

Better Consciousness

Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Value

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Contents

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	vii
PREFACE	ix
1 SCHOPENHAUER'S PHILOSOPHY OF VALUE <i>Christopher Janaway</i>	1
2 BACK TO TRUTH: KNOWLEDGE AND PLEASURE IN THE AESTHETICS OF SCHOPENHAUER <i>Paul Guyer</i>	11
3 AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN SCHOPENHAUER'S METAPHYSICS OF WILL <i>Alex Neill</i>	26
4 SCHOPENHAUER ON AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING AND THE VALUES OF ART <i>Bart Vandenabeele</i>	41
5 POETIC INTUITION AND THE BOUNDS OF SENSE: METAPHOR AND METONYMY IN SCHOPENHAUER'S PHILOSOPHY <i>Sandra Shapshay</i>	58
6 LIFE IS BUT A MIRROR: ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ETHICS, METAPHYSICS AND CHARACTER IN SCHOPENHAUER <i>Matthias Kofler</i>	77
7 KNOWLEDGE AND SELFLESSNESS: SCHOPENHAUER AND THE PARADOX OF REFLECTION <i>Bernard Reginster</i>	98
8 NATURAL BEAUTY AND OPTIMISM IN SCHOPENHAUER'S AESTHETICS <i>Robert Wicks</i>	120
9 COMPASSION AND SOLIDARITY WITH SUFFERERS: THE METAPHYSICS OF <i>MITLEID</i> <i>David E. Cartwright</i>	138
10 SCHOPENHAUER, NIETZSCHE, DEATH AND SALVATION <i>Julian Young</i>	157
11 SCHOPENHAUER'S POLITICS: ETHICS, JURISPRUDENCE AND THE STATE <i>Neil Jordan</i>	171
INDEX	189

Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Value

Christopher Janaway

Friedrich Nietzsche once commented that Schopenhauer showed 'great knowledgeability about the human and all-too-human' and had a 'native sense of reality', all of which was 'not a little dimmed by the motley leopard-skin of his metaphysics (which one must first remove from him if one is to discover the real moralist genius beneath it).'¹ Schopenhauer apparently thought of himself first and foremost as a system-building metaphysician, but his overall system has been found wanting in coherence by many commentators, and it has had few serious philosophical adherents. However, as Nietzsche implies, such an assessment may obscure the breadth, profundity, and originality of Schopenhauer's insights in ethics and aesthetics, which were widely influential in the mid to late 19th century, but whose influence since then has largely vanished. The aim of the chapters in this volume is to explore Schopenhauer's conceptions of value from a variety of philosophical perspectives, governed by the question whether they stand up better to scrutiny and deserve more prominence than contemporary ethics and aesthetics have tended to give them.

At the heart of Schopenhauer's philosophy is a vision of human beings as essentially driven by will. To exist as a living being is to strive after ends, fundamentally those of staying alive and producing new life, secondarily the many diverse means towards those ends, and then, in the case of human beings, a vast array of other objects of desire or need corresponding to our widening cognitive and cultural repertoire. It is built into all such existence that we suffer. We have to pursue ends because we live, and not all ends can be satisfied. Striving towards some end is itself a species of suffering because it arises from a feeling that something is lacking; but attaining an end does not protect us from further feelings of want. What we achieve through the action of our will does not stop us from willing and therefore suffering some more. Even a person who regularly gets exactly what he or she wants is not safe from suffering: there lurks the spectre of boredom, in which we painfully feel the absence of any lack that motivates us to act. We have not chosen to live or to have the nature essential to all living things, that of endlessly willing and endlessly being exposed to suffering. Nor does our suffering have any ultimate redeeming point. Our existence and the existence of the world that is so ready to frustrate our willing are not designed to achieve any good, nor are we capable of making any progress towards perfection. In this fundamental part of Schopenhauer's philosophy of value, which has to do with the will as essence of the self and of the world, we

ultimately find nothing but an absence of value. Anything is good only if it satisfies the will of some being, but there can be no ultimate satisfaction of the will as such, and so there is no absolute good. And if, instead of pursuing the round of effort, aspiration and failure to which life condemns us, we stand back and ask after the value of the whole show, we should by rights reach the extreme verdict that 'nothing else can be stated as the aim of our existence except the knowledge that it would be better for us not to exist' (*The World as Will and Representation* (hereafter *WWR*) II: 605).

Against the background of this merciless picture of human life Schopenhauer nevertheless finds rare and precious exceptions: states to which a higher value pertains. Early in his development as a philosopher, while working especially under the influence of his first readings of Plato, Kant and the *Upanishads*, Schopenhauer had coined the term 'better consciousness' to describe a state that transcends ordinary experience, allowing human beings to gain access to something timeless and universal, to leave behind their everyday concerns for the individual human being and all its attendant achievements and failings, to find peace from all striving, and enjoy face-to-face cognition of the truest and most permanent aspect of reality.² Though he abandoned the term 'better consciousness' in his published works, the core of this vision remained with him throughout. Hence we find in his greatest work *The World as Will and Representation* a theory of aesthetic experience in which a consciousness temporarily devoid of all willing brings cognition of timeless Platonic Ideas, mirrored clearly by the mind in a rare state of rest and tranquillity. We find the claim that a more lasting release, indeed a 'salvation' from life, can be attained in even rarer cases when the will that makes up the essence of a human individual turns and negates itself, so that the subject loses all attachment to this particular human body and life and treats individuality itself as a kind of illusion, identifying him- or herself with the timelessly existing whole. We find also an ethical position which lauds as morally good only those relatively few actions in which the individual's own ends are not pursued, but a felt identity with others leads one to desire their well-being and feel their pain in a manner that ordinary consciousness cannot account for: the morally good person intuitively glimpses the higher truth that all is one and that the goods and ills of his or her own individuated existence are of no ultimate consequence.

All the positive value that really counts in Schopenhauer's outlook, therefore, arises when the will ceases from its normal role of pursuing the ends inherent in individual life. Either the will is activated in an unusual way so as not to impinge on or compete with the ends of other individuals, resulting in morally good action out of compassion, or the will disappears from consciousness for a brief spell while the mind enjoys a holiday contemplating something in which it is aesthetically engrossed, or the will stages a final rebellion against its own essential function and cancels out its own ability to act towards ends at all. We might say that for Schopenhauer value is ultimately snatched from the jaws of nihilism, yet only through our undergoing kinds of self-loss— affective, motivational and metaphysical—that are potentially as radical and unnerving as the condition from which they are supposed to save us.

Such are the doctrines that form the main body of Schopenhauer's philosophy of value. But there is little hint of them as one begins to read *The World as Will and Representation*—this being the main reason for his advice to read the book twice, since 'the beginning presupposes the end almost as much as the end the beginning' (WWR I: xiii). Schopenhauer begins his book as if it were a continuation of Kant's philosophy. He espouses transcendental idealism: empirical objects, those that we experience as outside of us in space and time, causally interacting in lawlike ways, constitute a world of *appearance*. We do not experience them *in themselves*, rather they are a species of the subject's representations (*Vorstellungen*). The mind necessarily shapes the world as representation according to the subjective forms of space, time, and the connection of cause and effect. The contents of the world as they present themselves to our experience are objects *for a subject*, and do not exist independently of the way they thus appear. The mind receives sensations and actively imposes on them the forms that constitute an objective world. Schopenhauer retains Kant's terminology of *Anschauung* and *Begriff*, intuition and concept, though he adapts it substantially for his own purposes. Intuition is a matter of immediate representation, a simple perceptual awareness of objects in space and time that humans share with other animals. The understanding or intellect actively processes the data from the senses by applying the cause-effect relation to them, resulting in experience of an object rather than a mere sensation. Causality's role in constituting objective experience is thus not at all, as it was for Kant, a matter of applying concepts. Concepts, by contrast, are abstract representations that are unique to human beings, connected with the capacity for language, and enabling us to engage in rational thought. Throughout his philosophy Schopenhauer makes much of this distinction between the intuitive and the abstract, between intellect, which humans share with other animals, and reason (*Vernunft*), the exclusively human capacity for abstraction. He chides philosophers, especially Kantians and German Idealists, for getting lost in abstractions that lure them away from concrete human experience. Especially relevant to his philosophy of value is his point that rationality, and the whole ability we have for conceptual representation, gives us no greater claim to 'dignity' or 'moral worth' than that possessed by any other sentient species. It is also important that for him abstract principles do not constitute the foundation of either ethics or aesthetics: 'Virtue is as little taught as is genius; indeed, the concept is just as unfruitful for it as it is for art, and in the case of both can be used only as an instrument. We should therefore be just as foolish to expect that our moral systems and ethics would create virtuous, noble, and holy men, as that our aesthetics would produce poets, painters, and musicians' (WWR I: 271).

