

Schopenhauer's Concept of Suffering and Aesthetics

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Abstract: The fundamental goal of this paper is to explore Schopenhauer's concept of aesthetic experience and how it ends suffering produced by the will. According to Schopenhauer the will is blind and purposeless; and therefore it is the cause of suffering. He offers three modes of reducing the suffering produced by the will; namely aesthetic experience, compassion, and ascetic resignation from the world. This project will explore one of the three modes; which is the aesthetic experience and will aim to answer the following: What is an aesthetic experience according to Schopenhauer? And how does it end the suffering produced by the will? With reference to the aforesaid, the framework of this paper will be divided into three parts: Firstly, Schopenhauer's metaphysics will be explored by establishing his concept of the will and by investigating its relationship with suffering. Secondly, his notion of aesthetic experience and artistic production will be elaborated. Lastly, the relationship between the aesthetic experience and the will be identified and discussed.

Keywords: suffering, will, aesthetics

Arthur Schopenhauer is known for his pessimistic philosophy. According to him, suffering is part of life. It is an irremovable aspect of existence.¹ Suffering originates from the will and it is a kind of manifestation of the will.² The body is both a representation and the *will*.³ In order to remove suffering, its cause (i.e., the will) must also be removed. The cessation of the will provides a form of satisfaction. In order to understand the relationship of the will and suffering, this research will first discuss Schopenhauer's notion of the world as will and representation.

The World as Will and Representation

Schopenhauer is undoubtedly influenced by Immanuel Kant. His work *The World as Will and Representation* covers metaphysics, aesthetics,

epistemology, and ethics. Similar to Kant's phenomenon (i.e., the reality that man experiences, which is conditioned by the senses) and noumenon (i.e., the thing-in-itself), Schopenhauer's philosophy understands reality in two ways. On one hand, there is the 'world as representation' and this could be understood as how the world is presented to my or the subject's own experiences. On this side falls the perceivable reality. It is where reality is *presented* to our experience. Consequently, like Kant's *Transcendental Idealism*, man perceives the world only through the *pure a priori forms of intuition and understanding*, namely space and time, and the categories. Experience is possible only through space, time, causality, and so on. The objects of perception depend upon the subject. Accordingly, since the objects depend upon the subject's experience which is only possible

through space, time, and causality it follows that the subject cannot know what is beyond thereof.

On the other hand, the 'world as a will' is understood as the world as noumenon or the "thing-in-itself". Kant, referred the forenamed as "unknowable", whereas Schopenhauer considered it as the "will". The will is that which is represented to us in our experience through space, time, and causality.

Moreover, the will is also manifested in nature. According to Janaway, the single will and its manifestation in nature is "... two sides of a coin, two aspects of the same world."⁴ The awareness of man towards the external reality is different from his inner awareness of his body in an intimate way.⁵ For instance, I am conscious of myself and my body in more thorough way than that of what is external to me and I more aware of my own feelings or emotions than that of other people. We have full awareness of our inner selves as opposed to what is external of us. I could fully understand what I would do or what I am thinking about. This comprehension of my inner operations is different from what I see outside. According to Schopenhauer this comprehension is given to me through the will.⁶

Consequently, Schopenhauer claims that "... What as representation of perception I call my body, I call my will so far as I am conscious of it."⁷ For instance, I am aware whenever I am in a state of joy, sadness, or anger; on the contrary, I am never fully aware whenever another is in such a state. I am aware of my intentions and motives. In addition, I cannot and will never fully comprehend another's intentions and motives. Since I have an awareness of the will, I am not totally separated from the thing-in-itself. Moreover, the will is not just a form of simple willing. It is not limited to a condition preceding an act and to the common understanding of willing. Will is also that "... which create and preserve the organic life and its substrate; and secretion, digestion, and the circulation of blood, are its work also."⁸ It is an underlying force

behind this reality that strives. It is behind the operations of nature. Every person, animal, and plant is driven by this will; even unconscious beings are driven by this will. As Schopenhauer puts it, "Teeth, gullet, and intestinal canal are objectified hunger; the genitals are objectified sexual impulse; the grasping hand and nimble feet correspond to the more indirect strivings of the will which they represent."⁹ This means that the will drives the operations nature. It is the underlying energy that is behind process in nature.

