

SCHOPENHAUER'S IDEA OF THE WORLD

Adrian NIȚĂ¹

Abstract: *The paper presents Schopenhauer's idea of the world, through the prism of the two famous claims that the world is representation and, respectively, that the world is will. Within this framework, the relations with subjective idealism (supported by Berkeley) and transcendental idealism (supported by Kant) are briefly analyzed.*

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In a work published in 1819 is one of the most provocative claims ever made by philosophers, namely that the world is my representation:

"The world is my representation" - this is a truth valid for any knowing creature, although only man can become aware of it, reflecting it abstractly: and indeed he does: thus philosophical reasoning arose in him. Then, for man, it becomes clear and certain that he knows neither the sun nor the earth, but is always only the eye that sees the sun and the hand that feels the earth, that the world that surrounds him exists only as a representation, that is, exclusively in relation to something else, to the one who represents it to himself and who is himself.²

The world is and is not something to be known, something that exists outside of us and that could be viewed with a telescope and a microscope. Eminently, the author, Artur Schopenhauer, emphasizes our inner, subjective side, therefore, the world presents itself only in relation to us. We deal with the world not in the sense that we can know the planets, stars and galaxies, but in the sense that our eye is the one that perceives the planets, stars and galaxies. Only in this relationship with us does the world exist.

¹ Institute of Philosophy and Psychology "Constantin Rădulescu-Motru", University "Ștefan cel Mare" Suceava, Romania.

² Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. Gabriel Sandu, vol. 1, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2019, p. 31.

If we emphasize representation, as the famous philosopher does, a hasty reader of the above fragment might think that we have an absolute subjectivism, like that advocated in the 17th century by George Berkeley, or an idealism of Platonic character. By using the term “only” twice, once to emphasize the role of man as a knowing subject, the second time to show the importance of representation, Schopenhauer leaves the impression that in reality there is nothing, or, conversely, that the world is a pure creation of the human mind. But although the world is my representation, he combats the apparent one-sidedness of this approach and, in the immediately following fragment, claims that the world is simultaneously my will.³

We would thus have two sides or two aspects of the world: on the one hand, the world is representation and on the other hand the world is will. We thus arrive at the theme given by the very title of the book: what does this “and” mean? What is the nature of this conjunction? Does Schopenhauer want to say that the world is will and representation as, for example, Descartes claims that the world is corporeal and soulful? The dualism that the little word “and” imprints is rejected, however, because, in fact, the world is entirely representation and entirely will.⁴ We see that we can understand the world starting from the objects around us, and claim that the world is nothing more than the set of objects given in intuition. From this point of view, the world is representation. But, simultaneously, another side of the world highlights the essence of things, that is, something internal that is not properly given in intuition, but which plays a decisive role for the phenomenon to exist, namely the will. Perhaps an analogy with Kant would be more useful here: the world is my representation in the sense that the world has a phenomenal aspect, and simultaneously the world is my will in the sense that the world is also a thing in itself. The analogy now appears in full light: just as in Kant, the thing in itself is, in a sense, the ground of the phenomenon, so in Schopenhauer, the will is the ground of representation. In other words, the world is the objectification of the will, or the will made an object.⁵

We see how the little word “and” does not induce a sense of cumulation, that is, a kind of addition: in a sense the world is not

³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

representation plus will, because it is as a whole representation, respectively as a whole it is will. In the second book, the role and nature of the will are well determined, and the representation-will relationship could also be approached from the perspective of the body-mind relationship: the body is objectified will, as long as it reaches representation, just as the will is the *a priori knowledge* of the body, and the body is the *a posteriori knowledge* of the will.⁶

Although I am aware of my body, both as a representation and as a will, I have direct access only to the body, our author believes, because I can see it, touch it, smell it, etc., and we can reach the will based on the movements of the body, the way we behave.⁷ The will needs to be seen more as a series of inclinations, a blind and irresistible impulse⁸, rather than as motives. To emphasize motives, or the principle of sufficient reason, in Schopenhauer's terms, would mean to put the role and nature of reason at the center. Now, Schopenhauer seems to continue the idea of the destruction of reason that we can accuse Kant of. As we saw in the other papers, Kant completes the age of reason, puts the dome on the building of reason, but this fact led to the demolition of the entire building, due to its own weight (metaphorically speaking).⁹ We see how Schopenhauer continues this approach, maintains a post-rational line, so to speak, showing that motives cannot determine someone to be virtuous,¹⁰ reason being able only to change the orientation of the will, but not the will as such.

