) *the will to life* (*Wille zum Leben*) which underlies every living thing in nature. At the next more specific level, it operates as (c) *the will of a species* which all members of the species have in common. At the most specific level, it operates as (d) *the individual will* which is unique to each of us, i.e., we do not have in common with anything else. Only human beings are considered to possess an individual will; plants and animals only possess the will of their species. The activity at a higher level of generality that supports and determines the activity at a lower level of generality is also capable of countering and canceling it.

Unlike plants and animals, each human being has a unique character of his own. Our character is determined by a single act of our individual will. From the transcendental point of view, it is something for which we are responsible insofar it is determined by an act of our will which is not subordinated to the principle of sufficient reason and, therefore, free; from the empirical point of view, it is something with which we are born. As is well-known, Schopenhauer embraces Kant’s distinction between *intelligible character* and *empirical character*. Our intelligible character is the will insofar as it belongs to each one of us, and our empirical character is our intelligible character insofar as it is manifested in our actions in time. Unlike Kant, Schopenhauer tends to understand character as the set of tendencies, propensities or inclinations to act in definite ways which defines *who we are*, rather than as the set of actions which add up to *what we do*. Our empirical character is not “our manner of action and course of life” itself, but something which is “exhibited” through it. It must not be identified with, but “induced” from, the sum of deeds which are “the constantly repeated manifestation, varying somewhat in form, of [our] intelligible character.” Moreover, as Atwell has noted, Schopenhauer thinks of it in the moral terms of egoism, malice and altruism.[[2]](#endnote-2) Schopenhauer individuates each of our empirical character according to the varying proportions of these three inclinations and regards it as “reflected” or “mirrored” in our actions (See Atwell, 1990, p. 38). Still, the different degrees of inclinations toward egoism, malice and altruism which define our empirical character must not be conflated with those of which we are immediately conscious to be in us at any given instant of time. The latter yields at best a *piecemeal* knowledge of our empirical character. A *comprehensive* knowledge of our empirical character can only be obtained by pursuing various courses of actions and noting how we respond to them *post factum*. But what kind of response indicates our having done something in character? As Atwell has also noted, Schopenhauer is not clear at all on this point. The absence of regret over having been overly egoistic, altruistic, or malicious in our manner of acting is no clear indication that we have acted in character, because, as we will see, we could regret over something we have done in character, and not regret over something we have done out of character.

How then does our character translate into our actions in time? Through *motive*, in a word. Schopenhauer understands a motive primarily as a *represented*, *cognized* or *known* object or objective state of affairs which draws or compels us to act from our character. Given his concern to maintain the sovereignty of the principle of sufficient reason throughout the world of appearances, he is especially keen to present it as a form of causality which connects our actions with the rest of the world into one causal nexus. Besides motives, there are mechanical causes and stimuli. A mechanical cause operates in the sphere of raw inorganic bodies, and is marked by the counter-influence and proportionality of the quantity of forces going into and out of a causal system. By contrast, a stimulus operates only in the sphere of living organic beings, and is marked by the lack of this kind of proportionality. Finally, a motive is distinguished from both a mechanical cause and a stimulus by its lack of immediate contact with its effect. It operates only in the sphere of highly complex and developed living organic beings. It is a form of *causa finalis*, namely, causality through cognition, i.e., *motivation*.

The intellect serves the will primarily as a “medium of motives.” Our action is nothing but the effect of a motive. But a motive must not only be present in order to be effective: it must *be* *known* to be present. The intellect comes in at this juncture. In its representative capacity, it brings a motive before the will so that the will can be drawn or compelled to act from it. More typically, it brings various conflicting motives before the will so that the will can be drawn or compelled to act from the strongest of them. Schopenhauer construes an act of the will as passing through three critical moments: (i) a wish (*Wunsch*), (ii) a resolve (*Entschluss*) and (iii) a deed (*That*). A *complete* deliberation must run through (i), (ii) and (iii) in that order.[[3]](#endnote-3) Moreover, we must not be misled into thinking that the intellect actually does anything in the process. Under the influence of the French materialists like Helvetius and Holbach, Schopenhauer regards the intellect as a mere passive on-looker throughout (Schmidt, 2007, pp. 256-8). Cassirer defines a very basic principle of Schopenhauer’s thinking on the will when he writes that “in all cognition, what is first and essential is not the cognizer [*das Erkennende*], but the cognized [*das Erkannte*]” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 421, my translation). Schopenhauer does not deny that we are conscious of ourselves as choosing and of our action as following from our choice. But this merely indicates our ability to refrain from acting immediately on what is intuitively present (what he calls “relative freedom”), and *not* our ability to do something other than what we in fact do. In Gardiner words, “whatever we may believe to the contrary, it is actually never in our power to control our future behavior [by means of some sort of intellectual act whereby we seek to determine, or commit ourselves to future courses of conduct]; it is not what we consciously ‘set ourselves to do’ that in the end decides things” (Gardiner, 1967, p. 164).[[4]](#endnote-4)

