

## Schopenhauer's Moral Pessimism: Reflections on *The World as Will and Representation*

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### Abstract

Schopenhauer's philosophy has special appeal to those who want to know the meaning of life. As one of the core philosophers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his work has inspired the most influential thinkers and artists of that time. Schopenhauer believes that will is hungry. We see it all around us in the strife and suffering that pervades every aspect of life, and even in the non-living material world. Nothing exists except the will as "a thing-in-itself" and its objectification in the world as its representation. The hungry will, as a result, can only rely on their own to feed themselves. In fact, there is no prospect of lasting peace or endless will to satisfy needs, which is the basis for Schopenhauer's moral pessimism. There is no philosophical basis for expecting the suffering in the world to be alleviated meaningfully, because the real world, as "a thing-in-itself", will never be satisfied. The psychological objectification of the will is correspondingly caught up in a never-ending cycle of suffering and frustration in its brutal confrontations with others. All willing life will inevitably suffer, because the will must feed on itself, and through its objectification in the world as representation, it will always be opposed to itself.

**Key words:** Schopenhauer; Moral pessimism; Will; Representation

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### INTRODUCTION

Schopenhauer was a contemporary of Hegel, but he did not recognize Hegel as a suitable successor to Kant. He considers Hegel to be the half-human, half-animal mutant Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but he claims that his philosophy is the most orthodox philosophy that sits in a shrine and overlooks many schools. Although Schopenhauer's evaluation of Hegel was unfair, he revealed the difficulties in the development of philosophy in the German social environment at that time. After Kant's critical philosophy reinvigorated the development of philosophy, philosophy became a tool for maintaining state power, a puppet for political power, and a sharp weapon for partisan struggles, all of which deviate from the pure purpose of philosophy for itself. Philosophy looks forward to its fate of truth again, looking forward to returning to tranquility to renew its steady influence.

Schopenhauer entrusted his own philosophy with the task of accumulating energy in silence, waiting to burst forth and lift the veil of truth, just as he believed that the fate of any good thing was only to be discovered later. Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* is Apocalypse-like, Doomsday-like prophecy. Great souls are not alone, and he did not expect this book to meet Nietzsche unexpectedly. Nietzsche saw it as a reflection of his own state of mind, like a beam of light piercing the dark tunnel through which he was walking. Nietzsche imbued the heavy body with the highest cathartic force of life with the carnival spirit of Dionysus, and let the superman like Zarathustra vacate the world, reach the other side of good and evil, and resurrect freedom.

### 1. SCHOPENHAUER'S *THE WORLD AS WILL AND REPRESENTATION*

Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* is set forth in all its fullness. It differs from his earlier

books in method. He no longer follows academic lines. He looks upon the work as a revelation of the meaning of life, based on a clear and direct intuition into life, and the style shapes itself accordingly (Beer, 2000, p.31). It is full of sadness for life and reality. Its keynote is Fatalism and Naturalism, and it strives for the power contained in itself through nature and human beings themselves. His doctoral dissertation *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (1813) embodied his understanding of necessity, which he discussed as will and representation or the philosophical basis of the world. The Law of Sufficient Reason is: Nothing is without reason (cause or basis). This is a self-evident principle that relies on the a priori nature proposed by Kant's philosophy. Time and space cannot be deduced from a posteriori intuitive experience. Physical objects actually exist in space and time, and causal connections occur, thus forming a certain relationship, which is manifested as a dynamic generative process and eternal changes. Schopenhauer believes that our mind also has certain innate conceptual forms, such as: quantity, quality and modality, and a priori or transcendental categories are imposed on our experiences, and these categories are reflecting the object of experiences, enters the realm of our knowledge. Schopenhauer tries his best to keep Kant's analysis of space and time, but he minimizes the importance of twelve abstract logical categories by simplifying them into a causal category. He points out that animals perceive according to causality, which means that causal thinking is not unique to human beings.

Schopenhauer introduces the form of logical judgment which is seen in Kant's analysis of causality, namely, "if A, then B." Schopenhauer claims that every form of explanation embodies this form of thinking, whether it happens to be an explanation in mathematics or geometry, an explanation involving the definition of abstract concepts, an explanation about why some material object has changed under certain conditions, or an explanation of why a person has performed certain actions.

Because time and space can be known independently without any experience, the law of sufficient reason based on the innate framework becomes the basis for the external physical world. The construction of the material world is based on mathematical and geometric principles. For the realm of the human mind, there is a certain necessary connection between concepts and the conclusions they deduce, and the Law of Sufficient Reason makes our way of knowing the possible. The ego can also become an object to be observed. The reason is: the ego is a willing subject, and this willing subject is the object of self-awareness or self-consciousness, and the principle governing self-willing behavior is also sufficient.