If the First Book of *The World as Will and Representation* presents a modified version of Kantian epistemology, from the Second Book onwards we find Schopenhauer on a path that diverges greatly from Kant's. For Schopenhauer the idealist account of the world as representation leaves the underlying true nature of the world as a 'riddle', and we are still driven to discover what this world is *in itself*. Schopenhauer proposes that the same world we have recognized as

representation for the subject is, in itself, a world as will (*Wille*). The world that appears to us as representation is in its essence, in its very being, will; and it is in relation to will that we shall discover the ethical significance of the world and of our existence within it. A unique inner consciousness of our own will when we act gives us the key to understanding our essence: it is that we are active and strive towards ends. But Schopenhauer very quickly widens the scope of the term 'will', to embrace not only conscious acts of will, but all emotions and affects, and non-conscious or 'blind' processes that can be described as end-directed. For example, he views the body and its many functions, including the brain and nervous system, as manifestations of an underlying will that blindly uses the body as an instrument towards its ends. The self-conscious subject of cognition that figured in Schopenhauer's account of the world as representation is thus ultimately to be explained in metaphysical terms as the manifestation of an underlying striving force, which Schopenhauer often refers to as the 'will to life' (*Wille zum Leben*). Schopenhauer then extends the scope of 'will' even further, describing the whole of nature as consisting in essence of a blind striving that manifests itself in multiple instances within our experience. Willing continues perpetually and without final purpose: it is built into us and into the fabric of the world. Throughout nature one being dominates and destroys another, the will tearing itself apart, says Schopenhauer, because it is a hungry will and there is nothing for it to feed on but itself.

Schopenhauer's distinction between the two aspects of the world, representation and will, maps on to a contrast between individuation and non-individuation. The world as it manifests itself to us in ordinary experience consists of a multiplicity of distinct things. This experience is necessarily in space and time, which together make up the principle of individuation (*principium individuationis*). But what exists *in itself* (the world as will) must be without space and time, hence without individuation. So the world as thing in itself is not divided up into distinct individual entities, and our own individuality is not metaphysically fundamental. The importance of this distinction for Schopenhauer's philosophy of value can scarcely be over-estimated. His accounts of aesthetic experience, morality, and the value of life all hinge around the possibility of ceasing to separate oneself out from the whole, forgetting or detaching oneself from one's existence as an individual human being and viewing things from a higher or more universal standpoint. This is the legacy of his youthful idea of the better consciousness. Although in a sense one never escapes the will, because it is the essence of everything, there are nonetheless possible states in which our consciousness becomes alienated from the will as it manifests itself in this particular living individual. Such forms of alienation are to be welcomed, for Schopenhauer, because they enhance our capacity to understand reality, free us from the misery of striving and suffering, and blunt the capacity for harm, for encroaching on the well-being of others, that dwells in each individual through whom the will flows unhindered.

In the Third Book of *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer presents his account of aesthetic experience. Here the notion of a transformed

consciousness that removes us from the everyday concerns of the will is at its clearest, as is the Platonic ancestry of Schopenhauer's thought. In aesthetic experience we perceive timeless Ideas, a series of grades at which the will manifests itself throughout nature. To avoid confusion with Kantian or Hegelian uses of 'Idea' Schopenhauer typically refers to his conception as '(Platonic) Ideas'. They are universals that are instantiated in nature, and in aesthetic experience we gain a privileged, objective cognition of them, while perceptually experiencing some particular object, be it an art work or a thing in nature. We see the universal in the particular object of intuitive perception rather than attaining knowledge of it through concepts or abstract reasoning. So this kind of experience has a higher cognitive value than that of ordinary everyday consciousness, which is taken up with particular objects and their spatial, temporal and causal inter-connections. Indeed, for Schopenhauer, aesthetic cognition reveals to us timeless realities common to all objects, and in that sense is more objective even than that of science, which only makes inferences about the universal forces of nature, and does not intuit them directly. Aesthetic experience has another great value for Schopenhauer in that while it lasts, our will is in abeyance. We do not seek to understand the object we perceive in relation to what it can do for us, whether we desire or need it, what associations it has with other objects or with our emotions: 'we no longer consider the where, the when, the why, and the whither of things, but simply and solely the *what*' (WWR I: 178). Thus we experience the exceptional state of a will-less consciousness. Nothing troubles us, because no felt lack or need moves us at all. We are free of the will for some blissful moments, attaining a peace without which, Schopenhauer tells us, true well-being would be impossible.

In the history of the philosophy of art, art has been assigned widely differing values. Schopenhauer's account is interesting partly because it appears, at least at first sight, to unite two different conceptions of the value of art, one cognitive, the other to do with a disinterested aesthetic attitude. Often with an 'aesthetic attitude' type of theory art is said to attain its value by virtue of its affording an experience of a kind that can in principle be had in response to any kind of object. It looks as if Schopenhauer has some such view in mind when he talks of experiencing things in nature, such as landscapes, trees and rocks, as examples of the pure, will-less consciousness which art is also capable of giving us. At the same time Schopenhauer wants a superior form of cognition or knowledge, that of universal Ideas, to be characteristic of all aesthetic experience. He seems confident that whenever we enter the aesthetic state of will-less, timeless consciousness we shall encounter universal Ideas, and that whenever we are in contact with universal Ideas we shall be in a state of will-less consciousness. However, when he comes to reflect on the many specific art forms, with which he shows considerable familiarity, he admits that in some cases their value has more to do with will-less tranquillity and less to do with cognition of any very important universals, and at the other end of the spectrum more to do with the latter and less with tranquillity. A challenging case at this end of the spectrum is tragedy, whose portrayal of a frightening universal aspect of humanity has its value in making us shudder before the truth of what is, or could well be, our own

life. It is at least not obvious how the value of tragedy will also be found in its offering the bliss of will-less, painless contemplation.

The artistic genius for Schopenhauer is someone who commands a technique for articulating his experiential grasp of the universal in such a way as to transmit it to the rest of humanity, and has the ability to remain in the state of will-less objectivity for an abnormal length of time, to experience the world continuously with a unique intensity of perception. Yet even the artist must return to the life of willing and is not permanently inured to it. There awaits a further transition to a state of resignation in which the will is quietened altogether:

That pure, true, and profound knowledge of the inner nature of the world . . . does not deliver him from life for ever, but only for a few moments. For him it is not the way out of life, but only an occasional consolation in it, until his power, enhanced by this contemplation, finally becomes tired of the spectacle, and seizes the serious side of things. The St. Cecilia of Raphael can be regarded as the symbol of this transition. (*WWR* I: 267)

The Fourth Book of *The World as Will and Representation* accordingly delivers Schopenhauer's account of this 'serious side of things'. It concerns ethics, both in the 'narrower' sense of moral goodness and badness, right and wrong, justice, obligation, freedom and so on, and in the wider sense of considering what (if anything) is of value in human life as such. Schopenhauer also dealt with the 'narrower' issues of ethics in two independent pieces of writing entitled 'Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will' and 'On the Basis of Morality', which he published together under the title *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*. In these essays, submitted anonymously to two competitions, Schopenhauer addresses the issues of free will and the grounding of morality directly, rather than embedding them first in his own metaphysics of representation and will. Much of their content is also present in *The World as Will and Representation*, but it is often presented more clearly and more thoroughly in the essays.

