

## Aesthetic Theory

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### **Abstract:**

Arthur Schopenhauer has been characterized as an “unremittingly gloomy” philosopher (Eagleton, Meaning 48). He undoes grand conceptions of human life and reduces the human being to a scuttling, pitiful, “diminutive insect(s)” in a gesture that is reminiscent of Swift’s savagery. I start from his “pessimism”, because of the presence of a radical impulse present in a depressive outlook. I say radical because it defamiliarizes a familiar world which is taken for granted, allowing for new ways of seeing and conceptualizing reality. Through this paper, I wish to engage with the possibilities that are generated as a result of this outlook. I will argue that his conception of art (seeing it in the broad sense of painting, poetry, music, literature, etc.) rather than using the aesthetic for purposes that do not relate to art, is one that uses the conventional definition of art. In this paper I will examine his theorization of the aesthetic state as a “painless state” and look at the implications that arise from such a formulation.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic Theory, Aesthetic State, Idiosyncrasy, Pessimism, Human Life, Reality, Philosophy.

“...he observed how contemptible a thing was human grandeur, which could be mimicked by such diminutive insects as I: and yet, said he, I dare engage, these creatures have their titles and distinctions of honour; they contrive little nests and burrows, that they call houses and cities; they make a figure in dress and equipage; they love, they fight, they cheat, they betray”. (Swift, 92)

Arthur Schopenhauer has been characterized as an “unremittingly gloomy” philosopher (Eagleton, Meaning 48). Bleak, cynical, somber, disturbing, etc. are a few of the adjectives that

find themselves in commentaries on his works.<sup>1</sup> It is his conception of the world that leads to such epithets. He undoes grand conceptions of human life and reduces the human being to a scuttling, pitiful, “diminutive insect(s)” in a gesture that is reminiscent of Swift’s savagery. His philosophical system will be discussed in detail in the next section; here I wish to make a few introductory remarks and briefly explain the arguments that this paper contains. I start from his “pessimism”, because of the presence of a radical impulse present in a depressive outlook. I say radical because it defamiliarizes a familiar world which is taken for granted, allowing for new ways of seeing and conceptualizing reality. So, when Janaway says that in the second book of *The World as Will and Representation*, we descend into a disturbing picture of a world that is will, manifesting itself in millions of individuals, and through them inflicting on itself pointless and unredeemed suffering, a ‘world of constantly needy creatures who continue for a time merely by devouring one another, pass their existence in anxiety and want, and often endure terrible afflictions, until they fall at last into the arms of death’ (in Schopenhauer’s words). (9-10, my italics)

He betrays an alarm and simultaneously distances himself from such a world. But this miserable world is the world that Schopenhauer inhabited and the one that we inhabit as well. There is no problem as such with his characterization, it is perfectly valid – Schopenhauer does present a disturbing world. Yet most commentaries, such as the one quoted above, tend to see the ‘disturbing’ world as an idiosyncratic projection, rather than a very real world. Interesting, “Idiosyncratic” is a word that Janaway uses for him (16). Through this paper, I wish to engage with the possibilities that are generated as a result of this outlook. One such possibility arises in his aesthetic theory in the figure of the genius.

Schopenhauer sees the space of the aesthetic as one of relief and freedom from the world of never-ending need and desire. I will argue that his conception of art (seeing it in the broad sense of painting, poetry, music, literature, etc.) rather than using the aesthetic for purposes that do not relate to art, is one that uses the conventional definition of art. In this paper I will examine his theorization of the aesthetic state as a “painless state” and look at the implications that arise from such a formulation. Not only does Schopenhauer see art as a reliever of sorrow, an escape from

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy*(681), or Janaway’s “Introduction” in the *Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*(1,10)

the will, for him art also performs the aesthetic function of maintaining an “exalted” realm (Scruton, 14).

