

THE AMBIGUITY IN SCHOPENHAUER'S DOCTRINE OF THE THING-IN-ITSELF

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THE GENERAL ATTITUDE toward Arthur Schopenhauer's metaphysics is rather fiercely critical and at times even tendentious. It seems that the figure of Schopenhauer as an irredeemably flawed, stubborn, and contradictory philosopher serves as a leitmotif among scholars. Julian Young describes Schopenhauer as "a stubborn personality unwilling to admit that the central claim of his philosophy—that the will is the thing-in-itself—rests on a fundamental error."¹ In his preface to *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy*, Christopher Janaway remarks,

Only a proper appraisal of the context in which, and the aims with which, Schopenhauer was arguing can bring out the true philosophical interest in studying him. That his metaphysics is flawed . . . does not detract from his historical importance or from the worth of the problems he raises.²

It has to be pointed out that as a result of this prevailing tendency many have become accustomed to treating Schopenhauer's philosophy as in need of substantial correction and reconstruction. In this paper, I especially take issue with certain interpretive routes that have been taken in Schopenhauer scholarship concerning his metaphysical system. In my view, Schopenhauer's metaphysics still deserves serious consideration and understanding rather than correction or rebuke. I also think that the history of philosophy is at its best when it is not guided by our preconceptions. Therefore, I am solely interested in examining what Schopenhauer has to say about the thing-in-itself and developing an account that does not go beyond what he is stating. That being said, my interpretative attitude is perhaps best reflected in Georg Simmel's words:

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¹ Julian Young, *Schopenhauer* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 98.

² Christopher Janaway, *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), viii.

The total philosophy of Schopenhauer is a way to the thing-in-itself. For Schopenhauer, it was certainly not the case that the concept of thing-in-itself had created a problem by offering an empty schema which had to be given flesh. Such would be the approach of an epigone or of someone who had merely flung the toga of philosophy around himself. Schopenhauer was a philosopher at heart, who from the first had a characteristic world-sentiment shaped by its direction toward absolute being, toward the simple totality of the manifold of things.³

Schopenhauer's identification of the thing-in-itself with the will continues to be a thorny puzzle in the secondary literature, and it presents perhaps the greatest challenge to Schopenhauer scholars.⁴ Schopenhauer borrows the term "thing-in-itself" from Immanuel Kant, who uses it to refer to a reality that is distinct from what appears to us and hence unknowable.⁵ Despite the fact that several interpretations

³ Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, trans. Helmut Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein, and Michael Weinstein (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 16.

⁴ The following abbreviations are used for Schopenhauer's works: *The World as Will and Representation* [*WWR*], vols. 1 and 2, trans. Eric F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966). Citations to the first volume of *WWR* are to volume, section, and page numbers, and those to the second are to volume and page numbers; *Parerga and Paralipomena* [*PP*], vols. 1 and 2, trans. Eric F.J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). Citations to *PP* are given first with the volume number and the section number; *Gesammelte Briefe* [*GB*], ed. Arthur Hübscher (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1978). All references to *GB* are to letter numbers and to the translation by John E. Atwell; *Manuscript Remains* [*MR*], in four volumes, trans. Eric F. J. Payne (New York: Berg Publishers Limited, 1988). Citations to *MR* are given first with the volume number and the section number; *Sämtliche Werke* [*Werke*], vols. 2 and 3, ed. by Arthur Hübscher (Mannheim: F. A. Brockhaus, 1988). Citations to *Werke* are to volume and page numbers; *On the Will in Nature* [*WN*], trans. Eric F.J. Payne (New York: Berg Publishers, Inc., 1992). Citations to *WN* include the chapter title and the page number; *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* [*FR*], trans. Eric F. J. Payne (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1997). Citations to *FR* include the section number; *Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will* [*FW*], trans. Eric F. J. Payne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Citations to *FW* are given with the chapter number and the page number.

⁵ For references to Kant's work, I cite the page numbers in the original first (A) and second (B) editions: *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Without going into the exegetical details, Kant has been interpreted as either espousing a "two worlds" or "two aspects" metaphysical view. According to the two-worlds interpretation, the thing-in-itself and the thing as it appears are ontologically distinct, unrelated entities, whereas, according to the two-aspects interpretation, they are not ontologically distinct from each other. On the latter

have been offered to make sense of Schopenhauer's identification of the thing-in-itself with the will, there appears to be no consensus about how to interpret this identification as well as his understanding of the term "thing-in-itself." The proposed interpretations fall under two main categories: those who recognize a change of heart by Schopenhauer from his earlier views on the thing-in-itself⁶ and those who do not.⁷

I agree with the first group of interpreters that there are noteworthy changes in Schopenhauer's views. The gist of their discussion seems implicitly to suggest that there are two stages in Schopenhauer's philosophy: the first stage, where the young Schopenhauer identifies the thing-in-itself with the will, and a later second stage, where he takes a less stringent stance by qualifying his use of the term "thing-in-itself." I do not believe, however, that one can trace clear-cut stages in his philosophical development given Schopenhauer's simultaneous adherence to views that are seemingly contradictory and incompatible in nature. My interpretation significantly differs from that of the first and second group of interpreters insofar as they either entirely omit or overlook those changes in Schopenhauer's thinking as greatly affecting the internal consistency of his position. Unlike the other interpretations, the interpretation I offer here distinguishes three distinct and mutually incompatible views that Schopenhauer formulates about the thing-in-itself. I believe any attempt to give a coherent, consistent account of Schopenhauer's thought as a whole is inevitably bound to encounter

view, which is more in line with Schopenhauer's position, the thing-in-itself and appearances are treated as one and the same, only considered from two different points of view. In Schopenhauer's words, "every being in nature is simultaneously phenomenon and thing-in-itself." *PP2*, §63. To illustrate this, I perceive myself, my body, as a material/empirical object, just a representation among many other representations. But I also recognize that my "body occurs in [my] consciousness in quite another way, *toto genere* different . . . not as representation, but as something over and above this, hence what it is in itself." *WWR1*, §19, 103.

⁶ Most prominently, John E. Atwell, *Schopenhauer and the Character of the World: The Metaphysics of the Will* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); David E. Cartwright, "Two Senses of 'Thing-in-itself' in Schopenhauer's Philosophy," *Idealistic Studies* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 31–54; Moira Nicholls, "The Influences of Eastern Thought on Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Thing-in-Itself," in *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 171–212; Julian Young, *Schopenhauer*.

⁷ Most recently, Sandra Shapshay, "Poetic Intuition and the Bounds of Sense: Metaphor and Metonymy in Schopenhauer's Philosophy," *European Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (July 2008): 211–29.

difficulties because Schopenhauer's writings are riddled with irreconcilable passages concerning the thing-in-itself. This is why, I suggest, Schopenhauer's multiple contrary views about the thing-in-itself leave any effort to reconcile them and reach a univocal representation of his thought a doomed task.

I separate out these apparently contrary views as follows. The first view, whose first formulation dates to 1815, is the most readily recognized, in which Schopenhauer refuses to ascribe a separate and distinct reality to the thing-in-itself and disagrees with Kant that the thing-in-itself is beyond human apprehension. On the contrary, he alleges that we all recognize the thing-in-itself immediately in the inner perception of our own will, which depends neither on any conceptual determination, nor on structured representations of the world of appearances. Schopenhauer then notoriously declares that the thing-in-itself is the will. The second view is somewhat subtler and for that matter rather more difficult to grasp: sometime during the period 1820–21, Schopenhauer begins to doubt that the thing-in-itself is accessible to the mind. Sensing the implausibility of identifying the thing-in-itself as the will, he seems to backpedal and admits that the will, strictly speaking, is not the thing-in-itself but instead the most distinct phenomenal appearance of it. He modifies his claim by saying that he only names the thing-in-itself after its most distinct (or closest) appearance. Beyond these views, it is possible to derive even a third view, according to which it is no longer the immediate experience of one's own willing but, rather, withdrawal from the will-to-life that awakens in one a realization of the inner essence, the in-itself, of all being. While this third strand contradicts Schopenhauer's previous understandings of the thing-in-itself, it evinces the apparently Kantian bent of his later writings. At times in his later writings, Schopenhauer seems reluctant to make any claim whatsoever about the thing-in-itself or its relation to the phenomenal world. He concedes that a nonphenomenal reality can be conceived only negatively, as "that to which the denial of the will-to-live opens the way."⁸

There are basically two ways to deal with this interpretative challenge that do not in any obvious way suggest "the unfolding of a single thought" in Schopenhauer's work.⁹ One can continue to try to

⁸ *PP2*, §144.

⁹ *WWR* 1, §53, 285.

solve the puzzling identification of the thing-in-itself with the will. Alternatively, one can attempt to understand the meaning and extent of these apparent shifts in Schopenhauer's thinking. I will go with the second approach and show that the differences in Schopenhauer's views about the thing-in-itself and the will can be interpreted only in terms of his increasing emphasis on ascetic ideals of suffering and worldly withdrawal in his later writings. This is a point that has been steadily neglected by commentators up to this day.