From the four fields of physical objects, mathematical objects, logical objects and self-objects covered by the Law of Sufficient Reason, Schopenhauer introduced four inevitability: physical inevitability, mathematical

inevitability, logical inevitability and moral inevitability. Inevitability is contained in the physical world and the human world itself, and is the inherent stipulation and ultimate driving force of the two worlds. Inevitability is an irreversible trend, and it is precisely because it cannot be reversed that Schopenhauer developed the concept of Fatalism, and such a calm and objective atmosphere permeates his entire work. Fatalism led him to define the world as a mirage. He quotes the ancient wise men of India to describe the unreality of this world: "This is Maya, the veil of deceit, which blinds mortals to see such a world. It cannot be said that it exists, nor can it be said that it exists. It is like a dream, like the sun shining on the gravel, and it is thought to be water by passers-by from a distance, like a rope casually thrown on the ground, but it is regarded as a snake.

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## 2. SCHOPENHAUER'S THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE WORLD AS WILL AND REPRESENTATION

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If we don't know the philosophical problem that Schopenhauer's metaphysical viewpoint is trying to solve, we can't fully understand it. Among the forms that Schopenhauer inherited from them, they appeared in the 17th and 18th centuries, which came from scientific reflections on the nature of perceptual experiences. For example, Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) thought that the external world, i.e. the daily world of tables, chairs, the sun, the moon, etc. was only composed of shapes, movements and their quantitative relations. He believed that color, taste, sound, smell and texture were just aesthetic side effects of the relationship between the outside world and our sensory organs.

The beginning of *The World as Will and Representation* is startling. It is a refutation of people's daily life experiences. As Schopenhauer says, the world is his idea, and this is a truth which is valid for all living creatures. Because of the one's observation, the object becomes the representation of the will. Something enters the realm of human perception, does it really exist elsewhere? In Schopenhauer's view, this is impossible. The eyes are the window to observe external things, and the visual response produced by the eyes is the basis of our understanding of things coming from Schopenhauer's research on optical problems. He once published a pamphlet called *On Vision and Colors*. The upright and vertical images of external objects are reflected on the retina, and the eye sees objects at different distances at the same time. Schopenhauer believes that the external world is an object associated with the observer and everything can be decomposed into representations. The world as an external object, a being that can be incorporated into the world of experiences depends entirely on human perception.

As long as human life continues, the world will continue to exist in our perception in the form of representation. The abstract concepts through which we perceive the world are innate forms, but these abstract concepts are not merely imaginary skeletons; they should be combined with primordial experiences of immediacy and openness.

### 3. THE TWO-DIMENSIONAL WORLD

“The division into object and subject is the only form under which alone any representation of whatever kind it might be, abstract or intuitive, pure or empirical, is possible and thinkable at all. No truth is therefore more certain or more independent from all others, and less requisite of any proof than this: that everything that exists for knowledge – and therefore, the entire world – is only an object in relation to a subject, a perception of the perceiver, in a word, a representation.” (WWR, I)

The world has two sides: will and representation, which are inseparable two sides of a coin. Schopenhauer's idea of will is different from the “will” developed from the intellectual mind (nous). In a general sense, will is the subjective initiative possessed by a limited rational being. Compared with external material entities, human beings are both the subject of knowledge and the subject of will. The action of the body is the product of the action of the will. But Schopenhauer believes that will and action are the same thing, and physical activity is an objectified volition.

Kant tries to determine the basic form of the human mind, that is, because it was structurally independent from the sensory content, he relied on the unquestionable and deeply-rooted concepts which came from classical Greek philosophy. Clearly noting that the principles of Aristotle's logic have remained unchanged for thousands of years and assuming that they will remain quite solid, Kant asserts that abstract and basic logical forms embody human rationality in their essential forms. He believes that these forms also regulate the psychological process of all people.

Kant believes that a thing-in-itself cannot be grasped, and the thing-in-itself includes: God, free will and human soul. In Schopenhauer's view, we are not only a subject of cognition, but we ourselves also belong to the inner nature to be known. The object of cognition, the dual structure of subject and object is not absolutely opposite within the ego. Therefore, from the analysis of ourselves as a thing-in-itself, we can draw a profound conclusion: the intrinsic quality of everything is will.

“Schopenhauer nevertheless rejected ‘the absolutely a priori nature’ of Kant's moral philosophy. Since for Schopenhauer reason is secondary to willing in human life, a morality grounded on purely rational principles would be ineffectual. Hence, Schopenhauer claimed, the

notorious Categorical Imperative, the alleged supreme principle of morality, is nothing but the form of a law without substance, lacking motivational force for men in the storm and stress of life.” (Lewis, 2012, p. 136)

Starting from the subject, and indeed without the knowledge of the object itself, the essential and therefore universal forms of all objects, that is, time, space and causality, can be fully understood. In Kant's views, there lies a priori in our consciousness. Schopenhauer claims beyond this that the principle of sufficient reason is the common expression of all these a priori forms of the object of which we are conscious, and in a result that everything we know purely a priori is nothing more than the content of that principle and what follows from it.

