

## Schopenhauer – PPG

**Why I'm interested.** I think Nietzsche's moral naturalism was a great advance. It said there were no objective moral rules from on high and that we must work these out for ourselves. Some of this he got from Schopenhauer and so I wanted to see the source of the idea. Also I came to see Schopenhauer as putting his finger on some important aspects of our lives even though he based them on what I think is a largely unnecessary and incorrect speculative metaphysics about how the world is made up.

**How does Schopenhauer fit in with our term's theme of the self.** He has a pretty unique view of the sorts of creature we are and how that impacts on ethics and how we should live. We are, in a way that I may be able to explain later, objectifications of the will, the only entity in a universe with no god.

Schopenhauer was one of the last metaphysical system builders who sought to explain all aspects of philosophy – what we can know, what there is and how we should behave. He followed Kant in saying (I think mistakenly) that there is a hidden world beyond what we can see in our mind-imposed categories of space, time and causation.

### Epistemology

His first written piece is about the idea of **sufficient reason**. This was a fairly standard exercise where you seek to explain what sort of things you need to look at to explain the world. While the idea has a long history, the idea was elevated and defined most notably by Leibniz in the seventeenth century. He had said, there has to be a reason for everything being what it is, where it is and when it is. Conventionally this is the idea of a physical chain of causation. Schopenhauer, however, added three new reasons for things to be as they are. **Time and space** – these are the Kantian categories through which we experience the world and they impose restrictions on what we can experience and understand. **Logic and concepts** mean that we know that our lives are governed by logic. For instance if we know A is larger than B and B is larger than C then A is larger than C. Perhaps most interestingly, Schopenhauer identified human **motivation** as one of the determining factors that results in the way the world is at any time. And motivations are also themselves subject to the law of sufficient reason = they could not have been other than they were. With a proper grasp of these four epistemological tools, he said, you could explain everything in the natural world. He was a determinist – there was a sufficient cause for everything in a vast chain of causes – and nothing could have been otherwise. Every event in the empirical world— be it physical, logical, or behavioral—is necessarily caused by a preceding cause or reason

Do we agree with Schopenhauer that there has to be a reason for everything to be as it is? By extending causation to human motivation is he showing that everything we do is determined? (Jung – synchronicity – acausal coincidence?)

## Metaphysics

Notice that everything claimed so far about the principle of sufficient reason applies to the natural or **phenomenal** world, not the **noumenal** world. Now let's re-cap what this distinction is which Schopenhauer inherited from Kant. Kant claimed that our minds receive information from the outside world and can only make sense of it by imposing our own mental intuitions of **space, time** and categories of understanding such as **causation** on them. These do not exist out in the real, complete or noumenal world and are **a priori** conditions for us to understand the external world at all. Thus the limitations of space, time and a causation do not apply in the noumenal world and it is not subject to the principle of sufficient reason. This was supposedly demonstrated by, for example, Kant's claim that we could not possibly imagine there being nothing, that is, anything existing that was not in space (extended) or persisting through time. That would be a contradiction. (This reasoning is, I think, suspect since it is equally consistent with our being unable to imagine a timeless and unextended object because that is what the universe is like and we wouldn't survive long in it if we did not understand it.) Be that as it may, Kant argued that statements such as "every event must have a cause" is **a prior synthetic**, that is we know it is true without having to observe anything, but nonetheless it tells us something about the world that is not tautologically included in the definition of the word "event". (I'm unconvinced by these arguments and twentieth century science has revealed time and space not to be figments of the imagination but to be phenomena independent of us that can be studied scientifically and shown to behave independently of us by distorting at high speeds and large masses – but that's another talk)

