

Christopher Janaway

SCHOPENHAUER

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 4

Will, body, and the self

Unity of body and will

Schopenhauer's claim 'My body and my will are one' (*WI*, 102) has a number of different aspects to it. The first, as we saw, is the idea that *acts* of will are movements of the body. Schopenhauer takes a robust line on this, saying that 'every true, genuine, immediate act of the will is also at once and directly a manifest act of the body' (*WI*, 101). This would suggest, somewhat perversely, that there can be no such thing as a willing which goes unfulfilled because one's muscles or nerves do not function in the right way. (Would Schopenhauer say that stroke victims have not 'genuinely' willed, if their bodies fail to move as they want them to?) But Schopenhauer is trying to oust the traditional division between mental and physical, and to supplant it with a division between will on the one hand and intellect and reason on the other. Perception, judgement, and reasoning are all functions of what he has called representation. We observe the way a state of affairs is in the world of objects, judge that it should be altered or preserved, and form the intention to act. Schopenhauer's chief point is that none of this is yet *willing*. The operations of perception, thought, and intention are quite separate preparatory events which may trigger the will – the body, that is – into action. He plays down the gap between willing and the movements one carries out with one's body, concentrating instead on the gulf between representing the world of objects, and being in goal-seeking motion within it.

Schopenhauer's other evidence for the unity of will and the body is that almost everything that impinges on the body sets off some reaction of the will, and that conversely, when the will is aroused, there are always bodily

manifestations. The list of mental states included under the heading of the will is extensive:

all desiring, striving, wishing, demanding, longing, hoping, loving, rejoicing, jubilation, and the like, no less than not willing or resisting, all abhorring, fleeing, fearing, being angry, hating, mourning, suffering pains – in short, all emotions and passions. For these emotions and passions are weaker or stronger, violent and stormy or else quiet impulses of one's own will, which is either restrained or unleashed, satisfied or unsatisfied. In their many variations they relate to the successful or frustrated attainment of that which is willed, to the endurance or the overcoming of that which is abhorred. Consequently, they are explicit affections of the same will which is active in decisions and actions. (*F*, 11)

Sometimes, Schopenhauer admits, when the bodily senses are affected our reaction is neutral, and does not rouse the will in any of these ways – but only rarely. For the most part, such an occurrence is to some degree painful or pleasant, welcome or irritating. Similarly, when we are in one of the mental states on Schopenhauer's list, there is usually a characteristic bodily accompaniment: the heart beats faster, the blood drains from our face or suffuses it. Thus 'every vehement and excessive movement of the will, in other words, every emotion, agitates the body and its inner workings directly and immediately' (*WI*, 101). For Schopenhauer these considerations tend to show the identity of the body with the will. They do at least suggest a close affinity between bodily existence and the empirical manifestations of willing in Schopenhauer's broader sense.

A representation in the conscious mind which causes the body to move in action is what Schopenhauer calls a *motive*. We share some kinds of motive with other animals that perceive the world. For example, behaviour in a cat which is caused by perceiving a predator or some food would be classed by Schopenhauer as willing brought about by a motive. Humans, on

the other hand, are distinctive in being able to act not just on perceptual motives, but also on rational ones: representing matters conceptually, we reason ourselves to a conclusion about what to do, and this process plays a causal role in setting us into action. A cat may eat because it senses food and is hungry, a human being because doing so is judged the best course of action. But willing manifests itself in the body's movements in the same way in both cases. Different kinds of willing really differ, for Schopenhauer, only in the causes that precede them. He makes a basic distinction between three kinds of cause. These are motive, stimulus, and cause pure and simple (as found in mechanical and chemical changes).