Every act of the body is in service of the will. Likewise, every willing that proceeds from a person or an animal's consciousness is conditioned by the will. As Schopenhauer says:

... the whole series of actions, and consequently every individual act and likewise its condition, namely the whole body itself which performs it, and therefore also the process through which and in which the body exists are nothing but the phenomenal appearance of the will, it's becoming visible, the *objectivity of the will*.¹⁰

The whole reality as it is presented to us in experience is but a representation of the will. Every being, in this case, possesses an inner character which is the will.

Schopenhauer also maintains that the intellect, which is usually considered superior to the will, is but a biological function and therefore it is also in service of the latter. According to him, philosopher before him maintained that the intellect and the will are one. He was the one to recognize that there is a difference between the two. As he stated: "The cardinal merit of my doctrine, and that which puts it in opposition to all former philosophies is the perfect separation of the will and the intellect."¹¹ Consequently, Schopenhauer maintains that the intellect is a biological function as opposed to it as a function of the soul. This position situates the intellect as secondary to the will. The intellect is a function

of the brain and dependent upon man whereas the will is a fundamental character of man. Hence, it is averred that the intellect is subordinate to the will.¹² The will to know is represented in the phenomenal reality by the brain and order for the will to reach its end, the intellect is needed. This kind of consideration makes the intellect the same level as the beating of the heart, the arousal of the sexual organs, sweating of the glands and the other biological operations. Moreover, as it was shown above, that all of this biological functions are representations of one thing, namely, the will. The culmination of all these biological function is seen in the body; hence the body is a representation of the will; it is the representation of the thing-in-itself.

According to Schopenhauer, “My body and my will are one.”¹³ Another way of showing the unity between the two is, whenever something interacts with the body, there is an elicited reaction from the will.¹⁴ An example would be mental states, the will to laugh is elicited in me whenever I perceive something of humorous character. An animal, a pet dog for instance, has a will to warmly greet its master whenever its master returns from a period of absence. The will to greet its master is elicited whenever it sees its master. Another would be that of a plant, which has a will to grow towards wherever there is sunlight. The sunlight elicits from the plant a will to grow.

The intellect being subordinate to the will results to the supremacy of the will. According to Bertray, “the will itself, the unintentional will which is discovered in everything, is the creator of the world.”¹⁵ The will can be understood as a striving force in nature or in reality. Man is not the only being that exhibits a kind of willing. The will could also be found in animals, plants, and the organs. Nature exhibits and follows a certain structure. He adds “... the structure of any animal is the result of its will to be what it is.”¹⁶ Likewise, every being in reality follows a certain fundamental organization. Nature is precisely the way it is because it adheres to its own

fundamental character. A dog, for instance, is called as such because it wills to be what it is. Since the will constitutes the underlying reality of the world, Schopenhauer maintains that “we see at once from the instinct and mechanical skill of animals that the will is also active where it is not guided by any knowledge...”¹⁷ We see in every species of animals the will to propagate its existence. Every species has the will to continue its posterior generations. This kind of will is shown through the will to reproduce. It is a kind of striving that beings follow. Whatever an organism may do in order to satisfy itself, it is because of the will. For instance, my thirst for knowledge, hunger for food, and search for entertainment are because of the will.

In the micro level, the will guides human acts however in the macro level, the will “... appears in every blindly acting force of nature, and also in the deliberate conduct of man...”¹⁸ It is not only limited in humans, but rather it is also found in nature. Animals, plants and every being in nature show one form or another of the will. It is blind inasmuch as it does not necessarily follow a final and an absolute *telos* or end. Whenever, an individual has satisfied one will, the will does not end in one act. For instance, whenever I eat my will to eat may be satisfied whenever I eat but it does not fulfil the striving of the will once and for all. The will continues to strive and it does not have a final and absolute object. According to Harms and Morgan, “Motives can only modify the will in its original determination by its circumstances and relations in space and time, but, ... can never direct the will itself or determine its direction.”¹⁹ Whenever my will is directed at something it is because of my intellect or other motives. A plant has a will to grow towards a direction because of an external factor that would elicit the will; in this case it is the sunlight.