Be that as it may, Schopenhauer accepted Kant's premises about the a priori foundation of our experience and the phenomenal and noumenal distinction. Kant ruled that we could know nothing about the noumenal world, where time, space and causation do not exist and that we can only know of the phenomenal world. That is the world where, Schopenhauer said, the ideas of sufficient reason apply. However, he disagreed with Kant's idea that we can know *nothing* about the noumenal world. His argument is clever. We are **subjects** surrounded by inanimate **objects**, each of which can be imagined, as having a real (or noumenal)

nature as well as the phenomenal nature it presents to us in time and space. Being inanimate these objects have no insight into their own noumenal nature that they would have if they were also subjects. We, however, with our minds do have access to our inner or noumenal nature. Because that is beyond time and space it must be unitary because time and space are how we chop up the world into separate entities. Without these a priori categories there can only be a unitary existence. And Schopenhauer says that if we look inside our minds what we see is ***the will***, or ***the will to life*** (or energy). And once we know that and we get an idea of what the will is like we can see the will manifesting itself in the phenomenal world we experience through our intuitions of space and time and categories of understanding such as causation. This is all a rather shaky chain of argument. Does the noumenal really exist, for example, and why can we somehow access it through our minds, which are locked into space, time and causation. But it is worth putting our doubts about Schopenhauer's methodology and resulting metaphysics to one side in order to get on to the substance of Schopenhauer's view of the realities of our lives.

## **The Will**

Schopenhauer's description of the will is essentially a study in psychology based on introspection and reinforced by observation of the world. The will is an undifferentiated, unified entity of which we are mere objectifications in the phenomenal world. In that world we appear as separate individuals, individuated by time and space. The will's nature is as a blind, constant seeking to extinguish the pain of unsatisfied desires. All desires for Schopenhauer are a form of pain, otherwise we would not feel the need to satisfy them. We are objectifications of the will so our teeth are objectifications of hunger and our genitals are the objectification of sexual desires. The will may also be called *the will to live* in the sense that not only does it constantly seek to satisfy its desires but it also seeks to create life through sexual activity. When a desire is satisfied there may be a brief period of satisfaction but soon boredom will set in and a new desire, with its attendant pain, will emerge. In different ways the will also manifests itself in the animal world and perhaps most oddly in the inanimate world. So gravity is an aspect of the will, as is the apparent effort of physical objects like a stone column to counteract the will in the form of gravity by keeping a temple's roof from falling down. The will is the basis of everything in the universe. Perhaps we should say it is the universe, and we mere tiny representations of it.

What are we to make of this? It might be termed speculative metaphysics – the author is convinced that he has used logic ineluctably to arrive at a true understanding of the nature of the universe. I've already said I think the logic is incorrect. So should we just take up all the writings of Schopenhauer and throw them on the fire. I don't think so, but we must take what he says with a bucket-full of salt. When I read what he says about the will I preface it with this phrase: "sometimes it almost seems as if it were the case that ....." There is an extraordinary timelapse film in one of David Attenbrough's programmes of a bramble. It slithers about the woodland floor searching for anything to clutch on to so it can pull itself up towards the light, choking weaker vegetation as it goes, constantly sending out new shoots to do the same. When I look at that *it almost seems as if* it is being driven by an unseen blind force that is constantly wanting to satisfy itself – in other words Schopenhauer's will. Though he meant it literally we can use it as a metaphor to reveal something about the world.

The will is a way of looking at human behaviour, whether or not we accept Schopenhauer's metaphysics. In the world of photography there is a well-known phenomenon called GAS – Gear Acquisition Syndrome. It's what capitalism feeds off. You have a perfectly good camera, but the grip isn't quite right and the sensor could be bigger. You scour the second-hand sites and nothing is quite right until you make the plunge and get something expensive and superior to what you have. It comes in the post and even as you pick it up you start thinking how much better a camera there might be out there somewhere, somehow. It is as if the will is feeding off your desire for a perfect camera. It is perhaps the basis of private enterprise in economics. When we're happy nothing has really been added – we just briefly do not feel the pain of desire.

More seriously (perhaps) this unseen but all-pervading force within us is an idea taken up by Freud, though he claimed not to have been influenced by Schopenhauer, only reading him once his ideas had been fully formed. For Freud the id is constantly seeking pleasure, a little like Schopenhauer's will. It has to recognise reality with the help of the ego and develop a conscience with the superego. We might regard this as a refinement of Schopenhauer's basic insight.