Now, the first question to be addressed is: "Are these three accounts perhaps representing the different stages in Schopenhauer's philosophical development?" As R. Raj Singh points out, the main problem with the suggestion of multiple stages in his thought is that Schopenhauer regarded the first edition of *WWR* as the ultimate and complete metaphysical system, to which the rest of his works are a series of footnotes. That is why he refers to the subsequent additions to this work, constituting Volume 2, simply as "supplements" (*Ergänzungen*). As a matter of fact, his later works other than *WWR* are just further elaborations of the original statement of his worldview.¹⁰ Thus, any thesis about different stages in Schopenhauer's thought is outright false and unconvincing—just the idea of it is "enough to make Schopenhauer turn in his grave."¹¹ I believe, however, with the first group of interpreters, that it is highly contentious to claim that there is no indication of any change in Schopenhauer's views. The real difficulty lies in the fact that Schopenhauer himself never explicitly acknowledged his change of views about the thing-in-itself and its relation to the will. Moreover, he was not so effective in dispelling the ambiguity in his understanding of the term "thing-in-itself" and apparently remained committed to incompatible views. To illustrate this with an example: In one place in the second volume of *Parerga and Paralipomena*, published in 1851 (nine years before his death), Schopenhauer claims, in line with the first view, that for Kant the thing-

¹⁰ R. Raj Singh, *Death, Contemplation and Schopenhauer* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 58. Here Singh is particularly taking issue with Nicholls's interpretation: "In response to Nicholls' interpretations it might be said at the outset that there are no shifts in Schopenhauer's doctrine of the thing-in-itself." *Ibid.*, 59.

in-itself “was an *x*; for me it is will.”¹² Yet in another passage in the same text, he characterizes the thing-in-itself as that which remains outside of the will and its manifestation, which reflects the third view but remains at odds with the first view.¹³ Therefore, we simply cannot understand Schopenhauer’s views on the nature of the thing-in-itself as going through different stages.

The question that follows directly is: “How are these three accounts to be reconciled?” Unfortunately, there is no easy answer. Although Schopenhauer formulated different views on the thing-in-itself and, as a result, came considerably closer to Kant’s stance on the unknowability of the thing-in-itself, till the very end, he remained faithful to the idea that the thing-in-itself is the will. One may say Schopenhauer was ambiguous to the point of blatant self-contradiction. On the one hand, he prided himself on aspiring to the ideal of consistency, claiming that his philosophy is “the unfolding of a single thought.”¹⁴ On the other, he made claims that, taken together and in context, hardly form an expression of a single thought. And he admitted that he “was never concerned about the harmony and agreement of my propositions, not even when some of them seemed to me to be inconsistent.”¹⁵ Schopenhauer was aware of the difficulty of holding fast to a single thought, and therefore, he at times deviated from it, switching from one view to another, with no concern for consistency. It is not at all clear whether these three accounts are merely different ways of describing the same underlying reality. Therefore, I suggest, it is better to embrace the ambiguity in Schopenhauer’s understanding of the thing-in-itself and accept that these three accounts are to be primarily understood as incompatible views Schopenhauer happens to hold simultaneously.

I will examine each of these views in more detail in the next three sections and show why the existing interpretations, while impressive in their ingenuity, are ultimately unsatisfactory in that they vainly attempt and fail to integrate Schopenhauer’s views about the thing-in-itself and the will into a tight-knit, coherent philosophical system. Although I make no claims for a strict periodization of Schopenhauer’s career into stages, I will demonstrate that Schopenhauer developed these three views throughout his career in the order given above. I will show that it

¹² *PP2*, §61.

¹³ *PP2*, §144.

¹⁴ *WWR1*, §53, 285.

¹⁵ *PP1*, “Fragments for the History of Philosophy,” §14.

is not only difficult to give a coherent, consistent account of Schopenhauer's position but also not worth trying, because such an endeavor comes at the cost of ignoring the textual richness and depth of thought that Schopenhauer's works offer. In the final section of the paper, I will focus my attention on how Schopenhauer employs essentially a Fichtean strategy to approach the problem of the thing-in-itself. In concluding my analysis, I will briefly speculate on whether we can understand these three accounts as contrasting but not contradictory views, in other words, as different perspectives on the same reality.

I

In the first edition of *The World as Will and Representation*, published in 1818, Schopenhauer vehemently denies the notion of the thing-in-itself as signifying a reality independent of our thoughts and experiences and asserts that this world as known by us has only two sides: first and foremost, the world as will and, second, the world as representation. Schopenhauer cautiously emphasizes that "a reality that is neither of these two, but an object in itself (into which also Kant's thing-in-itself has unfortunately degenerated in his hands), is the phantom of a dream, and its acceptance is an *ignis fatuus* in philosophy."¹⁶ Here the basic idea is that we can grasp the meaning or sense of an object only in its relation to a knowing subject. Subject and object necessarily presuppose one another: they "are inseparable even in thought, for each of the two has meaning and existence only through and for the other; each exists with the other and vanishes with it."¹⁷ Therefore, a reality to which the mind has no access, in other words, an object-in-itself, is simply inconceivable, the phantom of a dream.

Later in the same work, Schopenhauer repeats his contention that the notion of an in-itself, apart from the will and the representation, does not add an iota to our knowledge, and hence such an existence is pronounced inconceivable and meaningless. If this material world that we know as our mere representation has an in-itself aspect, we can find

¹⁶ *WWR* 1, §1, 4.

¹⁷ *WWR* 1, §2, 5.

that only immediately in ourselves as the will.¹⁸ According to Schopenhauer, the experienced external world, as exhibiting itself in time and space and as adhering to the law of causality, is a mere representation of our intellect. It is only in an allegedly nonrepresentational kind of experience of our own will that we gain an immediate insight into the in-itself of this phenomenal world. If one accepts this dualistic vision of reality, then the question of the thing-in-itself dissolves. For Schopenhauer, to the question "What is the thing-in-itself?" "Our answer has been the will."¹⁹ Or, as Schopenhauer in an 1815 notebook entry more forcefully expresses it, "[t]he will is Kant's thing-in-itself."²⁰ Schopenhauer asserted this bold claim several times in his later published works, such as his 1835 *On the Will in Nature*: "Kant's 'thing-in-itself', or the ultimate substratum of every phenomenon, is the will."²¹

But it remains doubtful whether the Schopenhauer of the first edition of *WWR* really took himself to have succeeded in putting an end to the question of the thing-in-itself. No analysis or (causal) explanation can be applied to further our understanding of that which is given merely in the form of the inner sense, in other words, of the immediate intuition of ourselves and of our inner state. According to Dale Jacquette, for Schopenhauer, "[w]e cannot explain thing-in-itself, but only arrive intuitively at the insight that thing-in-itself is Will."²² But how could we have insight into the nature of a reality that is beyond the forms of intuition? Schopenhauer's identification of the thing-in-itself with the will is deeply problematic. On the one hand, he seems to affirm the nonspatial, nontemporal nature of the thing-in-itself. On the other, he defines its nature as the will, thereby identifying the thing-in-itself as a temporal phenomenon accessible to consciousness. This is implausible in that no temporal phenomenon can be identical to the thing-in-itself.

¹⁸ *WWR* 1, §19, 105.

¹⁹ *WWR* 1, §24, 120.

²⁰ *MR* 1, §442.

²¹ *WN*, "Comparative Anatomy," 47.

²² Dale Jacquette, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 85.

II

Almost all major interpretations of Schopenhauer to date agree that, over the years, Schopenhauer's assertive tone mellowed, and that he began to suspend, or at least develop a critical distance from, the central claim of the first edition of *WWR*. As early as the first edition of *WWR*, Schopenhauer already begins to recognize that "I know my will . . . not completely according to its nature, but only in its individual acts, and hence in time."²³ However, he faces the issue more acutely in his 1820–21 Berlin manuscripts, noting that "[t]he will, as we perceive it in ourselves, is not the thing-in-itself, for it only shows itself in individual and successive acts of will; these have time as their form and therefore are already a phenomenon."²⁴

This critical awareness became more visible later on, with the publication of the second edition of *WWR* in 1844 (twenty-six years after the first edition), where Schopenhauer makes an explicit concession on the issue of the thing-in-itself. He admits to his readers that the inner observation of our own will "still does not by any means furnish an exhaustive and adequate knowledge of the thing-in-itself; [it] would do so if it were a wholly immediate [*ganz unmittelbare*] observation."²⁵ The admission that the immediate knowledge of one's own being is not "wholly immediate" appears to be a rejection, or at least a softening, of the assertive claim that the thing-in-itself is the will.²⁶

To fully grasp how exactly it softens the force of Schopenhauer's central claim, it is necessary to have an understanding of the notion of "wholly immediate experience." Schopenhauer's above remarks, together with the insights provided in §19 of his 1813 dissertation,

²³ *WWR* 1, §18, 101.

²⁴ *MR* 3, §98.

²⁵ *Werke* 2, 254/*WWR* 2, 196. In §19 of his 1813 dissertation, *FR*, Schopenhauer elaborates on the immediacy of the representations of inner sense.

²⁶ In my estimation Robert Wicks comes close to the truth when he states, "It is possible to read Schopenhauer in a more Kantian way, as someone who denies that we can know anything absolutely about the thing-in-itself. By these lights, his claim that the thing-in-itself is Will requires some considerable softening, but some of Schopenhauer's passages indeed sound very Kantian." Robert Wicks, *Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 67. However, he ultimately rejects the possibility of a strictly Kantian reading of Schopenhauer. For the details of my disagreement with Wicks, see my n. 52 below.

suggest that the disjunction of the following conditions provides both necessary and sufficient conditions for any experience to count as “wholly immediate”:

- (i) The experience in question is unconditioned by any subjective forms of representation, namely, space, time, as well as causality.
- (ii) It does not fall under the subject–object distinction.

