

# A Historico-Cultural Critique of Reason and Metaphysical Irrationalism in Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy

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## Abstract

*This paper is concerned with the dramatics of intra-conceptual divergence between Schopenhauer's metaphysical irrationalism and metaphysical rationalism of the triumvirate of German Idealists as represented by Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. In doing this, the paper brings into critical focus the prevalence of intra-conceptual disagreements in philosophical discourses while at the same time placing emphasis on the contemporary relevance of Schopenhauer's philosophy in the spiritual, ethical and dialogical significance of inter-cultural philosophy. Most important is the cautionary stance this paper takes against the generally acceptable interpretation of Schopenhauer's philosophy as pessimistic. It argues that it is only when Schopenhauer's philosophy is interpreted within the tradition of metaphysical rationalism that his philosophy can be interpreted as pessimistic. When taking out of the judgmental yardstick of metaphysical rationalism, the 'compassionate grid' on which Schopenhauer's philosophy is built becomes a vital moral spring of action which can stem the widespread of violence in our contemporary world.*

*Keywords: intra-conceptual divergence, metaphysical irrationalism and rationalism, Schopenhauer's philosophy, compassion*

## Introduction

The philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer made his queer and critical emergence in the elongated history of philosophy during the modern era. In characterizing modern philosophy, Friedrich Ueberweg points out that the modern period in the history of philosophy is the process in which philosophy "discontinued its sub-service to theology, developing, gradually into an independent mode of 'knowing' in the intellectual history of modern Europe. It is the threshold of philosophy's independent mode of knowledge concerning itself with the laws of nature and the nature of the human mind" (Ueberweg, 1985).

Ueberweg further divides the modern era in the history of philosophy into three periods. The first period is the transitional period, which was thematically marked by the renewal of Platonism. The second period was marked by the thematic characteristics of empiricism, rationalism and

skepticism; from Bacon to Descartes. The third period is characterized as the epoch of Kantian criticism, consequences and implications. It is the period in which Arthur Schopenhauer (the proponent of metaphysical irrationalism with human compassion) and Fichte, Schelling and Hegel (the triumvirate of metaphysical rationality and rational justice) made their controversial and highly polemical contributions to conceptual formations in the history of philosophy.

The first part of this paper discusses the problem of intra-conceptual divergence between metaphysical irrationalism and metaphysical rationalism; the second part discusses Schopenhauer's rejection of metaphysical rationalism and its replacement with the 'Will'. Then, a critique of Schopenhauer's philosophy is provided, while the contemporary relevance of Schopenhauer's philosophy is discussed in the last part of the paper.

### **Intra-conceptual Divergence in the Conceptual Formulations of German Idealism**

The core of the problematic of German idealism is the controversial role of reason in the ontological conceptualization of reality. German idealism began when leading philosophers of the Kantian era yielded to Kant's call that physically based evidence must be made the *touchstone of truth*. The real conflict between Schopenhauer and the triumvirate of reason (Fichte, Schelling and Hegel) is Schopenhauer's rejection of reason as the ultimate touchstone of truth. Schopenhauer argues relentlessly, that the inner-core of reality is ultimately irrational. The Will, and not Reason, is primal.

However, it is important that certain clarifications are made. Both the triumvirate of reason and Schopenhauer followed different pathways to respond to the question: what is the touchstone of reality? Thus, the conflict between Schopenhauer and the triumvirate is more or less a family quarrel. This is because both Schopenhauer and the triumvirate are metaphysicians. Both, however, pontificate different aspects of the inner-core of Being. While Schopenhauer argues that the 'primal stuff' is the Will, the triumvirate posits that the real is Reason.

If Schopenhauer and the triumvirate are idealists in the discipline of metaphysics, then the question that thrusts itself upon us is this: what were those influences on Schopenhauer which goaded him to take such a radical stance against Reason? Important amongst them is that Schopenhauer saw life as a problem and decided to dedicate his entire lifetime reflecting on these problems. As a non-philosopher, he came under the influence of Kant attempting to complete the philosophy of Kant by relying on experience and not Hegelian abstraction (Jekyl, 1971).