Is Schopenhauer's will an accurate description of our basic psychology?

---

## Ethics

Schopenhauer built up an ethical system from his idea of the will, but I think it stands independently of any such foundation. It appears in the Will and Representation but for me it finds its finest expression in two essays he submitted to two international competitions. One to the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences on the Freedom of the Human Will in 1839, which won. The other, to the Royal Danish Society of Sciences the following year on the Foundation of Morals. Although the only entry this did not win as the society felt the question had not been addressed but also because it contained a gratuitous insult of Hegel. ("Mr. Hegel, however, a pseudo-philosopher, who cripples all mental powers, suffocates all real thinking, and substitutes by means of the most outrageous use of language the hollowest, the most devoid of sense, the most thoughtless, and, as is attested by his followers, the most senseless and nauseating twaddle."

## Determinism

The first essay addresses the question of whether we have free will, this being generally thought of as a prerequisite for any morality. If I could not have done otherwise how can I be responsible for my actions. And how can I *feel* I am responsible for them? Schopenhauer, as does Kant, says we do not have free will as phenomenal beings because of the principle of sufficient reason and the iron grip of causation. All our actions are the result of our motives and our environment. While Kant thought that our rational minds could be free to adopt a moral law (the categorical imperative) from the noumenal world, Schopenhauer differed. At first he hovers a bit uncertainly when it comes to whether the noumenal self (which I take to be our self-consciousness) might be free. He says however that we cannot possibly know by introspection if I could have done otherwise than I did. He goes on to make a nice distinction: even if we are free to act on our desires, we cannot choose those desires themselves. These are a product of our never-changing character as manifestations of the will. We are not responsible for our characters but actions, which are determined by our character, are evidence of that determined character. As such we feel as if we are responsible and although we could not have done otherwise we know that the actions originate from us because of what we are. He refers to our phenomenal character as **empirical** and our basic character, which is somehow derived from the will, as our **intelligible** character. The Will gives us this character when we are created and

manifested into the phenomenal world. We cannot change it and we have to observe ourself to discover the nature of our intelligible character – are we good or bad? It is this unchanging character that we are attempting to judge in ethics. His view is summed up in the neat aphorism from the essay on the freedom of the will: **"Man can do what he wills but he cannot will what he wills."**

So the intelligible character is for each person a timeless act of the will that creates them. It's not a choice and it determines the character of the person in the phenomenal world. It seems to be a case of having one's cake and eating it. Would anyone really have come to this conclusion other than by trying to offer some sort of explanation of why we feel responsibility for our actions in a deterministic universe? This view differs from Kant who said that our noumenal self is free to act morally at all times.

Although we may not be free in our actions some of these can be judged good and some bad. According to Schopenhauer, true morality arises from a **fundamental sense of compassion**, which he saw as a spontaneous and non-egoistic response to the suffering of others. He devotes much of his extended essay on the foundations of ethics to an attack on Kant's idea that there is a moral rule we should work out and follow. This is variously described as treating others as you would want to be treated, acting only in accordance with a rule that could be universalised (that is always applied) and finally always acting to treat others as ends in their own right, not as ends to your means. This is the **categorical imperative** which is, Kant claimed, discovered through rationality.

Schopenhauer points out various problems with these formulations, but his basic attack is to say, first that Kant is smuggling in an essentially religious set of commands and secondly that this is simply not how morality works. Morality for Schopenhauer springs instinctively from compassion and a recognition of the common character we all share as manifestations of the will. We are all doomed to suffer. For Schopenhauer, Kant's approach is secretly egoistic since Schopenhauer believes the only real motivation for following a duty is self-interest, either in the form of avoiding some sort of punishment (a hold over from religion) or hope of a reward. Instead, true morality, a disinterested morality, comes from an immediate, intuitive, and non-rational feeling of empathy that breaks down the distinction between oneself and another. This is an idea he may have developed from the Upanishads, which also claim there is a fundamental but hidden unity between all people – as does the Bhagavad Gītā. Perhaps also these disinterested acts of compassion help us by taking us out of ourselves and away from the ceaseless suffering of the will, if only temporarily.