Schopenhauer aims to describe what kinds of action and person qualify as morally good. He thinks that there is decisive evidence for this in ordinary experience: we feel a certain inner satisfaction when we have acted in certain ways, and the unpleasant sting of conscience when we have acted in the opposite way. Certain of our actions towards others tend to be especially applauded by third parties, and there seems to be a great deal of consensus about which persons and actions are the very worst, the furthest away from what is morally good. The single criterion of moral goodness for Schopenhauer is that one's action spring from compassion. Compassion (German *Mitleid*) is an irreducible incentive present in the character of human beings: it disposes their individual will towards the well-being of others: towards helping them and preserving them from harm. Two kinds of virtuous action arise from this fundamental incentive, those of justice and human loving kindness (*Menschenliebe*). They correspond to different levels of intervention by the incentive of compassion, which either restrains the individual from harming another or brings it about that they

positively seek the other's benefit. The justice that is a moral virtue for Schopenhauer is quite distinct from the kind of justice which consists in acting out of respect for law, and which holds sway in a stable State or other human community. There, he maintains, it is fear of punishment and hope of reward that provide the motivation to be just—but such hopes and fears show that the incentive at work is not compassion, but egoism. He regards the State as an institution that arises from collective egoism, and not, strictly speaking, as a matter of morality.

Schopenhauer admits that the existence of compassion is somewhat mysterious. We are in our essence, and not by choice, beings that will their own well-being, which means, in ethical terms, that we are all egoistic. Even animals are egoistic, for Schopenhauer, meaning that they are constantly out to preserve and enhance themselves (though they cannot be called 'self-interested' because they lack the conscious conceptual mechanisms for forming interests as such). Compassion therefore seems to go against our nature as individuals, at least given the way Schopenhauer has set things up. Against the sceptical line that all would-be compassionate actions are ultimately egoistic, Schopenhauer appeals to the reader's intuitions about particular examples: a case of self-sacrifice in battle or an incident in which a poor person returns valuable property when they could have escaped undetected. All that Schopenhauer needs from us here is the concession that, despite the egoistic nature of human beings, it sometimes occurs that someone's action aims solely at the well-being of another. Without that concession, he says, ethics would become an empty subject.

However, action from compassion is a rare and fragile thing because it must compete with egoism, the incentive that is vastly more common, and also with a pure incentive towards harming others, namely malice. Each human character contains an element of each incentive, Schopenhauer claims, though the proportions are very different. Schopenhauer's views on character play a central role in his ethics. He says, on a certain amount of anecdotal evidence, that character is unique in each individual human being, that it is inborn and unchangeable. This has the corollary that one cannot change someone's basic moral character, the direction in which their individual will tends to carry them. What one can change is their knowledge, their understanding of the world and of the consequences of their actions. An egoist can be trained to harm fewer people in pursuit of his own interests, but only by supplying him with a richer and more considered set of interests to pursue. Schopenhauer sometimes refers to this figuratively as reforming the head but not the heart of the human being. The heart is his will, as opposed to the less essential and mutable intellect through which his cognition of the world is channelled.

Schopenhauer's notion of character also features in his rejection of freedom to act. Given my inborn, unalterable character, and given the experience I have at any one time, my resulting action is necessary: I could not have acted otherwise. Schopenhauer frequently quotes the scholastic formula *operari sequitur esse*: acting follows from being. It is not in my power to change what I am, and what I do follows necessarily from what I am, given the occurrence of particular experiences, which Schopenhauer calls motives. A motive is a cognition that

moves someone to action. Self-consciousness gives us the impression of being free when we act, but Schopenhauer unmasks this as an illusion. We can often know that there are no obstacles to our doing something if we will it; but we are in the dark about what it is and is not possible for us to will. In order to know that, we would have to step outside of self-consciousness and understand what brought about our willing. But a motive, which sets our will in motion on a particular occasion, is a cause like any other in nature, and the individual character is on a par with the fixed dispositions to behave in certain ways that we find throughout the empirical world. So human action is subject to the rule that every event must be necessitated by its cause.

Why then do we have feelings of responsibility and guilt, and moreover ones that are not dissipated even by the conviction that our actions are determined? Schopenhauer's answer uses two distinctions: that between our actions and our self (or our doing and our being) and that between the empirical realm and the transcendental. He makes use of Kant's distinction between the empirical and intelligible character. The latter is what we can think of ourselves as being in ourselves, beyond what we are in the realm of appearance. There is no space, time or causality beyond that realm, so our intelligible character is uninfluenced by nature and can be regarded as freely initiating courses of events without being part of them. There is no absolute necessity of my actions occurring when and where they do. If someone else had been here in my stead, there might have been a different course of events; but given that *I* am present, the resulting actions are necessary. So if a morally bad action occurs, the fault lies in my *being* myself. Hence there must be a transcendental kind of responsibility and a transcendental kind of freedom: what I feel responsible for and guilty about is my character as it is in itself, which Schopenhauer rather remarkably describes as a free 'act of will outside time' (WWR I: 289). Schopenhauer runs into a metaphysical tangle here, for if the thing in itself is beyond individuation, how can there be an 'in-itself' that pertains uniquely to me? And how can there be any 'acting' outside of time, space and causality? A deeper thought lurks behind this discussion, however: that the will (i.e. the world as it is in itself) has freely manifested itself as me, and thereby burdened me with being an individual through whom will flows, with all the potential it has for harmful expression against other individual wills that appear as distinct from it. On this reading, any human being rightly feels guilt about his or her very *being* as an individual. For all the genuine atheism of his metaphysical system, Schopenhauer adopts the Christian notion of 'the deep guilt of the human race by reason of its very existence, and of the heart's intense longing for salvation therefrom' (WWR II: 625).

Schopenhauer's account of compassion as the source of all moral goodness also gains its ultimate underpinning from his metaphysics. If compassion is a feeling of someone else's pain that motivates me to alleviate it in as immediate a manner as my own suffering would, I must be experiencing less of a distinction between myself and the other than an agent who acts according to the normal egoistic incentive. I identify with the other person, as we commonly say. But Schopenhauer grounds this attitude of identification towards others in a

metaphysical identity. Morally good and morally bad human beings relate differently towards the very fact of individuality. The bad character regards the basic metaphysical divide as lying between 'I' and everything else which 'not-I'. The good character regards all others as 'I once more'. And it is the latter who has the superior insight into reality. However unreflective and inchoate their insight may be, compassionate human beings sense the allegedly deeper truth that the separateness of individuals is an illusion.

