

Schopenhauer's Pessimism as Response to Kant's Rationalism

“The World as Will and Representation” is a continuation and completion of the Kantian philosophical project. Schopenhauer proposes that rather than causality being an empirical consequence, as Kant implies in his Critique of Pure Reason, causality is an a priori phenomenon, happening independent of any knowledge of causality itself. Therefore, he challenges Kantian rationalism with pessimism. To be blunt, and to begin this work stating the stark contrast between Kant’s epistemology and Schopenhauer’s, there are a few important characteristics to note from Schopenhauer’s aesthetics: (1) there is no rationality to nature. Instead, humanity is characterized by the mysterious, blind Will; (2) there is no ‘purposeness’ in life, according to Schopenhauer. Thus, reason is just a tool we human beings use to get by, to continue the race; and (3) human beings are not fundamentally rational. Rather, we act out of ‘striving desire.’

To properly characterize Schopenhauer’s philosophical pessimism it might be clarifying to briefly describe his temporal, historical and ideologically collegial relationship to Immanuel Kant. Schopenhauer himself viewed his ideological precepts as a continuation of Kant’s philosophy. Indeed Kant’s transcendental idealism served Schopenhauer as the springboard for his own phenomenology, agreeing explicitly with Kant from the very beginning of his most important work “The World As Will and Representation” in which Schopenhauer states, “The world is my representation,” asserting the Kantian expression of reality as a set of phenomena whose relationships are begotten in one’s mental models alone (“Schopenhauer's Aesthetics”).

Schopenhauer’s philosophy describes a quality of the human will expressed in both the blind urge for living things to achieve as well as in the sum total forces governing non-living matter. He constructs his pessimistic conclusion as the enslavement of conscious beings by their

own will to be and stay alive (“Schopenhauer’s Aesthetics”). As a consequence to this irresistible urge to life, all things alive must be in a constant state of competitive pressure to both reproduce and to survive. Living things must necessarily be malleable to their environmental conditions, and flexible to all manner of external constraints such that their most primordial impulse to continue on can be satisfied. All of this uncomfortable activity against the momentous resistance of natural forces *is what manifests as suffering in the conscious being.*

Schopenhauer constructs his pessimistic ideology as an inescapable conclusion beginning with Kant-inspired metaphysics and drawing from natural philosophical science with his observation that conscious life suffers through its inexorable effort to overcome the pull of death, ultimately succumbing to it via senescence and infirmity. Therefore, Schopenhauer concludes, life is, in essence, not worth the effort to live. Here we would not be sufficiently diligent if we neglected to mention that while Schopenhauer’s philosophical aesthetics depart rather sharply from that of Kant, Schopenhauer maintains high praise for his predecessor for adding a heretofore missing depth in the aesthetics and setting it on the right course, one that Schopenhauer undoubtedly believed he could navigate to his inevitable conclusions.

While Schopenhauer begins his exploration of metaphysics where Immanuel Kant concludes, with the latter’s transcendental idealism, he is not in undeparting agreement with the thesis of Kant’s “The Critique of Pure Reason.” Indeed, it is a minor ideologic excursion from Kant’s empiricism that leads Schopenhauer to his greatest philosophical insight of reality as appearance, with “alone” or even “merely” implicitly emphasized to this reader. Namely, while Kant describes a reality consisting of mental representations whose nature is suggested to be a posteriori, Schopenhauer understands reality to be noumenal and its perception by sentient life to be indirect, subject-dependent, and consequently a priori.

Schopenhauer makes his view on causality's *a priori* nature even more emphatic in his 1816 work "On Vision And Colors" which was born from his invited collaboration with the great German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who asked Schopenhauer's help in a philosophical exploration of color theory.

Although Schopenhauer remains an advocate of Kant's discourse on perceived reality and causality, he clearly prefers to constrain conscious perception to the *experience* of reality rather than, as Kant does, to travel into the transcendent dimensions as a proving-ground or even breeding-ground for conscious perception. While to Schopenhauer, as to Kant, the phenomenal reality is a subject-dependent representation, he asserts that no phenomenon, representation or element of reality exists without a reason for being. This simplification of Kant's cognitive mechanism becomes Schopenhauer's principle of sufficient reason, in which the individual can escape the torment of the Will through such aesthetic pursuits as music, and becomes a "will-less, painless, timeless, subject of cognition." (Schopenhauer, "The World As Will And Representation").

Schopenhauer's sufficient reason manifests in four ways, namely, becoming, knowing, space and time, and willing. With more than a little dissatisfaction he declares that previous philosophers, including his respected Kant, did not recognize that the manifestations of becoming and of knowing are separate and distinct. As a result those thinkers erroneously overlapped causes with premises, leading to missing the principle of sufficient reason being operative in such areas as mathematics.

