

SCHOPENHAUER ON THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL VALUE OF ART

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Art, as discussed in the third book of Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, plays a double role in his philosophical system. On one hand, beholding an object of aesthetic worth provides the spectator with a temporary cessation of the otherwise incessant suffering that Schopenhauer takes life to be; on the other, art creates an epistemological bridge between ourselves and the world as it really is: unlike science which only studies relations between things, contemplation of art leads to knowledge of that which is "alone really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena." (*WWRI*: 184) It is this second aspect of Schopenhauer's aesthetics that is both appealing and curious: while Schopenhauer's aesthetics and epistemology are both rooted in his picture of the world as Will, which is (taken at face value) deeply counter-intuitive, it yet seems to me that by assigning epistemic value to art, he manages to capture the quality of profundity with which certain works of art strike us – a profundity that is accounted for neither by reference to mere enjoyment nor by reference to paraphrasable, propositional knowledge. It is this tension between the plausible and extravagant elements of Schopenhauer's philosophy of art that I will try to relieve in this paper. I will firstly point to the difficulties that Schopenhauer's account runs into when we consider his treatment of Platonic Ideas, and will then suggest a way in which Schopenhauer's insights about aesthetics can still be preserved, if we separate them from a literal reading of his metaphysics.

The way in which Schopenhauer's account of the epistemic value of aesthetic experience arises out of his metaphysical position can perhaps be best characterised by invoking the two main points of difference between his idealism and that of Kant.

For Schopenhauer, as for Kant, the world as representation (the world as we normally perceive it) does not match the mind-independent, noumenal reality. Schopenhauer, however, diverges from Kant in his explanation as to why this is so: for him, our mode of perception is a consequence of the survival mechanism of the will and thus the primary task of our perceptual organs and our mental capacities is to shape the world as representation in such a way as to give best expression to our willing nature (cf. *WWR2*: 284-5). The chief corollary of this is that even the most fundamental features of the world as representation – the categories of space, time and causality – are imposed upon the world for the purposes of the will. That is because it is only through these categories that causal, spatial and temporal relations can obtain between the willing subject and the objects of will: “only through these (relations) is the object *interesting* to the individual, in other words, has it a relation to the will.” (*WWR1*: 177) Put otherwise, the world-will, acting through willing human subjects, structures the world as representation so that a plurality of objects, individuated through the categories of space, time and causality, appears. Such individuating of phenomena is necessary for relations of willing to obtain between them.

Connected to this is Schopenhauer's second departure from Kant: he holds that it is exceptionally possible to transcend the world as phenomena and come into contact with reality: this happens in rare cases where a particularly developed human intellect is able to lay aside the force that structures the world into the categories of space, time and causality – the subject's own willing nature. For Schopenhauer, this profound shift in perception which allows us to come into touch with the thing-in-itself is what constitutes an aesthetic experience. This rare “objective tendency of the mind”, that is, the ability to suspend the intellect's ordinary instrumental calibration and to contemplate the world as it is in-itself, Schopenhauer calls “genius”. He writes:

[W]e relinquish the ordinary way of considering things, and cease to follow under the guidance of the forms of the principle of sufficient reason [i.e. forms of space, time, causality] merely their relations to one another, whose final goal is always the relation to our own will. Thus we no longer consider the where, the when, the why, and the whither in things, but simply and solely the *what...* (*WWR1*: 178)

These talented individuals are able to suspend their will in such a way as to observe not particular objects in the world, such as particular clouds, but to perceive in them

what is *essential* to them – as clouds were before they were made into individual instantiations through the phenomenal matrix of space, time and causality. (*WWR1*: 185-6) But just as genius is unequally distributed among men, so there are also some natural objects that exemplify the essential properties of their species better than others. These objects are then more “beautiful” than others, since the essential, pre-phenomenal nature of things is more easily grasped when it is beautiful objects that are contemplated (*WWR1*: 209).

But what is it that is being thus contemplated? Schopenhauer equates objects when they are known in-themselves with Platonic Ideas, which Schopenhauer views as kinds of eternal species that display unchanging, essential characteristics of groups of objects. For example, particular clouds and their many shapes are only phenomenal and ephemeral, but the Idea of the clouds is “that as elastic vapour they are pressed together, driven off, spread out, and torn apart by the force of the wind, this is their nature, this is the essence of the forces objectified in them, this is the Idea.” (*WWR1*: 182) The genius's aesthetic knowledge, then, consists of direct perception of the essential nature of a species of things, attained through will-less contemplation of beautiful objects.