Earlier we saw Schopenhauer adopt the religious notion of salvation. Of this he says that it can be attained only by 'the denial of one's own self, hence by a complete reform of man's nature' (WWR II: 625). Schopenhauer also describes this as the will to life within me turning against itself, denying or negating itself. Towards the end of *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer says that a 'knowledge of the whole', and 'comprehension of its inner nature . . . [as] a vain striving, an inward conflict, and a continual suffering' (WWR I: 379) can quieten or sedate the will within an individual. Something very radical is to be imagined here, which he describes as 'the abolition of the character' (WWR I: 403), a process in which 'the whole being is fundamentally changed and reversed', and 'a new person takes the place of the old'. He seems to have in mind that the will to life as it is manifest in me freely abolishes itself. The will to life is 'the real self', what I really am, like it or not, will it or not. It gives rise to my dispositions to respond to motives, which dispositions are again not subject to my own agency, or to what we normally call my own will. I cannot in any ordinary sense *will* what it is I will, or what my character is, or how it is that I am disposed to respond to motives, or how I am moved or affected by the world of appearance as it strikes me. The effect of attaining 'knowledge of the whole' is that the will to life as manifest in me is switched off; my essence changes; my character disappears; my natural dispositions to respond to motives are no more. My own real nature kills itself off in recoil at the content of that 'knowledge of the whole'. So it is not so much that I try to stop being a being that tries for things. Rather the responding and trying part of me, which is my very essence, the will to life in me, gets disabled by knowledge. Because of such a dramatic shift in my real nature, at the level of conscious willing I become resigned before all suffering and desire, and attain a mystical state in which I do not distinguish myself as an individual from the whole. For Schopenhauer only a change of this nature can redeem our existence for us, and give it any ultimate point.

Nietzsche frequently returned to the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Schopenhauer, whom he still called his 'great teacher' even when opposing all his central doctrines.³ In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche complains that some of his contemporaries are enchanted not by Schopenhauer's virtues ('his sense for hard facts, his good will to clarity and reason, . . . the strength of his intellectual conscience, . . . his cleanliness in matters of the church and of the Christian God'), but rather by

Schopenhauer's mystical embarrassments and evasions in those places where the factual thinker let himself be seduced and corrupted by the

vain urge to be the unridder of the world; the indemonstrable doctrine of *One Will* ('all causes are merely occasional causes of the appearance of the will at this time and this place'; 'the will to life is present wholly and undividedly in every being . . .'), the *denial of the individual* ('all lions are at bottom one lion'; 'the plurality of individuals is an illusion' . . .); his ecstatic reveries on *genius* ('in aesthetic intuition the individual is no longer individual but pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge'; 'the subject, in being wholly taken up in the object it intuits, has become the object itself'); the nonsense about *compassion* and how, as the source of all morality, it enables one to make the break through the *principium individuationis*. . . . (*The Gay Science*, sect. 99)

If we react to Schopenhauer's metaphysics in a similar way, we have various choices of approach. We might attempt to preserve Schopenhauerian accounts of aesthetic value, morality, moral psychology or the meaning of existence that can be made intelligible without the aid of the metaphysics. Another approach is to treat elements of the metaphysics as a kind of figurative expression for would-be fundamental truths about the values in life. Another is to start with the attitude that reading Schopenhauer is a source of philosophical understanding and at the very least of new philosophical questions—perhaps with answers quite other than his own—and follow him as far into his metaphysics as is necessary to comprehend and address those issues, keeping a sceptical eye open for outright embarrassments and evasions. Contributors to this volume are united in rejecting the further option of simply pulling apart Schopenhauer's metaphysical system and moving on. As Nietzsche saw, too much would be lost by that course of action: too much that is challenging and worrying, and too much penetrating insight into the human condition.⁵

NOTES

¹ *Human, All too Human*, II/1, sect. 33. For more on Schopenhauer's influence on Nietzsche, see Janaway 1998 and Janaway 2007.

² The term 'better consciousness' occurs persistently in the notebooks of 1812–1814. See Schopenhauer 1988: vol. i, 1, 23–4, 43, 44, 48–52, 53–5, 57, 72, 73–4, 83, 86, 98, 113–14, 120, 132, 162, 164, 165, 191.

³ See *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Preface, sect. 5.

⁴ I thank Alex Neill for helpful comments on this chapter.

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Back to Truth: Knowledge and Pleasure in the Aesthetics of Schopenhauer

Paul Guyer

1. Introduction

Kant's philosophy of fine art, the culminating level of his thought in the 'Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment', constituted a unique synthesis of the novel theory that the intrinsically pleasurable free play of our mental powers is the essence of aesthetic experience that was developed in mid-19th century Scotland and Germany with the theory that aesthetic experience is a distinctive form of the apprehension of truth that had been the core of aesthetic theory since the time of Aristotle. Kant brought these two strands of aesthetic theory together in his conception of 'aesthetic ideas' as the source of 'spirit' in fine art and of genius as the uniquely artistic capacity for the creation and communication of aesthetic ideas, for by means of this concept he postulated that in both the production and the reception of fine art the imagination freely plays with and around the intellectual content furnished by ideas of reason. In spite of Kant's immense prestige, this synthesis, like so many others among the delicate balancing-acts that comprised Kant's philosophy, was quickly sundered by Kant's successors, and Kant's combination of the aesthetics of play with the aesthetics of truth was rejected in favor of a purely cognitivist aesthetics. This is particularly evident in the next two great aesthetic theories to take the stage after Kant, those of Schelling¹ and Schopenhauer—the former of which indeed deeply influenced the latter—and beyond them in the aesthetics of Hegel and his numerous followers. While both Schelling and Schopenhauer preserved much of the terminology and outward organization of Kant's aesthetics, they transformed Kant's central conception of aesthetic ideas as a form of *free play with truth* back into a more traditional conception of an *apprehension of truth* that is certainly different from other forms of cognition but does not really involve an element of free play at all. And they both rejected Kant's idea that aesthetic experience is intrinsically pleasurable because it is a free play of our mental powers, replacing that theory with the view that for the most part aesthetic experience is pleasurable only because it releases us from the pain of some otherwise inescapable contradiction in the human condition—to borrow terms used by Edmund Burke a half-century earlier, they replace Kant's conception of aesthetic response as a 'positive pleasure' with a conception of it as 'the removal of pain' or 'delight' as a merely

‘negative’ or ‘relative’ form of pleasure.² This is somewhat of an overstatement, and we will see that Schopenhauer in particular recognizes that there is some pleasure in aesthetic response that goes beyond mere relief at the removal of pain, but he nevertheless maintains that all of the pleasure in aesthetic experience comes through cognition alone rather than from a free play of our cognitive powers. It is above all the element of play that disappears from their transmutation of Kant’s aesthetics back into a version of cognitivism, an element that was then not to reappear for another half-century, in the post-Schopenhauerian thought of the later Nietzsche, in spite of his own hostility to all things Kantian.

Nietzsche will return briefly at the end of this chapter, but its focus will be Schopenhauer. My main task will just be to show that in spite of the many outward trappings of Kant’s theory that Schopenhauer preserved, his aesthetic theory replaced Kant’s central idea of the positive pleasure of the free play of our mental powers with the idea of a predominantly negative form of pleasure afforded by aesthetic experience as a distinctive form of cognition.