However, concerning the relation between (i) and (ii), one might wonder whether (ii) is somewhat redundant. Is (ii) another way of stating (i)? And if so, then why is there a need to present them as two separate conditions? According to Schopenhauer, because everything is given to us in the subjective forms of representation only, we can never overcome the subject–object distinction. Something becomes comprehensible only through representation, through the correspondence between what is subjective and what is objective. In other words, there is no knower without a known as its object, no knowing without representing. My knowledge that “there is a round steel canteen right in front of my eyes” is my subjective mental representation of that object, that is, a canteen, which is something external to my mind. Although (ii) seems to be philosophically redundant, it is still useful to present (i) and (ii) as two separate conditions insofar as Schopenhauer’s language at times suggests that (i) and (ii) are distinct conditions. Specifically, on the one hand, he speaks in terms of subjective forms pointing out that the knowledge one has of one’s own will is still subject to the form of representation, that is, time. On the other hand, he also notes that even in the most immediate consciousness of one’s own being, the subject, as knower or intellect, is confronted with an object that slips from any conceptual grasp (that is, the will): “there still remains the form of time, as well as that of being known and of knowing in general.”²⁷ The consciousness we have of our own bodily experiencing is still “tied to the form of representation; it is perception or observation.”²⁸ The will may be arguably free from the forms of space and causality, but “there still remains the form of time.”²⁹

²⁷ *WWR* 2, 197.

²⁸ *WWR* 2, 196.

²⁹ *WWR* 2, 197.

It is something known to us most immediately, yet not wholly immediately.³⁰

Young points out that “to the youthful Schopenhauer this would count as an admission of defeat, of the failure of the task of philosophy, that of uncovering the ultimate ‘whatness’ of reality, of cracking the problem of the Kantian thing in itself.”³¹ Here it should be noted that Young’s attempt at periodizing Schopenhauer’s intellectual development is misguided from a scholarly viewpoint because, strictly speaking, there is no textual evidence supporting the distinction between young and mature Schopenhauer, despite the changes in his position toward the Kantian “thing-in-itself” over the years.

There has been a valiant attempt to rescue Schopenhauer from the contradiction of claiming that the thing-in-itself is the will. One group of commentators³² proposes that he employs two different conceptions of the thing-in-itself in his philosophy: the thing in itself “in its relation to appearance,” or simply “in appearance,” and the thing in itself “outside its relation to appearance.” On this two-sense reading, the will is the thing-in-itself, but not in the absolute (Kantian) sense as that which lies outside its relation to appearance. Put in David Cartwright’s words, “the will is the thing-in-itself in a relative sense, namely, that it is the essence or content of appearances; that which gives the phenomena both their character and meaning.”³³

I should first note that I am aware of no passage where Schopenhauer admits that he holds, simultaneously, two distinct conceptions of the thing-in-itself. John Atwell is also aware of this interpretive difficulty: “Unfortunately, Schopenhauer does not explicitly say that he has two very different conceptions of the thing-in-itself.”³⁴ This interpretation is based upon rather slim textual evidence. Commentators mainly point to a letter from 1852, sent to Julius Frauenstädt, Schopenhauer’s disciple and future literary executor, where Schopenhauer attempts (rather unsuccessfully, in my view) to clarify his use of the term “thing-in-itself”:

³⁰ *WWR* 2, 196.

³¹ Young, *Schopenhauer*, 99.

³² Atwell, *Schopenhauer and the Character of the World*; Cartwright, “Two Senses of ‘Thing-in-itself’”; Young, *Schopenhauer*.

³³ Cartwright, “Two Senses of ‘Thing-in-itself,’” 32.

³⁴ Atwell, *Schopenhauer and the Character of the World*, 127.

It is precisely my great discovery that Kant's thing-in-itself is that which we find in self-consciousness as the will. . . . But this will is thing-in-itself merely in relation to appearance: it is what this [appearance] is, independently of our perception and representation, which means precisely in itself; therefore it is that which appears in every appearance.³⁵

Or, consider the following remarks from another letter written a year later, again to Frauenstädt:

[My philosophy] teaches what appearance is, and what the thing-in-itself is. This [latter], however, is the thing-in-itself merely relatively, i.e., in its relation to appearance; and this [appearance] is appearance merely in its relation to the thing-in-itself. . . . What, however, the thing-in-itself is outside that relation I have never said, because I don't know it; but in that relation it is will to life.³⁶

According to Young, "the crucial point that emerges from these letters is, clearly, the distinction between two senses of 'thing in itself': the thing in itself 'in its relation to appearance', or simply 'in appearance', and the thing in itself 'outside its relation to appearance'."³⁷ It is indeed tempting to think that, in these letters, Schopenhauer (perhaps under the pressure of his critics³⁸) proceeds to qualify his use of the term "thing-in-itself" with the phrases such as "merely relatively" and "merely in relation to appearance." However, it is entirely unclear why Schopenhauer insists on calling the will the thing-in-itself even in this relative sense. Why does he not call the will simply the essence of the phenomenal world? This at least points to a certain tension in this interpretation of which Cartwright is also aware. He says, "Still, there seems to be something disingenuous about Schopenhauer's retention of

³⁵ *GB*, 279.

³⁶ *GB*, 280.

³⁷ Young, *Schopenhauer*, 97.

³⁸ The abusive tone of his letters powerfully conveys his frustration with the critics. In the letter to Frauenstädt quoted already Schopenhauer writes: "[Y]ou say, 'it remains a contradiction that I speak of the thing in itself in terms incompatible with the concept of the thing in itself.' Quite right! with your concept of the thing in itself it is eternally incompatible, and this make you known to us in the following declared definition: the thing in itself is 'eternal, nonoriginating, and nonceasing original being [*Urwesen*].'—That would be the thing in itself?!—I'll tell you what that is: that is the well-known Absolute, thus the disguised cosmological proof on which the Jewish God rides." *GB*, 280, cited by Atwell, *Schopenhauer and the Character of the World*, 114–15.

the idea that the will [is] the thing-in-itself in any sense."³⁹ The suggestion that Schopenhauer employs the term "thing-in-itself" in a specialized sense alone does not explain why he chooses to "retain the Kantian expression as a standing formula" and not just use a different word altogether.⁴⁰

It seems to be in accord with this reading that Schopenhauer elsewhere says that the thing-in-itself "is precisely that which, insofar as it falls within consciousness, represents itself as will [*ist ebendas, was, indem es ins Bewußtsein fällt, sich als Wille darstellt*]."⁴¹ Or, to put it in less Schopenhauerian language, there is one and only one thing-in-itself that appears in this world we experience most distinctly as the conscious will of the human being. And, admittedly, we cannot go beyond this most immediate manifestation of the thing-in-itself because we cannot go beyond our consciousness to apprehend things as they are in themselves—in a nonrelative, absolute sense. Therefore, Schopenhauer concludes, "the question what that may be in so far as it does not fall within consciousness, that is to say, what it is *absolutely in itself*, remains unanswerable."⁴²

Now, there are two things to note here. First, it is quite clear from Schopenhauer's so-called relative conception of the thing-in-itself that, strictly speaking, the will is not the thing-in-itself but only a "phenomenal appearance." And second, a problem seems to come up: Construed this way, the thing-in-itself is not absolutely and completely beyond our comprehension. It is not that we know nothing about the thing-in-itself. On the contrary, we know something about it in its relation to the phenomena, namely, that it "represents itself as will."⁴³ This poses a problem, however, because this is still a very un-Kantian way of conceptualizing the thing-in-itself. While assuming there is no direct intuition into the thing-in-itself, Schopenhauer maintains that the thing-in-itself is given from within phenomenal consciousness. He says,

[A]lthough no one can recognize the thing-in-itself through the veil of the forms of perception, on the other hand everyone carries this within himself, in fact he himself is it; hence in self-consciousness it

³⁹ Cartwright, "Two Senses of 'Thing-in-itself,'" 37.

⁴⁰ *WWR* 1, §22, 110.

⁴¹ *Werke* 2, 634. My translation.

⁴² *Ibid.* My emphasis.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

must be in some way accessible [*irgendwie zugänglich*] to him, although still only conditionally.⁴⁴

Elsewhere, Schopenhauer similarly emphasizes that “we have not, like Kant, absolutely given up the ability to know the thing-in-itself; on the contrary, we know that it is to be looked for in the will.”⁴⁵ However, Schopenhauer never further clarifies how exactly the thing-in-itself relates to and manifests in the phenomena.

By speaking of a positive relation of the thing-in-itself to the objects of sensory experience, Schopenhauer radically departs from Kant’s understanding of the thing-in-itself. Kant’s conception of the thing-in-itself leaves no space for any claim about any (temporal) relation between the thing-in-itself and the phenomenal contents of consciousness. Kant says, “All our intuition is nothing but the representation of appearance . . . [T]he things that we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them to be.”⁴⁶ Kant clearly dismisses the possibility of our gaining knowledge of the relation between the thing-in-itself and any phenomena, for example, the claims that privilege the will or a special kind of intuition that allegedly enables access to the reality of the thing-in-itself. What the objects may be in themselves can never be known, even “through the most enlightened cognition of their appearance.”⁴⁷

To make this point clearer, we just need to turn to what Schopenhauer repeatedly and expressly says regarding his understanding of the thing-in-itself: “I admit entirely Kant’s doctrine that the world of experience is mere phenomenon . . . but I add that, precisely as phenomenal appearance, it is the manifestation of that which appears, and with him I call that which appears the thing-in-itself.”⁴⁸ And Schopenhauer emphatically reminds us that he “never speaks of the thing-in-itself otherwise than in its relation to the phenomenon.”⁴⁹

Although the above passage clearly suggests that Schopenhauer endorses Kant’s distinction between appearances and the thing-in-itself, he significantly alters Kant’s understanding of the thing-in-itself. As

⁴⁴ *Werke* 2, 237/*WWR* 2, 182.

⁴⁵ *WWR* 2, 494.

⁴⁶ A42/B59–60.

⁴⁷ A43/B60–61.