So far 'willing' has stood for a range of mental states which have bodily manifestations, including active striving, the emotions, and feelings of pleasure and pain. But some manifestations of the will in the body are not what we should call mental states at all, and are of a kind which we share even with lowlier parts of nature. Plants behave in certain ways in reaction to light, moisture, gravity, and so on. They do not perform actions, and their movements and modifications are not caused by motives, for the simple reason that they have no minds with which to perceive. The plant's turning towards the sun is caused by a *stimulus*, rather than by a motive. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer is prepared to call such plant-behaviour a manifestation of will, because he thinks it can only be understood as goal-directed, even if there is no mind present to entertain the goal. Having located will in bodily movement, and distinguished it from representation, he sees an affinity between the plant's movement in response to stimuli and those of the cat and the human brought about by motives. It is clear that human beings and animals also respond to stimuli – the involuntary contraction of the pupil of the eye provides but one example. This occurrence, for Schopenhauer, is equally a manifestation of the will – though not an *act* of will, because it is not caused by a conscious representation of the world.

Will to life

Schopenhauer's conception of the will is not restricted to the body's episodic reactions to motives and stimuli, for he claims that 'the whole body is nothing but the objectified will' (*W1*, 100), meaning that the way in which the body grows and develops, and the way in which its parts are organized, reveal a principle of striving towards ends which is 'blindly' at work:

Teeth, gullet, and intestinal canal are objectified hunger; the genitals are objectified sexual impulse; grasping hands and nimble feet correspond to the more indirect strivings of the will which they represent. (*W1*, 108)

What underlies and explains the body's functioning, indeed its very existence, is its being directed towards life – or what Schopenhauer calls its *will to life*. (The usual translation of *Wille zum Leben* as 'will to live' is linguistically correct, but what Schopenhauer has in mind is more inclusive; it is a striving not just to live, but also to engender life and to protect offspring. [See *W2*, 484–5.] In other words, *life*, rather than *living*, is the common end of all *Wille zum Leben*.) Schopenhauer is boldly seeking a single hypothesis to explain the ways in which all life-forms grow, function, and behave.

It is easy to think that the idea of the 'will to life' is wrongly fixated on the idea that there are purposes in nature. However, although Schopenhauer speaks of 'purposes' or 'ends' being fulfilled by behaviour patterns and the workings of particular organs, he clearly does not think that organisms entertain any conscious purposes – for the will works 'blindly':

we see at once from the instinct and mechanical skill of animals that the will is also active where it is not guided by any knowledge ... The one-year-old bird has no notion of the eggs for which it builds a nest; the young spider has no idea of the prey for which it spins a web; the ant-lion has no notion of the ant for which it digs a cavity for the first time.... Even in us the same

will in many ways acts blindly; as in all those functions of our body which are not guided by knowledge, in all its vital and vegetative processes, digestion, circulation, secretion, growth, and reproduction. (*W1*, 114–15)

So, despite superficial appearances, Schopenhauer does not simply wish to understand nature in anthropomorphic terms. Although he asks us to interpret the world using concepts applied first to ourselves, the notion of the will to life has the effect of demoting humanity from any special status separate from the rest of nature. First, in our bodies, the same ‘blind’ force operates as throughout nature: we are organized to live and to propagate life not by any conscious act of will. Secondly, there is a close continuity between even the conscious, purposive willing of human action and the life-preserving functions and instincts at work elsewhere. In our seeking of mates and providing for offspring, we are driven by the same instincts as other animals. And Schopenhauer sees the human capacities for perception, rationality, and action as an offshoot of the same wider principle which leads insects to build nests, feathers to grow, and cells to divide. In this respect, the will to life can seem quite a forward-looking notion. Another crucial feature is Schopenhauer’s steadfast opposition to anything approaching an external or divine purpose for nature. Even though it is ‘a single will’ which expresses itself throughout the multiplicity of phenomena, this means only that all behaviour is of the same striving or goal-directed kind. All life-forms strive towards life; but there is no coordinated purpose to nature, rather the kind of purposelessness and conflict which are usually associated with Darwinism. Schopenhauer derides those ‘pantheists’ and ‘Spinozists’ who think the world divine, but have not ‘the remotest idea why the whole tragi-comedy exists’ (*W2*, 357).