### **Of Human Being: The Darkness of the Cave**

In answering some basic questions in the *World as Will and Representation*<sup>2</sup> such as the meaning and purpose of human existence, or what the world is, Schopenhauer negates any purposeful existence, believing that human life is a joke; but ironically, even jokes have a purpose. Existence is robbed of any purpose, and the human is brought lower than the animal at various places. Comparison is made with the tiniest of creatures such as mites, in order to explain what the world really is. There is no purpose of the “torment an agony” which characterizes the world we live in; there is no higher goal to be reached anywhere (Studies). The pain that we suffer is pointless.

There are two things which make it impossible to believe that this world is the successful work of an all-wise, all-good, and, at the same time, all-powerful Being; firstly, the misery which abounds in it everywhere; and secondly, the obvious imperfection of its highest product, man, who is a burlesque of what he should be (Schopenhauer, Studies 13).

The two poles of human life are “need” and “boredom”. Either the human being (whom he often refers to as a miserable and needy creature) constantly desires; if there is no desire, this results in an existential boredom (Studies 10). Once a desire is satisfied, another emerges to take its place. Here it becomes very important to mention that Schopenhauer is the first modern philosopher who places the “abstract category of desire” at the centre of his work (Eagleton, *Ideology* 158-9). In a society of “possessive individualism, “desire has been reified into a thing”. Desire has no purpose or end, it is not attached to anything; it floats, possessing a capacity to latch onto anything. It is capitalist society “where the only end of accumulation is to accumulate afresh” (Eagleton, *Ideology* 158-9)

Atwell starts his account of the Schopenhauerian aesthetic by giving a context to Schopenhauer’s despair. He explains how the philosopher’s trip to Europe (in his youth) where he

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<sup>2</sup> From here on it will be abbreviated as WWR. Citations are from the first volume of the work.

witnessed the misery of the masses, prisoners and prostitutes left him horrified. Atwell quotes Schopenhauer:

In my 17<sup>th</sup> year, without any learned school education, I was gripped by the misery of life, as was Buddha in his youth when he looked upon sickness, old age, pain, and death ... and my conclusion was that this world could not be the work of an all-good being, but rather that of a devil who had brought creatures into existence in order to take delight in their suffering; to this the data pointed, and the belief that it is so won the upper hand (81, my italics)

This shows that for Schopenhauer the world - and this metaphor has been used by many commentaries – exists as a coin, which has two faces or aspects to it. Both sides exist simultaneously at the same time; one side is the world as representation, and the other side is the world as will. The world that appears to the subject is the subject's representation. The same world is will, and the same world is representation (WWR 1.162). Every human is both will and representation. The phenomenal world is subject to the principle of sufficient reason, wherein things have a reason for happening, a cause for occurring, unlike the will which simply is. The laws of motivation, causation is present in the world of phenomena, and not to the world of will. The world as representation contains the subject/object division. The worlds of will and representation are not two geographically distinct places; both exist in the same time and same place. It is only a question of what we can see and what we can know. However, to posit such ideas is confusing, because the world as will does not function according to ideas of space or time. It does not evolve or expand. In the same way, every particular act of will on the part of a knowing individual (which itself is only phenomenon of the will as thing-in-itself) necessarily has motive, without which that act would never take place (WWR 1.163)

The will is. This metaphysical entity is the ultimate reality of the Schopenhauerian conceptualization of the world. The will is the ever-pulsating thing which manifests or represents itself as the world that we see. If the world as we know it consists of matter in the form of rocks, soil, plants, animals, human beings. These are the different grades or levels of the will's objectivity. The lowest form of the will's objectification is gravity, which has no "final goal" in fact that thought becomes almost an absurdity. "Eternal becoming, endless flux, belong to the revelation of the essential nature of the will" (Schopenhauer, WWR 1.164). The ultimate will is the "absence of

all aims, of all limits”. It is an “endless striving” (Schopenhauer, WWR 1.164). The will is outside time, space and causality. It is self-determining: as Eagleton says, a “malevolent caricature of the Almighty” (Meaning 48). The will in itself is not subject to any of the laws that govern the lives of the human beings. Rather, it has created them in order to continue its own existence. The prized human being has no purpose except to continue living in order for the will to reproduce.