⁴⁸ *WWR* 2, 183.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Young puts it, "he muddies the waters by quite wrongly suggesting that [this] is Kant's sense of the term"; however, "what Schopenhauer is in fact doing here is introducing a new, non-Kantian sense of 'thing in itself'."⁵⁰ The thing-in-itself, as Kant often uses this expression, is simply the way a thing is apart from all relations to other objects, and as such, it is independent of a thinking subject and hence beyond the world of phenomena. This is obviously not how Schopenhauer conceives of and uses this expression, because, as shown above, he remains occupied with what seems to be central to his philosophical concerns, namely, the relation of the thing-in-itself to the phenomena and the question of the knowability (*Erkennbarkeit*) of the thing-in-itself. The thing-in-itself in the only proper sense Schopenhauer seems to acknowledge at this point is "that which appears in the world most distinctly as the will."⁵¹ But only that which is spatial and capable of change appears. The thing-in-itself is not spatial or temporal in any way but transcends all human thought and comprehension. Therefore, it seems problematic to maintain that the thing-in-itself appears in the phenomenal world.

Central to the second view is the idea that the thing-in-itself signifies a reality that is fundamentally different from the will. Now, in the second edition of *WWR* (1844), Schopenhauer openly admits that "the thing-in-itself . . . may have, entirely outside all possible phenomenon, determinations, qualities, modes of existence which for us are absolutely unknowable and which then remains as the inner nature of the thing-in-itself."⁵² Furthermore, sensing the implausibility

⁵⁰ Young, *Schopenhauer*, 97.

⁵¹ *Werke* 2, 634.

⁵² *WWR* 2, 198. Schopenhauer first admits this in his 1820–21 *Reisebuch* (travel diary), "this very thing-in-itself . . . may have, quite apart from all possible phenomenon, definitions, properties and modes of existence which for us are simply unknowable and inconceivable." Wicks also discusses these "Kantian passages" in Schopenhauer's writings and shows similarities between the two thinkers regarding their understanding of the thing-in-itself, though those similarities seem rather difficult for him to articulate clearly. Wicks, *Schopenhauer*, 68–69. Wicks reads this passage as suggesting that even though our knowledge of the thing-in-itself is not absolute, this does not mean that we know nothing about it. Wicks claims that, for Schopenhauer, "mystical knowledge of the thing-in-itself is attainable." *Ibid.* And the fact that "Schopenhauer acknowledges mysticism . . . is sufficient to reject interpretations that portray him immediately as a strict Kantian." *Ibid.* Apparently, Wicks fails to recognize that Schopenhauer develops a third view on the concept of the thing-in-itself as that which does not will life. On this

of identifying the thing-in-itself as the will, Schopenhauer backpedals and claims that the will, strictly speaking, is not the thing-in-itself but instead a phenomenal appearance of it. To the extent that it is possible to distinguish myself, as this knowing subject, from me, as the one who wills, the immediate experience of our own will is just a perception in the intellect, and hence it “remains phenomenon only.”⁵³

But then one wonders what sense, if any, is left for the claim that “the will is Kant’s thing-in-itself.” This is where Schopenhauer’s persuasiveness as a philosopher appears to be limited because he eventually takes refuge in figurative language. The will is not the thing-in-itself; however, as being completely different in kind from all other phenomena, it is distinguished by its immediateness to the thing-in-itself and hence “is its representative for us [*es für uns vertritt*].”⁵⁴ Thus, it is only in this sense that Schopenhauer says he refers to the will as the thing-in-itself.⁵⁵ And, only in this way, he contends, Kant’s doctrine of the unknowability of the thing in itself “is modified to the extent that the thing-in-itself is merely not absolutely and completely knowable.”⁵⁶ In his 1820–21 *Reisebuch* (travel diary), Schopenhauer writes, “Therefore the word will, used for thing-in-itself, is indeed only the description of the thing-in-itself through its most distinct phenomenon.”⁵⁷ Just as the flag is not the country nor the idol a god, but a representative thereof, the will is not the thing-in-itself but only its representative for us. Yet, Schopenhauer’s figurative equation of the thing-in-itself with the will does not help us much to understand better the essence of the relationship between the representative (the will) and the represented (the thing-in-itself). As D. W. Hamlyn aptly points out, “Kant was surely right; once given the notion of a thing-in-itself there is no way of spelling out the relation between it and phenomena, and Schopenhauer’s claim

view, “what philosophy can express only negatively as denial of the will . . . cannot really be called knowledge.” *WWR* 1, §71, 410. The thing-in-itself and its attributes transcend everything. It cannot be understood; and no experience, mystical or otherwise, can lead to even partial knowledge of the thing-in-itself. It can therefore be described only in the negative. For more on this view, see the section below.

⁵³ *WWR* 2, 197–98.

⁵⁴ *Werke* 2, 255/*WWR* 2, 197.

⁵⁵ *WWR* 2, 197.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *MR* 3, §98.

to find evidence of the nature of the thing-in-itself in phenomena is just illusion."⁵⁸

In sum, at places Schopenhauer clearly backs away from strictly identifying the thing-in-itself with the will. He clarifies that he only names the thing-in-itself after its most distinct appearance. On the face of it, this move seems to avoid saddling Schopenhauer with an implausible view, though now he loses much of his air of "great discovery," which had made him something of a *cause célèbre* in the post-Kantian era.⁵⁹ Here, we come to see a Schopenhauer who, in contrast to his earlier confidence, becomes more modest about the possibility of our epistemological access to the ultimate reality. In other words, his understanding of the thing-in-itself, for the first time, takes a step back in the opposite (Kantian) direction.

Sandra Shapshay offers an interpretation that comes close to endorsing this "modified" view. One merit of Shapshay's reading is that it suggests at least a way to spell out the relation between the thing-in-itself and phenomena. Shapshay simply dismisses the two-sense reading of Schopenhauer's understanding of the thing-in-itself on the grounds that "[t]his account . . . runs counter to many central passages in Schopenhauer's main work, where he says quite explicitly that Will is the Kantian thing-in-itself."⁶⁰ It is clear from this remark that Shapshay does not postulate any changes in Schopenhauer's thinking since the first publication of *WWR*. As we saw above, among the commentators who recognize the problem with claiming that the will is the Kantian thing-in-itself, some suggest that Schopenhauer simply misunderstood Kant's concept of "thing-in-itself" and unwittingly introduced "a new, non-Kantian sense of 'thing in itself'."⁶¹ Shapshay's response to this problem, on the other hand, does not involve attributing to Schopenhauer a misunderstanding of the Kantian thing-in-itself. Her solution to the problem consists in retaining the original, Kantian sense of "thing-in-itself" and attributing to the expression "the will is the thing-in-itself" a different meaning that can render it plausible.

⁵⁸ David Walter Hamlyn, *Schopenhauer* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 121–22.

⁵⁹ *GB*, 279.

⁶⁰ Shapshay, "Metaphor and Metonymy in Schopenhauer's Philosophy," 215.

⁶¹ Young, *Schopenhauer*, 97.

Shapshay argues that the expression “the will is Kant’s thing-in-itself” should not be taken as literal but metonymical. A metonym is a figure of speech in which the name of a thing is replaced with the name of something closely associated with or considered to be part of the original. Here are some examples of metonymic phrases: “Captain Haddock is very fond of the bottle.” Here the word “bottle” stands for alcoholic beverages with which “the bottle” is generally contiguous. Similarly, the word “crown” may stand for the king, “hands” for workers, and so on. Shapshay suggests that Schopenhauer uses a special kind of metonymic device to refer to the thing-in-itself as the will: *denominatio a potiori* or “naming from the main part or feature of a thing.” By naming the thing-in-itself after its most distinct phenomenon (or something with which it is contiguous), Schopenhauer, Shapshay claims, is trying to get us to extend the concept “will” (with which we are immediately and noninferentially acquainted in inner perception) beyond its usual confines and its original emphasis on the individual—in other words, “beyond the bounds of possible sensation to the thing-in-itself.”⁶² He “invites us to feel for ourselves the mysterious connection between our wills and the in-itself of the world in general.”⁶³ And he “invites [us] to do this on the strength of [our] special insight into [our] own wills.”⁶⁴ Insofar as the will is only in time (and other phenomena are in space and time), the will, Schopenhauer claims, is the phenomenon that is the most closely associated with the thing-in-itself. And by utilizing this unique relation of contiguity between the will and the thing-in-itself, Shapshay proposes, Schopenhauer metonymically (in other words, not literally) identifies the thing-in-itself with the will.

Although Shapshay’s gloss may look attractive, particularly to a reader who is sympathetic to the strategy of teasing out the linguistic nuances of Schopenhauerian language, I take issue with her interpretation on the following grounds. First, she seems to have extended Schopenhauer’s use of the phrase *denominatio a potiori*, literally “denomination by the stronger or more important,” even further than Schopenhauer himself intended. The main textual evidence for Shapshay’s interpretation comes from the following passage in the first edition of *WWR*:

⁶² Shapshay, “Metaphor and Metonymy in Schopenhauer’s Philosophy,” 218.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Now, if this thing-in-itself (we will retain the Kantian expression as a standing formula) . . . can be none other than the most complete of all its phenomena, i.e., the most distinct, the most developed, the most directly enlightened by knowledge; but this is precisely man's will. We have to observe, however, that here of course we use only a *denominatio a potiori*, by which the concept of will therefore receives a greater extension than it has hitherto had. . . . But anyone who is incapable of carrying out the required extension of the concept will remain involved in a permanent misunderstanding. For by the word will, he will always understand only that species of it hitherto exclusively described by the term, that is to say, the will guided by knowledge, strictly according to motives, indeed only to abstract motives, thus manifesting itself under the guidance of the faculty of reason. This, as we have said, is only the most distinct phenomenon or appearance of the will. We must now clearly separate out in our thoughts the innermost essence of this phenomenon, known to us directly, and then transfer it to all the weaker, less distinct phenomena of the same essence, and by so doing achieve the desired extension of the concept of will.⁶⁵

The first thing to note is that Schopenhauer seems to be retaining the concept of "thing-in-itself" while subverting its meaning by identifying it with the will. My reading of this passage leads me to think that it is not so much that Schopenhauer uses the concept "will" as a metonym for the Kantian thing-in-itself. Rather, he identifies the will as the most important aspect of human nature, that which leads human beings to act as they do. His main purpose is, then, to persuade us to extend the human will, by virtue of a *denominatio a potiori*, to the whole universe so as to demonstrate how diversity, striving, and antagonism unfold within the broader context of the natural processes. So, contrary to Shapshay's suggestion, here Schopenhauer seems to invite us to feel for ourselves the connection between our wills and all other forms of life (including also inanimate forms of existence) and not necessarily the nonphenomenal essence, the in-itself, of all being. Indeed, in a later work from 1839 Schopenhauer indirectly supports my contention by noting that he had been primarily concerned with "the question whether the inner condition of reaction to external causes in the case of beings without cognition and even without life is essentially identical with what we call the will in ourselves."⁶⁶ Therefore, I believe the chief weakness of Shapshay's interpretation derives from her overestimating and

⁶⁵ *WWR* 1, §22, 110–11.