2. Kant

I begin with a brief review of the central themes of Kant’s aesthetics that will be relevant to what follows. Kant begins from the challenge posed by mid-century aesthetic theory, for example by Hume’s essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ (1757): to explain how a judgment of taste can be made only on the basis of one’s feeling of pleasure in response to an object, independent of any determinate concept of or rule for that object, and yet can be universally valid, that is, valid for all qualified observers of the object responding to it under appropriate conditions.³ Kant begins his answer to this puzzle by accepting from Shaftesbury and Hutcheson that a judgment of taste must be disinterested, independent of any personal physiological, prudential, or moral interest in the existence of the object.⁴ But disinterestedness seems to be merely a necessary condition for universal validity: one’s pleasure in an object might be independent of any identifiable interest, and yet still be utterly accidental or idiosyncratic. To find a sufficient condition for the universal validity of the judgment of taste, Kant seeks its ground in a mental state that is disinterested and free from regulation by determinate concepts but nevertheless can be reasonably expected from all normal human beings who can themselves approach the object without an antecedent interest in or preconception of what the object ought to be. This state Kant claims to find in the free play of the imagination and understanding in response to an object, a state of the ‘animation [*Belebung*] of both faculties (the imagination and the understanding) to an activity that is indeterminate but yet, through the stimulus of the given representation, in unison [*einhelliger*]’ (*CPJ*, §9, 5: 219).⁵ Such a state of mind is pleasurable because it seems to us like the satisfaction of our general goal in cognition—finding unity in our manifolds of representation—in a way that is contingent and surprising precisely because it is not dictated by any concept of rule that applies to the object (*CPJ*, Introduction,

section VI, 5: 187–8).⁶ But it is also intersubjectively valid, that is, a response to the object that we can impute to others as what they too would experience under ideal or optimal conditions, because it involves nothing but cognitive powers which themselves must be imputed to others and assumed to work in the same way in them as they do in ourselves. This inference is what Kant calls the ‘deduction of judgments of taste’.⁷

In the ‘Dialectic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment,’ Kant restates the challenge of justifying the judgment of taste’s claim to universal validity in the form of an ‘antinomy’ between the ‘thesis’ that ‘The judgment of taste is not based on concepts, for otherwise it would be possible to dispute about it (decide by means of proofs)’ and the ‘antithesis’ that the ‘judgment of taste is based on concepts, for otherwise . . . it would not even be possible to argue about it (to lay claim to the necessary assent of others to this judgment)’ (*CPJ*, §56, 5: 338–9). However, instead of then simply reiterating his previous solution to this dilemma, that the judgment of taste is based on a free and therefore indeterminate play of cognitive powers that can be assumed to work the same way in everybody under ideal conditions, Kant here argues that ‘all contradiction vanishes if I say that [determining the ground of] the judgment of taste . . . may lie in the concept of that which can be regarded as the supersensible substratum of humanity’ (*CPJ*, §57, 5: 340), the noumenal basis of our phenomenal, psychological powers. This assertion relocates the explanation of the non-derivability of particular intersubjectively valid judgments of taste from determinate concepts of their objects from the psychological (empirical or otherwise) theory of the free play of the faculties to a metaphysical theory of a common but noumenal and therefore inaccessible ground of the phenomenal psychologies of all human beings.⁸ But although his introduction of the metaphysical conception of a noumenal basis for taste would be decisive for later aesthetic theories including Schopenhauer’s,⁹ this leap into metaphysics plays no role in Kant’s own account of fine art or of the significance of either natural or artistic beauty for us.

Thus, Kant uses his idea of the free play of the cognitive faculties but not that of the supersensible ground of that state of mind in his theory of fine art and its source in genius. Kant defines beautiful or fine art as ‘a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication’ (*CPJ*, §44, 5: 305–6). Kant initially suggests that in order to appreciate beautiful art as such one may have to suppress one’s knowledge that it is the product of intentional human production (*CPJ*, §45, 5: 306). But as he continues he makes it clear that beautiful art produces a free play of our cognitive powers precisely because its form engages and unifies our imagination in a way that goes beyond whatever determinate concepts—concepts of its goal, its medium and techniques, its genre, and its content—that we do know apply to it. This is the lesson of Kant’s conception of genius as the source of art and of ‘aesthetic ideas’ as what the artistic genius produces.¹⁰ Beautiful art must be produced by genius because ‘The concept of beautiful art . . . does not allow the judgment concerning the beauty of its product to be derived from any sort of rule that has a **concept** for its

determining ground,' and genius is precisely the 'talent (natural gift)' for 'producing that for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition of skill for that which can be learned in accordance with some rule' (*CPJ*, §46, 5: 307). Beautiful art, Kant also says, must contain 'spirit,' so genius must be responsible for the spirit in art. Kant then explicates spirit in terms of the concept of aesthetic ideas.¹¹ Spirit, he says, is the 'animating principle in the mind' in the production and experience of beautiful art, and that 'by which this principle animates the soul . . . into a play that is self-sustaining and even strengthens the powers to that end' (*CPJ*, §49, 5: 313). What sets the mental powers into such a play, Kant then continues, is an aesthetic idea, 'that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e. **concept**, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible.' What Kant means by this is that a work of art on the one hand has intellectual content—Kant assumes without argument that fine art is paradigmatically representational or mimetic—but specifically *rational* content, a content of ideas that cannot be reduced to determinate concepts of the understanding, and on the other hand conveys this content through a wealth of materials of the imagination—intuitions—that cannot be derived from that content by any concept or rule but nevertheless illustrate it and convey it to us in a satisfyingly harmonious and therefore pleasurable way. What a successful work of fine or beautiful art does is set the form and the content of a work of art and the mental powers for the intuition of that form and the intellection of that content into a free and harmonious play. Genius is thus the capacity for the 'exposition or the expression of **aesthetic ideas**,' the ability to present rational ideas through particular artistic media and genres in imaginative ways that cannot be fully determined by any rules for the latter. Further, Kant stresses that genius consists not just in the artist's capacity to create such ideas for herself but also in the capacity to find ways to communicate them to others: 'thus genius really consists in the happy relation . . . of finding ideas for a given concept on the one hand and on the other hitting upon the **expression** for these, through which the subjective disposition of the mind that is thereby produced' in the artist 'can be communicated to others,' namely the audience for art (*CPJ*, §49, 5: 317).

Schopenhauer draws on all of these ideas. But he turns Kant's idea of the free play of our cognitive powers back into the more traditional idea that aesthetic experience is actual cognition, and also treats such cognition primarily as a source of the negative pleasure of relief from pain rather than as a source of positive pleasure presupposing no antecedent pain. Let us now see how he does that.

3. Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer exploits many of the central themes of Kant's aesthetics, notably Kant's concepts of disinterestedness, of genius, and of aesthetic ideas, but transforms Kant's theory of the free play of our cognitive powers, even with aesthetic ideas, into a strictly cognitivist theory of the content of aesthetic

experience—a transformation signaled by his use of the expression ‘Platonic ideas’ instead of ‘aesthetic ideas’—and Kant’s theory of the positive pleasure of such free play into a theory of negative pleasure at our release from the incessant demands of our particular wills through the cognition of the general forms of the expression of the will in aesthetic experience. Schopenhauer does at least sometimes recognize a positive rather than merely negative pleasure in aesthetic cognition, however, and thus at least takes a step toward the restoration of Kant’s positive conception of the pleasure of aesthetic experience if not toward his conception of it as free play rather than cognition.

The general outlines of Schopenhauer’s philosophy are well known, and can be presented briefly here. According to Schopenhauer, the general structures of conscious human thought—above all, the organization of our experience into space, time, causal relations among events, and intentional relations between desires and actions—are structures imposed by our own minds on the effects of an otherwise unknown substratum of reality on our own underlying reality. In this position, which the twenty-five year old already defended in his doctoral dissertation *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (1813), Schopenhauer took himself to be the legitimate heir of Kant. Unlike Kant, however, in his magnum opus *The World as Will and Representation* (1818, revised 1844; Book I recapitulates this doctrine), Schopenhauer insisted that we could characterize the underlying reality that acts upon us and that acts within us as non-rational *will*. He based this assertion upon the claims that we have a double knowledge of ourselves, through the cognitive representation in which our own bodies are like everything else in the world and through voluntary action in which we have a unique relation to our own bodies, that we recognize the latter to be more fundamental than the former, even though the former contains all the structures we think of as rational, and that we can extend this view to all of reality beyond ourselves.¹² Thus in the Book II of the *World as Will and Representation* he writes:

Whereas in the first book we were reluctantly forced to declare our own body to be mere representation of the knowing subject, like all other objects of this world of perception, it has now become clear to us that something in the consciousness of everyone distinguishes the representation of his own body from all others that are in other respects quite like it. This is that the body occurs in consciousness in quite another way, *toto genere* different, that is denoted by the word *will*. It is just this double knowledge of our own body which gives us information . . . about what it is, not as representation, but as something over and above this, and hence what it is *in itself*. (*WWR*, §19 103)¹³

Then he continues that we can use this ‘double knowledge’ as the ‘key to the inner being of every phenomenon in nature’:

We shall judge all objects which are not in our own body . . . according to the analogy of this body. We shall therefore assume that as, on the one hand, they are representation, just like our body . . . so on the other hand,

if we set aside their existence as the subject's representation, what still remains over must be, according to its inner nature, the same as what in ourselves we call *will*. If, therefore, the material world is to be something more than our mere representation, we must say that, besides being the representation, and hence in itself and of its inmost nature, it is what we find immediately in ourselves as will. (*ibid.*: 105)

Now it may seem natural to insist that once Schopenhauer has accepted Kant's distinction between representation or things as they appear and those things as they are in themselves it is completely illegitimate of him to make any further claims about the real nature of the in itself. But in fact Kant himself was willing to make a claim about the determinate nature of the in itself, at least about the human self as it is in itself, namely that the otherwise indeterminate concept of our real self can be made determinate through the concept of a rational will governed by the moral law.¹⁴ Schopenhauer's departure from Kant lies not in his willingness to make any claim about the noumenal, but in the fact that insists (following Schelling's 1809 *Essence of Human Freedom*, which he had closely studied and annotated) that our own underlying reality and by extension that of the rest of nature is thoroughly non-rational will, and that rationality is only one more superficial feature of appearance like spatiality, temporality, and causality which does not characterize will at its deepest level.¹⁵ 'Every person invariably has purposes and motives by which he guides his conduct; and he is always able to give an account of his particular actions. But if he were asked why he wills generally, or why in general he wills to exist, he would have no answer; indeed, the question would seem to him absurd. This would really be the expression of his consciousness that he himself is nothing but will' (*WWR*, §29 163). For Schopenhauer, further, the non-rational nature of the will means that it never leads to a feeling of pleasure in the realization of our potential for rationality, what Kant called 'contentment' or 'moral feeling',¹⁶ but only to an endless striving which has no stable, unconditionally valuable goal and which therefore can never be completely satisfied. 'Absence of all aim, of all limits, belongs to the essential nature of the will in itself, which is an endless striving. . . . human endeavours and desires . . . buoy us up with the vain hope that their fulfillment is always the final goal of willing. But as soon as they are attained, they no longer look the same, and so are soon forgotten . . . and are really, although not admittedly, always laid aside as vanished illusions' (*ibid.*: 164). The nature of the will that is the underlying reality of both ourselves and everything else in nature means that we are apparently condemned to a painful cycle of frustration in which even the realization of our desires turns out to be nothing but the source of another unfulfilled desire, a cycle that would be ended by nothing but death. The will and rationality which for Schelling in *The Essence of Human Freedom* must be able to come apart in order to mark our difference from God must come apart for Schopenhauer, perhaps because for him there is no God to guarantee even the possibility of the reunion of these two contrary principles.

The first step of Schopenhauer's aesthetics, however, is to transform Kant's account of disinterestedness as a characteristic of aesthetic experience that allows us to make intersubjectively valid judgments of taste into the negative pleasure of at least a temporary respite from this cycle of frustration that is afforded by the experience of beauty. Schopenhauer's thought (presented in Book III) is that ordinarily we set ourselves on the possession of particular objects that we expect to fulfill desires, but that it is possible so to immerse ourselves in the perception of an object that we can actually forget our inevitably unsatisfying desire to possess or consume it, at least for a while. In such a state we,

... devote the whole power of our mind to perception ... and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building, or anything else. We *lose* ourselves entirely in this object ...; we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject, as clear mirror of the object. ... Thus at the same time, the person who is involved in this perception is no longer an individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself; he is *pure* will-less, painless, timeless *subject of knowledge*. (WWR, §34 178–9)

This state of relief from the pain of particularized desire, a strictly negative form of pleasure, is achieved by perception, which is a form of cognition itself rather than a play with cognitive powers, although Schopenhauer's initial suggestion that it is achieved through the perception of particulars *qua* particulars is misleading; it is achieved through the cognition of the general form of the kind of expression of the underlying reality of will that the particular object is: 'If, therefore, the object has to such an extent passed out of all relation to something outside it, and the subject has passed out of all relation to the will, what is thus known is no longer the individual thing as such, but the *Idea*, the eternal form, the immediate objectivity of the will at this grade' (*ibid.*: 179). The disinterested pleasure of Kant's free play of our cognitive powers with aesthetic ideas is transformed into relief at the liberation of the will from its unsatisfiable obsession with particulars through the cognition of the general forms or Platonic ideas of the expression of the will itself in aesthetic experience.¹⁷

The cognitive rather than play-character of Schopenhauer's theory of ideas is immediately apparent in his theory of art, including his theory of genius as the source of art, his comments about the reception of art, and his classification of the arts as types of representations of the ideas—until he reaches music, which represents the will itself rather than any of its other objectifications. Following his initial introduction of the theory of ideas as the objects of timeless, painless, will-less contemplation, Schopenhauer illustrates the contrast between the 'different grades at which' the 'objectivity' of the 'will as thing-in-itself' appears, 'i.e., the Ideas themselves, from the mere phenomenon of the Ideas in the form of the principle of sufficient reason, the restricted method of knowledge of individuals' (WWR, §35 181), with examples drawn from nature: the shape of particular

clouds at particular moments is mere phenomenon, but the very fact that 'as elastic vapour they are pressed together, driven off, spread out, and torn apart by the force of the wind' shows that 'this is their nature, this is the essence of the forces that are objectified in them, this is the Idea' (*ibid.*: 182). (We have to take the identification of physical forces of the sort that are mentioned as the phenomenal expression or objectification of a thing-in-itself that is *will* as a leap of metaphysical faith: there can be no further evidence for it than the experience of will in our own cases that Schopenhauer earlier mentioned.) But in the ensuing sections, Schopenhauer makes it clear that the primary way in which we encounter Ideas and enjoy the benefits of contemplating them is through art, and here he makes clear the cognitive character of art and of our response to it:

What kind of knowledge is it that considers what continues to exist outside and independently of all relations . . . the true content of phenomena . . . known with equal truth for all time, in a word, the *Ideas* that are the immediate and adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself, of the will? It is *art*, the work of genius. It repeats the eternal ideas apprehended through pure contemplation, the essential and abiding element in all the phenomena of the world. According to the material in which it repeats, it is sculpture, painting, poetry, or music. Its only source is knowledge of the Ideas; its sole aim is communication of this knowledge. (*WWR*, §36 184–5)

While natural things might occasionally suggest their own Ideas and dispose us toward contemplation, art actively and therefore presumably more reliably and frequently 'plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of the world's course, and holds it isolated before it'.¹⁸