If the artist ever had a philosopher advocate it is Arthur Schopenhauer. Not only did Schopenhauer affirm art as the portal through which to escape the suffering of this world, he raised the artist's role in society as supremely important. Far from a material reductionist of the

modern era, Schopenhauer integrated far Eastern philosophies into practical Western aesthetics. Yet despite his aspirational ideas pertaining to fleeing reality through the imagination of art, Schopenhauer remains best known to us for his ultimately pessimistic view of a reality replete with unavoidable suffering and devoid of meaning. Schopenhauer's "The World as Will and Representation" can be understood as a simplification of Kant's stance via the subcategories of space, time and causality.

Space and time comprise the organizing principles of distinction of all objects. Space, time and causality are synthetic a priori principles because they govern the generating morphology of all real-world phenomena.

Kant had previously explored synthetic a priori judgments, and Schopenhauer followed him with an explication of priori forms important to phenomena in his doctoral dissertation titled "The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason." Two characteristics of the will can be elucidating to Schopenhauer's World as Will. Firstly, the Will in terms of the "Atman" which is the timeless *subject* that cannot access self-knowledge through cognition, or the Husserlian "transcendental subjectivity."

Simultaneously, the subject self maintains a presence. In a twentieth century sense, Schopenhauer's notion of Will is the equivalent of Freud's Id, which is a primordial, aimless entity that is ever engaged in aggressive striving. However, it may be of great use to those struggling with Schopenhauer's intensely abstract aesthetics, as his response to Kant, looking to the great thinkers of the "East." In particular, Nāgārjuna's epistemological endeavors can be quite insightful when trying to unravel Schopenhauer's pessimism of humanity and reality.

Among a distinguished list of Buddhist philosophers spanning the most recent twenty five centuries, none has been more original, authoritative and eminent among his peers than

Nāgārjuna. Indeed, Nāgārjuna is recognized with unanimity as the greatest of Indian philosophers. Nāgārjuna's philosophy of *madhyamaka*, literally the "middle way" is predicated on the idea of *śūnyatā*, "emptiness."

The central concept around which all of Nāgārjuna's philosophy is built is the notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Emptiness refers to the vacantness of an object that has, at least, conceptual boundaries, namely, a vessel. To Nāgārjuna, that bounded vessel which he has in mind here is *svabhāva*, the essence or essential nature of a being. An assortment of terms have been used to translate this word into English with varying success: "inherent existence" and "intrinsic nature" appear to be the more popular choices, yet "substance" and "essence" have also been proposed. As appealing as some of these terms might be, especially to the western mind, none encompass the context and complexity of this term that is key to the *śūnyatā* philosophy. We therefore have to give some more detailed account of the way *svabhāva* is characterized in Nāgārjuna's thought. By understanding what empty things are supposed to be empty of, we simultaneously gain a more precise understanding of the concept of emptiness.

While normally translated "suffering", the Sanskrit word "duhkha" by which all of extant reality is characterized in the first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, the word additionally connotes "unrest" and should be kept in mind here. To expose even more paralleled emptiness in Schopenhauer's thought and Buddhist, Schopenhauer viewed the subject as being something outside of, but not super-sensible to the world. It is something which isn't something or an entity. This, too, is where Schopenhauer's "western" thought refers to "eastern," namely Mahayana Buddhism, corresponding with Nāgārjuna's famous paradox.

To return to the points of divergence in Schopenhauer's epistemological arguments versus Kant's, it is crucial to note that rationality to Schopenhauer simply makes human beings

more clever, than animals, say; it is not the focus or most important faculty we have. Rather, it is the *striving* toward individual goals which makes us unique.

This clearly is not Kant's argument, for this yields the conclusion that the will, and life itself, is meaningless. To avoid this pessimistic conclusion, Kant instead argues that "the will is the faculty of acting according to a conception of law" ("Schopenhauer's Aesthetics"). To continue, he claims that "when we act, whether or not we achieve what we intend with our actions is often beyond our control, so the morality of our actions does not depend upon their outcome. What we can control, however, is the will behind the action" ("The Logic of Schopenhauer's Aesthetics"). So, although both Schopenhauer and Kant argue that there exists a Will, they come to a diametrically opposite conclusion on the basis of a difference in definition.

Bibliography

Abelsen, Peter. *Schopenhauer and Buddhism*. vol. 43, University of Hawaii Press, 1993. *JSTOR*.

Koestenbaum, Peter. *The Logic of Schopenhauer's Aesthetics*. vol. 14, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 1960. *JSTOR*.

Shapshay, Sandra, "Schopenhauer's Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)