

Beyond Good and Evil (15): Nietzsche's Critique of Schopenhauer's 'Vicious Circle'

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Abstract

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 15, Nietzsche offers a criticism of the Kantian contention (inherited by Schopenhauer) that the external world is but the work of our organs. As such, he claims, our organs, as part of this world, would by implication also be the work of our organs. Unless then we are to assume that the concept of a *causa sui* is not an absurd one, the external world is, *reduction ad absurdum*, not the work of our organs. This paper offers a defence of Schopenhauer from Nietzsche's charge of circularity, based on the contention that the apparent circularity arises only upon the Nietzschean assumption that the transcendental idealist is, in fact, mistaken in his conception of a transcendental subject. It is only by assuming that Schopenhauer was mistaken, for example, in supposing the law of causality to be of a subjective and transcendental nature, that Nietzsche can even speak about the subject or the world as 'caused'. A true grasp of Schopenhauer's position can only lead to the conclusion that no causal chain, let alone a circular one, is at play here.

Nietzsche's error is diagnosed as arising from a deepening of historical sense, which assumes, from the outset, that the conceptual categories of the perceiving subject do not offer us an *aeterna veritas*. Finally, Nietzsche's misconception, and his subsequent inability to diagnose it, arises from Schopenhauer's own inability to escape what Wittgenstein terms the "temporality of our grammar." Schopenhauer simply does not have the words at hand to ever remove the notion of temporality from the idea that the subject and the world 'create' each other. Taking cognisance of Schopenhauer's 'double aspect' theory of the subject, removes from the relationship the notion of causality upon which Nietzsche's critique is based.

I Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on Man's Intellect as a Condition for Life

Nietzsche claimed that on reading the opening line of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (i.e. *Die Welt ist meine Vorstellung*), he had felt as though Schopenhauer had written expressly for him. It is precisely this Kantian belief, however, that the world is but the product of a perceiving subject, which Nietzsche came to criticise in section 15 of *Beyond Good and Evil*. What is here intended is a largely exegetical account of the extent to which the mature Nietzsche's account of the subject is yet an acceptance of Schopenhauer's position; to isolate precisely their point of divergence; and to explicate my own contention that Nietzsche's criticism of

Schopenhauer is based, firstly, upon a misunderstanding of Schopenhauer's position and secondly, upon Nietzsche's own failure to escape what Wittgenstein had termed 'the temporality of our grammar'. (1980 22e)

The entire world of Representation, is, for Schopenhauer, the product of an intellect which is the *practical* evolutionary by-product of the species' will-to-life. For Schopenhauer, the intellect stands beside the will in the relation of a tool.

The most striking figure for the relation of the two is that of the strong blind man carrying the sighted lame man on his shoulders. (Schopenhauer, 1966b 209)

To quote Bryan Magee, Schopenhauer sees the mind in biological terms, as

a survival mechanism whose operations are to be understood only in terms of the functions for which it has been evolved. (Magee 1983 287)

A single section entitled 'Origin of knowledge', from *The Gay Science* sufficiently explicates Nietzsche's position:

Over immense periods of time the intellect produced nothing but errors. A few of these proved to be useful and helped to preserve the species: those who hit upon or inherited these had better luck in their struggle for themselves and their progeny... Thus the strength of knowledge does not depend on its degree of truth but on its age, on the degree to which it has been incorporated, on its character as a condition of life. (1974 169)

For both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the world of Representation, that is, the world as perceived by the intellect, is shaped according to its utility as a condition for the

life of the species. Thus far, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche agree entirely upon the relationship between representation and will, that is, on the intellect as a historical, biological tool created for the preservation of the species. That Nietzsche fails to adopt the phrase '*Wille zum Leben*' seems, in this instance, to be of little consequence.