On the other hand, Schopenhauer does believe that the various species of animate and inanimate things in the world are eternal and static. There are not only individuals, which we happen to classify as ants, or oak trees, or magnetic fields. Rather, each individual is of a *kind*, and the kinds that can exist are fixed. Thus, while individual things come and go over time, *the ant*

or *the oak tree*, as a kind, is a permanent feature of empirical reality. Schopenhauer has two ways of expressing this point, which he frequently repeats. One is to say that the will (the thing in itself) manifests or objectifies itself in a series of *grades*. The other is to say that *the ant* and *the oak tree* as such are Ideas, or as he often puts it ‘(Platonic) Ideas’. The most adequately objective knowledge we could have would be of the nature of these abiding forms ‘fixed in the nature of things’. Such objective knowledge would not consist in knowing the thing in itself in its naked form, which is impossible, but in knowing the timeless patterns of the things that are experienceable by us.

The following passage shows quite well how Schopenhauer uses his doctrine of the will to life and his notion of the order of Ideas in nature:

everywhere in nature we see contest, struggle, and the fluctuation of victory ... Every grade of the will’s objectification fights for the matter, the space, and the time of another ... This universal conflict is to be seen most clearly in the animal kingdom. Animals have the vegetable kingdom for their nourishment, and within the animal kingdom again every animal is the prey and food of some other. This means that the matter in which an animal’s Idea manifests itself must stand aside for the manifestation of another Idea, since every animal can maintain its own existence only by the incessant elimination of another’s. Thus the will to life generally feasts on itself, and is in different forms its own nourishment, till finally the human race, because it subdues all the others, regards nature as manufactured for its own use. (*WI*, 146–7)

Intellect as an outgrowth of will

Now we come to a step in Schopenhauer’s argument whose importance cannot be overestimated. He claims that all our knowledge of the empirical world is the product of the kind of organism we are. The structure of

knowledge and of its objects depends on the kind of manifestation of will to life which its subject happens to be. Everything the reader was told at the outset about the world of representation, the forms of space, time, and causality which govern the objects of our experience, and the concepts and judgements which we can obtain from them by abstraction – all of this is merely a surface beneath which lurks the driving force of our nature, the will. We grow into creatures who can perceive, judge, and reason, in order to fulfil the ends of life: survival, nourishment, and reproduction. In Schopenhauer's narrative this is a marked change of fortune for the human subject. The capacity for knowledge on which we pride ourselves suddenly appears as merely a way in which a particular species manipulates the environment that impinges on it, so as to foster its well-being:

[the intellect] is designed for comprehending those ends on the attainment of which depend individual life and its propagation. But such an intellect is by no means destined to interpret the inner essence-in-itself of things and of the world, which exists independently of the knower. (*W2*, 284)

To establish this picture, Schopenhauer has to claim not only that all biological functions are manifestations of will to life, but also that knowledge, perception, and reasoning are biological functions. This he does by espousing a particularly blunt form of materialism: states of mind are states of the brain. If, instead of regarding our processes of thought and perception from the point of view of self-consciousness, we take an 'objective' view of them, we must conclude them to be 'nothing more than the physiological function of an internal organ, the brain' (*W2*, 273). The whole world of individual objects in space and time consists only of our representations, and representations are brain-functions. So the brain, the 'pulpy mass in the skull', supports the whole world of objects – Schopenhauer's materialist account of mental states combines with his idealism to produce the claim that the empirical world of individual things is a product of the brain's functioning. For fear of saying such things,

people in the past invented the notion of an immaterial soul, but Schopenhauer will have none of that:

We say fearlessly that this pulpy mass, like every vegetable or animal part, is also an organic structure, like all its humbler relations in the inferior dwelling-place of our irrational brothers' heads, down to the humblest that scarcely apprehends. (*W2*, 273)

Finally, the brain is a biological organ, and so it cannot be exempt from Schopenhauer's doctrine of the will to life:

the *will-to-know*, objectively perceived, is the brain, just as the *will-to-walk*, objectively perceived, is the foot; the *will-to-grasp*, the hand; the *will-to-digest*, the stomach; the *will-to-procreate*, the genitals, and so on. (*W2*, 259)

