The World as Will and Representation, Arthur Schopenhauer

Reflection on the lives of at least some philosophers can be dispiriting. When their books aren’t being burnt, they are. The ones who hold on to sanity for a while are variously arrested, poisoned, exiled or forced to flee for their lives – a few have been shot, usually by their students. When they manage to escape such fates, their lives are not lived in celebration, and their deaths are frequently sad and lonely. Even many of the great philosophers have been comprehensively ridiculed in their lifetimes – others are just ignored until long after their deaths. Rarely are philosophers carried out of the lecture hall on the shoulders of their cheering and adoring students. Never do you see their faces on the cover of Vogue.

Despite all of this, you can come around to the view that philosophers as a species seem fairly happy, certainly happier than you might expect. They smile a lot. The autobiographies of at least some philosophers brim with cheerfulness. Given the miserable lives, you would expect philosophy to contain some miserable books, some unhappy conclusions, but by and large it doesn’t. The legendary exception is Arthur Schopenhauer’s The World as Will and Representation. Schopenhauer’s philosophy is spectacularly pessimistic, and so was Schopenhauer.

His mother tells us that from an early age he ‘brooded on the misery of things’. She operated a literary salon, and eventually threw him out because her guests found his diatribes on the futility of existence a little tedious after a while. The broodings, though,
produced a book of genius. He wrote the first edition before he was thirty, but no one really noticed. He had to wait until he was seventy-seven for interest in his work to demand a third edition. What is remarkable is that throughout the intervening years he found no reason to make changes to the original manuscript. Instead, he added pages, spelling out what he took to be the further consequences of truths already discovered and firmly established almost fifty years earlier.

He has some advice for you, if you want to get the most from the book. First, thoroughly familiarize yourself with Kant’s philosophy. This might take you a while, because you must not only plough through all three of Kant’s difficult *Critiques*, but Schopenhauer suggests that you also work through his own daunting treatment of Kant’s categories of the understanding, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*. Thus fortified, you must read *The World as Will and Representation* with great patience, no less than twice. If you think this advice is a little too demanding, he says that you shouldn’t bother reading the book at all. He suggests, instead, that you can still get your money’s worth by using the book to fill a gap on the shelves of your library or maybe by leaving it on a table to impress the opposite sex. Or, he says, if you really don’t want to read it you might review it. This is probably Schopenhauer’s best joke.

The book, Schopenhauer insists, imparts a single thought, though despite his best efforts he is unable ‘to find a shorter way of imparting that thought than the whole of this book’. Here’s a slightly shorter way: the world appears to us as representation, but its underlying nature is will. The work is divided into four books. The first deals with
Schopenhauer’s take on the world considered as appearance, idea, or representation. The second, and perhaps most interesting, explains Schopenhauer’s view that the entire world of appearance is nothing but objectified will. The third book contains Schopenhauer’s treatment of aesthetics. The fourth is something of a solution to the horrors of existence in the denial of the will to live. We’ll consider some of this in what follows.

The Kantian background

Schopenhauer is quite right to say that some grounding in Kant is required for an understanding of his book, so this is where we’ll begin. Recall that Kant argues that the mind is active and that it is the a priori powers of the mind which have a role in shaping the nature of the experienced world. The forms of sensible intuition, space and time, ensure that the objects we experience are always experienced as existing at a time and in a place. The categories of the understanding, he argues, further structure experience, and this enables us to see a world not just in space and time but also one built up of parts and wholes, standing in causal relations, and so on. Schopenhauer departs from Kant only a little in this connection, reducing Kant’s twelve categories of the understanding to just one, causation. For both thinkers, the world – considered as something which appears to us and which can be known by us – is entirely representational in nature.

For Kant the very notion of a world as it appears to us presupposes something more, namely a reality beyond appearances. Kant and those who follow him operate with a distinction between appearances (phenomena) and things-in-themselves (noumena). Things-in-themselves, Kant argues, are things as they are apart from experience, things
which somehow underpin or cause our experience, provide the mind with the raw materials from which a world of objects is constructed. Kant argues that we can know something about appearances, but we can only think haphazardly about things-in-themselves. We cannot say much more about them other than that they exist and interact with the mind in such a way as to cause experience. You might recall that Kant tries to show that the contradictions of speculative metaphysics result from a particular sort of error, namely reason attempting to think outside the world of appearance, trying to bring the categories of the understanding to bear outside the bounds of sensation.