Before we can mark their point of divergence, we need to be clear about Nietzsche's own relationship to the transcendental idealism of Kant. In *On Truth and Lying*, the early Nietzsche speaks affirmatively of "the unknowable X of the Thing in itself." This quote appears as a direct acceptance of Kant's noumenon/phenomenon division and of man's inability to grasp the noumenon. From this point on, however, it is evident that Nietzsche becomes increasingly less Kantian. By the publication of the first volume of *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Nietzsche had formulated his view of Kant's transcendental idealism, which changed little, if at all, thereafter:

Our feelings of space and time are false, for if they are tested rigorously, they lead to logical contradictions..... When Kant says "Reason does not create its laws from nature, but dictates them to her," this is perfectly true in respect to the concept of nature which we are obliged to apply to her (Nature = world as idea, that is, as error), but which is the summation of a number of errors of reason. (1994 26-27)

According to Nietzsche, Kant was correct in supposing that the laws of nature are placed upon the world by man's faculty of Reason, but Nietzsche rejects Kant's assumption that this faculty of Reason (what are for Kant the categories) is an ahistorical, transcendental faculty. Where Kant's categories are, as it were, set in stone, the laws of Nature imposed by Nietzsche's Reason are those same elements which develop as a product of the evolutionary survival mechanisms of a species. Our

ideas of time, space, substance, number, the laws of logic etc. are all imposed upon the world not according to any criterion of truth but because they have proven beneficial to the preservation of our species. For Kant, the necessity of the way in which we perceive the external world is governed by the impossibility of escaping the categories of one's own intellect through which we are limited in any such perception. Nietzsche too champions the necessity of the way in which we perceive the world, but now this necessity appears as the obligation to accept a concept of nature which is the *historical* summation of our past errors of Reason. Thus, in *The Will To Power*, Nietzsche clearly demarcates himself from Kant when he claims that it is not only the case that we possess an intellect out of a practical need, but also the form of *this particular intellect* is the product of practical need.

To what extent even our intellect is a consequence of conditions of existence - : we would not have it if we did not *need* to have it, and we would not have it *as it is* if we did not need to have it *as it is*, if we could live *otherwise*. (Kaufmann, 1967 273)

We are obliged to a particular interpretation of the world as a result of our erroneous faith in a Reason that has evolved as a history of species-preserving errors. That we cannot look around "our own corner" is Nietzsche's expression of the problem that Kant had formulated in his account of transcendental idealism: namely, the subject who provides the conceptual framework which is presupposed by any possible experience of the world, and is necessarily restricted to this conceptual framework, cannot extricate himself from his current perspective. (It was in this regard that Kant's subject could never become known as an object to itself.)

In so far as transcendental idealism refers to the impossibility of the subject's escaping those presuppositions of experience imposed by one's own intellect, Nietzsche is in agreement with Kant. In so far as it supposes that my *current* conceptual presuppositions, through which I find my experience is necessarily filtered, are the definitive concepts presupposed by the possibility of my having *any* form of experience, Nietzsche stands vehemently opposed. It could have been the case, for example, given that man's Reason evolved in alternative circumstances, that Kant's categories would need to be drastically altered.

Now I wish to further illustrate that Nietzsche's eventual break from Schopenhauer's view of the subject springs from his naturalisation of Kant's transcendental idealism. This naturalisation is itself merely an extension of Schopenhauer's own critique of Kant. It is my contention that the core element in the divergence of Nietzsche from Kant is the strong impetus that Nietzsche places on historical philosophizing, while Schopenhauer, it would seem at least, lingers inconsistently between the two positions. For Schopenhauer's conception of the subject, we will see, is simultaneously and paradoxically expressive of both Kant's transcendentalism and the later historicism of Nietzsche.

II Kant's Transcendentalism, Nietzsche's Historicism and Schopenhauer's 'Vicious Circle'

A lack of historical sense is the congenital defect of all philosophers.... They will not understand that man has evolved, that the faculty of knowledge has also evolved, while some of them even permit themselves to spin the whole world from out of this faculty of knowledge.... But everything has evolved; there are no eternal facts,

nor are there any absolute truths. Thus historical philosophizing is necessary henceforth, and the virtue of modesty as well. (Nietzsche, 1994 14-15)