Like everything else, the intellect originally comes into being in “the service of the will.” The “cognition that has sprung from the will” is considered to be *ordinary* or *natural* cognition. The role of natural cognition in actions is basic and straightforward. Unlike plants and animals which act by immediate response to stimuli, highly developed animals and human beings act by motives which can be effective only insofar as they are cognized. Through natural cognition, we perceive outer circumstances in a way that answer immediately to our inner desires and inclinations. Natural cognition is based on desires and inclinations which are in turn immediate expressions of *the will*. But which will? Since some animals which are without any individual will are nonetheless taken to possess a form of natural cognition, we must conclude that the will which drives our natural cognition is *the will of our species* rather than *our individual will*. Still, the relation between motives and the will of our species in natural cognition might be more complex than what Schopenhauer’s description of the will as being simply “affected” by motives “from outside” suggests. In the first place, motives are identified in natural cognition through the color-glass of the will of our species. Thus “motivation only works on the basis and assumption of [a] definite tendency that is in [the] case [of a human being], individual, in other words, a character” (*SW* I: 410; *WWR* 1, p. 298).

In human beings, the intellect is developed to such a degree that we are able *to think*. The capacity to think “which is properly expressed by the word *reason*, consists in a human being not merely capable, like an animal of an *intuitive* apprehension of the external world, but also of abstracting universal concepts from it. To be able to fix and retain these in his sensuous consciousness he denotes them by words, and then makes innumerable combinations with them” (*SW* III: 552; *TFP*, p. 61). The cognition that results from this excessive power of the intellect is *reflective* or *abstract*. Through abstract cognition, we are “emancipated from the power of the present moment existing in perception, to which the animal is unconditionally abandoned” (*SW* II: 190; *WWR* 2, p. 148). We are able to formulate general abstract concepts, and retain the past and anticipate the future through them. This does not only make possible abstract theorizing (including philosophical speculation), but also transforms the way we act. First, we enjoy the “advantage” of “elective decision” (*Wahlentscheidung*). Elective decision involves deliberating and choosing *from* *motives* (rather than *from choices*). Though our “decision is at once determined and necessary *in the case of every choice presented to [us]*” (*SW* I: 401; *WWR* 1, p. 291, my emphases), the choice is presented to us in the first instant by the intellect in its role in deliberating and choosing from a range of abstract representations of different and opposing motives, motives which can be more vividly represented through the imagination in concrete pictures or images. As a result, our acts of mere wishing do not, like those of animals, amount to those of willing and acting. Second, the motive (the cause) of our action become increasingly separated from the action (the effect), and their causal relation is increasingly less apparent (both to ourselves and to others). The motive is no longer immediately present in perception, but traceable back into the distant past. Nevertheless, there is “*always a real objective source* for [it]” (*SW* III: 559-60; *TFP*, p. 66-7). As it becomes increasingly opaque to us, we are deceived by our lack of knowledge of it into thinking that our action is without cause. Schopenhauer insists that this is nothing more than a deception: despite “[t]he cause [becoming] more complex, the effect more heterogeneous, […] the necessity with which it enters is not less by a hair’s breath” (*SW* III: 557; *TFP*, p. 65).

