

Schopenhauer: The World as Will

It is a perennial philosophical reflection that if one looks deeply into oneself, one will discover not only one's own essence, but also the essence of the universe. For as one is a part of the universe as is everything else, the basic energies of the universe flow through oneself, as they flow through everything else. So it is thought that one can come into contact with the nature of the universe if one comes into contact with one's own nature.

Among the most frequently-identified principles that are introspectively brought forth — and one that was the standard for German Idealist philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel who were philosophizing within the Cartesian tradition — is the principle of self-consciousness. With the belief that acts of self-consciousness exemplify a self-creative process akin to divine creation, and developing a logic that reflects the structure of self-consciousness, namely, the dialectical logic of position, opposition and reconciliation (sometimes described as the logic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis), the German Idealists maintained that dialectical logic mirrors the structure not only of human productions, both individual and social, but the structure of reality as a whole, conceived of as a thinking substance.

As much as he opposes the traditional German Idealists in their metaphysical elevation of self-consciousness (which he regarded as too intellectualistic), Schopenhauer stands within the spirit of this tradition, for he believes that the ultimate principle of the universe is likewise apprehensible through introspection, and that we can philosophically understand the world as various manifestations of this general principle. For Schopenhauer, however, this is not the principle of self-consciousness and rationally-infused will, but is rather what he calls simply “Will” — a mindless, aimless, non-rational urge at the foundation of our instinctual drives, and at the foundational being of everything. Schopenhauer's originality does not reside in his characterization of the world as Will, or as act — for we encounter this position in Fichte's philosophy — but in the conception of the Will as being devoid of rationality or intellect.

Having rejected the Kantian position that our sensations are caused by an unknowable object that exists independently of us, Schopenhauer notes importantly that our body — which is just one among the many objects in the world — is given to us in two different ways: we perceive our body as a physical object among other physical objects, subject to the natural laws that govern the movements of all physical objects, and we are aware of our body through our immediate awareness, as we each consciously inhabit our body, intentionally move it, and feel directly our pleasures, pains, and emotional states. We can objectively perceive our hand as an external object, as a surgeon might perceive it during a medical operation, and we can also be subjectively aware of our hand as something we inhabit, as something we willfully move, and of which we can feel its inner muscular workings.

From this observation, Schopenhauer asserts that our body is given in two entirely different ways, namely, as representation (i.e., objectively; externally) and as Will (i.e., subjectively; internally). One of his intriguing conclusions is that when we move our hand, this is not to be comprehended as a motivational act that first happens, and then causes the movement of our hand as an effect. He maintains that the movement of our hand is but a single act — again, like the two sides of a coin — that

has a subjective feeling of willing as one of its aspects, and the movement of the hand as the other. More generally, he adds that the action of the body is nothing but the act of Will objectified, that is, translated into perception.

At this point in his argumentation, Schopenhauer has established only that among his many ideas, or representations, only one of them (viz., the [complex] representation of his body) has this special double-aspected quality. When he perceives the moon or a mountain, he does not under ordinary circumstances have any direct access to the metaphysical inside of such objects; they remain as representations that reveal to him only their objective side. Schopenhauer asks, though, how he might understand the world as an integrated whole, or how he might render his entire field of perception more comprehensible, for as things stand, he can directly experience the inside of one of his representations, but of no others. To answer this question, he takes a philosophical leap, and uses the double-knowledge of his own body as the key to the inner being of every other natural phenomenon. He consequently regards every object in the world as being metaphysically double-aspected, and as having an inside or inner aspect of its own, just as his consciousness is the inner aspect of his own body. For such reasons, he rejects Descartes's causal interactionism, where thinking substance is said to cause changes in an independent material substance and vice-versa.

This precipitates a position that characterizes the inner aspect of things, as far as we can describe it, as Will. Hence, Schopenhauer regards the world as a whole as having two sides: the world is Will and the world is representation. The world as Will ("for us", as he sometimes qualifies it) is the world as it is in itself, and the world as representation is the world of appearances, of our ideas, or of objects. An alternative title for Schopenhauer's main book, *The World as Will and Representation*, might well have been, *The World as Reality and Appearance*. Similarly, his book might have been entitled, *The Inner and Outer Nature of the World*.

Wicks, Robert, "Arthur Schopenhauer", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2010 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/schopenhauer/>>.