Another important influence on the development of Schopenhauer was his relationship with his mother. It was a warlike situation between mother and son; in such a way that Schopenhauer predicatively claimed that the fame of his own mother (who was a novelist) would diminish while he would become greater in posterity. This influence explains the prevalent view of Schopenhauer as a misogynist.

Another strong influence on Schopenhauer's philosophy is his relationship with Eastern philosophy, especially Buddhism. His theory of the phenomenal character of empirical reality was powerfully re-enforced by oriental philosophy. It is not surprising, therefore, that he associated his theory of the world as 'idea' or 'presentation' with the Indian doctrine of *Maya*: appearance (Copleston 1971:260).

The most striking influence on his philosophical development, however, was the prevailing idealism, which took hold of the cultural life of Germany during his early and late philosophical career. The extent to which he was influenced by idealism which percolated the cultural and intellectual life of Germany during this time can be gleaned from his fulmination against Fichte, Schelling and most importantly, Hegel. In fact, the influence of Fichte's, Schelling's, and Hegel's philosophy completely enveloped Schopenhauer's.

Further, Schopenhauer's philosophical system is a simple system. Copleston calls Schopenhauer's philosophical system *Transcendental Voluntaristic Idealism*. Firstly, it is idealism in the sense that the world is our idea or that the world is our presentation of it. Secondly, it is *voluntaristic* in the sense that the concept of Will rather than that of Reason or Thought is made the key to reality. Thirdly, it is *transcendental* in the sense that the absolute is the Will which manifests itself in the multiple phenomena of experience.

Schopenhauer himself calls his system *Immanent Dogmatism*. It is dogmatic because it is the world, given in its ultimate element. It is immanent in the sense that it remains within the purview of concrete experience. This system is against the transcendentalism which Kant overthrew, it is also against what he calls the *windy nonsense of the three modern-university sophists*, a phrase which refers to Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. The difference being that as a broad based, analytic and systematic philosophy in its composition, Schopenhauer's philosophy starts with the propositions that grounds and consequents exist only in the world (Jekyl, 1971:3).

According to Schopenhauer, theistic philosophies derive the world and its development of nature from a Will. But this Will is by the intervention of knowledge and matter, acting on things rather than in things. However, Schopenhauer's Will does not act upon things, it acts in them. Schopenhauer

agreed with theism that the ultimate essence of things is the Will. He, however, rejects what he calls the 'pantheistic absurdity' that the Will which works in things is 'a god'. The 'will' that works in things, is the Will-to-live.

Schopenhauer also takes time to react to and show his dissatisfaction with Hegelianism. He claims that he has an unusual enemy to fight in Hegelianism; the argument that 'the real is rational and the rational is real'. The point of course, is that Schopenhauer's philosophical method of 'immanent dogmatism' was against the philosophical spirit of the time and therefore was overtly ignored. Nonetheless, each of the two philosophies is, of course, the reverse of a leaf.

Hegelianism was the standard to which everyone rallied, while Schopenhauer's philosophy found no applause, no adherents, and was systematically ignored, because its presence constituted a crisis of alternative to the profitable game of the professors of philosophy as surely as daylight put an end to the picture of a magic lantern.

## **Schopenhauer's Rejection of Metaphysical Rationalism and its Replacement with Metaphysical Irrationalism**

### **The will in nature**

The fundamental trait of Schopenhauer's philosophy which distinguishes and puts him in opposition to all the previous systems is his complete separation of the 'will' from knowledge. His metaphysics rests on the Kantian assertion that the thing-in-itself is unknowable, but consummated this by saying that the thing-in-itself; is the Will. It is that which gives to everything whatsoever the force by which it comes to exist and operates. The Will manifests itself (1) not only as the voluntary actions of animals, but also as the organic machinery of their living body (2) it also manifests as the vegetative principle in plants (3) and also apparent in the inorganic kingdom. Every original force that manifests itself in physical and chemical phenomena is exactly identical with that which we find within ourselves as will. The particular manifestations of this 'will' are set in motion in human beings by motives, while in the organic life of animals and plants they are set in motion by stimuli, and in the inorganic world, by mere causes.