⁶⁶ *FW* 3, 29.

misreading the function of *denominatio a potiori* in the above-mentioned passage.

Second, and equally significant, Shapshay's metonymic approach to Schopenhauer's philosophy inevitably remains in tension with what he says about the thing-in-itself and its relation to phenomena elsewhere. Shapshay is right in that the textual evidence indeed shows that Schopenhauer regards the will as (allegedly) the least mediated of all phenomena and hence as the closest phenomenon of the thing-in-itself. Yet elsewhere Schopenhauer says things that appear to fly in the face of this key assumption about the will's closeness to the thing-in-itself. In one instance, he boldly asserts that "the two [in other words, the thing-in-itself and the phenomenon] are absolutely incommensurable [*schlechthin inkommensurabel*]. The whole mode of being of the one, together with all the fundamental laws of this being, signifies nothing, and less than nothing, in the other."⁶⁷ But if, as Schopenhauer claims here, the thing-in-itself and the phenomenon are epistemologically and ontologically incommensurable, then it becomes puzzling how we can speak of a (metonymic) relation of contiguity between the two. It seems more plausible to admit that we simply cannot know whether the will as a temporally mediated phenomenon bears such relation to the thing-in-itself, because the thing-in-itself, as Schopenhauer's above remark suggests, stands outside all possibility of any relation to phenomena (including our own will).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Werke* 2, 636/*WWR* 2, 497.

⁶⁸ We can also consider "the metaphorical view," which is a close cousin to the view Shapshay defends. Some scholars claim that the expression "the thing-in-itself is the will" is not literal but metaphorical. I think that the best articulation of this view is offered by F. C. White in his book *On Schopenhauer's Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*. For Schopenhauer, White argues, only those concepts that are based on sense observation or perceptual knowledge are genuine or meaningful. The concept of "will" is derived from our inner experience and verifiable perceptually. It is therefore genuine. Although it is genuine, it cannot be applied literally to the thing-in-itself, since the latter is imperceptible, that is, beyond experience and the subjective forms of cognition. However, White suggests, the concept "will" can still be applied to the thing-in-itself metaphorically. His reasoning is that "if there are cases where only metaphorical terms can describe what we experience, it is not incoherent to assert that if we have experiential knowledge of the [thing-in-itself] we can describe it only in metaphors." F. C. White, *On Schopenhauer's Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 92. I reject this interpretation for four reasons. First, the metaphorical interpretation of the

III

In this section I want to suggest that the problematic aspect of the identification of the thing-in-itself with the will could reveal a central insight highlighted only by Schopenhauer's later works, which he describes as follows:

Kant brought to light the great though negative truth that time cannot belong to the thing-in-itself, because it lies preformed in our apprehension. . . . I am now trying to show the positive aspect of the matter, namely that the thing-in-itself remains untouched by time and by that which is possible only through time, that is, by arising and passing away.⁶⁹

Here we see that Schopenhauer's emphasis shifts from grappling with the temporal aspect of the will (as the thing-in-itself) to focusing on a reality that can be shown to be both "nonspatial" and "nontemporal," and hence is free from representation and the will. In the remainder of my analysis, I will examine the texts that in many ways substantiate this apparent shift in Schopenhauer's thinking.

So far, I have distinguished two different views of the thing-in-itself in Schopenhauer: first, the view that the thing-in-itself is the will, and second, the view that the thing-in-itself is that which appears in the world most distinctly as the will. I have presented them as two incompatible views he happens to hold simultaneously. I now further distinguish a third view, namely, that the thing-in-itself is that which does not will life.

I take the passage below, in which Schopenhauer discusses the ascetic effects of tragic representations of suffering on the spectator, as implicitly putting forward a third view on the thing-in-itself:

In the tragic catastrophe we turn away from the will-to-live itself . . . in the tragedy the terrible side of life is presented to us, the wailing

thing-in-itself comes into conflict with Schopenhauer's conviction that "the thing-in-itself as will" reflects a truth about the inner nature of things. Second, metaphors are in principle based on similarities between objects, or they require some underlying resemblance. There is simply no relation of similarity between "will" and "the thing-in-itself" that we can recognize or even imagine. Third, the precise way in which such similarity is to be perceived is left unexplained by White. Fourth, White's interpretation is not based on textual evidence, which he does not deny: "Schopenhauer himself does not attempt to develop any such theory." *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *WWR* 2, 484.

and lamentation of mankind, the dominion of chance and error, the fall of the righteous, the triumph of the wicked; and so that aspect of the world is brought before our eyes which directly opposes our will. At this sight we feel ourselves urged to turn our will away from life, to give up willing and loving life. But precisely in this way we become aware that there is still left in us something different that we cannot possibly know positively, but only negatively, as *that which does not will life*.⁷⁰

According to this passage, the experience of tragic suffering has almost an unnatural yet positive purpose, which is to point to the presence of a radically different reality, a mode of existence foreign to what we ordinarily experience. Tragedy realizes this purpose in two ways; first, by evoking a deep sense of our finitude and vulnerability vis-à-vis the terrible side of worldly existence, the preponderance of misery over happiness in human life; second, by producing a substantial tempering or quieting effect on the will and leading to an attitude of ascetic indifference toward life and one's worldly self. The above passage focuses exclusively on witnessing suffering in others (particularly when it appears senseless or unfair). However, the same effect can also be achieved by going through extreme personal suffering, as evidenced by the following remark. "[A]t times," Schopenhauer points out,

in the hard experience of our own sufferings or in the vividly recognized suffering of others, knowledge of the vanity and bitterness of life comes close to us. . . . We would like to deprive desires of their sting, close the entry to all suffering, purify and sanctify ourselves by complete and final resignation.⁷¹

Depending of course on the success and intensity with which it realizes this twofold purpose, tragic pathos can hold before us an aspect of reality that we cannot ordinarily conceive of, much less know, something that stands in direct opposition to everything that lives and strives. Although Schopenhauer does not use the term "thing-in-itself" in this passage, it is quite clear from the context of his discussion what the phrase "that which does not will life" refers to, namely, something that we cannot know in any positive sense.

Schopenhauer later expresses this position more clearly in the following passage from *Parerga and Paralipomena*, published in 1851 (seven years after *WWR2*):

⁷⁰ *Werke* 2, 556/*WWR2*, 433. My emphasis.

⁷¹ *WWR1*, §68, 379.

All this is accordingly finite existence whose opposite would be conceivable as infinite, as exposed to no attack from without [in other words, indestructible], or as requiring no help from without, and therefore as . . . in eternal rest and calm . . . without change, without time, without multiplicity and diversity, the negative knowledge of which is the keynote of Plato's philosophy. *Such an existence must be that to which the denial of the will-to-live opens the way.*⁷²

There are a couple of points to be made here. The first thing that catches one's attention is Schopenhauer's attempt to discern the thing-in-itself not through the concept of will but through the ascetic denial of the will, a state that develops after experiencing or witnessing a tragic event. The essence or in-itself of the world manifests itself continually and most distinctly in the will of a human being. This idea lies at the core of the second view that we find in Schopenhauer's writings.

In his discussion of the second view, Schopenhauer seems to operate with a non-Kantian sense of "thing-in-itself," namely, as Cartwright and the likeminded commentators put it, the thing in itself "in its relation to appearance." It follows from this view that the immediate, volitional awareness of one's self, or experiencing oneself as a conscious, willing being, facilitates an understanding of the essence or in-itself of the phenomenal world. However, at times Schopenhauer moves away from this view and the understanding of the thing-in-itself as the essence or content of appearances to a more Kantian sense of "thing-in-itself." This apparent change of view in Schopenhauer is not, however, a change in his basic understanding of the will. Central to understanding the third view is the role of one's relation to one's own will in determining one's overall attitude toward life, whether that of affirmation or that of denial. According to Schopenhauer, there are two distinct ways of attending to our own will. One's relation to one's own will consists in either a sense of inclination or striving toward something not-yet-reached, or a sense of retreat from or striving "away from the interest of the will."⁷³ The first way of attending to one's will leads to an act by which the will-to-live affirms itself.

The second way of attending to one's will, on the other hand, opens the possibility of the suppression of willing, of overcoming the self and the phenomenal world, and thus of recognizing a reality that is beyond

⁷² *Werke* 5, 337/PP2, §144. My emphasis.