Schopenhauer thinks Kant himself has slipped up here too. Kant maintains that things-in-themselves are somewhere in the causal chain underpinning our experience, but this is to say that the concept of cause applies to something other than or outside of our experience. (You can also wonder what sense might attach to the word ‘thing’ in Kant’s expression, ‘things-in-themselves’ – if things get to be things because of the operations of the mind, how could there be things-in-themselves?) If Kant is right and the category of cause applies only to objects as they appear, how are we to understand Kant’s claim that things-in-themselves do some causing? Schopenhauer argues that another conception of the relation between appearances and things-in-themselves is required, and whatever the relation, it certainly cannot be a causal one.

The world as Will

So Schopenhauer needs a different way of thinking about the relation between the world as it is apart from experience and the experienced world. He claims, courageously,
that the world of appearances and the world as it is in itself are the same thing, the same reality, ‘viewed’ in two different ways. The relation is not causality; it’s identity. On the one hand, the world is representation, but on the other, the world in itself is will. How does he arrive at this intriguing claim? He argues that sensation is not our only access to reality: ‘a way from within stands open to us to [the] real nature of things’.

There is a sense in which I perceive my body as an object like any other in the physical world. It appears to me in time and space, stands in causal relations, changes over time and so on. I can and do see it as a representation, an appearance situated in the external, empirical world. But I know about it in another way too. I just saw my hand reach for a glass of juice, but I would have known it was moving even if I had not seen it. Apart from my knowledge of my hand as an object in the world of representations, I have an immediate awareness of it and its movement. I moved my hand intentionally, and as I did so I also felt a desire for the juice. Of all the objects in the world as representation, I have special access to one of them: my body. I know my body from the inside, as it were, quite apart from my body as a representation, because I inhabit it. On the inside what I find is will.

It is important to avoid a tempting mistake here. Schopenhauer is not saying that willing causes bodily movements. He’s just taken Kant to task for thinking that the world as it is in itself helps cause my representations. Instead, Schopenhauer argues that willing is body. The hand and the will are two aspects of the same reality. In Schopenhauer’s language, the hand is ‘objectified will’.
Schopenhauer makes a heroic leap from a single window into the hidden side of reality, namely his own access to his body as will, to the claim that the whole world as it appears is nothing but objectified will. Part of the argument depends on a rejection of solipsism, the view that only the self and its representations exist. Schopenhauer also notes that our bodies are parts of the world as it appears, seamlessly integrated into the rest of reality. If I know that the inside of an integrated part is will, why not think of the whole as will too? Once an individual has recognized that his own inner nature is will:

[h]e will recognize that same will not only in those phenomena that are quite similar to his own, in men and animals, as their innermost nature, but continued reflection will lead him to recognize the force that shoots and vegetates in the plant, indeed the force by which the crystal is formed, the force that turns the magnet...all these he will recognize as different only in the phenomenon, but the same according to their inner nature.

The ‘way from within’ leads Schopenhauer to nothing less than a grasp of what should be beyond the reach of our understanding: the Kantian thing-in-itself.

Now the bad news. The will is completely devoid of rationality. It is blind and violent striving, mindless and insatiable craving, meaningless impulse. The will has no particular goal or object. It is a simple want which pointlessly drives everything, better, which pointlessly is everything. The underlying reality, for Schopenhauer, is a single,
unified Cosmic Will – parts, number and the other concepts required to think of things as
distinct have no application to the world as it is in itself. In the world as representation,
though, the Cosmic Will is fragmented, fractured and struggling against itself. The will
‘feasts on itself’ in the experienced world, and the feast is terrible, appallingly pointless
and painful.

A human life is characterised by nothing but a constant striving after this or that,
sometimes momentarily satisfied but more often than not frustrated. On those rare
occasions when the will manages to satisfy itself, ‘life-benumbing boredom’ quickly sets
in and the will is reawakened. Life, on Schopenhauer’s view, is something which ought
not to be, and this is the very worst of all possible worlds. Existence, he says:

…is a constant hurrying of the present into the dead past, a constant
dying…the life of our body is only a constantly prevented dying, an ever
postponed death: finally, in the same way, the activity of our mind is a
constantly deferred ennui. Every breath we draw wards off the death that is
constantly intruding upon us.