Schopenhauer's unique originality is that he not only regards the will as a characteristic of rational beings, but also believes that non-rational beings also have will. Such will can be understood as life instinct, desire, and impulse. Even primitive single-celled organisms, such as bacteria and algae, have begun to have subjective initiative. Everything has a chance to survive, an instinctive impulse to survive, which is an endless and eternal desire, a universal vitality. We can see that this view is similar to Aristotle's animism. Everything is striving to climb the upward passage to reach its own purpose.

The idea of representation provides an empirical basis for his theory from a perceptual point of view. Schopenhauer adopts the concept of will to describe the entire world as a state of eternal motion under the action of internal forces. By virtue of such necessity, man needs the animals for his support, the animals in their grades need one another, and also the plants, which again need soil, water, chemical elements and their combinations, the planet, the sun, rotation and motion round the sun, the obliquity of the ecliptic, and so on. At bottom, this springs from the fact that the will must live on itself, since nothing exists besides it, and it is a hungry will. Hence arise pursuit, hunting, anxiety, and suffering. (WWR 1: 154)

Schopenhauer does not think that the will that drives animals is higher than the will that drives people. The two are the same. This is because people have reason, but will power is primary, reason is secondary, and will power is inevitability. In deep sleep, reason does not work, but will supports the continuity of life.

The fundamental driving force of the entire world is reproduction. The purpose of the will is to maintain life. This is an active tendency at the foundation of life. It can exert infinite creativity, but it can also lead to disasters. Driven by the will to live, the natural world follows the principle Darwinism, that it, the fittest survive.

After all, one's life is not about enjoying the sacrament given by God and living a better life for the sake of faith. The purpose is to maintain the fleeting and insignificant individual life. From this point of view, Schopenhauer's

philosophy of life is full of pessimism. Life is a transaction that is not worth the gain, and the sporadic gains do not equal the huge losses. But people always have the desire for the future, and the endless desire crushes our limited life. Existentialism is similar to Schopenhauer's tone. Like Camus' "Myth of Sisyphus", the ultimate hope is that there is no hope.

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#### 4. SCHOPENHAUER'S VIEWS AND BUDDHIST NOBLE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

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"Schopenhauer explains: we wish to consider in human existence the inner and essential destiny of the will. Everyone will readily find the same thing once more in the life of the animal, only more feebly expressed in various degrees. He can also sufficiently convince himself in the suffering animal world how essentially all life is suffering."(WWR I: 310)

Schopenhauer's view of the will is similar to the Noble Truth of Suffering in Buddhism. The secular life is a quagmire of pain, and the pain is like fine needles penetrating every inch of our skin. These sufferings are concentrated in imperfection, impermanence, evanescence, inadequacy, and incompleteness. The cause of suffering is craving or desires. Desires are always accompanied by our greed. We crave sensual pleasures of taste, smell, touch, etc., and all are just pains .

Schopenhauer believes that matters rely on the innate law of sufficient reason or the law of causality by showing itself with the simple truth as an intuitive representation, and the intuitive representation unfolds on the chains of causes and effects. But there is no causally necessary connection between the existence of things and our knowledge. We can stand outside the experience, see the danger in the experiences, and turn away. We can even see ourselves as an object and examine ourselves with self-consciousness. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer often says that life is like a dream. If we consider the mind dependence of the sweetness of sugar and interpret the experience of objects in time and space as a similar spiritual dependent experience similar to sweetness, then the first line of Schopenhauer's main works or "The world is my representation" can be more

easily appreciated. For Schopenhauer, the space-time world of things does not represent what those things are, just as the sweetness of sugar can neither provide knowledge of the chemical properties of sugar nor its crystal structure.

By getting rid of the delusional state of external things, you can enter the meditation of mind, and you will not be caught in the complicated effects of the karma of external things. People have a rational soul, and they can eliminate ignorance through meditation and achieve a state of mind like a mirror, thus showing the noble and simple quietness of life like an ancient Greek statue. This is also the essence of philosophy uncovered by Schopenhauer. In this way, the Buddhist introspection of the mind and the meditation of Buddhism have gained excellent philosophical interpretations from Schopenhauer.

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#### CONCLUSION

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In order to appreciate Schopenhauer's moral theory, we can start from an immoral and selfish standpoint as the background for setting any moral concept. Developing the latter needs to stay away from selfish standpoint, which requires a unified principle to soften the obstacles of confrontation, self-isolation and self-centeredness between people.

Schopenhauer rejected dialectical rationality, but puts forward a sterner two-sided method to create a wedge between the objective aspect of the "world as representation" and the subjective aspect of the "world as representation". It maintains the broad gap between the objective and subjective aspects of the world, while acknowledging their potential identity. Because one aspect shows the other, they are essentially the same.

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