The idea that the world is will and representation needs to be put in connection with two other themes: the categorical couple materialism-idealism, respectively optimism-skepticism. By supporting the thesis that the world is will and representation, Schopenhauer does not want to reach materialism, because it would mean that substance exists in itself, absolutely.¹¹ Everything is explained on material bases, and this circle that contains objects, representations, objects, representations, etc. does not lead

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁹ See the development of this idea in Adrian Niță, *Epoca spiritului (The Age of Spirit)*, Iași, European Institute, 2020, pp. 68-73.

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, *op. cit.*, p. 415.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

to matter in any way, but is a simple *petitio principii*. For the materialist, it would mean isolating the representative aspect, considering that everything is matter, and, simultaneously, excluding the role of the subject, the role of interiority and all non-material aspects.

Since everything is a mediated given, materialism seeks to explain the immediate aspects, or, Schopenhauer believes, things are relative: everything is not only immediate, mediated and conditioned; it is mediated as long as space, time and causality are applied to it, and it is conditioned due to the relationship with the knowing subject, with everything that concerns the essence of the things we have in intuition.¹² Although it is true that knowledge is the modification of matter, the opposite thesis is equally true: all matter is nothing but the modification of the subject's knowledge, as its representation. Materialism will never reach the intimate essence of the world: "any science in the proper sense, by which I understand systematic knowledge on the guiding thread of the principle of sufficient reason, can never reach an ultimate goal nor can it offer a fully satisfactory explanation because it never reaches the intimate essence of the world and fails to go beyond representation, but, in essence, does nothing more than show us the relationship between one representation and another."¹³

The explanation is that science starts from two main data, namely the principle of sufficient reason, on the one hand, and its particular object as a problem, on the other. For example, geometry has as its problem space, and as its organon the sufficient reason of existence in space; arithmetic has as its problem time, and as its organon, the sufficient reason of existence in time.¹⁴

The relationship with the subject is essential: there is no object without a subject. Not even the stars or the planets. It is a wrongly posed problem, or even nonsense, to ask whether and how the stars existed before there was a knowing subject. Schopenhauer explains this aspect in the sense that the world, before the knowing subject, cannot be conceived. In order to be representation, a subject is needed, that is, an eye that opens on things; the world depends, as on a mediator of knowledge, on this.¹⁵

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

The time that appears in all this problematic needs to be seen in the correct sense, according to our author, there could not even be anything before the subject. So, practically, we find ourselves in the impossibility of asking ourselves what existed before the subject, before the knowing subject closed the circle of knowledge and existence of the world.¹⁶ Time exists only with the first act of knowledge, and conditioning must be seen not only in the sense that the present is conditioned by the past, but also that the past is conditioned by the present. The example of Cronus, who brings time for people, can be the same as the work of Prometheus who brought fire.¹⁷

The fact that both object-based and subject-based theories are wrong, Schopenhauer believes, is not an insoluble dilemma, but has a clear solution: the world is representation, that is, it is neither an object (or set of objects) nor a subject (or set of subjects). The world as representation refers to the first state of fact of consciousness, whose first fundamental and essential state is the division into object and subject in the form of the object as a principle of sufficient reason. This leads to a "relativity of the world as representation" in the sense that the intimate essence of the world - the will - is needed.

The final arguments in favor of rejecting materialism come from the second and fourth books, which deal with the will. Thus, from the material aspect proper to the world, one moves on to its essence, to what conditions and determines from within. The will, although not accessible as such in its own right, is made evident through the movements of the body, therefore through behavior. The will is the "*a priori knowledge* of the body", just as the body is the "*a posteriori knowledge* of the will".¹⁸ We thus see that we arrive at the will starting from the body, from representation. On the other hand, acts of the will are acts of the body, and can only be known through the body. Likewise, conversely, any action on the body leads to influencing the will - this is where pleasure and pain exist.