Schopenhauer accordingly describes genius, the ability to create art, in strictly cognitive terms. Genius consists in the exceptional capacity for the recognition of timeless Ideas through the particularities of phenomena and in the exceptional capacity for the communication of such cognition. First, the heightened capacity for cognition: 'Only through the pure contemplation . . . which becomes absorbed entirely in the object, are the Ideas comprehended; and the nature of *genius* consists precisely in the preeminent ability for such contemplation. . . . the *gift of genius* is nothing but the most complete *objectivity*, i.e., the objective tendency of the mind . . . Accordingly, genius is the capacity to remain in a state of pure perception, to lose oneself in perception'. And 'For genius to appear in an individual, it is as if a measure of the power of knowledge must have fallen to his lot far exceeding that required for the service of an individual will' (*ibid.*: 185). Second, the exceptional capacity for the communication of such cognition: while all people must have the capacity to contemplate the Ideas and through that contemplation to obtain relief from the demands of their will to some degree, otherwise the effect of art would be entirely lost on them, they have the capacity to recognize or discover ideas to a 'lesser and different degree' than the genius; and the genius in turn excels the rest of mankind not merely in the capacity to have such ideas but also in the capacity to

retain them and convey them through a 'voluntary and intentional work, such repetition being the work of art. Through this he communicates to others the Idea he has grasped'. The gift of the genius is the twofold gift of cognition and communication, although the latter can to some extent be acquired: 'that he knows the essential in things which lies outside all relations, is the gift of genius and is inborn; but that he able to lend us this gift, to let us see with his eyes, is acquired, and is the technical side of art' (WWR, §37 194–5). The key point is not so much whether one aspect of genius is more innate than the other, however, but that it has these two aspects. In this regard, the structure of Schopenhauer's analysis of genius replicates that of Kant's, with the key difference that the element of play is missing from the experience of both the genius and the audience. For Kant, genius consisted in the ability to create a free play of the imagination with an idea and then to communicate that to the audience in a way which would allow the audience not just to apprehend the content of the artist's idea but also to enjoy a free play of their mental powers in some way analogous to but not fully determined by the free play of the artist—without that, the experience would not be an aesthetic experience for Kant. For Schopenhauer, however, although the genius must be *active* in plucking an idea out of the phenomena, he does not *play* with the idea, but simply contemplates it, and facilitates the contemplation of it in his audience, by means of which they are both, to some degree or other, transformed into will-less and therefore painless pure subjects of knowledge.

Throughout this cognitivist account, Schopenhauer's theme remains that aesthetic experience offers the negative pleasure of relief, although only momentary, from the incessant frustration of the will. But there is a hint in Schopenhauer that aesthetic pleasure may have a positive side, a sheer pleasure in knowing that does not presuppose any antecedent frustration from which knowledge offers an escape. In §38, Schopenhauer says that there are '*two inseparable constituent parts*' in the 'aesthetic method of consideration', namely 'knowledge of the object not as individual thing, but as Platonic *Idea* . . . ; and the self-consciousness of the knower, not as individual, but as *pure, will-less subject of knowledge*', and he then adds that the pleasure produced by contemplation of an aesthetic object arises sometimes more from one of these sources than the other (WWR, §39 195–6). Here he is alluding to this theory that in the case of beauty the Idea presents itself to us (or at least the genius) as if it were immediately in the object, whereas in the case of the sublime we are more conscious of a struggle to isolate the Idea out of the experience of the object. In the case of beauty, 'that purely objective frame of mind is facilitated and favoured from without by accommodating objects' (197), whereas in the case of the sublime 'that state of pure knowing is obtained first of all by a conscious and violent tearing away from the relations of the same object to the will . . . by a free exaltation, accompanied by consciousness, beyond the will and the knowledge related to it' (WWR, §39 202). But in the opening paragraph of his discussion of the sublime, Schopenhauer does describe the 'subjective part of aesthetic pleasure' as 'that pleasure in so far as it is delight in the mere knowledge of perception as such' (200). Whether he intended it thus or not, this remark suggests that we might take

pleasure in the contemplation of Ideas even if we did not need to be relieved from frustration by that contemplation. So here Schopenhauer hints at a return to the purely positive account of aesthetic pleasure characteristic of Kant (and most other 18th century writers), and to prepare the way for a return to this emphasis in subsequent aesthetics. But even Schopenhauer's suggestion of a positive pleasure in aesthetic experience remains firmly linked to his interpretation of this experience as an exceptional form of cognition rather than a free play with our cognitive powers that is not aimed at actual cognition.¹⁹

Schopenhauer's theory of art as the genius's vehicle for the repetition and presentation of the Platonic Ideas leads him to a classification of the arts. Schopenhauer's classification begins with architecture as the medium which, insofar as it is considered 'merely as a fine art and apart from its provision for useful purposes', brings to 'clearer perceptiveness some of those Ideas that are the lowest grades of the will's objectivity', such Ideas as 'gravity, cohesion, rigidity, hardness', and so on, 'those first, simplest, and dullest visibilities of the will' (*WWR*, §43 214). Schopenhauer then mentions both horticulture and landscape and still-life painting as arts which present the Ideas of the objectification of the will in vegetable life, a form of its objectification that is more advanced than the mechanical forces presented by architecture but is still far from its objectification in human character and action (*WWR*, §44: 218–19). From these arts, Schopenhauer advances to historical painting and sculpture, which present the outward forms of isolated manifestations of the will in human actions (§§45–49), and then to poetry, which reveals 'that Idea which is the highest grade of the will's objectivity, namely the presentation of man in the connected series of his efforts and actions' (*WWR*, §51 244). His discussion of poetry culminates with his own version of the conventional wisdom that tragedy is the 'summit of poetic art': for Schopenhauer this is so because tragedy presents more effectively than any other art-form 'The unspeakable pain, the wretchedness and misery of mankind, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and the innocent' (*ibid.*: 253). Then Schopenhauer turns to music, which is for him the highest rather than the lowest of the arts, because it 'is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but [is] a *copy of the will itself*, the objectivity of which are the Ideas. For this reason the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts, for these others speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence' (*WWR*, §52 257). Music is thus on a par with the other manifestations of the will rather than with the other arts as copies of the manifestations of the will; music is the art that crosses the Platonic barrier between art and other ordinary things by being a copy of reality itself rather than a copy of a copy of reality itself. From this point of view, Schopenhauer then interprets the different aspects of music as 'copies' of different aspects of the will itself rather than of its objectifications: the deepest tones of harmony are a manifestation of inorganic forces; in 'the whole of the ripienos . . . between the bass and the leading voice singing the melody' he recognizes 'the whole gradation of the Ideas in which the will objectifies itself', and finally in melody he

recognizes 'the highest grade of the will's objectification, the intellectual life and endeavour of man' (258–9).

Schopenhauer's accounts of both tragedy and music seem to present a paradox: the contemplation of beauty, especially artistic beauty, is supposed to present us with timeless ideas the contemplation of which will release us from the frustration of our timebound wills; but tragedy presents us with such affecting representations of human suffering, and music supposedly presents the will and all of its indifference to our own concerns to us with even greater directness, that it is difficult to see how we can take pleasure in these arts, except perhaps to the limited extent that Schopenhauer recognizes a positive pleasure in cognition as such—a form of pleasure, however, which he hardly emphasizes and does not seem adequate to account for the profundity of our pleasure in these arts. Schopenhauer recognizes the threat of this paradox and confronts it directly in his discussion of music. He writes that music 'never expresses the phenomenon, but only the inner nature, the in-itself, of every phenomenon, the will itself'.