In the world of representation, the subject appears as the objectivity of the will, that is, s/he is a form of the objectified will. In this world the human being is an individual, and “knows” as an individual, differentiated from another individual and so on. This human being knows according to the principle of sufficient reason, and will not know the (Platonic) Idea of the will’s objectivity, which lies outside his cognitive limits. “The plurality of such individuals can be conceived only through time and space, their arising and passing away through causality” (WWR 1.169). Ordinary human consciousness is “interested” consciousness – Interested in survival, and the prolongation of life (which is the interest of the will; it is governed by the will (Schopenhauer qtd. in Young 108). Young explains further, the self is the central point. Interested consciousness is also self-interested consciousness. Interested consciousness is determined by our location within space-time and causality. Young will call this defining characteristic “egocentricity” (109). Therefore here we miss out the “absolute essence of things” and only see the “relative essence”, where “relative essence” signifies causality (Schopenhauer qtd. in Young 109-110). Continuing to borrow from Young’s reading, when we see an apple, we see it in relation to ourselves and our needs or desires, not itself as it actually is (110).

The history of all of existence has been the will striving to reproduce. There is no concept of the past or the future. Human life is envisioned as non-movement - going nowhere. There is no escape, until we meet our death, or until we practice self-denial, that is renounce the will within us. There is one space of relief, however, which comes in the form of the aesthetic.

### **Of Art: The Sunbeam that Dispels Darkness**

Schopenhauer quotes Plato at length at the outset of the third book which discusses art. He uses this metaphor to say that art delivers us from the dark cave where we can only see the “shadowy outlines of things” (WWR 1. Art, to extend the metaphor, is the hidden window somewhere in the cave, which allows one to see the Platonic ‘Ideas’. The idea is not the will, or

the thing in itself, but rather, “the only immediate and therefore adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself” (WWR 1.174). The Platonic Idea, he continues to explain, is not the thing-in-itself but “necessarily object, something known, a representation” and it is only in this quality that it differs from the thing-in-itself that is the will (WWR1.175). Thus, the idea does not belong in space, time or causation, it does not evolve or change over time; rather, it is eternal and absolute. Due to the idea being what it is, we cannot come to any knowledge of the idea; we cannot arrive at it through rational or conceptual thinking, because “it is experiential and, as such, constitutive of the premises from which all reasoning has to begin” (Magee 167). The idea is the “first and the most universal form” of the will’s objectivity which one sees through the aesthetic object (Schopenhauer WWR1. The process wherein the idea is what is known rather than the particular object is the aesthetic process or the aesthetic method of consideration and not the knowledge available under the principle of sufficient reason. Therefore, this highly significant rupture can be called an epistemological rupture. The individual suddenly finds himself in another world, outside of his everyday life and in a realm devoid of time, space and causality. So the anxious individual, harried by the “interested” ways in which the will requires him to function, upon seeing beauty, transports himself (or is transported) into a state of “calm contemplation”, where a process of de-selfing takes place and he is no longer body and individual, and he becomes the “*pure will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge*” (WWR 1.178; WWR 1.179, my italics). Schopenhauer will go on to say:

We lose ourselves entirely in this object, to use a pregnant expression; in other words, we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject, as clear mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception, but the two have become one, since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception. (WWR 1,178-9)

The absolute difference between the two worlds must be stressed: in the world of the idea there is no individuality, only pure subjectivity which as it turns out is not a subjectivity at all since the boundaries between the subject and the object blur to the point where the subject is actually the mirror of the object. The two have become one, whereas the other world is characterized

(among other things) by the supremacy of the self. The break with this order of knowledge is significant.