Will and Suffering

The will to life is purposeless. It is not directed to a final object; and hence it is blind. Life is merely an empty will; it wills in order for it to continue willing.²⁰ Animals have a will to propagate its species. This is continuous, which means that there is a cycle of reproduction in nature; one generation breeds and the succeeding ones do the same. As a result, it does not end whenever a certain object has been reached hence, it is continuous. It will continue on for the sake of the species' existence, but why does the will, will to reproduce? It does so, to continue willing.

The will is fundamentally the cause of suffering. According to Harms and Morgan, "The will itself is this endless struggle, from which all the unhappiness proceeds."²¹ The will is unceasingly struggling to fulfill its endless desire hence suffering proceeds from it. The will alternates from satisfaction to suffering. Schopenhauer maintains that satisfaction is negative whereas suffering is positive. He says "all *willing* springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering."²² There is suffering in this world inasmuch as there is a will behind its representations. He maintains that for the most part, life is suffering.²³

Since the will inevitably leads to life's suffering, Schopenhauer maintains that most of the particular wills of man fundamentally lead to futility. According to him, the will cannot be satisfied. Its desires cannot be quenched. The will's inexhaustible desire leads to misery. Schopenhauer maintains that because of this, earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated and futile.²⁴ Achieving one desire to satisfy the will would in turn bear fruit to another one, and this goes on *ad infinitum*. He describes it as "no attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines; but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow."²⁵

The will's insatiable hunger could also be understood in terms of the body. Since the will is blind, it follows that it is in a state of continuous pursuit to satisfying itself. Consequently, since the body and the will are one, it follows that the body is also in a constant pursuit to satisfy itself. Whenever the will attain one end it is satisfied, otherwise it is suffering. The body, since it is the representation of the will, is also a cause of suffering. The body wills and whenever it fails to attain an end it suffers; consequently, when it is in a prolonged pursuit to its end it suffers. This results to Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy. Similar to Buddhist thought, he maintains that life is suffering. Consequently, since the will pervades nature, then suffering also infused in it. Moreover, the relationship between the will, body, and suffering leads to the renunciation of the self; which is evident in Hinduism and Buddhist philosophy.

Man's intimate connection with the will, ultimately makes him an egoist perspective towards the world. His perspective is always in relation to himself. Although, there are times of compassion and benevolence, man is fundamentally an egoist because of the will. The will always directs man towards an object. The will makes man's perception towards the world subjective; his perception is always in relation to himself. According to Schopenhauer as long as our consciousness is subjected to the will, and as long as we are be subjected to a throng of desires with its hopes and fears or in short as long as we are willing; we will never obtain peace.²⁶ This leaves us the question: how do we escape suffering?

Schopenhauer gives us two ways through will-less contemplation, or saint-hood. The will-less contemplation is achieved through art whereas saint-hood is a form of renunciation of bodily desires and involves compassion for others.

Art and Will

As it was discussed in the previous sections of this paper, will is the reason for suffering. It is in a constant pursuit to satisfy itself in order to continue *willing*. Hence, whenever the will fails to satisfy itself there is suffering; likewise, whenever the will is in prolonged pursuit of its end, it suffers. Ultimately, the *will* always bring with it suffering. Although there may be satisfaction or happiness, nonetheless, it certainly carries with it the possibility for suffering. Furthermore, the will alternates between satisfaction and suffering. Nonetheless, according to Janaway, for Schopenhauer suffering lasts longer.²⁷ The implication of this is that existence offers satisfaction however, along with this happiness is suffering and for the most part existence is suffering. In other words, existence or life is fundamentally suffering and misery. This leaves us a question: since the will is the reason why existence inevitably offers suffering, is there any kind of happiness not born out of the will?