So states Nietzsche in *Human, All Too Human*, thereby aligning himself with a general 19th century trend towards the imposition of historical limitations upon what were once held to be eternal ideals. In an essay entitled *Schopenhauerian Moral Awareness as a Source of Nietzschean Nonmorality*, Robert Wicks identifies Nietzsche's move "beyond good and evil" as an elaboration upon the Schopenhauerian ethics of eternal justice under the veil of the 19th century tendency towards self-conceptions that were "more historically developmental, more temporarily sequential, more individual context-sensitive, and less focused upon timeless and unchanging universal concepts, as had been the prevailing style of the preceding Enlightenment period." (Wicks, 2002 32) As one example of this general trend, Wicks offers Hegel's criticism of Kant as being too "abstract", who was in turn criticized by Kierkegaard for ignoring individual existence in an attempt to develop an absolute philosophical system. It is clear that Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche stand in a similar relationship to each other. The movement we are hoping to trace is from the eternal-transcendental to the this-worldly historical.

Firstly, Schopenhauer criticizes Kant on account of his taking forms of thought as his philosophical starting point, instead of beginning in the world of perception. Kant bypasses the grounding of his philosophy in the temporal world of perception by skipping the problem of "all that is empirically apprehended, with the phrase "it is given." He does not ask how it comes about, *whether with or without the*

understanding, but with a leap passes over to abstract thinking, and not even to thinking in general, but at once to certain forms of thought.” (1966a 476) Kant clings yet to the Cartesian rationalism which takes thought as its unquestioned starting-point, whereas Schopenhauer here exhibits the deepening of 19th century historical sense by turning his attention to the question of origins (albeit through the resurrection of Locke’s empiricism). For Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, in turn, lacks the awareness of origins, evolution and development that characterises the historical sense of *Human, All Too Human*. Here, the difference is expressed in Nietzsche’s comment on what he deems to be Schopenhauer’s excessive scorn of the then current deification of evolution. For Nietzsche, everything evolves, and from this standpoint, it would seem that Schopenhauer, who had appeared historical relative to the steadfast categories of Kant, is entirely lacking in awareness of historical development:

The deification of evolution is a metaphysical outlook — as from a lighthouse along the sea of history — which gave comfort to a generation of scholars who had historicized too much. One must not become angry about it, however erroneous their idea may be. Only someone who, like Schopenhauer, denies development and also feels nothing of the misery of those historical waves; and because he neither knows nor feels anything of that evolving God or the need to accept him, he can fairly let out his scorn. (1994 147-148)

Nietzsche’s remark is well grounded, for Schopenhauer himself conceived of history’s method as the direct antipode to that of philosophy.

Whereas history teaches us that at each time something different has been, philosophy endeavours to assist us to the insight that at all times exactly the same was, is, and will be. (Schopenhauer, 1966b 441)

It is obvious that Kant is one of those philosophers Nietzsche had previously criticized who permits himself to spin the entire world out of a historically-developed faculty of knowledge. His transcendental idealism locates the subject, and the conceptual categories that comprise his intellect, prior to any experience of the world. Whether Nietzsche similarly construed Schopenhauer in the above-quoted passage as spinning the world from the subject's faculty of knowledge remains unclear but if so, it is nevertheless not the most damning critique of Schopenhauer's position that Nietzsche offers. Kant's position, again, is that the subject is the prerequisite to experience itself, and experience is possible only through the categories of understanding that comprise the subject's intellect. These categories taint Kant with a still strong sense of Cartesian rationalism, in so far as they are viewed as ahistorical, as unevolved, as an *aeterna veritas*. As such, however, Kant is at least consistent. For Nietzsche, Kant's categories, what he now designates as the faculties of reason, are the collective of history's species-preserving errors. Thus, while we are still necessitated to a particular conception of the world, the subject, thus necessitated, stands as the product of, and not metaphysically prior to, the world. The subject, and his faculty of reason, are situated prior to the world as it is being currently perceived by the subject, but this subject has itself evolved within, and so cannot be *metaphysically* prior to the world itself. What Nietzsche here puts forward is Kant's transcendental idealism under the lens of a newfound historical sense. Yes, the subject stands at the limit of the world, but not out of any metaphysical necessity; rather, he has been actively placed there in the long process of man's errors of reason. Thus, in *The Will to Power*, we see that man himself is an active participant in creating his new post-Kantian position at the

limit of the world. The subject itself is now viewed as a historical creation, not as a Kantian *aeterna veritas*:

We set up a word at the point at which our ignorance begins, at which we can see no further, e.g., the word “I,” the word “do,” the word “suffer”: - these are perhaps the horizon of our knowledge, but not “truths.” (Nietzsche, 1967 267)

Nietzsche remains consistent to the historical subject, just as Kant had previously remained consistent with the subject construed as an *aeterna veritas*. Schopenhauer, however, who prompts Nietzsche’s cultivation of the historical sense, himself remains at a crossroads between the metaphysically prior subject of Kant and Nietzsche’s historically evolved subject, who has been actively self-situated prior to man’s *current* conception of the world. That Schopenhauer refers to the Kantian transcendental conditions of experience (Kant’s ‘*Erkenntnißvermögen*’) which he withholds (that is to say, space, time and causality) as ‘*Gehirnphänomen*’ now becomes of central importance. It is the first step towards the naturalism of the later Nietzsche which permitted a move beyond the transcendental idealism of Kant.

In Schopenhauer’s account of the World as Representation, the subject (“*das Auge Alles sieht, nur sich selbst nicht*”) is the Kantian unknown X. But it becomes clear in his account of the World as Will that all this is merely the product of the organ of the brain and that the intellect is merely the evolutionary byproduct of the species’ will-to-live. Thus, for Schopenhauer, the entire world (now just “phenomenon of the brain”) is spun from the faculty of reason (what has now become mere “brain-functions” (*Gehirnfunktionen*)), but this faculty of reason was in turn spun out of the

species' will to survive in the same world which allegedly presupposes the "brain-functions" of the subject. It is in the light of this vicious circle that we must read the following passage in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*.

If one is to pursue physiology with a good conscience one is compelled to insist that the organs of sense are *not* phenomena in the sense of idealist philosophy: for if they were they could not be causes! Sensualism therefore, at least as a regulative hypothesis, certainly a heuristic principle. – What? and others even go so far as to say that the external world is the work of our organs? But then our body, as a piece of this external world, would be the work of our organs! But then our organs themselves would be – the work of our organs! It seems to me that this is a complete *reductio ad absurdum*, supposing that the concept of *causa sui* is something altogether absurd. Consequently the external world is *not* the work of our organs - ? (1973, § 15, 27)

Schopenhauer is not directly mentioned but the passage appears too applicable not to be directed towards him. Also, the passage which succeeds this opens with a critique of Schopenhauer as a harmless self-observer who pronounced the immediate certainty of "I will"; as though knowledge here got hold of its object purely and nakedly as "the thing in itself." (1967 213)

Schopenhauer's faith in the thing-in-itself is precisely what binds him, though somewhat half-heartedly and inconsistently, to the old idealistic philosophy that Nietzsche has criticised above. A second article by Robert Wicks, this time bearing the title *Schopenhauer's Naturalization of Kant's A Priori Forms of Empirical Knowledge*, summarises that

The brain therefore structures its structure. This, however, is preposterous. (1993 189)

(Note also that Wicks deems it superfluous to argue the case of relevance to Schopenhauer.) Wick's defence of Schopenhauer involves pinpointing the seeming paradox as the inevitable result of Schopenhauer's earlier account of the subjects' dual-aspect awareness of himself as both transcendently precedent to and empirically resultant of the world of matter.

In sum, when Schopenhauer describes the *a priori* forms of empirical knowledge as brain functions, he draws from both aspects of his dual-awareness of himself as the constructor of his world, *and* of himself as a being located within this construction. (Wicks, 1993 193)

In line with Wick's defence, we can return to a phrase of Schopenhauer's in which he stated that

It is just as true that the knower is a product of matter as that matter is a mere representation of the knower; but it is also just as one-sided. (Schopenhauer, 1966b 13)

On this account, one is *not* mistaken in pointing out that Schopenhauer viewed the world as the product of the subject and the subject in turn as a product of the world, but one must keep in mind that these opposing truths are each truths from a single perspective only. Wicks cites the following to push this point home:

It is true that space is only in my head; but empirically my head is in space. (Wicks 1993 189)

Wicks' defence is not definitive but points simply to the fact that such inconsistencies are to be expected in a philosophy of the subject which is given from alternative standpoints, that is, from the subject of Will (the knower is a product of matter;

empirically my head is in space) and the subject of Representation (matter is a mere representation of the knower; space is only in my head).