⁷³ *WWR* 2, 433.

plurality, transience and decay, change and extinction, in other words, a reality beyond willing. From the above-cited passages, it follows that one's attending to the felt temporal immediacy of one's embodied self is no longer singled out as a unique experience (because it only reveals the vanity and insatiability of all that is worldly). It is, rather, one's remaining undisturbed by the excitements or immediate affections of the will, and hence the experience of dissociating or turning away from all transient forms of phenomenal existence and all plurality in time and space that enables one to participate in the recognition of a reality that exists independently of one's cognizing it. More specifically, the very possibility of abandonment—denial of one's will, renouncing the temporary—instigated by tragic suffering, enables one to know that there exists something beyond the self, which resides outside the phenomenal realm of experience. The world presents itself as the blindly striving will, "the luckiest development of which is that it comes to itself in order to abolish itself."⁷⁴ In this self-abolishing, Schopenhauer suggests, it reveals a consciousness that is devoid of thought, differentiation, conceptualization, and hence not reducible to the reflective apprehension of one's own being. The underlying goal of Schopenhauer's later treatment of ascetic themes is to elucidate the nature of the unique way such consciousness relates us to something that persists behind and above all time, something that is not itself in time. Put simply and somewhat paradoxically, for Schopenhauer, it is as if the will negates itself in order to disclose to itself what it truly is and hence voluntarily passes "over into empty nothingness."⁷⁵ This is what I take to be the surface import of Schopenhauer's rather cryptic remark that

[a]t this sight [of tragic suffering] we feel ourselves urged to turn our will away from life, to give up willing and loving life. But precisely in this way we become aware that there is still left in us something different that we cannot possibly know positively, but only negatively, as that which does not will life.⁷⁶

Facing the tragedies of human life and thus the prospect of death, for Schopenhauer, can afford us a unique perspective by which we may

⁷⁴ *WWR*2, 570.

⁷⁵ *WWR*2, 198.

⁷⁶ *WWR*2, 433.

arrive at "the deep consciousness of the indestructibility of our real inner nature [*das tiefinnere Bewußtsein der Unzerstörbarkeit unsers Wesens*]." ⁷⁷ But what is it about us that is indestructible and that does not rest on the phenomenon? Schopenhauer's starting point is that "a reasonable person can think of himself as imperishable only in so far as he thinks of himself as beginningless [*anfangslos*], as eternal [*ewig*], in fact as timeless [*zeitlos*]." ⁷⁸ If we regard ourselves as having come out of nothing, then we must also accept that at some point in life we will become nothing again. Likewise, if we regard our birth as the absolute beginning of our existence, then we must also accept that our death one day will be our absolute end.

Dying, Schopenhauer claims, represents only the temporal destruction of the phenomenal individual. However, where the self dissolves into the timeless, "a sure and certain feeling says to everyone that there is in him something positively imperishable and indestructible [*sagt jedem ein sicheres Gefühl, daß in ihm etwas schlechthin Unvergängliches und Unzerstörbares sei*]," "that something in us does not pass away with time . . . but endures unchanged." ⁷⁹ However, Schopenhauer continues, we are not able to comprehend exactly what this imperishable element is. It is not consciousness any more than it is the body, on which the conscious experience supervenes. ⁸⁰ We ordinarily tend to think of ourselves as existing only objectively, solely for the perceiving consciousness, as this particular individual. And this

⁷⁷ *Werke* 2, 622/*WWR* 2, 487.

⁷⁸ *Werke* 2, 622/*WWR* 2, 487.

⁷⁹ *Werke* 2, 634/*WWR* 2, 496. Schopenhauer often refers to the being-in-itself of things as "indestructible" (*unzerstörbar*). But later he seems hesitant even to use this negative adjective because our notion of "indestructibility" is ultimately derived from the physical world, and as such it cannot have any application to the thing-in-itself, something groundless, that is, entirely outside the chain of causes and effects that presupposes time. We can speak of "indestructibility" only in a temporal sense, "only as continued existence." *PP* 2, §136. And therefore "we can hardly form even an abstract notion of an indestructibility that would not be a continuance, because we lack all intuitive perception for verifying such a notion." *PP* 2, §136. This, of course, has a bearing on the problems associated with Schopenhauer's first identification of the Kantian thing-in-itself with the conscious will, which is temporally determined. Here, however, Schopenhauer consistently uses the term "thing-in-itself" to mean atemporal or timeless existence, that is, existence in which there is no temporal succession or duration.

⁸⁰ *WWR* 2, 496.

way of placing our existence in the identity of consciousness, Schopenhauer claims, is what really holds us back from recognizing what is independent of and beyond our phenomenal selves. If, on the other hand, we could bring to our consciousness that up until now we have existed, “an infinite time, and thus an infinity of changes, has run its course, but yet notwithstanding this” we exist.⁸¹ Therefore, our existence must rest on “some original necessity [*irgendeiner ursprünglichen Nothwendigkeit*].”⁸² And this necessity, which has manifested itself in this particular form, cannot be “limited to such a brief span of time, but . . . is active at all times [*sondern daß sie in jeder wirke*].”⁸³ It follows that “what is proved to be indestructible through death is not really the individual” but something that is free from the causal determinism to which all things are susceptible.⁸⁴ With death we surely lose both our individuality and consciousness, “but not what produced and maintained consciousness; life is extinguished, but with it not the principle of life which manifested itself in it.”⁸⁵ Therefore, the denial of the will-to-live or the approach of death, Schopenhauer insists, is not just about giving up our individual character. Rather, it is a sure and certain guide by which we are to be led to “the consciousness of our original and eternal nature [*dem Bewußtsein unserer Ursprünglichkeit und Ewigkeit*]” or, more specifically, “the deep conviction [*die tiefe Überzeugung*]” of the being-in-itself of the world that, based on Schopenhauer’s purely anecdotal observations, “everyone carries at the bottom of his heart.”⁸⁶ Death reveals that our “true essence-in-itself does not know either time, beginning, end, or the limits of a given individuality.”⁸⁷

There are two problems with what Schopenhauer says here about resignation from willing and from life. One relates to the nature of the experience of resignation, specifically, its accompanying feeling of

⁸¹ *WWR* 2, 488–89.

⁸² *Werke* 2, 624/*WWR* 2, 488.

⁸³ *Werke* 2, 624/*WWR* 2, 488.

⁸⁴ *WWR* 2, 490.

⁸⁵ *WWR* 2, 496.

⁸⁶ *Werke* 2, 622/*WWR* 2, 487; see also *WWR* 2, 508 and *PP* 2, §139: “From time to time, everyone will perhaps feel in his heart of hearts a consciousness that an entirely different kind of existence would really suit him rather than this one which is so unspeakably wretched, temporal, transient, individual, and preoccupied with nothing but misery and distress. On such an occasion, he then thinks that death might lead him back to that other existence.”

⁸⁷ *PP* 2, §141.

conviction that something in us never perishes, something that is beyond our will. The other is about how far, for Schopenhauer, ascetic resignation can take us, in other words, whether it can lead to, or open the way to, a transcendental knowledge that goes beyond the limits of what can only be known phenomenally. Schopenhauer claims that, in a state of ascetic resignation or liberation from the one-sided, representative reality of human experience, we all grasp intuitively and immediately, so it appears, the in-itself of our own phenomenon. One should be careful, however, in viewing the feelings of certainty and conviction as indications of knowledge. Some people talk of a "sure and certain" feeling that they are going to win the lottery, that they have arrived at the solution to a difficult problem, or that God is telling them to do something. Should we regard these as different instances of the same kind of phenomenon, which involve the same mental states and processes? Some of our intuitions are well founded, correspond to immediate apprehensions of sensory events, and hence present a reasonable possibility, while some are purely subjective, irrational, or nonverifiable. Schopenhauer does not really attempt to work out such differences or spell out any specifics. There are no criteria in Schopenhauer's account for determining whether a felt awareness leads to the apprehension of something as it really is or only appears to be a genuine intuition.

Another issue concerns how, exactly, the felt consciousness of the indestructibility of one's being can provide one with the insight that enables one to sense something beyond all possibility of experience. On the one hand, in the second volume of *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer claims that we can have but negative knowledge (*negative Erkenntnis*) of the thing-in-itself, a knowledge of what it is not, as that which does not will life, and hence without change, time, multiplicity, and diversity.⁸⁸ Yet, on the other hand, elsewhere he seems to suggest that no knowledge, whether positive or negative, about the in-itself beyond the will is possible for us: "[W]here the being-in-itself of things begins, knowledge ceases, [because] all knowledge primarily and essentially concerns merely phenomena."⁸⁹ Even if "negative knowledge" significantly differs from positive knowledge, as Schopenhauer seems to suggest, it is still knowledge. Thus, it appears

⁸⁸ *PP2*, §144.

⁸⁹ *WWR2*, 275.

on the face of it somewhat problematic to speak of a knowledge (albeit negative) of the thing-in-itself. Now perhaps by “negative knowledge” Schopenhauer means to signify not a knowledge of a thing as such but, rather, an attempt to determine our position in relation to something that necessarily exceeds our cognitive limits. In his later writings he seems less concerned about how the relation of the thing-in-itself to the objects of phenomenal experience is ultimately to be understood. In a passage from the second edition of *WWR*, where the possibility of grasping that relation is placed in question, he says, “[S]uch knowledge is . . . not ever or anywhere possible; that those relations [between the thing-in-itself and the phenomena] are not only relatively but absolutely inscrutable.” He reiterates more repeatedly and firmly “that not only does no one know them, but that they are in themselves unknowable, since they do not enter into the form of knowledge in general.”⁹⁰ In other words, we may conceive of the thing-in-itself as a reality distinct from phenomenal reality, yet we remain simply incapable of comprehending its relation to the phenomena.