Now that we have some idea of the will, character, motive, and the intellect, let us turn to consider how we could change in the way we act. First of all, Schopenhauer recognizes the possibility of our changing in the way we act *without our ceasing to act in (or out of) character*. The fact that our knowledge are essentially imperfect and correctible through experience explains how we might come to act differently from how we have acted before without ceasing to act either in character or out of character. Our “mental horizon”

varies from the mere apprehension of the present, which even the animal had, to the horizon embracing the next hour, the day, the following day also, the week, the year, life, the centuries, thousands of years, up to the horizon of a consciousness that has almost always present, although dimly dawning, the horizon of the infinite. (*SW* II: 184; *WWR* 2, p. 143)

These variations do not just obtain between individuals, but between different stages in the life of a single individual: our knowledge “is changeable, and often vacillates between error and truth” (*SW* I: 404; *WWR* 1, p. 294); “the same thing often appears very different to us at different times, in the morning, in the evening, at midday, or on another day; opposing views jostle one another and increase of our doubt” (*SW* II: 179; *WWR* 2, p. 138). Thus even assuming that we never fail throughout our lives to act according to our nature, we could still act differently at different stages of our lives as a result of the different things we come to know at stage. We could, for example, come to refrain from pleasures in which we used to indulge as we come to be acquainted with opposing motives. In particular, Schopenhauer raises three kinds of considerations: first, we could come to understand that certain appearances have a moral significance which we did not understand before; second, we could come to know that such and such means are available for such and such ends which we did not know before; and third, we could come to decide that the beliefs we adopted before about the world or people are imaginary, groundless and false. For example, someone with an altruistic nature would not act to alleviate the sufferings he saw around him before learning that what he saw exemplifies sufferings, before finding out what could be done to alleviate the sufferings, or before realizing that his belief that sufferings are part of the dispensation of divine justice is unfounded. Schopenhauer is clear that we could regret over what we have done out of ignorance, misunderstandings or superstitions such as these despite our having done them in character (*SW* I: 406-7; *WWR* 1, p. 296-7).

Natural cognition does not by itself allow us to act in character in the way it allows animals to, because unlike the nature of an animal, our nature is unique to each of us. In other words, not every desire we have by virtue of our being a member of our species contributes to expressing our character. Insofar as we are a member of our species, we desire food or sex as long as we have at some instant of time not yet had our fill of it and perceive the occasion for its fulfillment. Yet it does not follow from this that it is in our character to desire it. “The wish is merely the necessary consequence of the present impression, whether of the external stimulus or of the inner passing mood, and is therefore as immediately necessary and without deliberation as is the action of animals… it expresses merely the character of the species, not that of the individual, in other words, it indicates merely *what a human being in general* (*überhaupt*), not what *the* *individual* who feels the wish, would be capable of doing” (*SW* I: 413; *WWR*, p. 300). Thus, supposing that we could (which we cannot) “know only what is actually present and live solely in the present moment” (*SW* III: 552; *TFP*, p. 61) without any intervention of abstract cognition. It does not automatically follow that we act in character. The only way for us to act in character is for us to reflect on what we desire and to resolve to act on one of them. There is thus a systematic connection between our capacity for elective decision and our capacity to express our character through our actions: (i) *a wish* expresses the kind of species of which we are a member, (ii) *a resolve* expresses the kind of person we are, and (iii) *a deed* confirms it. Thus a deed of ours mirrors “the kernel of our will” only insofar as it has proceeded from an elective decision that has run through (i), (ii) and (iii) in that order.

The fact that the intellect is only initially capable of natural cognition (which serves the will of our species) and only gradually develops to become capable of abstract cognition (which *could* serve our individual will) is decisive in explaining how we could act out of character. Since, as a member of our species, we have desires we do not have as the individual we are, the fact that the intellect serves the will of our species before coming to serve our individual will means that we could initially act contrary to our nature before coming to act according to it. These cases are rather uninteresting, because we can hardly be considered to be acting as human beings when we act with mere natural cognition. Our deeds in these cases would proceed immediately from a wish, and would be no results of a complete elective decision. But when reason and abstract cognition come upon the scene, do we have any clear criterion for distinguishing our individual will from the mere will of our species? Admittedly, our immediately felt conflicting desires and inclinations (or what is the same, the motives to which they render us susceptible) at an instant of time might be said to yield a piecemeal knowledge of our empirical character as it is supposed to be manifested at that instant. But part of what it means for us to be unable to know our character except through deciding on a course of actions and observing how we respond to it is that *not every* desire and inclination of ours contributes to expressing our individual will. Thus Schopenhauer suggests that we initially “wait,” “[waver],” “[hesitate],” “attempt” and “grope about,” and are susceptible to being “led astray by the fleeting influence of the mood or impression of the present moment” and “checked by the bitterness and sweetness of a particular thing we meet with on the way” (*SW* I: 419; *WWR* 1, p. 305). The will of our species could either work for or against our individual will.