The essential point is that Nietzsche's critique has failed to take account of Schopenhauer's dual descriptions of the philosophical subject, that is to say, of Schopenhauer's 'double aspect' theory of the subject. The subject of transcendental ideality, the subject as knower, is the Kantian metaphysical subject that is never object to itself. The subject of empirical reality, the subject as known, is the subject in respect of which Kant's "forms of intuition" become described in physical terms, i.e., "*Gehirnphänomen*". Schopenhauer's subject is simultaneously that of transcendental ideality and of empirical reality. Thus, in *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, Schopenhauer says the following.

Now the identity of the subject of willing with that of knowing... is the knot of the world (*Weltknoten*), and hence inexplicable... whoever really grasps the inexplicable nature of this identity, will with me call it the miracle "par excellence". (Neeley, 1997 54)

Kant went only as far as stating that space belongs to the *a priori* forms of my sensibility (as Schopenhauer later expresses it, space is in my head.) For Kant, the subject remained an unknowable X. It is not until Schopenhauer's addition that, despite the truth of this, it is nonetheless empirically true that my head is in space, which amounts to the same as stating that it is true that the knower remains a product of matter, that the Kantian unknowable X becomes interchangeable with the world of matter (i.e., that the 'I' becomes the microcosm).

The flaw in Nietzsche's critique is that it views the knower's production of the world of matter and also, the world of matter's production of the knowing subject, as temporally sequential events. Thus we are led to suppose that A causes B causes A, and so on into a nonsensical infinite regress. Such a regress, however, is avoidable if one takes cognisance of Schopenhauer's 'double aspect' theory. From the *Fourfold Root*, we see that the two subjects (knower and known) never stand in the causal relation of object to object. Though the conscious subject is the product of a species' will to life, it is nonsensical to suppose that the world is thus situated temporally prior to the conscious subject. It is only with the subject that time is *a priori* imposed upon the world, and it is only from the perspective of a subject, whose intellect is so structured that he must look out through the lens of time, that the very notion of cause itself is applicable. The key to understanding why Nietzsche's critique is founded upon a perversion of Schopenhauer's philosophy is the following excerpt from Schopenhauer's *On Philosophy and Natural Science*:

At bottom, however, all those events that cosmology and geology urge us to assume as having occurred long before the existence of any knowing creature are themselves only a translation into the language of our intuitively perceiving intellect from the essence in itself of things which to it is incomprehensible. For these events have never had an existence-in-itself, any more than have present ones. (Dorman, 1995 14)

To state that the subject is the product of the world *in time* entails that one impose the subject-orientated concept of time upon the world as it is in-itself. When we meditate on the identity of subject with world, we can only come to the conclusion that the subject and the world, in the only form in which it is meaningful to us, must come into existence simultaneously. The identity of self and world is the very core of

Schopenhauer's philosophy, a notion whose fundamental status is captured in the description of it as the knot of the world (*Weltknoten*). It is only from the perspective of Nietzsche's own philosophy — from a fully-fledged naturalism that believes it has located the historical origins of time, space and causality in man's species-preserving errors — that time and causality could be applied to the pre-subject domain. For Nietzsche, the concept of time is an error of reason which, if applicable now, must be equally applicable to the pre-subject and post-subject domains. Only from this point of view can one remark with sense that the subject both precedes and is preceded by the world of matter. Schopenhauer never intended that these be taken as two separate truths, whether taken together or alternately, and which thus lead to the A-B-A ... explanatory infinite regress. The two stand or fall together, both comprising nothing more than the realisation that the subject as knower and the subject as known comprise an immediately given identity. Taking cognisance of the transcendental aspect of Schopenhauer's subject (the subject as knower), the attempted location of self and world in any form of temporal sequence is rendered nonsensical, as one will also grant that 'before' the subject (i.e., the world as we know it), there is no time of which to speak. Schopenhauer's standpoint does not require, as Nietzsche supposes, that the concept of a *causa sui* not be something fundamentally absurd. Schopenhauer requires Nietzsche's acceptance that the very notions of space, time and causality are applicable only from the subject's perspective, never temporally prior to the subject (a phrase which, although nonsensical, serves to illustrate the point.)