There are other passages that suggest a more Kantian sense of “thing-in-itself.” At several places in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer appeals to the Kantian understanding of the thing-in-itself. “[I]n the proper Kantian sense,” he says, the thing-in-itself “expresses that which exists independently of perception through any of our senses,”⁹¹ something quite different from the phenomena, something metaphysical, “distinct from everything physical.”⁹² And in line with this, he maintains that “[w]here the thing-in-itself begins, the phenomenon ends.”⁹³ Thus, any attempt to gain insight into the former by means of the latter, he consistently concludes, “proves to be like the attempt to cover two absolutely dissimilar figures by each other, which never succeeds because one or other corner sticks out, however we turn the figures.”⁹⁴ Note that Schopenhauer’s remark here echoes the point made earlier (in *WWR* 2, 497) about the absolute incommensurability of the thing-in-itself and the phenomenon. In his later years he continues

⁹⁰ *WWR* 2, 641. This passage is copied from Schopenhauer’s 1821–22 *Foliant I* (Tome).

⁹¹ *PP* 2, §61.

⁹² *PP* 2, §66.

⁹³ *PP* 2, §64.

⁹⁴ *PP* 2, §62.

to embrace the idea that this world is the will and nothing besides. And he adds, allegorically, that if we endeavor to move beyond the world of phenomena, "everything is then 'land on which one cannot stand, water in which one cannot swim.'"⁹⁵ The essence of things before or beyond the phenomenal realm of experience, "and consequently beyond the will, is not open to any investigation."⁹⁶ Hence, Schopenhauer concludes, "[s]o much as regards the limits of my philosophy and of all philosophy."⁹⁷ It appears that the above cautionary note says it all, namely, that we can know nothing about a reality that lies beyond the bounds of all possible experience because such an existence overcomes the separation inherent in the subject-object split, the only means by which we can perceive or comprehend anything at all. An intuition in which the opposition of object and subject is canceled is simply inconceivable. Or, to put it in Schopenhauer's own words, "knowableness in general, with its most essential, and therefore constantly necessary, form of subject and object, belongs merely to the phenomenon, not to the being-in-itself of things."⁹⁸

This and Schopenhauer's later writings express a significant affinity with Kant. And in his later years Schopenhauer appears to embrace every opportunity to stress this affinity:

[My philosophy] arrives at no conclusions as to what exists beyond all possible experience, but furnishes merely an explanation and interpretation of what is given in the external world and in self-consciousness. It is therefore content to comprehend the true nature of the world according to its inner connexion with itself. Consequently, it is immanent in the Kantian sense of the word.⁹⁹

He then curiously adds:

After all my explanations, it can still be asked, for example, from what this will has sprung, which is free to affirm itself, the phenomenal appearance of this being the world, or to deny itself, the phenomenal appearance of which we do not know. What is the fatality lying beyond all experience which has put it in the extremely precarious dilemma of appearing as a world in which suffering and death reign, or else of denying its own inner being? . . . Further, it may be asked how deeply in the being-in-itself of the world do the

⁹⁵ *WWR* 2, 642.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *WWR* 2, 641.

⁹⁹ *WWR* 2, 640.

roots of individuality go. In any case, the answer to this might be that they go as deeply as the affirmation of the will-to-live; where the denial of the will occurs, they cease, for with the affirmation they sprang into existence. We might even put the question: "What would I be, if I were not the will-to-live?" and more of the same kind.¹⁰⁰

These questions, Schopenhauer says, defy our ability to come to any kind of answer at all, simply because for us the only possible way of conceiving and knowing things is through the forms of the intellect. We apprehend everything in temporal terms, in the form of a perceived succession, and as involving some mental representation extracted from sensory input in accordance with a cause-effect pattern. And as a result, "We cannot possibly escape from this sphere, in which all possibility of our knowledge is to be found."¹⁰¹ Thus, strictly speaking, no experience, as Schopenhauer suggests here, opens the way to a knowledge of the in-itself, a knowledge of ultimate truth or a reality in-itself. Here his suggestion that intuition, in the sense of consciousness or apprehension of something directly, without the functions of the understanding, needs to be always sense based, if not purely sensory in character, undermines his other claim that we can access the thing-in-itself solely from within, as affecting the will in itself and immediately.

Maira Nicholls similarly portrays Schopenhauer as having expressed significantly different views on the thing-in-itself. She argues that Schopenhauer's later writings suggest that the will is the thing-in-itself not in an absolute sense but in a qualified sense, as something contiguous with the thing-in-itself. This suggests that the nature of the thing-in-itself remains mainly (if not entirely) unknown to us. "Speculatively," Nicholls continues,

this shift from a strict identity of the will with the thing-in-itself to the view that the will is just one aspect of the thing-in-itself suggests that had Schopenhauer lived longer, he may well have shifted his views even further so as to embrace the idea that the thing-in-itself is not will at all, but instead is solely the object of awareness of those who have achieved salvation.¹⁰²

Notice that Nicholls regards these views as different stages or shifts in Schopenhauer's thinking, but I consider them as essentially

¹⁰⁰ *WWR* 2, 640–41. Some portions of this passage are taken from Schopenhauer's 1821–22 *Foliant I* (Tome).

¹⁰¹ *WWR* 2, 641.

¹⁰² Nicholls, "The Influences of Eastern Thought," 185–86.

incompatible views that Schopenhauer apparently did not recognize as incompatible and hence held simultaneously. Moreover, interpretative challenges notwithstanding, I have hopefully demonstrated that there are passages in Schopenhauer that contain the view that the thing-in-itself is beyond the will and the experience of our senses. In other words, he already recognized what Nicholls speculates he might have recognized about the thing-in-itself, though perhaps not as expressly as we would expect from him. It is rather astonishing that commentators have effectively neglected this aspect of Schopenhauer's thought and continue in vain to discuss strategies for resolving the conflict between his incompatible views. As the above analysis suggests, at times he not only seems to give up the claim that the thing-in-itself is the will but also avoids with care any hint of a possible correspondence between the thing-in-itself and the will. He appears no longer to regard the will as an aspect of the thing-in-itself but, rather, as the one and the same immanent force that animates all phenomenal processes and activities. The will as an endless striving for and of life stands, on the third view, in direct opposition to the thing-in-itself, with which this domain of arising, struggling, suffering, privation, and passing away has no relation or association. Since the world as it is in-itself is absolutely incommensurable with the world as we perceive it through our senses and our interpretations of those perceptions, this in-itself remains hidden in mystery. The knowledge of any possible aspect of it lies beyond human reach because such a mode of existence bears no relation whatsoever to any property, event, or object in the phenomenal world. All we have is, at the very least, some kind of negative knowledge claim, namely, that the thing-in-itself neither wills life nor enters our experience. In effect, Schopenhauer is telling us that we can never claim knowledge of the thing-in-itself. Since "that to which the denial of the will-to-live opens the way"¹⁰³ simply defies all understanding, our concepts, which have their basis in sense experience or perception, cannot be meaningfully applied to it.

Despite the fact that the third view is of particular relevance for enriching our understanding of Schopenhauer's ideas on the denial of the will and the obliteration of one's individuality, his ambiguous claim that the thing-in-itself is the will continues to engage commentators' interest more deeply. In the final analysis, Schopenhauer, Shapshay

¹⁰³ *PP2*, §144.

argues, mainly by way of figurative talk, invites us to feel for ourselves the connection between our wills and the in-itself that goes beyond the phenomenal-representational content of consciousness.¹⁰⁴ However, Shapshay's interpretation appears to overlook a crucial feature of the will that, in my view, is finely captured by Yasuo Kamata, who remarks that "in a way" the will "transcends the world as representation, even though it does not point to any substance outside of consciousness [in other words, an in-itself]."¹⁰⁵ The primary concern here is whether Shapshay is attributing to the will, as the basic disposition of our being, a power that it does not necessarily possess in the first place, in other words, its supposed ability in creating a connection of some sort, which can be described as metonymic or otherwise, with a reality that is far beyond anything that the mind can embrace and comprehend. It is not (the immediacy or primacy of) the will but rather (the possibility of) its denial that induces in us a heightened awareness of the in-itself—something that Schopenhauer particularly emphasizes in *WWR* 2, 433 and *PP* 2, §144. Now, compared with the tendentious interpretations that (implicitly) blame Schopenhauer for misunderstanding the Kantian "thing-in-itself," indeed we find greater plausibility in Shapshay's interpretation. But there is indication in Schopenhauer's other writings that makes it possible to suspect that he would actually discern a metonymic association of the will with the thing-in-itself, as Shapshay proposes. The textual evidence considered above supports an alternative reading of Schopenhauer's understanding of the thing-in-itself, which seems irreconcilable with the interpretation Shapshay advanced.

IV

So where does all this discussion leave us? At best, we may cast some light on the ambiguity with which Schopenhauer's understanding of the thing-in-itself is fraught, and yet not dispense with it once and for all. Schopenhauer sometimes suggests that it is beyond human ken to know the relation between the thing-in-itself and phenomena. Yet, he

¹⁰⁴ Shapshay, "Metaphor and Metonymy in Schopenhauer's Philosophy," 218.