Schopenhauer says that the actions we applaud and should follow are those where we **"Harm no one; rather, help everyone to the extent that you can."** This may sound a bit trite, but more clout is given to this maxim by Schopenhauer's contention that it reflects two cardinal virtues, Justice and Loving-Kindness

Justice is the negative aspect of the rule, not harming others. It's the foundation of social and legal morality. It requires us to respect the rights of others and refrain from egoistic actions that would cause them suffering. It is about avoiding wrongdoing. An example might be to obey laws that say we should not allow thugs to beat up people, even if we dislike those people.

Compassion or Loving-Kindness is the positive aspect— proactively helping others. It goes beyond mere justice and is motivated by a direct sense of compassion for another's suffering. Schopenhauer believed that loving-kindness, or altruism, arises from the metaphysical realization that the separateness of individuals is an illusion (maya), and that we are all manifestations of the same suffering Will. This recognition of a shared, underlying essence is what drives us to help others as if we were helping ourselves. Charity work or diving into a river to help someone in difficulty would be examples of this.

An example may help to see the distinction. Justice would be supporting a law that said we should not steal corn from a neighbour. If everyone obeys this then the neighbour is not harmed. However, loving kindness would require us to give corn to a starving neighbour, something that justice would not require. As an aside, Schopenhauer was outraged by both cruelty to animals, though he was a meat-eater, and by accounts of slavery as practised in the United States which he read.

Schopenhauer's is a naturalistic account of morality: that is one that takes account of our nature as human beings rather than relying on laws from some supernatural authority or from pure rationality. It was taken up by Nietzsche. Rules of morality can hinder or help us and there is no reason to accept those provided by religions or the state. Nietzsche, helpfully, dropped the negativity and the determinism of Schopenhauer's ethics, emphasizing that we all have a choice in how we live our lives. I think together that they make a great advance in the ideas of morality.

Is Schopenhauer's account of morality as recognizing our common humanity in compassion better than Kant's adoption of rules purely on the basis of rationality?

.....

## Aesthetics

I once had an interesting experience in an art museum in Bruges. There was a picture by Jacob van Oost - The calling of St Matthew painted in 1648. It shows Matthew, a Jewish tax collector for the Roman imperialists at dinner with his family and being summoned by Jesus to accompany him. Matthew is getting up from his stool clearly conflicted: should he stay with the comfort of his family or accompany this strange but compelling little (he does look little in the picture) man. Now as a colour blind atheist with very little knowledge of art history I found this picture strangely compelling and repeatedly went back to it to examine it in ever greater detail. I suppose I now think of it as a great work of art, though there are more celebrated depictions of the same scene.

More broadly we may ask one of the central questions of aesthetics, what makes a great work of art great.

Schopenhauer, of course, claimed he had the answer as to what makes a great work of art and that it related to his philosophical world view. He claimed great art can jolt us out of the misery of perpetual desire by making us *will-less*. We go beyond the individual, for example in my case, the image of someone in two minds, and see the very essence, the idea of being in two minds, indeed the Platonic form of this condition. This allows us to see the scene objectively and independently, not as an objectification of the desiring will. The idea or picture of something (say a painting of a house) cannot be useful to you in satisfying a desire so you contemplate it in a neutral way – a little like Heidegger's way of looking at objects as “**present at hand**” rather than as more functionally as “**ready to hand**”. For Schopenhauer we become the pure will-less subject of knowing – and this is intellectual. We see beauty unclouded by the desires of the will. Where what we look at would normally threaten us then we experience the **sublime**. In a sublime representation, say a picture of a powerful storm, the reality would threaten us. Perhaps in my example I am seeing the essence of a man in psychological crisis and this would be disturbing for him and for spectators if in the real world. The sublime however is more difficult to create and to appreciate since because of the perception of danger it is more of a struggle to get to the neutral contemplative state to see the beauty.

Is Schopenhauer shoe-horning his world view artificially into his account of beauty? Are there better accounts of why we find some things more beautiful than others?