Throwing him out of the salon was probably the right thing to do. Can anything else be
done?

**Escaping the Will**
Schopenhauer argues that a temporary escape from the tyranny of willing consists in aesthetic experience. The contemplation of something beautiful snaps us out of the world of representation for a moment, releases us from being subjects striving after objects. If you have a look at a bowl of ripe fruit or a beautiful member of the opposite sex, the will becomes aroused and the awful pattern repeats itself: desire, then either frustration or momentary satisfaction followed by boredom. But if you have a look at a well-executed still life or a finely drawn portrait, the will quietens in a kind of detachment. The object of art is not viewed just as an object categorized by the mind, another desirable representation. Instead, it is possible to see more than the object, to find oneself in touch with a basic type. Schopenhauer argues that the Will manifests itself not just in the particular objects of this world, but also in universal types. These types, Schopenhauer claims, are the Platonic Forms themselves, and the artist can communicate her knowledge of them through fine art.

In the moment of aesthetic reverie, the individual passes for a moment beyond simply viewing or hearing a work of art. It is not the particular thing which is contemplated; instead, the individual gains a kind of awareness of something more, a true and basic aspect of reality. In moving past the particular object, she becomes something more than a mere subject. The individual tears herself free from the demands of the will by ‘ceasing to be merely individual, and being now a pure will-less subject of knowledge’.
This is, presumably, what we are getting at when we say we ‘lose ourselves’ in music. There really is a kind of suspension, even peace, which attends the experience of all good art, a feeling of going beyond just the thing before us, and perhaps Schopenhauer is on to something here. But he says that through art we are getting in touch with a basic manifestation of the Cosmic Will, and it is hard not to wonder how getting in touch with that terrible thing tears us free of the tyranny of the will itself.

A more lasting escape consists not in aesthetic contemplation, but in ascetic renunciation. When a rare individual genuinely recognizes the world for what it is, sees it as nothing but pointless striving, it is possible for her to free herself in a certain way. Schopenhauer thinks that the path of the morally enlightened individual, the person who tries to love others as she loves herself and do for others as she does for herself, is on the way to seeing the world as it is. What is required is a further step: the individual will turning in on itself. A certain kind of moral thinking can lead a person to the view that self-interest is illusory, and this can evolve into the right sort of renunciation, indifference to all things, self-mortification, self-deprivation – all of this is a deliberate breaking of the will. It results in something much more than a welcome death.

You might want to forgo the fasting, flagellation and hair sweaters and go straight for suicide, but Schopenhauer argues that this would be a mistake. Suicide is self-defeating, an affirmation of the will, a recognition that the sorrow of life matters. A life which ends as a consequence of the denial of the will, Schopenhauer maintains, ends differently. Suicide merely destroys an individual in the world as representation, but the
death of the saint, he hints, has an effect on the thing-in-itself, somehow breaks the
noumenal will. Schopenhauer cites Eastern philosophy regularly in his consideration of
the denial of the will, and whatever he might mean by the extinction of the will through
acetic denial, it has something to do with the nothingness of Nirvana. But pointing to this
obscure doctrine is not much help if we are after an understanding of Schopenhauer’s
meaning here. What is left when the will is denied in the right way? What’s nothing?

Schopenhauer has something of an answer to this. He argues that there is not
much positive which can be said about nothing. We cannot say anything positive because
we cannot really know anything about nothing. Knowing requires a subject and an object
known, and Schopenhauer is talking about the abolition of subject, object, space, time,
understanding, and the will itself. He can only point us to Nirvana and similar, mystical
talk of ‘ecstasy, rapture, illumination, union with God, and so on’. If he cannot offer a
positive account of nothing, perhaps predictably he has a go at negativity, at saying what
nothing is not. As he puts it, perhaps too succinctly: ‘No will: no representation, no
world.’ If there is any happiness at all in Schopenhauer’s writings, you can hear the
slightest murmur of it when he considers nothing, even if he has nothing positive to say
about it: ‘to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of
ours with all its suns and galaxies is – nothing’.