Schopenhauer, once again, emphasizes the need to see the two aspects of the world together – we distinguish them only for theoretical, didactic reasons, in order to be able to expose them; otherwise, representation and will are as intimately linked as, for Aristotle, matter and

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

form, or for Descartes, body and mind: "my body and my will are one – or what I call my body as an intuitive representation I also call my will, to the extent that I am aware of it in a totally different way, incomparable with another – or my body is *the objectivity* of my will – or, abstracting from the fact that my body is my representation, it is nothing more than my will, etc."¹⁹

The deep connection that exists between the world as will and the world as representation, or, in other words, that the world is will and representation, allows for an analogy with the Kantian approach – the world as an idea of reason means that the world has two aspects or sides, namely the phenomenal side and the side of the thing in itself. In the phenomenal sense, we could have access to the world through experience, but as the world in the sense of the thing in itself we can no longer have a theoretical knowledge. Now, we see how Schopenhauer maintains this distinction, considering in an analogous way the world as representation similar to the Kantian phenomenal aspect, and respectively the world as will analogous to the aspect of the world as a thing in itself.²⁰

We do not have direct access, as we have already said, to the will: a motive, for example, is only something that influences the direction of an action, a certain way of responding, etc., but not the will as such. Just as the thing itself cannot be accessed through experience by us humans, so the will is not directly accessible.²¹

The relationship with the Kantian analogy, to which is added that with the eternal Platonic ideas, allows Schopenhauer to reach art and the role it plays in the world. As a work or creation of genius, art puts us in touch with eternal ideas, with what is most intimate in things. It is interesting to note that Schopenhauer uses the term "universe" – one of the few occurrences of this term, in direct relation to reason, to science, by being under the principle of sufficient reason. Space, time and causality are to be seen in relation to this aspect of the world, that is, to what changes, to the world as becoming (therefore, not as being, as the ancients would say). As a work of genius, art takes a step further, goes beyond reason and science, and can reach the essence of things, reproducing the eternal ideas,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁰ There are many passages in which Schopenhauer supports this analogical thinking: pp. 156, 201, 208, 471, etc.).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

perceived through contemplation.²² Knowledge of the phenomenal world, based on causality, can advance as far as it wants in the world (as a phenomenon), but without reaching the last element of the series. In contrast, art always reaches its destination, precisely because it can tear the object of contemplation from its universal flow in which it is caught and considers it in isolation - it is something particular (a painting, a novel, a symphony etc.) and at the same time it is the whole, considering what is essential and enduring in all the phenomena of the world.²³ In every work of art we recognize the particular idea or thing. The artistic object as an idea (in the Platonic sense) is something intuitive, representing an infinite multitude of particular things and is something completely determined.²⁴

Communicated by the artist's spirit, the idea he grasps is to be seen in relation to the novelty it brings.²⁵ It is as if the artist's spirit is in touch with the world as spirit and spins that idea as if from a universal whirlwind. The creator objectifies the spirit, makes it pass from the spiritual to the material register, precisely so that others (the viewer, the spectator) have access to the essence of the world.

The pessimistic conception of the world also transpires from reflections on artistic methods. Thus, tragedy is the one that emphasizes the terrible side of the world, suffering, pain, mourning, wickedness, the dominance of chance and the fall of the just and innocent.²⁶ We see from here how the motives of the action are not directly related to the events that the dramatic characters go through. Moreover, after suffering, at the end of the tragedy, we see how the noblest characters give up the goals initially pursued, the pleasures or even life: Gretchen, from *Faust*, Hamlet, the Maid of Orleans, the Bride of Messina, etc. In Voltaire, in *Mohammed*, Palmeira shouts to Mohammed that "the world is for tyrants. Live you!"²⁷

The World as a Confrontation of Will comes to reinforce the idea that in art we need to see the individual-general relationship from different perspectives: a hero does not atone in the strict sense for his particular sins, but for a general sin, of man, in particular, original sin. To consider that

²² *Ibid.*, p. 223.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

man is guilty because he was born marks a metaphysical pessimism, for which, over the years, Cioran developed a great passion and raised it to a level unsurpassed (yet) in universal literature.

The world as an arena for the confrontation of will is realized in a specific form in music. Just as words are the language of reason, music is the language of feeling and passion in its highest form.²⁸ In melody, Schopenhauer sees the supreme stage of objectification of the will, that is, "the will and the deliberate aspiration of the human being".²⁹ Melody tells the story of the will illuminated by deliberation and which is imprinted in the deeds of people, but the deepest (secret) of all, depicting every impulse, every aspiration, every volitional determination.