So the position is this: our capacity for knowledge of empirical objects resides in the functioning of the brain, the brain is an organ of the body, and all organs of the body have developed in order to propagate life. Our much-vaunted knowledge is thus a derivative feature of what we are; the primary element in us is the will that manifests itself in the body as a whole. Conscious actions, caused by perception of the world and reasoning about it, are merely one way in which this will in our bodies is set into motion. The individual human subject is different from other kinds of striving thing in the world only by virtue of the fact that the particular organization of his or her brain gives rise to self-consciousness and reasoning. But these capacities are only the tip of an iceberg, whose bulk is the will. Our predicament is to be driven by this will, whether we like it or not, into conflict, pain, and frustration. Schopenhauer still holds out the hope of rising above this predicament, but, as we shall see, the will within us must be suspended or turn against itself before we can exploit the capacities of our intellects to their full potential. Knowledge must eventually 'throw off its yoke, and, free from all the aims of the will, exist purely for itself,

simply as a clear mirror of the world' (*WI*, 152). But for that to happen is very much an exception.

The self

What am I? Schopenhauer can say that I am an individual item in the world, a living, bodily thing of a certain species, which is capable of self-conscious thought and action. But he makes it something of a puzzle how I can think of myself in this way. In his philosophy the self is seen successively as a subject of experience and knowledge, a subject of will and action, a bodily manifestation of will to life, and a pure mirror of timeless reality. Sometimes it is as if a struggle for dominance is being waged between these different conceptions. The dichotomy between *subject* and *object*, which is the starting-point for the whole of *The World as Will and Representation*, is especially important here. As we saw, he explains that the subject is that which knows, the object that which is known by it. But this must leave us in some doubt about what a subject is.

A subject of representation is, for Schopenhauer, a single consciousness in which many diverse experiences of objects are united. Material things and conceptual thoughts are representations for the subject. But the subject itself is the 'I' that thinks and perceives, as opposed to the things thought and the things perceived. It is vital to understand that Schopenhauer's subject of representations is not any part of the world of objects. It is not a thing at all. It is not in space or time, does not interact causally with objects, is not visible, not identified with the body, or even with the individual human being. His favourite metaphorical images for it are the eye that looks out on the world but cannot see itself, and the extensionless point at which light-rays focus in a concave mirror. The subject is where experiences all converge, but it is never itself an object of experience: 'We never know it, but it is precisely that which knows wherever there is knowledge' (*WI*, 5). Schopenhauer is not alone in having such a view of the subject. It is recognizable as a version of Kant's conception of the pure 'I' of self-consciousness (apperception); moreover, says Schopenhauer, 'the fine

passage from the sacred *Upanishad* applies: “It is not to be seen: it sees everything; it is not to be heard: it hears everything; it is not to be recognized: it recognizes everything” (R, 208). Wittgenstein later borrowed Schopenhauer’s image of the eye that cannot see itself and the idea that the subject was not part of the world.

Schopenhauer’s attitude to this pure subject of representation is ambivalent. On the one hand, he says that ‘Everyone finds himself as this subject’ (W1, 5). We are conscious not only of what we think and perceive, but of *being* that which thinks and perceives; moreover, he suggests, we cannot avoid the idea that that which thinks and perceives is distinct from every object of which it is conscious – even the body, which is ‘an object among objects’. At the same time, however, each of us is an individual distinct from others. Each of us is closely associated with one particular part of the material world, and, as a subject of action or will, each of us must be a bodily thing. We seem to be two kinds of subject at once: subject of willing, which is essentially embodied, and subject of knowledge, which knows everything objectively, including its own body and acts of will, and hovers outside the world of individual things altogether. Our conception of ourselves ought, perhaps, to be split. Yet we think of the ‘I’ that thinks and perceives and the ‘I’ that acts as one and the same. Schopenhauer calls this a ‘miracle *par excellence*’, saying that ‘the identity of the subject of willing with that of knowing by virtue whereof ... the word “I” includes and indicates both, is the knot of the world, and hence inexplicable’ (R, 211–12).