Knowledge and its substratum; the intellect, are phenomena totally different from the Will. Knowledge is not an essential part of the will, it is an accomplishment of the higher stages of the objectification of will. Knowledge is physical, not metaphysical as the will; hence, the will is not conditioned by knowledge, as was supposed by previous philosophers. Knowledge is conditioned by the Will.

The Will, is an 'all-inclusive irrationality' which underpins reality. It is the eternal and indestructible element in man, which constitutes the principle of life. It is not the soul, but the 'radical of the soul'. The soul is a compound; a conjunction of the Will with intellect. The Will is not self-conscious; it is known through its objectification. The order of things according to Schopenhauer is therefore as follows:

First, the will as things-in-itself, completely original and underived. Secondly, its mere visibility, objectification, the body. Thirdly, the knowledge, as a mere function of one organ of his body. This organ is the objectified will-to-know, the will-to-know becomes presentment, for the will requires knowledge as mere function of one organ of his body (Schopenhauer, 1911:25).

Another central point is the differentiation of the will from freewill. The freewill is will, enlightened by knowledge; and therefore, motives are its moving causes. This means that there is a freewill when the influence comes from without, which causes the act, conveyed through a brain. Freewill is intelligible while the Will is not. It is severed from knowledge. The endosperm of freewill is motive. "The aboriginal is everywhere the will, which fills all and in everything manifests itself immediately, thereby proclaiming that everything is appearance of the will (Jekyll, 1971:30).

From the above analysis about the Will in nature, one can deduce the fact that Schopenhauer's philosophy is really a determined counterbalance against Reason. His metaphysics is metaphysical irrationalism because he severs reason from the Will.

### **Compassion is the foundation of morality, not duty**

Schopenhauer believes that the moral significance of existence is more important than the physical significance of the world. In his essay on human nature, he identifies two types of truths: moral truths and physical truths. Moral truths have internal significance, while physical truths have external significance. Consequently, it would be a fundamental blunder, to conclude that the world is made up of physical truths alone. Although, the moral truths of the world are not easy to explicate; the search for the facts of morality is a worthwhile effort.

Schopenhauer argues that his predecessors have not been able to put ethics on a secure basis. Kant's foundation of ethics which for over the years have been held to offer ethics its firm basis has its own philosophical errors. Kant's ethics as duty is an inadmissible assumption disguised in theological ethics (Schopenhauer, 1911:197).

Thus, the questions that the study of morals should address are these:

first, what is that thing which actually encourages each one of us to act justly? Second, what is that thing that counterbalances the strong inclination to injustice and harshness? Thus, an ethical basis is needed, which would open us to understand in practical and experiential terms our moral inclinations. It is difficult to ascribe rationality to the moral behaviour of human beings because of their suffering of irrational indignity (Schopenhauer, 1911:208).

He then urges us not to consider the moral dignity of a man, not to focus our attention on his moral dignity because this could lead us to hate him or even despise him; nor should we consider his bad actions, his narrow understanding and perverse ideas, but our attention should be fixed upon his sufferings, his needs, his anxieties and his pains. Humans are in the same ethical crisis. The reason to sympathize and commiserate with 'the other' as the basis of Schopenhauer's ethics is compassion for 'others'.

Man, accordingly, is not inherently moral, positing that human morality is based on the influence of law and the ostensible show of public morality. It is the fear of punishment and the crave for public honour which cage the inner and innate depravity of man. It is not enough for ethics to say it wants to prescribe a moral pathway for man; it cannot even do it. As for the reasons he gives for rejecting this aim of ethics as a physical science, which points out how men ought to live, he argues that:

The concept 'ought', the imperative form of ethics, is valued in theological ethics alone; outside the limits of which it loses all sense and significance. I assert on the contrary, that the aim and object of ethics is to interpret, explain, and trace to their ultimate ground man's s very diverse ways of acting in a moral regard (Schopenhauer, 1911:208).

