

# **ART AND THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER**

**Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860) presented in his masterwork *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* an account of the world as consisting of two discrete aspects; will and idea, or will and representation. The essence of the self is similarly comprised of dual aspects, being simultaneously an object of perception and a manifestation of the will.**

**Schopenhauer argues that in our everyday lives we experience suffering as a result of our mind representing the world around us as an egocentric perception, consisting of external objects of perception and their relation to oneself. Our consciousness is, for Schopenhauer, in service of the will. Objects are perceived by individual wills not in terms of intrinsic objective qualities, but rather in terms of utility to the individual will. Suffering is ultimately caused by the frustration and conflict that arises from competition between individual wills. Schopenhauer is sometimes considered, mistakenly, to be a pessimist. However he clearly holds that through art and the aesthetic experience we can escape the suffering of our ordinary mental state.**

**In ordinary consciousness we are in the service of the will. That is, “our consciousness is filled by our will” (Schopenhauer 1969: Vol. I, 196) It is the will that enables our survival; without the will filling up our consciousness we could not survive because we would have a disinterested perception of the world. That is, our perception would not be directed to attend to those things in the world that are relevant to our welfare. In our ordinary consciousness we see things in relation to ourselves; we have an egoistic view of the world. We do not see individual objects in the world in terms of their own intrinsic nature and qualities. Instead we see things in terms of utility, and specifically their utility to ourselves.**

**Schopenhauer holds that in our ordinary consciousness we actively contribute to our perceptions of the world; part of our everyday experience consists in ideas that we project onto the world. He calls these projections we make onto the world to**

form our everyday experience “relative essences”. (Schopenhauer 1969: Vol. II, 372) The relative essences can take the form of threats to our welfare, which may be either potential or actual. They can also be objects of desire, things that spark a yearning desire within us to be fulfilled. For so long as each craving is desired but not satisfied we suffer. The relative essences can also be means of preserving our welfare in the face of threats, or else means of satisfying our desires in order to bring to an end the suffering caused by feeling an unfulfilled desire.

It is essential for us to see the world not objectively but subjectively, adding our own projections into experience in order to survive. It seems therefore fair to claim that our ordinary consciousness is acting in our best interest; it is allowing us to recognise threats and react to them. It also allows us to have desires that are needed in order to survive. For instance, it is essential for us to desire to eat regularly in order to nourish ourselves; if we failed to do this we would die. It is also essential to the survival of the species that we desire to procreate; if enough of us failed to do so then our species would become extinct. So relative essences can be seen from two points of view; firstly, that they cause our desires and fears thereby causing us endless suffering, and secondly, that they cause our desires and fears thereby allowing our survival. Schopenhauer fixates on the former viewpoint, claiming the relative essences keep us trapped in a false perception of the world. On this point of view “[t]he world is my representation” (Schopenhauer 1969: Vol. I, 3)

Schopenhauer seems to suppose that it is desirable to transform ones state of consciousness, turning it away from the will in order to free oneself from suffering. He seems inclined to think of ordinary consciousness as something undesirable from which we ought to seek salvation. The genius is a rare individual with the capacity to transform his consciousness in this way for prolonged periods of time, but we all have the capacity to transform our consciousness for brief periods with the aid of aesthetic contemplation; contemplation of artworks created by a genius. Art facilitates the transition “from the common knowledge of particular things [that is, the mental state of ordinary experience] to knowledge of the Idea [that is, the mental state of aesthetic experience]” (WWR I: 178) This by no means happens with every artwork, it is great works of art that Schopenhauer concerns himself with. Great art should allow the non-genius, which is the vast majority of us, to

temporarily transform from the ordinary mental state to that of the aesthetic mental state, which Schopenhauer calls the “aesthetic method of consideration” (WWR I: 195). The genius is differentiated here because Schopenhauer holds that the genius is one who is able to enter into the aesthetic state for sustained periods of time and who does not require the aid of an existing artwork in order to transform his mental state.

The genius is able to create new works of art by virtue of being able to enter into that state in which he is free of subjectivity. This is an ability that goes entirely against what Schopenhauer holds is the fate of all mankind, to be in the service of the will. It surely follows that the genius is more at risk than the rest of us from threats and dangers because unlike the non-genius who sees the world in terms of utility, that is, subjectively, the genius sees the world objectively for extended periods of time. It seems that evolution should not allow the genius to survive given his persistence in seeing the world objectively for prolonged periods of time. This concern is not directly addressed by Schopenhauer, though he notes that genius is very rare.

If we consider roles played by both the ordinary consciousness and aesthetic state issue it seems that it is actually desirable that things are as they are. That is, we ought to recognise that our suffering serves a great good; the promotion of our own survival. Therefore ordinary consciousness is not something to be resented and avoided. I hold that Schopenhauer is partly mistaken in thinking that we should seek to deny the will and escape from ordinary consciousness. Schopenhauer is mistaken, as I see it, not in holding that we should seek to free ourselves of the will per se, but rather it in thinking that this a mental state from which we ought to aim to permanently escape.

The cumulative psychological toll that results from consistently being in the state of ordinary consciousness is a difficult burden to bear, and it is important that we obtain some respite from it for our own well-being. Schopenhauer’s account of the transformation from our everyday state of ordinary consciousness into the aesthetic state is a brilliant insight into that change of mental state which we undeniably experience when contemplating great works of art. If one puts aside the

failing of wanting this to be a permanent mental transformation, and considers the account of the dual mental states themselves, and their relation, then Schopenhauer offers a compelling account of the aesthetic experience.