As a direct objectification of the will³⁰, melody expresses the polymorphic aspiration of the will, but also the satisfaction that comes from finding the appropriate intervals of harmony. This discovery and revelation of the deepest secrets of human desire and feeling are, of course, the work of genius, which is led in this entire creative endeavor not by reason, but by inspiration (in my terms, by spirit). The artist, the composer, reveals the "intimate essence of the world" and expresses the deepest wisdom in musical language, which reason has no way of understanding.³¹ More than in other artistic manifestations, the composer has the artistic side separated from the human side. The rapid transition from desire to satisfaction, then to a new desire, is precisely happiness, and this is seen in joyful melodies; slow music, which reaches painful dissonances and returns to the fundamental note after several measures, is sad. Far from expressing a certain joy, or a particular sorrow, music accounts for the general universal aspect, namely joy, sorrow, pain, goodwill, etc. Music must be seen in relation to the will as such, not to a certain aspect of a certain, individual human will.

As the supreme objectification of the will, music makes us see how the phenomenal world or nature and music are two expressions of the same thing. The relationship between the will and a certain individual will is to be seen analogously to the connection and universality of concepts

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

and, respectively, language and particular things.³² Universality, however, is not abstract, empty and needs to be seen in the following way: a geometric figure is simultaneously a universal form of possible objects and at the same time something given in intuition or drawn on paper. All the efforts, challenges and manifestations of the will, therefore the processes that take place inside man, can be expressed through music in the form of thousands, millions, infinite melodies, but always "in a universal, immaterial form, and only in accordance with the thing itself, not with the phenomenon", showing us, in a way, its spirit in depth, without corporeality.³³ Music is not a copy of the phenomenon, but directly reproduces the will itself and represents for the physical world the metaphysical, and for any phenomenon the thing itself. In this way, Schopenhauer concludes, the world as embodied will can very well be called embodied music.³⁴ In the language of the medievals, we could say that all concepts are *universalalia post rem*, music gives *universalalia ante rem*, and reality being *universalalia in re*.³⁵

The following question now arises: how does Schopenhauer understand, on these metaphysical grounds, the problem of freedom of will? As long as motives can influence the orientation of actions, the manifestations of will, but not the will as such, how can freedom be defended?

In the fourth book, dedicated to the second consideration of the world as will, it is shown that virtue cannot be taught. Words, concepts and propositions prove powerless, just as it is the case, analogously to ethics, with aesthetics – courses cannot build a poet. Just as the study of aesthetics does not generate poets, so the study of ethics will not give rise to virtuous people.

However, education is important; there is an influence both from the perspective of reason and from habit or personal example.³⁶ The problem is that it does not reach the intimacy of the will, to what is deepest in the human being. Lacking direct access, through arguments, the will needs to be seen as a blind force, as an energy that leads us from within ourselves. I

³² *Ibid.*, p. 305.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 415.

thus arrive at what I might call the mirror theory: the world as representation is a mirror in which the will recognizes itself.³⁷

The will as raw, blind energy is to be seen like the vegetative aspect of the human being, or like the inorganic and the vegetal, if we take into account the living world. The phenomenal aspect of the world is the objectification of the will, therefore mirroring in the sense of making visible what is intelligible; just as the image in the mirror is proportional to the reality it reflects, so is the will in relation to the phenomenal world; just as the image is something ineffable (without smell, weight, etc.), so is the will the ineffable side of the world. The fact that it is blind comes to emphasize that it is something that is oriented towards life, it is a natural tendency towards life. Schopenhauer arrives at a more radical idea – he puts the sign of equality between the will and the will to live.

Fulfilled with the species, the will is realized as nature, precisely because it is the will to live; the forms of nature (space, time, causality) need to be seen externally, for individual existence, but not for the species.³⁸ Individuals are born, live and die, so the forms space, time and causality apply to them, but at the level of the species a more intimate relationship with the will is to be seen – the will to live is not in time, although the will of a particular individual is dated.

Privileging the present is the next step: it is as if the present were always³⁹, or in other words, history is a set of presents. Only now can we understand the full meaning of the idea regarding the role of the subject: how can the world exist before the first subject, the first eye to perceive it and lead to representation? This "before" did not exist in the proper sense of the term; time as a set of present moments has nothing to do with the future or the past, for it is completely devoid of the usual temporal relations. Because there is no "before", "after", "at the same time as", the question of what existed before the first eye is either badly posed or badly approached. If we nevertheless approach it and necessarily pursue an answer, then it can be argued that the world is entirely representation and is entirely will, that is, a kind of "representation-will", because the two are not successive moments, nor simultaneous, nor previous, etc., but function as a kind of unitary, homogeneous block, that is, together.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 320.