To discover the basis of ethics, morality needs to go back to experience to find out whether there are actions to which one must ascribe genuine moral worth. Actions such as voluntary justice, pure love of our neighbours, and real nobility of soul are worthwhile. These springs of action, are the ultimate ground of morality on which ethics can be established. Within this purview, Schopenhauer divides the springs of human action into two: the moral and anti-moral springs of action. The anti-moral springs of action are egoism, malevolence, envy and schadenfreude (malicious pleasure in the misfortune of others).

Schopenhauer conclusively reduces everything to only three fundamental springs of human action, and no motive can operate except by setting on one or other of these in motion.

**Egoism:** Which wills our own pleasure; it is boundless.

**Malice:** Which wills the woe of another; it may rise to extreme cruelty.

**Compassion:** Which wills the happiness of another; it may rise to nobility and greatness of mind.

Accordingly, the fundamental principle of ethics is: "injure no one, but rather help all men as far as you can". Since all humans are engaged in struggle and strife; compassion, which consists of two parts, justice and charity is the mainspring of all genuine actions.

However, the questions that arise from this ethical discourse are these: agreed that compassion is the mainspring of all genuine actions, why does it move one person and does not move the other person? Can ethics turn a hard-hearted man into a compassionate and therefore a just and humane action? No. This is because in Schopenhauer's view, the difference of character is innate and in-eradicable. Human character is determined. The anti-moral spring of action, is as much inborn in the malicious man, as are the poison fangs and glands in the snake. Schopenhauer cites authorities such as Plato, Aristotle and Montaigne to support himself. However, it is in Kant that he finds a stronger support. By supplanting Kant's conception of the foundation of ethics with compassion he effectively argues that the basis of the empirical character of human being is compassion and not duty.

In this sense, human character in its astonishing rigid immutability cannot be ignored. The difference in the character of man is due to the fact that the three ethical springs of human action which are egoism, malice and compassion, exist in each individual in extra-ordinary different proportions, and these proportions will determine the motives which act in the man and lead him to do one thing or the other. Everything in this world acts according to its nature (Schopenhauer, 1911:129).

This determinist basis of Schopenhauer's ethical system is attained when one individual immediately recognizes himself in another person. Individuation is mere appearance. The only real thing is the essence. Therefore, the highest stage of ethical development is attained when one has grown to recognize that the other man, who in appearance is different from one, is in fact, metaphysically, one and the same with one.

### Critique

A plausible critique of Schopenhauer's philosophical system is that it lacks the most essential condition of permanence. That is, it does not have the possibility of an all-sided and intrinsically harmonious, systematic development. Schopenhauer's philosophy is a pack of original aphorisms, loosely united with each other in a seeming whole, but in reality destroying

each other by contradictions which are hardly concealed. Despite his continuous assertions that human beings are innately bad and depraved, he still asserts that there is a moral spring of action which is not motivated by egoism and malevolence. This moral spring of action is compassion which is also innate (Jekyl, 1971:197).

If there are innate moral springs of action, then, human nature cannot be wholly bad from his innate self. There must, at least from the point of view of the Will, be the presence of both. To argue that man is innately bad, and at the same time accept that man can be just, charitable and compassionate is an obvious contradiction.

Further, the Will, which is the fundamental reality of all appearance, is irrational, yet according to Schopenhauer, the character of man is determinate. How can 'something' that is determinately fixed and undeniably rational, objectify an underlying reality which is irrational, unfixed and without organization? It would have been better if Schopenhauer made the Will infinitely irrational as much as possible even in its process of objectifying itself. But nothing gives what it does not fundamentally possess, no matter what. Underlying irrationality cannot objectify itself in rationality without an unfathomable organizing primordially. So, the idea of a fluctuating and determinate human character is objectified by the Will; the domain from which both rationality and irrationality sprout.

From the above critique; it is simply implausible, for Schopenhauer to sever knowledge from the will in nature. It has been noted above that, Schopenhauer himself accepts that the world or existence is organized, intellectual, and therefore, rational in all appearances, but disagrees that the underlying reality from which these take their appearances is without knowledge; therefore, irrational. This is a contradiction. Whatever is fundamentally irrational, cannot support a rational mode of life. Irrationality should be objectified by rationality not vice versa. As a result of these and many other contradictions, Schopenhauer's philosophy cannot but remain a disjointed system, whose broad base cannot support its uncoordinated arguments. Furthermore, by exaggerating the depravity of human nature, Schopenhauer becomes a willing model of a general interpretive pessimist of human ethical condition (Schopenhauer, 1911:248).