¹⁰⁵ Yasuo Kamata, "Platonische Idee und die anschauliche Welt bei Schopenhauer," *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 70 (1989): 92. My translation.

problematically continues to speak of a deeply felt conviction of the indestructibility of our being-in-itself that proceeds from the self-suppression of the will. Here, Schopenhauer appears to share some significant parallels with Johann Gottlieb Fichte (his teacher at Berlin), who suggests that our knowledge, which is by no means connected with the thing-in-itself through representation, nevertheless may relate to it in a different way, through feeling. While Fichte expressed this view early in his philosophical career and moved on to grapple with many different philosophical issues, this idea might have found its way to Schopenhauer through the Berlin lectures. In Fichte's words, "our knowledge is by no means connected directly through representation with things in themselves." But, Fichte suggests, it

is connected with them only indirectly, through *feeling*; that in any case things are *represented* merely as *appearances*, whereas they are *felt as things in themselves*; that no representation at all would be possible without feeling; but that things in themselves can be recognized only *subjectively*, i.e., insofar as they affect our feeling.¹⁰⁶

Feeling as such lacks any definite intentional content directed toward an immanent object of perception. It simply bypasses any conceptual determination that could distinguish or individuate its referent. In this regard, feeling differs from representation, namely, in virtue of its "immediate," hence prereflective character. Feeling, owing to this immediacy, gets us closer to the thing-in-itself—even though this does not constitute (or ground) knowledge about the thing-in-itself. One should note at this point the similarity between this view and the one that takes willing to be closest to the thing-in-itself. Because feeling, just as willing, is nonspatial in nature, it brings us closer to the thing-in-itself. Schopenhauer believes the conscious awareness of one's own willing, or the feeling of the indestructibility of one's being is what enables the subject to gain an intuitive, immediate insight (*unmittelbare Einsicht*) into the inner nature, the in-itself of all phenomena. Such an insight lacks the specificity and accuracy of knowledge (*Wissen*), yet it is taken to be offering a transcending glance that reaches beyond the realm of empirical perception. The problem with this, however, is that although this felt insight is real and presumptively far more immediate than any other experience, it is still confined within the territory of phenomena.

¹⁰⁶ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 95 n. 2.

It ultimately remains as a stirring (*Regung*), a phenomenal modification (*Modifikation*) of willing. Therefore, it cannot give us experiential access to something beyond the phenomena. Therefore, feeling, in whatever form and manifestation, falls short of comprehending the thing-in-itself.

A question suggests itself: regarding the feeling of the indestructibility of one's being, one may wonder, are we to understand it as the same sort of feeling that has no object, does not differentiate a referent, and has no conceptual determination? It may be suggested that the notion of "feeling" can be used in two different ways. It can designate a belieflike "propositional attitude" in which a given possibility is felt to be likely, with none or some degree of justification for believing that it is in fact possible. Or, feeling can just designate a mere stirring of one's intuitive awareness, which may either immediately express a deep conviction about something that is not distinctly known or gradually tend toward such a conviction. For Schopenhauer, "the feeling of the indestructibility of one's own inner nature" is just a mere "stirring" that underlies a prereflective, inarticulate conviction (*Überzeugung*) of one's will. Schopenhauer more specifically refers to this as "the deep conviction of the impossibility of our extermination by death, which, as the inevitable qualms of conscience at the approach of death also testify, everyone carries at the bottom of his heart."¹⁰⁷ Owing to its obscure and mystical character, this particular feeling of conviction remains as something that can never be verified through sense experience or reached through conceptual means or abstract representations. It is not the sort of thing that can be verified, even if it may continue to affect the individual's psychology and determine their ultimate orientation toward life, which typically manifests itself as a gradual abandonment of worldly attachments, sensory desires, and interests.

Schopenhauer's characterizations suggest that this feeling of conviction comes in degrees. The strength of one's felt conviction about one's inner being increases as one, who is already seized with a yearning to give up willing after contemplating the temporal finitude of his existence, actually approaches death. Only this way of dying—with a felt consciousness of the indestructibility of one's own inner nature—counts, for Schopenhauer, as dying "actually" (in other words,

¹⁰⁷ *WWR* 2, 487.

“willingly,” “gladly,” and “cheerfully”) and “not merely apparently.” And only this way of dying guarantees absolute deliverance from the bondages and miseries of worldly life and results in ultimate restoration to one’s former or primal state, that is, the in-itself that is beyond all representational boundaries and stands in direct opposition to the phenomenal world experienced in ordinary states of consciousness.¹⁰⁸ Schopenhauer says,

Dying is the moment of that liberation from the one-sidedness of an individuality which does not constitute the innermost kernel of our true being, but is rather to be thought of as a kind of aberration thereof. The true original freedom again enters at this moment which in the sense stated can be regarded as a “restoration to the former state.”¹⁰⁹

Here, a caveat is necessary: Schopenhauer should not be understood as expounding a conception of death as a means for supersensuous cognition or transcendent perception. As Eduard von Hartmann correctly observes, it seems as if he is suggesting the possibility that, after death, a higher form of noncognitive consciousness might be attributed to the intrinsically noncognitive will, which is in itself without knowledge and hence devoid of the subject–object contrast. However, for Schopenhauer, every consciousness presupposes a sensibility, something determinable, or more specifically, a consciousness of an object in opposition to a consciousness of one’s objective self. Therefore, Hartman correctly concludes, for Schopenhauer, “a consciousness in which this opposition ceases is inconceivable.”¹¹⁰ No representation (that is contiguous with our embodied experience), act of will, feeling, or awareness persists after death. This means that during the process of dying any possibility of knowledge together with its correlative form of object and subject entirely vanishes. What is at stake here is, then, precisely a felt conviction that one’s true inner being is indestructible, but one is never able to fully grasp the true nature of this feeling or articulate what this feeling is all about. Schopenhauer speaks of “a sure and certain feeling [that] says to everyone that there is in him

¹⁰⁸ *WWR* 2, 508.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Eduard von Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, vol. 1, trans. William Chatterton Coupland (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co. Ltd., 1893), 31.

something positively imperishable and indestructible."¹¹¹ "However," he adds, "we [are] not able to see clearly what this imperishable element is."¹¹² Insofar as this feeling has no object, does not differentiate a referent, and has no conceptual determination, it leaves us with an irresistible yet unjustifiable certitude about the existence of something that is prior and external to the phenomenal world.

However, a question persists: How can feeling in the sense of certitude or enhanced conscious awareness be thought of as leading into the profoundest metaphysical insight? How can we be so sure that feeling is not susceptible to error or illusion? One answer might be that feeling is never susceptible to error or illusion, for in feeling we have no subject-object distinction and hence no possibility of falsity or error, nor any place for knowledge to directly reflect what is experienced. A possible objection to this might be that feeling is essentially subjective, and what is subjective necessarily accompanies what is objective. Then in reply to that, one might point out that feeling is not subjective, in the sense of being opposed to or being directed at something objective. Rather, feeling is subjective in the sense that it is inextricably bound up with our embodied nature. This answer would fit how Fichte understands feeling, as the proper point of unification of what is subjective and what is objective. For instance, when Fichte speaks of our feeling of a drive, longing (*Sehnen*), "an indeterminate sensation of a need" that is "not determined through the concept of an object," he seems to speak of a "wholly immediate" relation that we bear to the drive, not of a particular representation of that drive that, as such, necessarily assumes the subject-object distinction.¹¹³ However, it is not clear whether this is the position Schopenhauer leaves us in.

In his attempt to answer the question of the thing-in-itself in a generally Fichtean manner, Schopenhauer at times came close to Kant's stance on the unknowability of the thing-in-itself. However, despite the apparent shifts in his thinking, Schopenhauer, till the very end, never dropped the claim that the thing-in-itself is the will. But how can we make sense of this complicated and ambiguous textual situation of his philosophy? It seems that Schopenhauer leaves the contradictions simply as they are—but perhaps this is precisely his point.

¹¹¹ *WWR* 2, 496.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The System of Ethics*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 102.

I have argued that Schopenhauer identified the thing-in-itself with the will, then later appeared to soften his stance by saying that the will is the appearance of the thing-in-itself, and at times simply opposed the thing-in-itself to the will and the phenomenal world. How can he hold these views simultaneously and see no contradiction? Although his use of the term "thing-in-itself" appears irremediably ambiguous, he is quite consistent in his characterization of "will." He often speaks of the will's inner conflict or contradiction with itself (*Widerspruch mit sich selbst*), as expressed by the phenomenon of self-renunciation (*Selbstverleugnung*), in which "the in-itself of its real nature ultimately abolishes itself"¹¹⁴ and thus leads us back to the Kantian thing-in-itself, "that to which the denial of the will-to-live opens the way."¹¹⁵ Nature expresses itself through a duality of polar opposites, "from the particular or the universal, from inside or outside, from the centre or the periphery."¹¹⁶ On the one hand, it has its center in every individual, given that each individual manifests the entire will-to-live. On the other, single individuals come into and go out of existence; from the periphery, "the individual is nothing," a mere phenomenon, conditioned by time and space.¹¹⁷ According to Schopenhauer, "[o]nly he who really knows how to reconcile and eliminate this obvious contradiction of nature [*Widerspruch der Natur*] has a true answer to the question concerning the perishableness or imperishableness of his own self."¹¹⁸ This requires "looking inward" and thereby recognizing in one's inner being, "which is his will, the thing-in-itself, and hence that which alone is everywhere real."¹¹⁹ If by "will" we understand "that which inevitably contradicts itself to the extent of self-annihilation," then it appears the human will, in some fundamental sense, belongs to a nonphenomenal reality that transcends time. So as soon as we realize that the will has "non-existence as its goal,"¹²⁰ we may be warranted in regarding these three formulations of the thing-in-itself as complementary attempts at unfolding a single thought. In other words, they appear contradictory,

¹¹⁴ *Werke* 1, 414/*WWR* 1, §55, 301.

¹¹⁵ *PP* 2, §144.

¹¹⁶ *WWR* 2, 599.

¹¹⁷ *WWR* 2, 600.

¹¹⁸ *Werke* 2, 769/*WWR* 2, 600.

¹¹⁹ *WWR* 2, 600.

¹²⁰ *PP* 2, §147.

and we may be troubled by the apparent contradiction, but Schopenhauer would not be terribly troubled by that. He regards these inconsistencies as the natural implication of his theory, for, as he wisely remarks in his later years, contradiction “is always the case when the transcendent is to be brought into immanent knowledge.”¹²¹

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¹²¹ *PP2*, §141. “Noch will was Ewig ist kein einig Mensch betrachten!”

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