Therefore music does not express this or that particular gaiety and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, or peace of mind, but joy, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without any accessories, and so also without the motives for them. (*WWR*, §52 260)

Schopenhauer's thought is that contemplation of the universal ideas always turns our attention away from the frustrating particularities of our personal situations, even when those universal ideas are themselves the ideas of pain, suffering, and so on. 'It is just this universality', which Schopenhauer ascribes uniquely to music, although one would think that it could be achieved by tragedy as well, 'that gives it that high value as the panacea of all our sorrows' (262). Music 'reproduces all the emotions of our innermost being, but entirely without reality and remote from its pain' (164).²⁰

Schopenhauer's solution to what threatens to be the greatest paradox for art—his version of the traditional paradox of tragedy perhaps—depends entirely on his theory of the redemptive power of the contemplation of universals, and thus confirms the thoroughly cognitivist character of his aesthetic theory. He has transformed Kant's idea of the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment into the idea of a literal release from painful self-interest through cognition, Kant's conception of the aesthetic ideas as that with which the mind plays in art into that which the mind knows in art, and Kant's conception of the genius as the one who can both more freely play with ideas than others yet communicate a sense of that free play to others into the conception of one who more readily knows than others and can communicate that knowledge and its ensuing benefit to others. Schopenhauer has disrupted Kant's delicate synthesis of the ancient idea of aesthetic experience as a form of knowledge and the novel idea of aesthetic experience as the free play of our mental powers and turned it back into the

traditional theory of aesthetic experience as a heightened form of cognition alone, although his account of the cognition in aesthetic experience naturally reflects the innovations in his account of cognition itself. Whether this reversion to the fundamental idea of traditional aesthetics was a good thing or not, I will venture to judge, but it was certainly influential: the strictly cognitivist approach to aesthetics would be continued by Hegel, who first lectured on aesthetics the year after *The World as Will and Representation* was first published, and would continue to dominate aesthetic theory at least until the time of Nietzsche, and in some quarters well beyond (consider, for example, Lukács and Adorno). That story is beyond the scope of this chapter, but here I will conclude with a comment on a famous remark of Nietzsche's about the aesthetics of both Kant and Schopenhauer.

4. Nietzsche

In the third essay of his late work *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), entitled 'What do Ascetic Ideals Mean?', Nietzsche claimed that Kant looked at art and beauty from the point of view of the spectator rather than the artist, and that 'Schopenhauer made use of the Kantian version of the aesthetic problem,—although he definitely did not view it with Kantian eyes'.²¹ Nietzsche writes:

Kant intended to pay art a tribute when he singled out from the qualities of beauty those which constitute the glory of knowledge: impersonality and universality. Whether or not this was essentially a mistake is not what I am dealing with here; all I want to underline is that Kant, like all philosophers, just considered art and beauty from the position of 'spectator', instead of viewing the aesthetic problem through the experiences of the artist (the creator), and thus inadvertently introduced the 'spectator' himself into the concept 'beautiful'. I just wish this 'spectator' had been sufficiently known to the philosophers of beauty!—I mean as a great *personal* fact and experience, as a fund of strong personal experiences, desires, surprises and pleasures in the field of beauty!²²

Nietzsche continues to explain that Schopenhauer specifically adopted from Kant the idea that aesthetic experience is 'without interest' and thus impersonal, an idea that Nietzsche regards as the epitome of the 'spectator' approach to art, and fails to realize precisely how personal his conception of the experience of beauty is: Schopenhauer's conception of beauty is based on 'the strongest, most personal interest possible: that of the tortured person who frees himself from his torture',²³ specifically from the sexual torture of a twenty-six year old man, that is, presumably, a sexually unsatisfied twenty-six year old man.²⁴ According to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer's aesthetics is one giant feat of sublimation.

I do not want to dispute Nietzsche's diagnosis of the psychological sources of Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory: perhaps he is entirely right about that, perhaps sexual sublimation is the psychological source of the sixty-six-year-old Kant's aesthetic theory (though that seems a little less likely). What I do want to suggest

is that Nietzsche's claim that both Kant and Schopenhauer offer aesthetic theories of the spectator rather than of the artist is not entirely right. Although Kant's initial analysis of the *judgment of taste* might well focus on the experience and the epistemological position of the spectator and the critic, his *theory of fine art* is couched in the form of a theory of creative genius rather than that of a theory of the spectator's response. And this is not just a *façon de parler*: his emphasis is on the free play of the artist's imagination with his ideas and his materials, and he suggests, almost just in passing, that the artist must communicate his own experience in creating to the spectator, who must then to some extent recreate for himself an experience like the artist's, but not exactly the artist's experience—for then his experience would not be one of free play. In other words, it seems fair to say that Kant bases his conception of the spectator's experience of beauty on his conception of the artist's experience of it, rather than the converse.

Schopenhauer takes over the Kantian figure of the genius, whom he sees as especially gifted at separating the wheat of Platonic Ideas from the chaff of ordinary, individuated experience that encases them, and then at communicating that grasp of ideas to the audience of less cognitively gifted persons, who are capable of recognizing the Platonic Ideas and being transported into the state of pure will-less, subject-less being once they are led to these ideas but who could not quite get there on their own. So again it would not seem fair to suggest that Schopenhauer does not privilege the role of the creative artist in his aesthetic theory. What would be fair to suggest, however, is precisely what I have argued in this chapter, namely that Schopenhauer does have a primarily cognitive and contemplative conception of artistic creation itself: it is primarily a matter of grasping an idea that is out there to be grasped rather than inventing something new by means of imagination. So perhaps we should conclude that while Nietzsche's claim that Kant conceives of the experience of art and beauty from the point of the spectator misses how much Kant's conception of the experience of the spectator is itself based on the experience of the artist, it would not be wrong to think that Schopenhauer's cognitivist conception of artistic genius is in fact a spectatorial account of aesthetic experience.²⁵ Nietzsche's remark, while wrong about Kant, thus confirms my interpretation of Schopenhauer.

NOTES

¹ The present chapter is drawn from a longer piece that discusses Schelling's philosophy of art as well as Schopenhauer's.

² Burke 1757: Part One, Sections III–IV; 1958: 33–6.

³ For my interpretation of Hume's approach to the problem of taste, see Guyer 1993b: 37–66; 2005: 37–74.

⁴ See Guyer 1993a: 50–61.

⁵ References are to Kant 2000; the Academy edition pagination used here is indicated in the margins of this edition.

⁶ For my most recent approach to the free play of the faculties, see Guyer 2006. See also Stolzenberg 2000; Rush 2001; and Zuckert 2007.

⁷ For discussion, see Guyer 1997: chs. 7–9, and Allison 2001: 160–92.

⁸ For criticism, see Guyer 1997: 294–311; for defense, see Allison 2001: 236–69.

⁹ On the succession of Kant's theory by the 'speculative theory of art,' see Schaeffer 2000.

¹⁰ On genius, see Guyer 1983; reprinted as 'Genius and the Canon of Art: A Second Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment,' in Guyer 1993a: 275–303.

¹¹ See Guyer 1994; reprinted in Guyer 1997: 351–66; see also Savile 1987: 168–91; and Allison 2001: 279–86.

¹² See Janaway 1989: ch. 7, pp. 188–207.

¹³ Translations from Schopenhauer 1958. All citations will be from Volume I, the original portion of the work published in 1818 (dated 1819), so the reference to the volume will be omitted from the parenthetical references.

¹⁴ See Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, section III, 4:452, and *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:49.

¹⁵ For further discussion, see Guyer 1999.

¹⁶ See *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:118, and *Metaphysics of Morals*, Doctrine of Virtue, Introduction, section XII.a, 6:399.

¹⁷ See Janaway 1996.

¹⁸ For discussion of Schopenhauer's theory of the Platonic Ideas in art and his classification of the arts on the basis of that theory, see Foster 1999.

¹⁹ I have developed the argument of this paragraph more fully in Guyer 1996.

²⁰ See Guyer 1996: 127–9, or Guyer 2005: 285–8. On Schopenhauer's philosophy of music, see also Simmel 1991: 91–5.

²¹ For discussion of Nietzsche on Schopenhauer's aesthetics, see Soll 1998: 107–11.

²² Nietzsche 2007, Third Essay, §6: 73–4.

²³ *Op. cit.*: 74–5.

²⁴ See Leiter 2002: 248–54.

²⁵ I have developed this contrast between Kant's and Schopenhauer's conceptions of genius in a larger historical context in Guyer 2003.

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