



Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860)

SCHOPENHAUER

Schopenhauer gave the arts a central place in his philosophical system. He was both influenced by Kant and also one of Kant's greatest critics. Against Kant he argued that it was possible to know the nature of reality beyond the sensuous experience (the phenomenal world). In finding art as the means of access to this knowledge of the world, Schopenhauer was influenced by the earlier Romantics and in holding music as that art form which reveals the innermost heart of the nature of reality he provided something of a *finale* to the development of Romanticism.

Schopenhauer's philosophy was deeply influential for the composer Richard Wagner and also had a deep impact upon the young Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's influential first book was written under the influence of Wagner and Schopenhauer. Though Nietzsche would later reject the Romanticism, and thus the influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner in his first work, he would never waver from the emphasis on the importance of art in his thought, and in this he remained somewhat in Schopenhauer's debt.



Wagner explaining his Ring Cycle to his wife Cosima, Franz Liszt (Cosima's father), and Friedrich Nietzsche. Above Wagner is a portrait of Schopenhauer. Painting by W. Beckmann

The World as Will and Representation (1844)

Schopenhauer's system rests on the Kantian distinction between

the Phenomenal World
the world as it appears to us

and

the Noumenal World
the world as it is "in-itself"

for Schopenhauer is the distinction between:

the World as Representation

and

the World as Will

In the first book the world was shown to be mere *representation*, object for a subject. In the second book, we considered it from its other side, and found that this is *will*, which proved to be simply what this world is besides being representation. In accordance with this knowledge, we called the world as representation, both as a whole and in its parts, the *objectivity of the will*, which accordingly means the will become object, i.e., representation. (*The World as Will and Representation* §30)

Schopenhauer further connects the *will* that is the world, as it is in-itself, with Plato's eternal *Ideas*:

First of all, however, the following very essential remark. I hope that in the preceding book I have succeeded in producing the conviction that what in the Kantian philosophy is called the *thing-in-itself*, and appears therein as so significant but obscure and paradoxical doctrine, is, if reached by the entirely different path we have taken, nothing but the *will* in the sphere of this concept, widened and defined in the way I have stated. [. . .] Further, I hope that, after what has been said, there will be no hesitation in recognizing again in the definite grades of the objectification of that will, which forms the in-itself of the world, what Plato called the *eternal Ideas* or unchangeable forms. [. . .]

Now if for us the will is the *thing-in-itself*, and the *Idea* is the immediate objectivity of that will at a definite grade, then we find Kant's thing-in-itself and Plato's *Idea*, for him the only "truly being"—those two great and obscure paradoxes of the two greatest philosophers of the West—to be, not exactly identical, but yet very closely related. . . . (*The World as Will and Representation* §31)

Schopenhauer's will, which is the Kantian "thing-in-itself," is very closely related but not quite the same as Plato's *Idea*:

It follows from our observations so far that, in spite of all the inner agreement between Kant and Plato, and of the identity of the aim that was in the mind of each, or of the world-view that inspired and led them to philosophize, *Idea* and thing-in-itself are not for us absolutely one and the same. On the contrary, for us the *Idea* is only the immediate, and therefore, adequate, objectivity of the thing-in-itself, which itself, however is the *will*—the will in so far as it is not yet objectified, has not yet become representation. (*The World as Will and Representation* §32)

As the will is prior to representation and to Plato's *Idea* discoverable through reason, for Schopenhauer, reason is thus subordinate to the will:

Thus, originally and by its nature, knowledge is completely the servant of the will, and, like the immediate objects which, by the application of the law of causality, becomes the starting-point of knowledge, is only objectified will. [. . .] Therefore, knowledge that serves the will really knows nothing more about objects only in so far as they exist at such a time, in such a place, in such and such circumstances, from such and such causes, and in such and such effects—in a word, as particular things. If all these relations were eliminated, the objects also would have disappeared for knowledge, just because it did not recognize in them anything else. We must also not conceal the fact that what the sciences consider in things is also essentially nothing more than all this, namely their relations, the connections of time and space, the causes of natural changes, the comparison of forms, the motives of events, and thus merely relations. [. . .] Now as a rule, knowledge remains subordinate to the service of the will, as indeed it came into being for this service; in fact, it sprang from the will, so to speak, as the head from the trunk. (*The World as Will and Representation* §33)

a contrast between two ways of looking at the "world"
 on the one hand, the world is a phenomenon in the minds of sentient beings
 but also, the phenomenal world is not a random flux, but includes orderly relations of space,
 time, causality

Kant thought the noumenal was unknowable
 even though we can make assured postulates about it on moral grounds

Schopenhauer's original and striking suggestion:

the thing in itself is really an irrational and limitless urge—he called it "the Will to Live"

the phenomenal world thus becomes the “objectification” of the primal Will
the Will is sheer striving, without direction, goal or end

As soon as knowledge, the world as representation is abolished, nothing in general is left but mere will, blind impulse. That it should obtain objectivity, should become representation, immediately supposes subject as well as object; but that this objectivity should be pure, complete, adequate objectivity of the will, supposes the object as Idea, free from the forms of the principle of sufficient reason, and the subject as pure subject of knowledge, free from individuality and from servitude to the will.