*Another aspect to this is that recent research has identified physiological effects when we are presented to original pieces of great art in a gallery. This would seem to back up Schopenhauer's claim that great art has a beneficial influence on us, but not perhaps that it has anything to do with the will.*

## **How to live – will-less asceticism**

As well as Schopenhauer's system of what we might call academic philosophy, dealing with epistemology, metaphysics and axiology (ethics and aesthetics) he had advice on how to live life for your own good. It amounts to a sort of asceticism and owes something to Hinduism and Buddhism though he claimed to have come upon the latter after his system was clear in his head and was pleased to find the common ground.

Our lives are as objectifications or manifestations of the will, that blind ceaseless striving to satisfy our desires. We will die and presumably be reabsorbed by the will never to appear again. It is not a pleasant existence. We can never be satisfied. Now I think many would not agree with such a characterisation of our lives, but may perhaps recognise at least some truth in it some of the time. Schopenhauer's answer to how we can make the best of this bad situation, apart from occasional relief gained from artistic appreciation, is to cut ourselves off from the will as much as possible. In other words we should control our desires by not having them or at least restricting them to a minimum. This can sometimes be achieved through the making and contemplation of exceptional art, as we have seen, and also by trying disinterestedly and instinctively to help other people who are suffering. It also helps to withdraw yourself from the world and its temptations and to stifle our desires. This is very similar to the tradition in many cultures of the contemplative hermit.

Schopenhauer himself had a mixed success in these terms. He had sexual affairs, ate well and was not a recluse. However, he adopted a strict regime in later years, including set times for practising the flute, writing and a daily two hour walk.

Is asceticism a useful strategy and how far should we take it?

## **Some Biographical Details**

His father committed suicide. He inherited enough to live comfortably without having to work. He argued with and eventually broke off all relations with his mother. His academic career was cut short by ill-advisedly timing his lectures to coincide with those of Hegel, whom he despised as a fraud. His great work – The

World as Will and Representation received little notice when published as a young man, but became popular near the end of his life. He wrote on suicide, how to win arguments and a great range of subjects in later life and this eventually led a new generation back to his original tome. At one point following an argument with his landlady he pushed her down the stairs and had to pay her an annual sum for the rest of her life as a result of her suing him over her resulting injuries. He was pleased when she eventually died twenty years later and the burden was lifted. Though ahead of his time on issues like slavery and animal cruelty he had detailed, stereotypical and misogynistic views about women that he was not afraid of committing to paper. from On Women "Neither for music, nor poetry, nor the plastic arts do they possess any real feeling or receptivity: if they affect to do so, it is merely mimicry in service of their effort to please. This comes from the fact that they are incapable of taking a *purely objective interest* in anything whatever...." He also published a work entitled, in a very modern manner: "The Art of Being Right: The 38 Ways to Win an Argument".

## Conclusion

I think Schopenhauer is worth reading, especially his shorter works and especially his two essays on ethics. He is a clear writer. In these works it is by and large easy to see the point he is trying to communicate. I think his metaphysics is frankly shaky, both because it is based on Kant's shaky foundation but also because he uses shaky logic when he departs from that to posit the will largely based on his own introspection. Some may find the picture of the world he paints based as it is on the will unpalatable, but I see it as an interesting interpretation of our existence and take refuge in the idea that it sometimes seems as if what he describes is the case. When his thought is shorn of the need for its dubious metaphysical foundation, and particularly of his importation of Platonic forms, as it can be in his epistemology, in his ethics and in his aesthetics, I find him compelling. As an atheist he had no time for the supposed rules of ethics that were passed down from generation to generation, or of those based on Kant's rationalism, and this was clearly an influence on Nietzsche. I see this as a clear advance in meta-ethics. His principle of compassion to arrive at the motto "**Harm no one; rather, help everyone to the extent that you can.**" I find obvious and compelling, though of course it is just the beginning of an analysis that needs to be undertaken whenever we seek to apply it in the real world. It led him to outspoken criticism of slavery and of cruelty to animals. His central view of the self as a mere manifestation of the will I find unattractive and unlikely, though it may help to highlight certain aspects of our existence. If it is true then we are trapped creatures who can only occasionally ameliorate our inevitable misery.