Since willing results to suffering, then it must be distinguished in order to avoid further misery. The possibility of the cessation of willing is gleaned from art. According to Schopenhauer there is a possibility to emancipate one's self from the endless stream of willing. There is a state or disposition wherein man is no longer in the grips of the will; by then he no longer considers things with subjectivity, it is now purely objective; this is possible through the knowledge of the idea.²⁸ It is a state wherein there man no longer considers things in relation to him. He does not *will* toward a certain end. He transcends his subjectivity towards the knowledge of the idea which is objective. This opens the possibility of satisfaction without the will. He characterizes it as:

... the state where, simultaneously and inseparably, the perceived individual thing is raised to the Idea of its species, and the knowing individual to the pure subject of will-less knowing, and now the two, as such, no longer stand in the

stream of time and of all other relations.²⁹

In this state, the individual as a subject disappears. When this subjectivity is removed, the individual is no longer an individual. In order to understand this, Schopenhauer uses *idea*, in the Platonic sense.³⁰

The subject perceives reality in a state of constant change. Things come and go; they occupy space which cannot be simultaneously occupied by another. The reason for this is the subject is bounded by the laws of space, time, and causality; and hence what the subject perceives are necessarily contingent and particular; however, this is reality as representation. Consequently, the individual is the reason for its own subjectivity. As it was mentioned, the individual always considers things in relation to itself because of the will; as a result, the individual is always subjective. However, according to Schopenhauer, there is a possibility to access an eternal and universal reality through unique moments.³¹ In the eternal and universal reality lies the ideas. Beyond the realm of subjectivity, ideas offer knowledge of the objective. According to Schopenhauer "while the individuals in which it expresses itself are innumerable and are incessantly coming into existence and passing away, it remains unchanged as one and the same, and the principle of sufficient reason has no meaning for it."³²

Our subjectivity must be given up in order to achieve knowledge of ideas. Schopenhauer maintains that "... if the ideas are to become object of knowledge, this can happen only by abolishing the individuality in the knowing subject."³³ The individual, and its subjectivity are relinquished in the process. The transition from a subjective to an objective point-of-view involves an individual losing his individuality. Since one loses his individuality, he achieves a state of objectivity. He describes the state wherein the knowledge of the ideas is achieved "we no longer consider the where, the when, the why and the whither of things, but solely *what*." Moreover, we

“sink ourselves completely therein, and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object.”³⁴ In this state, there is no longer an *I*. The subject no longer considers things in relation to itself; it no longer maintains a distinction from itself and what is not itself. The individual is absorbed within the whole. Moreover, there is no subject-object duality. According to him:

we lose ourselves entirely in this object... we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject, as clear mirror to the object... we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception, but the two have become one...³⁵

This is aesthetic contemplation, however, how does this state, aesthetic contemplation, remove one from suffering?

Aesthetic contemplation offers both the knowledge of ideas and satisfaction. The knowledge of ideas gives man an objective state wherein he loses his subjectivity brought about by willing. This objectivity emancipates from his subjectivity. Since he loses his subjectivity, it follows that he also breaks free from the grips of the will. He is no longer directed by the will. He contemplates about art objectively. He no longer considers it with regards to himself. There is no longer an *I* or an *ego* that desires an end in order to satisfy itself. It is a *will-less contemplation* of art. The possibility of happiness and sadness that the will brings with it also disappears. There is no will to bring suffering; although, the implication of this is also the impossibility of pleasure, since the will could either bring pleasure or suffering. The cessation of the will, not only removes the possibility of suffering, but also results to the impossibility of happiness.