In particular, we can act out of character when a motive determined on the basis of the will of our species is so overwhelming that it stops the intellect from giving voice so to speak to its counter-motives. Schopenhauer diagnoses such failures as owing to an *inclination* (*Neigung*), by which he means a “strong susceptibility of the will to motives of a certain kind” (*SW* II: 759; *WWR* 2, p. 592). The intellect could be carried away by an *affect* (*Affekt*), in which case it comes under the sudden momentary grip of an inclination, or it could be overwhelmed by a *passion* (*Leidenschaft*), in which case it succumbs to the preponderance of an inclination. An affect is “a stirring of the will, just as irresistible yet only temporary, by a motive that… gets its power merely by suddenly appearing and excluding for the moment the counter-effect of all other motives” (*SW* II: 759-60; *WWR* 2, p. 593). A passion is a “heightening of all affects” arising from a “heightened intellect”(*SW* II: 363; *WWR* 2, p. 280), “an inclination so strong, that the motives that excite it exercise a power over the will which is stronger than that of any possible motive acting against them” (*SW* II: 759-60; *WWR* 2, p. 592). When we act from an affect, we fail to act according to our nature not as a result of the intellect’s relative strength, but of its relative weakness: “the capacity for reflection, and with it *intellectual freedom*, are… abolished” to the extent that “not all the motives attained to effectiveness.” In addition, reason which presents motives to us in the abstract is sometimes “not supported by an imagination [*Phantasie*] strong enough to present to [us] their whole content and true significance in pictures or images” (*SW* II: 760; *WWR* 2, p. 593). Our deeds in these cases proceed immediately from “somewhere between a wish and a resolve” (rather than from a resolve), and are no results of a complete elective decision.

The question can be raised as to whether we might be considered to be acting in character in the hypothetical situation where what we are led by an affect or a passion to do turns out by luck to match what we would have done from our character and we do not regret over it. The answer, I believe, is a resounding “no”. We cannot be considered to be acting in character when we act from an affect or passion, because we would *not* be acting as we are supposed to act in the first place. As human beings, we are supposed to act by deliberating and choosing from a range of abstract representations of different and opposing motives. We are supposed to act through the intellect, and not through its incapacitation. Thus Schopenhauer insists that “[t]he *reasonableness* of character, *σωφροσύνη*, which is opposed to passionateness, really consists in the will’s never over-powering the intellect to such an extent as to prevent it from exercising its function of presenting motives distinctly, completely and clearly, in the abstract for our faculty of reason, and in the concrete for our imagination” (*SW* II: 761; *WWR* 2, p. 594). This goes to show that we need not regret over what we have done out of character.

So far, we have seen that we cannot act in character without first developing reason and abstract cognition, i.e., the development and functioning of reason and abstract cognition are “the condition of the possibility of the individual character’s expression.” Still, the question remains as to whether the development and functioning of reason and abstract cognition by themselves *guarantee* the individual character’s expression. In other words, do we always act in character whenever we could? Not, Schopenhauer argues, without “*acquired character*.”

On Schopenhauer’s view, the development and functioning of reason and abstract cognition could bring with them their own pit-fall. This is evident from his discussion of a minority of people whose intellect is invested with such a surplus of natural force and energy that they do not so much reach an elective decision through an actual conflict of motives as through an overview of the different possible ways in which they could act as a human being in general. Their “power of forming representations has such a surplus that a pure, distinct, objective picture of the outer world exhibits itself *without a purpose* as something useless for the intentions of the will, which is even disturbing in the higher degrees, and can even become injurious to them” (*SW* II: 486; *WWR* 2, p. 377). Their excessive power of intellect is, in his words, a “*monstra per excessum*.”