Now whoever has, in the manner stated, become so absorbed and lost in the perception of nature that he exists only as purely knowing subject, becomes in this way immediately aware that, as such, he is the condition and hence the supporter, of the world and of all objective existence, for this now shows itself as dependent on his existence. He therefore draws nature into himself, so that he feels it to be only an accident of his own being. In this sense Byron says:

Are not the mountains, waves and skies, a part
Of me and of my soul, as I of them”

But how could the person who feels this regard himself as absolutely perishable in contrast to imperishable nature? Rather will he be moved by the consciousness of what the *Upanishad* of the Veda expresses: “I am all this creation collectively, and besides me there exists no other being.” (*The World as Will and Representation* §34)

Schopenhauer now reveals where art comes into the pictured—it is through the genius of the artist that one has access to the will itself:

But now, what kind of knowledge is it that considers what continues to exist outside and independently of all relations, but which alone is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change, and is therefore 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. Whilst science, following the restless and unstable stream of the fourfold forms of reasons or grounds and consequents, is with every end it attains again and again directed farther, and can never find an ultimate goal or complete satisfaction, any more than by running we can reach the point where the clouds touch the horizon; art, on the contrary, is everywhere at its goal. For it plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of the world’s course, and holds it isolated before it. [. . .]

Only through the pure contemplation described above, 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. Now as this demands a complete forgetting of our own person and of its relations and connexions, the *gift of genius* is nothing but the most complete *objectivity*, i.e., the objective tendency of the mind, as opposed to the subjective directed to our own person, i.e., to the will. Accordingly, genius is the capacity to remain in perception, to remove from the service of the will the knowledge which originally existed only for this service. In other words, genius is the ability to leave entirely out of sight our own interest, our willing, and our aims, and consequently to discard entirely our own personality for a time, in order to remain *pure knowing subject*, the clear eye of the world. . . . (*The World as Will and Representation* §36)

The genius is distinguished from the common man:

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; and this superfluity of knowledge having become free, now becomes the subject purified of will, the clear mirror of the inner nature of the world. This explains the animation, amounting to disquietude, in men of genius, since the present can seldom satisfy them,

because it does not fill their consciousness. This gives them that restless zealous nature, that constant search for new objects worthy of contemplation, and also that longing, hardly ever satisfied, for men of like nature and stature to whom they may open their hearts. The common mortal, on the other hand, entirely filled and satisfied by the common present, is absorbed in it, and finding everywhere his like, has that special ease and comfort in daily life which are denied to the man of genius. Imagination has been rightly recognized as an essential element of genius; indeed, it has sometimes been regarded as identical with genius, but this is not correct. The objects of genius as such are the eternal Ideas, the persistent, essential forms of the world and of all its phenomena. [. . .] Therefore the man of genius requires imagination, in order to see in things not what nature has actually formed, but what she endeavored to form, yet did not bring about, because of the conflict of her forms with one another. . . . (The World as Will and Representation §36)

Schopenhauer comments on the fine line between genius and madness:

It is often remarked that genius and madness have a side where they touch and even pass over into each other, and even poetic inspiration has been called a kind of madness; *amabilis insania*, as Horace calls it; and in the introduction to *Oberon* Wieland speaks of “amiable madness.” Even Aristotle, as quoted by Seneca, is supposed to have said “There has been no great mind without an admixture of madness.” Plato expresses it in the above mentioned myth of the cave by saying that those who outside the cave have seen the true sunlight and the things that actually are (the Ideas), cannot afterwards see within the cave any more, because their eyes have grown unaccustomed to the darkness; they no longer recognize the shadow-forms correctly. They are therefore ridiculed for their mistakes by those others who have never left that cave and those shadow-forms. Also in the *Phaedrus* (245 A), he distinctly says that without a certain madness there can be no genuine poet, in fact (249 D) that everyone appears mad who recognizes the eternal Ideas in fleeting things. . . . (The World as Will and Representation §36)

Here Schopenhauer points out that there is some element of the genius in all of us—and then he will go on to emphasize what distinguishes the genius and then, exactly, what the work of art is:

Now, according to our explanation, genius consists in the ability to know, independently of the principles of sufficient reason, not individual things which have their existence only in the relation, but the Ideas of such things, and in the ability to be, in face of these, the correlative of the Idea, and hence no longer individual, but pure subject of knowing. Yet this ability must be inherent in all men in a lesser and different degree, as otherwise they would be just an incapable of enjoying works of art as of producing them. Generally, they would have no susceptibility at all to the beautiful and to the sublime; indeed, these words could have no meaning for them. We must therefore assume as existing in all men that power of recognizing in things their Ideas, of divesting themselves for a moment of their personality, unless indeed there are some who are not capable of any aesthetic pleasure at all. The man of genius excels them only in the far higher degree and more continuous duration of this kind of knowledge. These enable him to retain that thoughtful contemplation necessary for him to repeat what is thus known in a voluntary and international work, such repetition being the work of art. Through this he communicates to others the Idea he has grasped. Therefore this Idea remains unchanged and the same, and hence aesthetic pleasure is essentially one and the same, whether it be called forth by a work of art, or directly by the contemplation of nature and of life. The work of art is merely a means of facilitating that knowledge in which this pleasure consists. That the Idea comes to us more easily from the work of art than directly from nature and from reality, arises solely from the fact that the artist, who knew only the Idea and not reality, clearly repeated in his work only the Idea, separated it out from reality, and omitted all disturbing contingencies. The artist lets us peer into the world through his eyes. . . . (The World as Will and Representation §37)

Schopenhauer's philosophy is, in the end, deeply pessimistic. The will to live is the essence of reality and all willing springs from suffering:

All *willing* springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering. Fulfillment brings this to an end; yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied. [. . .] No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines, but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which relieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow. Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace. (*The World as Will and Representation* §38)

since in willing, which we do all the time, we are trying to change the state we are in
it follows that this state is felt to be unsatisfactory
but as soon as we achieve what we are willing, we are propelled into willing something else
this willing is the essential nature of everything
thus the world is a scene of perpetual frustration and conflict

but there are certain circumstances where we are able to suspend, if only temporarily, the activity of willing—primarily in aesthetic experience
accepts here Kant's notion of 'disinterested contemplation'

When, however, an external cause or inward disposition suddenly raises us out of the endless stream of willing, and snatches knowledge from the thralldom of the will, the attention is now no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively; it is entirely given up to them in so far as they are merely representations, and not motives. Then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with us. (*The World as Will and Representation* §38)

The experience of the *sublime* is particularly important for Schopenhauer:

There is a slight challenge to abide in pure knowledge, to turn away from all willing, and precisely in this way we have a transition from the feeling of the beautiful to that of the sublime. It is the faintest trace of the sublime in the beautiful, and beauty itself appears here only in a slight degree. The following is an example almost as weak.

Let us transport ourselves to a very lonely region of boundless horizons, under a perfectly cloudless sky, trees and plants in the perfectly motionless air, no animals, no human beings, no moving masses of water, the profoundest silence. Such surroundings are as it were a summons to seriousness, to contemplation with complete emancipation from all willing and its cravings; but it is just this that gives to such a scene of mere solitude and profound peace a touch of the sublime. For, since it affords no objects, either favorable or unfavorable, to the will that is always in need of strife and attainment, there is left only the state of pure contemplation, and whoever is incapable of this is abandoned with shameful ignominy to the emptiness of unoccupied will, to the torture and misery of boredom. (*The World as Will and Representation* §39)

Therefore if, for example, I contemplate a tree aesthetically, i.e., with artistic eyes, and thus recognize not it but its Idea, it is immediately of no importance whether it is this tree of its ancestor that flourished a thousand years ago, and whether the contemplator is this individual. Or any other living anywhere at any time. The particular thing and the knowing individual are abolished with the principle of sufficient reason, and nothing remains but the Idea and the pure subject of knowing, which together constitute the adequate objectivity of the will at this grade. And the Idea is released not only from time but also from space; for the Idea is not really this spatial form

which floats before me, but its expression, its pure significance, its innermost being, disclosing itself and appealing to me; and it can be wholly the same, in spite of great difference in the spatial relations of the form. (*The World as Will and Representation* §41)

art thus exists and justifies itself as a means of escape from the tyranny of will and the misery of existence

art alone makes life at times tolerable

leads to a Buddhist renunciation of desire and selfhood

the aesthetic experience leads to knowledge of the Platonic Idea

puts to sleep the restless craving of the Will

for a time deadens the pain of being

Therefore, those eternally praiseworthy masters of art expressed the highest wisdom perceptibly in their works. Here is the summit of all art that has followed the will in its adequate objectivity, namely in the Ideas, through all the grades, from the lowest where it is affected, and its nature is unfolded, by causes, then where it is similarly affected by stimuli, and finally by motives. And now art ends by presenting the free self-abolition of the will through the one great quieter that dawns on it from the most perfect knowledge of its own nature. (*The World as Will and Representation* §48)