There are instances wherein according to Schopenhauer, that is really the case. He says “Happiness and unhappiness have vanished; we are no longer the individual ... we are only pure subject of knowledge.”³⁶ However, there are instances that he says it is otherwise. According

to him, “... As all suffering proceeds from the will that constitutes the real self, all possibility of suffering is abolished ...”³⁷ Consequently the pure state of objectivity makes us feel positively happy.³⁸ Moreover, he adds “The storm of passions, the pressures of desire and fear, and all the miseries of willing are then at once calmed and appeased in a marvelous way.”³⁹ Janaway reconciles this predicament through the distinction of two kinds of happiness. On one hand, there is happiness brought about by willing; on the other, there is the aesthetic kind which is brought about by the ‘cessation of willing.’⁴⁰ The former instance pertains to the fulfillment one attains whenever one’s particular will is satisfied. Eating, for example, gives one pleasure and fulfillment. However, the pleasure in this case is momentary since the will continues striving. Furthermore, since it continues striving, then it continues to carry the possibility of suffering. On the other hand, the latter case pertains to the termination of one’s will. The peace and fulfillment, in this instance, is not momentary. The cessation of willing emancipates one from the suffering it carries. In other words, the person in this state no longer endures suffering since he also no longer enjoys pleasure. This state is beyond the happiness and unhappiness of the subject. It is purely an objective state.

Conclusion

Aesthetic contemplation is a will-less contemplation. Its value lies within its capacity to detach as from the grips of the will and therefore it offers us the possibility to escape suffering and enjoy a kind of positive aesthetic pleasure. It gives us objective knowledge that removes us from subjective desires; it emancipates us from our subjectivity that brings suffering. It removes the possibility for happiness and suffering however, it offers a positive kind of happiness which is born not from the will, but from art. Consequently, it not only offers a state of aesthetic happiness, a psychological state, but it also has a cognitive function. Aesthetic

contemplation gives us knowledge of what is eternal and unchanging.⁴¹ It does not only offer a state of peace, a cessation of willing, but also it can give insight to objective insight of eternal ideas; hence, it has a twofold value, one therapeutic and one cognitive. The therapeutic value of the cessation of willing signify that one attains peace and happiness. One, in this sense, is

beyond the misery and pain that life brings. The cognitive value of it signifies that one can attain an objective understanding of reality. One perceives beyond the dynamic nature of the world of appearances. The cessation of willing, therefore, provides man with a higher understanding of reality and that it offers him peace.

¹ Cf. Christopher Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 104.

² Cf. Arthur Schopenhauer, "The Freedom of the Will." *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, edited and translated by Christopher Janaway (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32.

³ Cf. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, volume 1, translated by E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1969), 125.

⁴ Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*, 39.

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶ Cf. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 1, 100.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸ C.L. Bertrays, "Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Will," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 1, no. 4 (1867): 233.

⁹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 1, 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Bertrays, *Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Will*, 232.

¹² Cf. *Ibid.*, 232.

¹³ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 1, 102.

¹⁴ Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*, 43.

¹⁵ Bertray, *Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Will*, 234.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* volume 1, 114-115.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁹ Freidrich Harms & Morgan S. Ella, "Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (1975): 127; A motive is an external influence wherein it is mediated by the will in order for its end to be accomplished. See also C.L. Bertrays, *Doctrine of the Will*, 233.

²⁰ Cf. Harms & Morgan, *Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy*, 130.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

²² Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 1, 196.

²³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁴ Cf. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, volume 2, translated by E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications Inc.), 573.

²⁵ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 1, 196.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁷ Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*, 72.

²⁸ Cf. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 1, 196.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

³⁰ An idea, in a platonic sense could signify the form beyond appearances, similar to Kant's *thing-in-itself*. In other words, it is a constant and universal reality underlying the dynamic world of appearances. However, Schopenhauer maintains that these two concepts (i.e. Plato's ideas and Kant's thing-in-itself) are different. Although the thing-in-itself can never be objectively known since man perceives it in appearances (hence, it becomes subjective), Platonic ideas, on the other hand, serve as the most objective kind of knowledge that he can ever attain. Schopenhauer claims that "... the Platonic Idea is necessarily object, something known, a representation, and precisely, but only, in this respect is it different from the thing-in-itself... it has retained the first and most universal form, namely that of representation in general, that of being object for a subject." Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 1, p. 175.

³¹ Cf. Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*, 74.

³² Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 1, 169.

³³ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 197

³⁷ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 2, 368. See also Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*, 73

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 1, 197

⁴⁰ Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*, 73

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

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