Art, in Schopenhauer's system, can then be defined as that whose "only source is knowledge of the ideas" (WWR 1.184-5). Its sole aim is "communication of this knowledge" (WWR 1.184-5). Art is defined here cognitively. It bases itself in knowledge; it is not based on the idea of expression. This however does not imply that it cannot be misunderstood or that it cannot move people (Magee 167-8). Here it is more important to consider what constitutes the 'fine arts' for him. His notion of fine art is based, like other aesthetic theories on the exclusion of certain categories. That which is "charming" appeals to the will, and hence excluded. So, for instance, still life paintings of food appeal to one's appetite or the body for it arouses hunger which leads to propagation of the will to life. He condemns those works which seek to "delude and delight"; for instance, the "delusions" of the imagination that are the "ordinary novels", which appeal to both the writer and the public who fancy themselves in the "hero's position" leaving them "unfit for real life" (187). The entire comment is scathing but what is extraordinary and interesting is his last comment; what can he mean by it being "unfit for real life"? In his scheme of things, real life or the ordinary life under the will is a task to be undertaken, so any deviance from this "real life" should be a source of relief. If the purpose of this type of imaginary work is escape, the purpose of art in his scheme is too, at one level, a form of escape. The question is then this: what constitutes true escape or rather true liberation? His answer would be: actual art, for it is based on the ideas and does not lead to reproduction of desires as those novels would.

Let us concentrate on the chasm between the two worlds, the bridge being the aesthetic object. He denounces the escape that the novels of his day seek to provide, he upholds the knowledge that the idea of the object provides. But it is not only a different order of knowledge that is available; the pure subject is "painless" as well as a "subject of knowledge". This state, that of "liberation" lifts us as do "sleep and dreams" (197). But here arises a problem: how are we to read the aesthetic? Eagleton is of the opinion that for Schopenhauer: "...the aesthetic....signifies less a preoccupation with art than a transfigured attitude to reality" (Ideology, 162). Guyer also raises his problem saying that on the first glance, it seems as if the purpose of this knowledge is merely to ease incessant pain of life: "such a purely negative account of the pleasures of such an elevated form of cognition seems disappointing, and to treat aesthetic experience as indeed nothing

but an anesthetic (“Pleasure and knowledge”, 109). This is a most interesting problem; especially the equation of the aesthetic with the anesthetic, for it raises the question: what is art? Or rather, what is essential meaning of art? However, the question that will be more enlightening for the Schopenhauerian system will be ‘why art?’

If we follow the logic of art as a pain-killer, we will have to ask, why does art become the structural savior. The reason for this would be that the aesthetic space was available to him as one that afforded a disinterested pleasure; in the form of the binary between art and society. Here the other question comes in, of the meaning of art. Let us examine this proposition and look closely at certain points of the third book.

The aesthetic object, be it natural or an artefact, as mentioned leads to the creation of the “pure subject” removed from his painful humdrum existence. Here it should also be mentioned who the subject can be. The one who can access the ideas of the particular object, and hence glimpse their “universal form” (WWR1, 30, 169), is the one who possesses knowledge in excess of the requirements of the will-ed existence. This individual who can either consciously (the case of the sublime) or unconsciously (the case of the beautiful) can make the transition from the world of sufficient reasons to a completely detached state is the genius. There are two sides to the genius. The genius has a touch of madness about him according to Schopenhauer. Genius and madness blur into each other, for the possessing knowledge in excess, looks at things not only in terms of its ordinary relations with other objects. He becomes something of an outsider in the ordinary worlds, for he is the one who can see the sunlight outside the cave, and finds it difficult to accustom himself to the darkness. The genius of the one capable of becoming a “pure subject” is set in opposition to the common ordinary man”. Genius “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 objectivity tendency of the mind, as opposed to the subject directed to our own person, i.e., to the will” (WWR1, 36, 185). The objective tendency is the quality of disinterest. In opposition to this stands the “common ordinary man” absorbed in that vicious cycle of never-ending needs and desires; that “manufactured article of nature (which she daily produces in thousands) is not capable, at any rate continuously, of a consideration of things wholly *disinterested* in every sense, such as is contemplation proper” (WWR1, 187, my italics).