It may seem strange that Schopenhauer is trying to fit Platonic Ideas into his system, and that it is them rather than the thing-in-itself (that is, the Will), which are the objects of aesthetic knowledge. The reason for this is that for Schopenhauer the very exercise of *knowing* presupposes a division of subject and object, whereas the world-as-will is unindividuated (and thus unknowable). An Idea is

necessarily [an] object, something known, a representation, and precisely, but only, in this respect is it different from the thing-in-itself[...] [I]t alone is the most *adequate objectivity* possible of the will or of the thing-in-itself; indeed it is even the whole thing-in-itself, only under the form of the representation. (*WWR1*: 175)

However, while this might explain the need for an intermediary stage between phenomena and reality, it does not seem self-evident why the subject-object division should entail a multitude of Ideas (of clouds, panthers etc.), which correspond unambiguously to the way ordinary language carves up the phenomenal world, rather than to a simpler duality. We shall return to this difficulty later.

To return to the broader matter in question, where does art feature in this story? The ability of a genius to perceive an Idea, even in its imperfect, particular instances, enables her to create works of art: beautiful things that express “purely the Idea of (their) species through the very distinct, clearly defined, and thoroughly significant relation of (their) parts.” (*WWR1*: 210) For example, by observing real clouds, the artist can create representations of beautiful, almost “Ideal” clouds. It is by

contemplation of such works of art that perception of Ideas is more readily available even to lesser minds. Therefore, the epistemic value of a work of art is that it smoothens the contemplation of the Idea it represents: “The work of art is merely a means of facilitating that knowledge in which this (aesthetic) pleasure consists.” (*WWR1*: 195)

Knowledge of Ideas, then, involves a kind of direct perception of the essential, *a priori*, nature of a species, before these are individuated into particular instantiations by the principles of space, time and causality; and it is thus directly opposed to knowledge of scientific *concepts*, which is knowledge of abstract generalisations crafted by men *a posteriori* from observation of already individuated particulars. (*WWR1*: 190, 233-6). Thus, knowledge of a perfect leopard gained from an artwork is supposed to be different to and more profound than knowledge held by a zoologist dealing with leopards. Good art portrays Ideas and not concepts – indeed the artist’s knowledge of Ideas cannot be paraphrased in abstract, scientific terms, but can only be communicated through unmediated perception of his work. (*WWR1*: 235)

We can now see just how radical Schopenhauer’s claims are. Firstly, knowledge of the thing-in-itself is possible, and it is gained through the knowledge of the essential nature of objects – Ideas. Secondly, this knowledge is not conceptual, but comes to us directly through perception. And thirdly, this knowledge is to be gained through disinterested contemplation of the works of art. Thus, not only is art epistemically significant, but is also the source of the profoundest type of knowledge.

How plausible is all of this when applied to a particular work of art? Let's take a promising example, Thomas Hardy's *Proud Songsters*. It may be felt particularly appropriate not just because it is short, but because we know Hardy was himself inspired by Schopenhauer in some of his writings.

Proud Songsters

The thrushes sing as the sun is going,
 And the finches whistle in ones and pairs,
 And as it gets dark loud nightingales
 In bushes
 Pipe, as they can when April wears,
 As if all Time were theirs.

These are brand-new birds of twelve-months’ growing,
 Which a year ago, or less than twain,
 No finches were, nor nightingales,
 Nor thrushes,
 But only particles of grain,
 And earth, and air, and rain.

How does Schopenhauer's account of epistemic value of art apply here? Well, we may note that there is some peculiar insight about these birds, the passing of seasons and the way we perceive them that we obtain by reading the poem. This knowledge is not empirical or similar to the knowledge of natural sciences: the merit of the poem does not consist in merely adorning some statement about the nature of birds' breeding cycles with rhyme and rhythm. Furthermore, the peculiar knowledge of the poem is in a sense *directly* perceived in the poem – the poem is not a paraphrase, a conceptual summing-up of the knowledge it yields to us. An attempt at a paraphrase of the poem's content, such as “Everything in nature, including birds, often seems significant and valuable, however, it is really just made of matter from which no such value can be deduced, and this fact inspires in human beings a mixture of melancholia and awe.” may count as a kind of interpretation, but is not equivalent to the direct perception of the poem itself. The peculiarity of the knowledge inherent in the poem is perhaps contained in the feeling that the poem is “profound”, expressing more than its paraphrase. This seems well accounted for in Schopenhauer's account of Ideas: we can explain such profundity by saying that Hardy's poem points us in the direction of the Idea of those birds, as well as the Ideas of nature and existence more broadly.