However, there is one further major difficulty I find in his presentation of the aesthetic experience. The will, being the ultimate cause of our fears and desires, is the ultimate cause of our suffering. We can be freed of our suffering though during aesthetic experience because in the aesthetic state (of consciousness) we are able to perceive the will objectively. This seems to be internally inconsistent however; how can we be free of suffering by losing our individuality and perceiving the will objectively when the will is evil in nature?

It seems to be inconsistent to hold both that (i) the will is evil and the cause of all suffering, and also that (ii) by contemplating the will objectively through the Ideas we can escape suffering and enjoy a sense of tranquillity in the aesthetic state, are both true. Yet this is what Schopenhauer does seem to say.

It seems unlikely that Schopenhauer would have failed to recognize such an obvious logical inconsistency in his own work. If one adopts the position that Schopenhauer did not hold his theory to contain a logical inconsistency on this point it becomes necessary to try to find a plausible hypothesis in which this objection is overcome.

Michael Tanner mentions briefly this very problem in his book on Schopenhauer, though he does not really discuss it. He writes that art, in its various forms offers us a way “of renouncing the will-to-live, until one loses one’s individuality altogether and achieves oneness – but with what? With, of course, the only thing that there really is: the will itself. Is that what we would want to do, given his accounts of it? It is hard to see how we could.” (Tanner 1998: 53)

I agree with Tanner that it is problematic, and it is difficult to see how we might be able to resolve the problem. I think there must be a strategy to negotiate the problem of the logical inconsistency as Schopenhauer, presumably saw no problem. Quite simply, it must either be the case that there is an internal inconsistency which Schopenhauer ignored or failed to recognise, or that there is a way of understanding Schopenhauer which yields no such inconsistency. My aim here is

simply to offer a possible understanding which does not yield the inconsistency we have observed above.

My strategy is to reformulate the formal argument to restate the premises so as to avoid a logical contradiction.

The argument can be formulated in terms something like the following:

- (i) The will is demonic in nature and causes all suffering.**
- (ii) The contemplation of art enables one to enter the aesthetic state.**
- (iii) The aesthetic state is a state of consciousness in which one is free of suffering by means of having a will-less (objective) knowledge of the deeper reality of the world; the will.**

Formulated in this way (i) and (iii) appear logically inconsistent. However if one can distinguish between the will itself and the will as acting on the subject it is possible to avoid the inconsistency. Reformulated on this understanding the argument would look something like this:

- (i) The will is the deeper reality of all things.**
- (ii) The will causes us to impose our own projections on our everyday experience (relative essences) and this causes suffering.**
- (iii) The contemplation of art enables one to enter the aesthetic state.**
- (iv) The aesthetic state is a state of consciousness in which one is free of suffering by means of having a will-less (objective) knowledge of the deeper reality of the world; the will.**

On this formulation of the argument the inconsistency is avoided by changing the premise that the will is evil in nature to simply claiming that it is the underlying cause of suffering, because it is the will that causes us to have relative essences, but that it is not evil per se.

However Schopenhauer clearly thinks that the will is intrinsically evil, and so it seems that my reformulation will not work. Recall though what I previously argued; that Schopenhauer was mistaken in thinking we ought to seek permanent escape from the will-driven ordinary consciousness. I have in fact shown that his conception of the will was mistaken on the grounds that he failed to properly appreciate the great good that the will actualises: our survival. If he had acknowledged this great good as being dependent upon the will, which it clearly is,

it would be implausible to also maintain that the will is malicious or demonic in nature.

The will cannot be evil since it is life-supporting which is a quality generally held to be altruistic. The will, like the world, may be seen as having two aspects; promoting our survival (positive) and necessitating our having relative essences which by their nature cause us to suffer (negative). It seems plausible to hold that the will has either a dual nature, being both good and evil, or else that it is good in nature because it supports life and that the suffering which we endure is unavoidable and therefore blameless on the will. It does not seem plausible however to hold that the will is evil for the reasons I have just stated. Thus we can be confident in thinking that Schopenhauer was mistaken to think of the will as being evil or demonic. As the will cannot be evil in nature there is no inconsistency. It remains clear that we suffer though, and this is clearly the result of the relative essences which Schopenhauer says act upon us in our ordinary consciousness.

We therefore need to re-evaluate Schopenhauer's philosophy in light of this realisation. It is by no means a catastrophic blow to Schopenhauerian philosophy to accept what I have argued here, at least in terms of his account of the aesthetic experience. I have argued that Schopenhauer failed to appreciate the great good that is actualised by the will. This great good is the life we have. He fixated on the suffering we endure, which is caused by having fears and desires, and he claimed that we should seek a sort of salvation from suffering by means of entering the aesthetic state, in which we have a will-less knowledge of the world. He thought that the will was evil in nature. I have argued that Schopenhauer was mistaken and that the will cannot be evil in nature, and also that he was mistaken to think we should seek a permanent refuge, or salvation in the aesthetic state because it is inconsistent with evolution as we need to have fears and desires in order to survive.

By modifying our understanding of Schopenhauerian thought on the aesthetic experience in line with what I have argued here the Schopenhauerian account is made stronger. By acknowledging that Schopenhauer made an error to think of the will as intrinsically evil it is possible to address inconsistencies that resulted from this error in his philosophical system.