The figure of the genius held a lot of promise. He is the one who has glimpsed the world outside the miserable world that we all inhabit. He holds the position of the middle man of simultaneously living in two worlds, two epistemological orders (although this is contentious (and complex), since the other world offers a completely different order of things, where he is not so much subject, but rather non-subject, that our vocabulary cannot define except in negative terms, i.e., what that being is not), yet instead of setting up an alternative to the structure (which however is possible only within the structure), we find to our-disappointment, that he was never outside the structure at all. For his aesthetic theory he relies on the conventional opposition of “interested” life and a “disinterested art”.

The aesthetic experiences although posited out of the system of the will, is depressingly not, for the vocabulary that Schopenhauer uses to define that, “without interest, without subjectivity, pure objectivity” (WWR 1, 38, 196) is that which fully complicit with the structural allocation of the aesthetic in the waters of disinterest. This is to say that Schopenhauer uses the aesthetic because the aesthetic is the place that is seemingly disconnected to any form of social life or human activity altogether. Hence, it was already viewed as a different order altogether. Beauty supposedly floats unconnected to practical life; a commonsensical notion which is politically dangerous and glaringly absurd. This idea has been expressed by Roger Scruton when he says, “wanting something for its beauty is wanting it, not wanting to do something with it” (19, my italics). In Schopenhauer’s work, sentences such as these express this thought: “Unlike the works of the other fine arts, those of architecture are very rarely executed for purely aesthetic purposes. On the contrary, they are subordinated to other, *practical ends* that are foreign to art itself” (WWR1, 43, 217, my italics). This thought of the separation of practical life and the world of art pervades the whole of the third book.

Thus, when Eagleton mentions that Schopenhauer’s theorization of the aesthetic is not so much about the aesthetic itself as a different notion or reality altogether, I would disagree, for Schopenhauer could rely on the aesthetic as a redemptory space purely because a social space was already available in the common imagination. I want to cite another example from Adorno’s book, *Aesthetic Theory* to make this notion clearer. On talking about the psychoanalytic theory of music, he says “the psychoanalytic thesis, for instance, that music is a defense against the threat of paranoia, does indeed for the most part hold true clinically, yet it says nothing about the quality

and content of a particular composition” (9). Here too, a type of art is being held up for purposes of relief, i.e., it is performing a function, yet the problem that Adorno sees is *not* its (blatant) utility but that the reasons for using particular compositions is not theorized. Here we may also conjecture that the reason Schopenhauer’s theory of aesthetic contemplation does not seem like an aesthetic theory proper that is pre-occupied with art is because it blatantly claims to relieve the individual of his sufferings, that is, speaks louder of the cessation of pain rather than the pleasure received. The notion of aesthetic pleasure must also be looked into. If an individual finds a certain object beautiful and thus pleasurable it is because of certain reasons, and those reasons are social in nature. Thus, Schopenhauer’s preference for Shakespeare, Goethe or Alfieri (these names (among others) and his admiration for them are strewn over the third book) over the popular novels of his day has causes that have a social grounding to them.

## Conclusion

To speak of beauty is to enter another and more exalted realm –a realm sufficiently apart from our everyday concerns as to be mentioned only with a certain hesitation.  
(Scruton, 14)

This is where we eventually end up with Schopenhauer. For him (true) beauty remains “exalted” above everyday concerns. Julian Young agrees with Thomas Mann, who sees Schopenhauer’s book as a work of art by a “great composer” who has written “a symphony in four movements” (Young; Mann qtd in Young 104-5). Therefore, after the harsh and troubling note of the second book which discusses the will, comes the third book which discusses art - it is gentler music. Constantly using natural metaphors to compare the aesthetic and world of the will, Schopenhauer says – “The first is like the innumerable violently agitated drops of the waterfall, constantly changing and never for a moment at rest: the second is like the rainbow silently resting on his raging torrent” (WWR1.185). The valorization of the aesthetic space as a gently refuge from the storm of the world is a significant metaphor for the separation of art and society. Each is attributed different characteristics.

Thus, the radical impulse appears in the figure of the genius only to get neutralized by Schopenhauer’s conception of the aesthetic.

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