The expressions [of our empirical character] are in addition disturbed by reason, and in fact the more so, the more reflectiveness [*Besonnenheit*] and power of thought the human being has. For these always keep before him what belongs to *a human being in general* as the character of the species, and what is possible for him both in willing and doing. In this way, an insight into that which alone of all he wills and is able to do by dint of his individuality is made difficult for him. He finds himself the tendencies to all the various human aspirations and abilities, but the different degrees of these in his individuality do not become clear to him without experience. (*SW* I: 417; *WWR* 1, p. 304)[[5]](#endnote-5)

The risk of people with an excessive power of intellect, and hence reason and abstract cognition, is that they end up reflecting on their desires and inclinations without ever resolving to act in any one way. They act very much like the way animals which functions exclusively by natural cognition do – on the spur of the moment. But they do so not much from an immediately present motive as from hesitating between the different ways in which they could act as a human being in general. In taking one path, they are disturbed and distracted by an impulse to take another, so that they are driven to attempt the impossible – namely, to cover a surface by taking a straight path. The result is that they take a “zig-zag path.” Though they have a character, they are alienated from it. They are, in everyday parlance, “without character,” and, in Schopenhauer’s terminology, lacking of an “acquired character,” viz., knowledge of their own character. They undercuts their only means of acquiring self-knowledge (*Selbstkenntniβ*) by failing to commit themselves to any one course of actions to the exclusion of others and to learn about themselves from their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with it thereafter. Schopenhauer does not go as far as to suggest that such people never acquire *any* character, but notes that they make a great deal more abortive attempts and do much more violence to their character.

However, these people are not so much distinguished by their lack of self-knowledge *per se*, as by the excessive degree to which they lack it (as a result of their refraining from pursuing any particular course of actions). None of us has an *a priori* knowledge of our character, and exemption from having to discover our character through experience. The only sure way *for anyone* to acting in character is for him to act from *knowledge of* his character. Since we can only come to know our character from the way we respond to a course of actions, we can only come to act according to our nature by pursuing various courses of actions with resolve and observing our responses to them, i.e., develop an acquired character. With an acquired character, Schopenhauer seems to think, we cannot fail to act according to our nature. For the kind of knowledge which constitutes an acquired character is not mere theoretical knowledge, but “real self-knowledge,” that is, something we acquire through “experience” in the practical sense of the word: “We must first learn from experience what we will and we can do” (*SW* I: 419; *WWR* 1, p. 304), and must do so by doing our best in whatever we set our mind on doing. We must not try to conjecture over what we must learn in advance; and if we did, we must not allow the conjecture to influence our elective decision on the course of actions to take. Thus it is thus important for us to decide what we want to do for ourselves at an early stage of our lives, and to try to stick to it rather than to spend our entire lives trying out everything. Only then can we come to know what we really will (and do not will) and can (and cannot) do. With distinct knowledge of our character, we will act according to our nature by concepts and principles (i.e., deliberately and methodically), and will no longer be led astray by fleeting moods and impressions. We will walk our paths more consistently.

The concept of an acquired character marks a crucial breakthrough in Schopenhauer’s thinking on the difference the intellect can make to *what* we do. So far, we have only considered cases in which the intellect makes a difference to what we do through being immediately determined by the will of our species (prior to being determined by our individual will). In the case of an acquired character, however, we see for the first time a case in which the intellect seems to make a difference to *what* we do by its own force independently of the will. But how is this possible? It seems to fly in the face, first, of the principle of the primacy of the cognized over the cognizer, and of the will over the intellect.[[6]](#endnote-6) While recognizing the primacy of both the cognized and the will for Schopenhauer, Cassirer sees an opposing strand in his system which admits “a comportment of the intellect, in which it raises itself over its own fundamental form [*Grundform*] – in which it sees through this form as a mere transition and thereby frees itself from the exclusive bondage to it” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 421).[[7]](#endnote-7) What he has in mind is the paradox contained in Schopenhauer’s central soteriological claim that the intellect *qua* a “pure cognizing subject” is ushered into a higher “region of the living gods” through aesthetic, ethical, philosophical motives: through an insight into the original ground (*Urgrund*) of things, the intellect first comes face to face with “itself in its free subjectivity and hence its positive content and worth” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 441).[[8]](#endnote-8) However, it is not far-fetched to argue that this kind of “free subjectivity” is already at work to some measure in the self-knowledge of an acquired character. An acquired character prefigures this kind of emancipation from the *Bannkreis* of pain and boredom inasmuch as it provides us with knowledge of a thing in itself (namely, our individual will or intelligible character) and spares us of the pain of having to come to terms with our incapacities and weaknesses through harsh blows in life. Though an individual with an acquired character does not know his will *as a thing in itself*, he knows a thing in itself nonetheless. And through his self-knowledge, he becomes invulnerable to the will’s inalterability and inflexibility.