One may think that Schopenhauer inadvertently refutes his own conception of the pure subject which is not an object. For he admits that it provides at best an incomplete and perplexing way of thinking of oneself, says that it is inexplicable how ‘I’ could refer both to this pure subject and to the acting, material body, and even has to invoke the notion of a ‘miracle’ to get round the problem. We may also not be convinced that we do ‘find ourselves’ as the pure knowing subject, or that this is a conception which a philosophical account of self-consciousness needs to use at all. However, Schopenhauer’s difficulties are not simply a matter of ineptness

on his part – they go deep into an area of enduring perplexity. Each of us is not *merely* an object in the world; some account needs to be given of one's awareness of being oneself, of being 'inside' one's experience and seeming to be distinct from the rest of the world. Schopenhauer is not a dualist: he eschews any notion that souls, spirits, or immaterial substances constitute part of reality. Reality is material, and what each of us refers to using 'I' is, partly, an active, material thing in the world. But he is surely right in saying that that cannot be the end of the story. It seems true that I somehow 'find myself as a subject', however precisely we account for that. Some philosophers more recently have suggested that there is a fundamental, perhaps insuperable problem in trying to square 'subjective' and 'objective' views of ourselves. The underlying difficulty which Schopenhauer reveals is a substantial philosophical issue.

The struggle between competing views of the self is made even more intense by Schopenhauer's materialist account of the workings of the intellect as brain-functions, and his doctrine that the individual's body is an expression of will-to-life.

That which in self-consciousness, and hence subjectively, is the intellect, presents itself in the consciousness of other things, and hence objectively, as the brain; and that which in self-consciousness, and hence subjectively, is the will, presents itself in the consciousness of other things, and hence objectively, as the entire organism. (*W2*, 245)

That focus of brain-activity (or the subject of knowledge) is indeed, as an indivisible point, simple, yet it is not on that account a substance (soul), but a mere condition or state ... This *knowing* and conscious *ego* is related to the will, which is the basis of its phenomenal appearance, as the image in the focus of the concave mirror is to that mirror itself; and, like that image, it has only a conditioned, in fact, properly speaking, a merely apparent reality. Far from being the absolutely first thing (as Fichte taught, for

example), it is at bottom tertiary, since it presupposes the organism, and the organism presupposes the will. (*W2*, 278)

We need to tease out two distinct elements here. One is Schopenhauer's materialism, the other his view that the will is our essence.

We can consider ourselves both subjectively and objectively. If we are considering ourselves objectively, as things occurring in the empirical world, then materialism is the most plausible and consistent position to take, according to Schopenhauer. To be a materialist pure and simple would be 'one-sided' (*W2*, 13), because materialism can never give a proper account of what it is to be a subject who experiences and understands the world: 'materialism is the philosophy of the subject that forgets to take account of itself'. But one side of the truth is an objective account of ourselves as things inhabiting the empirical world, and the only choice here is to conceive of ourselves as material occupants of space and time, falling under causal laws. So what from one viewpoint we call thought and perception are, from the other viewpoint, processes of the material brain and nervous system. From this objective point of view, the subject which we take ourselves to be is – in Schopenhauer's most extreme claim about it – 'merely apparent'.

But even this unsettled combination of subjective and objective views about oneself is not the complete predicament which Schopenhauer places us in. For brain and organism are not merely part of an inert, material reality. They are expressions of the blind will in nature, enabling life to exist and propagate itself. The will is primary, and lies beneath the division between subject and object altogether. The larger contrast between will and representation reasserts itself here. The subject that represents and the object that is represented are both, in a sense, illusory, because in the world in itself the division between subject and object does not exist. Even if I the subject disappeared, and along with me all the individual objects that make up my experience, the will would still be there in itself, continuing to strive and throw up new life-forms. And the most fundamental point about the

self, for Schopenhauer, is that this same will is exactly what now strives away within the bodily organism that has produced me the subject.