very clearly sees this experience of art and the knowledge that comes with it

as different from science and “viewing things from the principle of sufficient reason

art is essentially a cognitive enterprise

with its own special object of knowledge—the Platonic Ideas

in aesthetic experience we become pure will-less subjects of knowledge

works of art exist to present Ideas

each art is specialized with respect to content

architecture: the conflict between gravity and rigidity

sculpture: expression of human beauty and grace

painting: traits of human character

literature (lyric, epic and dramatic poetry): human character traits, natures of highly individual people

summit of poetical art is tragedy

Tragedy is to be regarded, and is recognized, as the summit of poetic art, both as regards the greatness of the effect and the difficulty of the achievement. For the whole of our discussion, it is very significant and worth noting that the purpose of this highest poetical achievement is the description of the terrible side of life. 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 are all here presented to us; and here is to be found a significant hint as to the nature of the world and of existence. It is the antagonism of the will with itself which is here most completely unfolded at the highest grade of its objectivity, and which comes into fearful prominence. [. . .] Here and there it reaches thoughtfulness and is softened more or less by the light of knowledge, until at last in the individual case this knowledge is purified and enhanced by suffering itself. It then reaches the point where the phenomenon, the veil of Maya, no longer deceives it. It sees through the form of the phenomenon, the *principium individuationis*; the egoism resting on this expires with it. The *motives* that were previously so powerful now lose their force, and instead of them, the complete knowledge of the real nature of the world, acting as a *quieter* of the will, produces resignation, the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will-to-live itself. (*The World as Will and Representation* §51)

tragedy brings us face to face with the misery of life
 shows life in all its terror and futility
 stripping away the veil of illusion
 shows “the strife of the will with itself”
 tragedy thus produces resignation
 the surrender not merely of life, but of the very will to live
 Schopenhauer then focuses on music and gives it an exalted role

The (Platonic) Ideas are the adequate objectification of the will. To stimulate the knowledge of these by depicting individual things (for works of art are themselves always such) is the aim of all the other arts (and is possible with a corresponding change in the knowing subject). Hence all of them objectify the will only indirectly, in other words, by means of the Ideas. As our world is nothing but the phenomenon or appearance of the Ideas in plurality through entrance into the *principium individuationis* (the form of knowledge possible to the individual as such), music, since it passes over the Ideas, is also quite independent of the phenomenal world, positively ignores it, and, to a certain extent, could still exist even if there were no world at all, which cannot be said of the other arts. Thus music is as *immediate* an objectification and copy of the whole *will* as the world itself is, indeed as the Ideas are, the multiple phenomenon of which constitutes the world of individual things. Therefore music is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but a *copy of the will itself*, the objectivity of which is 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. [. . .] (*The World as Will and Representation* §52)

music “stands alone, quite cut off from all the other arts. In it we do not recognize the copy or repetition of any Idea of existence in the world”
 It is the copy of the will itself

this philosophy of music had a major role in late 19th century reflection on musical aesthetics
 Schopenhauer’s philosophy had impact on Wagner, shaped transition from early to later works
 a transition from a more fully Romantic conception
 opera as an ideal drama in which all the arts are synthesized to produce the most powerful
 emotional expression
 the later view emphasizes music as the greatest of all arts
 for Schopenhauer: we have art so as to learn how to die

The pleasure of everything beautiful, the consolation afforded by art, the enthusiasm of the artist, which enables him to forget the cares of life, this one advantage of the genius over other men alone compensating him for the suffering that is heightened in proportion to the clearness of consciousness, and for the desert loneliness among a different race of men, all this is due to the fact that, as we shall see later on, the in-itself of life, the will, existence itself, is a constant suffering, and is partly woeful, partly fearful. The same thing, on the other hand, as representation alone, purely contemplated, or repeated through art, free from pain, presents us with a significant spectacle. This purely knowable side of the world and its repetition in any art is the element of the artist. He is captivated by a consideration of the spectacle of the will’s objectification. He sticks to this, and does not get tired of contemplating it, and of repeating it in his descriptions. Meanwhile, he himself bears the cost of producing that play; in other words, he himself is the will objectifying itself and remaining in constant suffering. That pure, true, and profound knowledge of the inner nature of the world now becomes for him an end in itself; at it he stops. Therefore it does not become for him a quieter of the will [. . .]; it does not deliver him for 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 World as Will and Representation* §52)