In sum, the intellect must neither be overly capacitated nor overly incapacitated if we were to act according to our nature. In other words, our intellectual capacity must fall within the range of a mean between two extremes in order for our actions to express our individual character. The more overly capacitated or overly incapacitated the intellect is, the more our actions tend to express the character of our species, rather than our individual character. While bearing the marks of the classical conception of a moral ideal as a mean between two extremes, there is nothing moral about the mean recommended here. The character of ours which we have no way of knowing *a priori* might turn out to be far from being morally commendable, i.e., far more egoistic or malicious than altruistic. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer recommends it as “the surest way to the attainment of the greatest possible contentment with ourselves” (*SW* I: 420; *WWR* 1, p. 306), thereby suggesting that it is more important for us to be contented with ourselves than to do what is good.

The concession that the intellect makes a difference to what we do does not go as far as to challenge Schopenhauer’s empirical determinism – i.e., the view that everything in the world of appearances (including our choices and actions) is subordinate to the principle of sufficient reason – when it is taken as making the weaker claim that every action of ours is fully determined by our character and some motive. For even granted that the knowledge of what we will and do not will brings about actions which would not otherwise be brought about, the fact remains that the knowledge is caused by a seamless chain of causes which is subordinate to the principle of sufficient of reason. But the concession certainly exposes Schopenhauer’s claim that an action of ours *of a particular kind* is fully determined by our character and a motive *of a particular kind* to be an overstatement. Notwithstanding its failure as a real description of how we act, the claim still works as a law of human action. In the first place, laws of the human sciences (or the natural sciences for that matter) are supposed to work as regulative principles rather than as factual descriptions. Schopenhauer’s point remains valid as long as we read it as saying no more than that we tend not to act contrary to our true self for long. Even as we are led astray by ignorance, misunderstandings, superstitions, affects, passions, indecisions, etc., we are soon driven back to the path of our daemons.

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1. See also *SW* III: 559-60; *TFP*, p. 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a detailed account of the egoism, malice, and altruism, as motives of our action, see Cartwright, 1999, pp. 269-82. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As Janaway observes, Schopenhauer suggests at times that resolves and decisions are not really acts of will. But this is consistent with his view (which Janaway also goes on to note) that acts of will encompass resolves and decisions (Janaway, 1999, p. 142). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See also Hamlyn and Magee’s explanation of the difference between absolute and relative freedom in Hamlyn, 1985, pp. 124-6, and Magee, 1997, pp. 189-92. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See also *SW* II: 284-5; *WWR* 2, p. 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Schopenhauer’s argument for the doctrine of the primacy of the will in chapter 19 of the *WWR* 2. Following the lead of Georg Simmel, contemporary scholars make much of the will’s dethronement of reason in Schopenhauer’s thinking in their effort to rediscover him as the true philosophical father of psychoanalysis. Nicolls, for example, observes that while “it was [traditionally] the conscious processes of the intellect which were seen as manifesting perfection and infallibility, especially in their divine, non-bodily state,… it is [for Schopenhauer] the non-conscious blindness with which operations are carried out that is the ground of their success and efficiency” (Nicolls, 1980, p. 109). More recently, Sebastian Gardner has investigated how Schopenhauer constantly returns to “the theme of the superficiality of consciousness, which he compares to the surface of the globe or a sheet of water, the depths of which are largely unknown to us, but are where our thinking and resolving take place” (Gardner, 1999, p. 376). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See also Cassirer, 1920, pp. 438-46. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Cassirer does not just argue from Schopenhauer’s soteriology, but also from his transcendental methodology: “if the ‘becoming’ of the intellect is a mere metaphor, if it is as ‘transcendental consciousness’, thus in its true fundamental and essential meaning, something unconditionally timeless and eternal – it would in this respect stand fully equal [*gleich*] with the will. Will and intellect would no longer be related like ‘substance’ and ‘accident’ or like ‘ground’ and consequence, but correlatively related to each other as equally original and as equally necessary moments.” In this way, he distinguishes “the intellect itself” from “its form of appearance” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 435, my translation). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)