However, while it seems to me that it is appropriate and worthwhile to talk, with Schopenhauer, of the *epistemic* value of Hardy's poem to account for its profundity, problems might arise when one tries to probe further into the role played by Schopenhauerian Ideas in this account. One might feel, and I think quite justifiably, that talk of Ideas actually distracts from Schopenhauer's main insight as to the epistemic value of art, making the account needlessly complicated and dependent on a rather murky ontological category. In particular, Ideas seem an odd concept because, as facets of the thing-in-itself, they are supposed to be free of the categories of space, time and causality; but, as soon as one considers what a particular Idea is supposed to be, it becomes difficult to see how that could be the case. This difficulty can be observed on Schopenhauer's own examples of Ideas. For instance, if it is contained in an Idea of a cloud that it behaves as an “inelastic, perfectly mobile, formless and transparent fluid,” (*WWRI*: 182) or if it is the Idea of human history that certain types of events always obtain (*WWRI*: 182-3), then it will seem at least curious to us that these purportedly essential characteristics (e.g. elasticity and repetition of historical events) all seem to be *already* familiar to us from the realm of space, time and

causality; they already seem to exist in the world-as-representation.¹ It is my impression that any further investigation into the nature of Ideas which would try to resolve this apparent tension would have to work very hard if it is to avoid two equally disagreeable options: either likening Ideas to run-of-the-mill empirical generalizations or shrouding them in metaphysical mystery, depicting them as strange categories that somehow happen to have both noumenal and phenomenal properties. Both of these options bear implausible consequences for the corresponding aesthetic theory: in the first case the knowledge of Ideas of finches, nightingales and thrushes gained from Hardy's poem is made akin to the knowledge of the birds' general features obtained from empirical observations, in the second it is knowledge of some obscure metaphysical wonder that somehow connects to these birds. Neither of these explanations, I think, does much to illuminate what goes on in an aesthetic experience. It may be that one could try to secure a better concept of what Ideas are and this may well be pursued by those more inclined than me to see such an investigation as a fruitful one; however, given the unease I think I have shown we can legitimately feel at any invocation of Ideas, coupled with the request that they be understood not metaphorically but as genuine ontological or epistemic categories, it seems to me that a Schopenhauerian theory of aesthetics would be better off if it did not have to rely on this rather troublesome postulation. Can this be achieved?

Fortunately, there seem to be two senses in which Schopenhauer thinks art communicates knowledge of the thing-in-itself, even though he himself does not clearly distinguish between them. The first of these two senses is the one we have just addressed, namely that knowledge of the thing-in-itself is available to us through contemplation of Ideas that are portrayed in art. We have suggested that in this, "essentialist" sense, the nature of the knowledge available in art is in fact left largely unexplained, due to the problems arising from the obscure nature of the Ideas themselves. However, there is another way in which art is supposed to communicate knowledge of the thing-in-itself, namely by articulating the willing nature of objects represented. I will call this other sense of Schopenhauer's account the "will-in-art" argument and it is this line of argument that I will pursue now.

Schopenhauer frequently rehearses this argument. For example, he writes that animal portraiture is of interest because in animal painting "the phenomenon of will

¹ A similar point is raised by Ivan Soll, see Soll (1998), p. 95.

... is exhibited [...] with a distinctness verging on the grotesque and monstrous” (*WWRI*: 219), and that tragedy is to be placed above the other literary genres because it best expresses “the antagonism of the will with itself.” (*WWRI*: 253) We could imagine something similar being said about Hardy's poem. Now, Schopenhauer's claim that the value of art lies with its propensity to reveal the willing nature of the world is not quite the same as his “essentialist” account. While the “essentialist” account says that art communicates the perfect, Ideal ways in which phenomenal things should be, the “will-in-art” argument says that art reveals the thing-in-itself (i.e. the Will) by bringing to attention how the subject of the work of art is a phenomenal instantiation of the principles of the World Will. As we have seen, to account for what is special about aesthetic knowledge – how the understanding communicated by Hardy's poem is different from scientific, paraphrasable, empirical observations – the plausibility of the “essentialist” story will depend on its being able to explain what the objects of such knowledge, Platonic Ideas, are. The “will-in-art” view, however, manages to account for the nature of aesthetic knowledge in a different way; the special epistemic value of art arises from the fact that both the work of art and its beholder are manifestations of the World Will:

The possibility of [the] anticipation of the beautiful *a priori* by the artist, as well as of its recognition *a posteriori* by the connoisseur, is to be found in the fact that artist and connoisseur are themselves the “in-itself” of nature, the will objectifying itself. (*WWRI*: 222)

By contemplating a work of art, the beholder becomes aware of the World Will through a recognition of the willing nature of the artist's subject; and this kind of knowledge is markedly different from empirical knowledge. It is a product of a more immediate, “partly *a priori*” (*WWRI*: 222) perception of the nature of the world (i.e. as Will), of which we are already tacitly aware, being willing subjects ourselves. In this respect Schopenhauer succeeds in showing that knowledge found in art is markedly different from the *a posteriori* knowledge of science: art is profound because it reveals to us something of the truth about its subject, which we have already, on some hidden level, understood. The knowledge of finches, nightingales and thrushes gained from the poem does not consist of learning some previously unknown (empirical) fact about them, but rather consists in an apt reformulation of

some already half-known truth of how things are, which we can agree to on the basis of our own human experience.

However, are we now guilty of just substituting one moot metaphysical concept for another? Is knowledge of the World Will any less odd than that of Platonic Ideas? Again, I will waive the metaphysical discussion, and presume that it is preferable for any Schopenhauerian aesthetic theory not to commit itself to any of his more contentious metaphysical claims. Therefore, in the concluding remarks, I will briefly sketch a proposal as to how one might sever Schopenhauer's metaphysics and yet keep his "will-in-art" account of the epistemic value of art largely intact.

My proposal can be best understood as a change of language in Schopenhauer's account of world as Will rather than some dramatic overhaul of its content, and it takes its cue from the mistake that Schopenhauer makes in his introspective discovery of the thing-in-itself and his identifying it as Will. Schopenhauer first establishes that we experience ourselves not only as empirical observables, but also as willing subjects, and then he concludes that this inner experience of ours must also be the 'content' of the rest of our world (cf. *WWRJ*: 117-8). However, it is surely much simpler to describe Schopenhauer's introspection not as a discovery of some underlying metaphysical primordial matter, but simply as a particular way in which he experiences and characterizes human existence – as that of a willing subject. By the same token, if Schopenhauer thinks that the epistemic value of art consists in displaying the conflicting and striving nature of the world-as-will, it is much simpler to think of art as contemplating the nature of our own existence. Although we may wish to agree further with Schopenhauer in describing this existence as fundamentally willing, wretched and self-defeating, we need not do so. Rather, we could leave the exploration of the fundamentals of human existence to art itself or perhaps to a separate philosophical investigation.

I have tried to show that it is human experience that provides the enduring appeal of Schopenhauer's aesthetics, even if his metaphysical infrastructure may require either an allegorical reading or complete removal. Once this has been achieved, however, the account of the epistemic value of art is preserved intact, only that the knowledge that art conveys no longer concerns the thing-in-itself but about our own existential experience. Furthermore, what is retained from Schopenhauer is the direct, unparaphrasable, "partly *a priori*" nature of knowledge gathered from such works of art; the onlooker, himself a part of the human race whose condition is being portrayed,

can recognise reflections of his own urges, strivings and experiences in the art he contemplates. Something already half-known, half-felt, “profound” is elucidated for her by art.

As a postscript, perhaps something still needs to be said regarding the limitations of the claims we are making. While Schopenhauer (as illustrated by his discussion of the many different areas of art, from horticulture and animal portraiture to classical tragedy) arguably intended his theory to cover art universally, I think it would be doubtless futile on his or anyone's behalf to try to provide necessary and sufficient conditions that would cover everything that we are willing to call “a piece of art.” In that sense, to say that all art speaks of the human condition is either false or uninformative. Likewise, it would be wrong to say that the content, the human experience, communicated is the same in all works of art – *Proud Songsters* is of course not a paraphrase of *Antigone*. Rather than making such bold claims, Schopenhauerian aesthetics should instead be taken as saying something about the peculiar impression of profundity that strikes us when contemplating some works of art, and its merit is to account for this profundity without referring to either pleasure, institutionalism or relaying of a conceptual message, but by reference to an articulation of a particular, unifying experience shared by the artist and her audience.

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