Finally we should not that Schopenhauer has been influential. This is explicitly so in the case of Nietzsche and Thomas Hardy (see for example his *The Darkling Thrush*) and many have thought also Freud though Freud himself has denied this..

.....

## Counsels and Maxims

1851

General rules – Aristotle: happiness is an absence of pain. Don't struggle for happiness, rather aim to survive (and later he says the prudent man will insure not just against what has happened but what might or could conceivably happen in the future. The Will means that life is to be survived) Threats to fend off.

Self

Others

the ages of life - children happier cos less will.  
Know and experience - horse stands for all horses – fixed – then categories and the will  
Obj appearance – beautiful - but then the subject – noumenal experience of will.

Live for insight rather than hope  
Stoical – have less essentials and you'll be less vulnerable.

Don't regard your days as a large pile, a few of which may be wasted, but each as a life in itself – a bit like Nietzsche's eternal recurrence,

## Essays and Aphorisms

*On the indestructibility of our essential being by Death*

Our individual consciousness and personality are destroyed on death: these are our phenomena. But our noumenal selves, our unconscious essence, seems to be taken back into the will to be partly re-cycled into a new individual phenomenal self. We do not have metempsychosis – where the self is reborn in another body, but

palingenesis – where our noumenal self is reabsorbed as a seed for the production of a new and different self. He gives a little dialogue where one participant thinks this is wonderful and the other is dissatisfied by the apparent destruction of the individual self. There is no psychological continuity. [Why on earth would anyone believe any of this?]

## Influence on Hardy

Yes, it's well-established that **Thomas Hardy read and was influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer**.

While Hardy's philosophical outlook (or *Weltanschauung*) was already tending toward pessimism and determinism in his earlier works, his engagement with Schopenhauer's philosophy significantly shaped his later novels and poetry.

---

## Evidence of Reading and Influence

- **Hardy's Notes:** Scholars have traced Hardy's reading in Schopenhauer through his personal notes, indicating he read works like **Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*** in the 1880s, particularly around 1883 while writing *The Woodlanders* and continuing while composing ***Tess of the D'Urbervilles*** and ***The Dynasts***.
- **Hardy's Own Admission:** Hardy himself acknowledged the affinity, reportedly telling the American scholar Helen Garwood (whose 1911 dissertation was titled *Thomas Hardy: An Illustration of the Philosophy of Schopenhauer*) that his philosophy "was a development from Schopenhauer through later philosophers."
- **Scholarly Consensus:** The intellectual connection is widely recognized in literary criticism, with many studies detailing the specific parallels in his work.

---

## Key Schopenhauerian Concepts in Hardy's Work

The influence of Schopenhauer's thought is most apparent in the concepts of the **Immanent Will** and **Determinism** that dominate Hardy's later writing:

- **The Immanent Will:** Hardy's novels often depict a blind, irrational, and impersonal force that governs the universe and human fate, a concept closely aligned with Schopenhauer's "**Will to Live**" (*Wille zum Leben*). This non-rational, unconscious force is seen as the ultimate reality, with human consciousness and intention often being secondary and ineffectual. This is powerfully represented in his epic poem *The Dynasts* through the "Overworld" scenes.
- **Determinism and Tragic Fate:** In Hardy's work, characters like Tess and Jude often appear as helpless victims, driven by blind impulses and circumstance, rather than making conscious, free choices. This deterministic view reflects Schopenhauer's idea that individuals are manifestations of the Universal Will and lack true freedom in the traditional sense, with "Determinism stands firm."

- **Pessimism:** The pervasive sense of tragedy, suffering, and the belief that the world is inherently flawed and indifferent to human well-being in Hardy's later fiction echoes the fundamental **philosophical pessimism** of Schopenhauer.

# The Darkling Thrush

BY [THOMAS HARDY](#)

I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-grey,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.  
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky  
Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted nigh  
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be  
The Century's corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament.  
The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry,  
And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited;  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.