However, despite these obvious weaknesses in Schopenhauer's philosophical doctrines, they still remain a very rich and commendable philosophy. By his efforts to turn idealism to 'immanent dogmatism', he has shown that, human suffering, the vanity of his existence, and the crisis of intellectual freedom are important subjects upon which critical philosophy can be turned. By building his ethical philosophy upon the twin daughters



of compassion; justice and charity, he redeems his pessimistic view of man and shows that despite all his emphasis on the depravity of mankind, man can still, after all, live in peace and harmony with himself, and the 'other'. Disregarding the obvious exaggeration, Schopenhauer's philosophy is a depth with the surface of infinity.

### **Contemporary Relevance of Schopenhauer's Philosophy**

The contemporary relevance of Schopenhauer's philosophy is enormous. Apart from the partly Nietzschean consequence of Schopenhauer's philosophy, it still has tripod significance and this can be identified in the spiritual, ethical and dialogical aspects of human hopes as the inherent possibilities of Schopenhauer's ideas. First, we find Schopenhauer substituting Reason with the Will; metaphysical irrationalism. Thus, it would not be out of place to recollect that the delicate relationship between Faith and Reason is one of the most perennial problems in philosophic-theological debate. However, with Schopenhauer's substitution of Reason with the Will, then, we are open to the potential of using the Will and its essentials, such as proper understanding of anti-moral and pro-moral understanding of human actions, to establish the possibility a non-religious but cultural core of existence. Now that Reason has wound up on itself and its limitations have been exposed, we begin to experience the possibility that the Reason and the Will are not parallel concepts; they are two sides of a coin; a binary. The implications can be traced in the intellectual history of Europe through Schopenhauer's successful critique of the most formidable triumvirate of Reason: Fichte, Shelling and Hegel.

Furthermore, listening to the wisdom of Schopenhauer opens up 'compassion' as a viable philosophical concept. By making it clear that care should be taken in appropriating moral dignity to human beings, Schopenhauer's revolutionary argument that the moral basis of ethics is 'compassion', shows that mankind's hope of rejuvenation can only be accomplished if we develop the compassionate disposition in us. Without this, mankind may not be able to move into the age of maturity which it is constantly yearning for.

By introducing the concept 'maya' into his philosophical doctrines, Schopenhauer explored the wisdom in other cultures. Although, he was not the first, but by opening himself up to other cultures in his contemporaneous existence within the Hegelian influence, he effectively lent credence to the fact that the declaration of Africa as a 'Dark Continent' is a gross philosophical error.

## Conclusion

This essay has traversed the intellectual and cultural experiences of Schopenhauer as a philosopher. It is glaring that Schopenhauer contributed immensely to the history of 'compassion' as a concept. His emphasis on compassion, charity and justice shows that his philosophy may not be wholly pessimistic after all. These triadic concepts of moral spring of action counterbalance the generally received interpretation of Schopenhauer as a pessimist. These triadic concepts offer glimpses of personal redemption and social hope.

What makes him outstanding in his contributing influence is that he remains one of the German philosophers who made possible and plausible the position of cross-cultural communication in philosophy since he successfully blended Buddhist frame of mind with that of European frame of mind. This can be located within his understanding of Buddhist outlines of the idea of 'suffering of the world' and the way to redemption through 'compassion'.

However, the radical dimension of his ethics is underpinned by his originality of the severance of reason from will and emphasis on compassion and not duty. This dialogical import of Schopenhauer's philosophy is outstandingly founded on compassion as the grid which agglutinates the 'will' with 'reason'. It is in this sense that Schopenhauer remains relevant in the contemporary human global search for inter-cultural dialogue and social relationships. It should be taken into infinite contemporary cognizance, however, that Schopenhauer's philosophy is non-religious. The basis of his ethics is not fetishistic of reason either, but a romanticist appropriation of the will as a tool of historico-cultural critique of ideas.

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