This reduction of the notion of temporality to the limited playing field of subjective representation offers us one perspective alternative to the Nietzschean postulation of a

reductio, which is itself intended to invalidate the idealistic hypothesis of a world that is but the work of our organs. Such a *reductio*, we have said, is invalidated when one takes cognisance of Schopenhauer's 'double aspect' theory of the subject. And it is only through ignoring the subjective nature of time and causality (itself dependent upon the subject as Kantian unknown X) that one can fallaciously infer that Schopenhauer views the subject itself as somehow created within the spatio-temporal world we currently occupy. The proposed alternative to positing a *reductio* here begins with the difficulty inherent in extricating oneself from those pre-requisites of experience, including temporality, which are provided by the cognitive framework of the Kantian subject. This problem later finds expression in the philosophy of Wittgenstein as the impossibility of escaping the temporality of our grammar. As Wittgenstein remarks in *Culture and Value*,

Philosophers who say: "after death a timeless state will begin", or: "at death a timeless state begins", do not notice that they have used the words "after" and "at" and "begins" in a temporal sense, and the temporality is embedded in their grammar. (Wittgenstein, 1980 22e)

Implicit in Nietzsche's remarks of *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 15, is the belief that there can be a 'before' the subject, though, for Schopenhauer, it is the separation of the subject from the undifferentiated thing-in-itself (the Will) that instigates the 'beginning' of time. By the time Nietzsche makes his critique of Schopenhauer, the deepening trend in what Wicks terms more "temporarily sequential" self-conceptions has separated Nietzsche entirely from Kant's *a priori* forms of space, time and causality. That Schopenhauer, like Kant before him, erred on this account is actually presupposed by Nietzsche's attempt to prove that he did so. Because it is only by

assuming that Schopenhauer's naturalism is underdeveloped — that, for example, causality, the last of Kant's twelve categories, is also of historical origin (i.e., that Schopenhauer was wrong to say it is of *a priori* origin) — that Nietzsche can even speak about the subject or the world as 'caused'. Of course, this is by no means anything approaching an affirmation of Schopenhauer's more transcendental stance, which is an essential component of his 'double aspect' theory. We need not, however, unproblematically assume Schopenhauer's 'double aspect' theory to be philosophically correct in order to defend it from a Nietzschean attack that is itself circular in nature. I wish here only to rebut Nietzsche's criticism by virtue of the fact that Schopenhauer's position must be presupposed false, before it can, without delving into nonsense, be thus criticised. Indeed, Nietzsche's misconception, and Wicks' inability to diagnose it, can be seen to arise from Schopenhauer's own inability to escape what Wittgenstein terms the "temporality of our grammar." While it would be incorrect to attribute to Schopenhauer a variant of Wittgenstein's later argument, which is made in an unrelated context, Wittgenstein's remark is nevertheless relevant. It provides us with a clear expression of the difficulty involved in removing oneself from the world of subjective temporality, which Schopenhauer's reference to a world 'before the existence of any knowing creature' entails. Indeed, rather than representing a resolution to the problem that Schopenhauer himself may have offered, Wittgenstein's remark instead presents us with an inescapable problem to which Schopenhauer was himself subject. Furthermore, it provides us with one explanation as to why a 'vicious circle' (which this author deems non-existent) seemed apparent to Nietzsche at all. Schopenhauer simply does not have the words at hand to ever remove the notion of temporality from the idea that the subject and the

world 'create' each other, though it is clear from *On Philosophy and Natural Science* above that, in this instance, temporality is not applicable.

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