

*THE WORLD AS WILL AND
REPRESENTATION*

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CHAPTER XVIII 121

On the Possibility of Knowing the Thing-in-Itself

In 1836, under the title *Ueber den Willen in der Natur* (second edition, 1854), I already published the really essential supplement to this book, which contains the most characteristic and important step of my philosophy, namely the transition from the phenomenon to the thing-in-itself, given up by Kant as impossible. We should make a great mistake if we tried to regard the statements of others, with which I have there associated my explanations, as the real and proper material and subject of that work, a work small in volume but important as regards its contents. On the contrary, those statements are merely the occasion from which I have started, and I have there discussed that fundamental truth of my teaching with greater distinctness than anywhere else, and brought it down to the empirical knowledge of nature. This has been done most exhaustively and stringently under the heading “Physical Astronomy”; so that I cannot hope ever to find a more correct and accurate expression of that core of my philosophy than what is there recorded. Whoever wishes to know my philosophy thoroughly and investigate it seriously must first take that chapter into consideration. Therefore all that is said in that small work would in general constitute the main subject-matter of the present supplements, if it had not to be excluded as having preceded them; whereas I here assume it to be known, since otherwise what is best would be missing.

First of all, I will make a few preliminary observations from a more general point of view as to the sense in which we can speak of a

knowledge of the thing-in-itself, and of the necessary limitation of this sense.

What is *knowledge*? It is above all else and essentially *representation*. What is *representation*? A very complicated *physiological* occurrence in an animal's brain, whose result is the consciousness of a *picture or image* at that very spot. Obviously the relation of such a picture to something entirely different from the animal in whose brain it exists can only be a very indirect one. This is perhaps the simplest and most intelligible way of disclosing the *deep gulf between the ideal and the real*. This is one of the things of which, like the earth's motion, we are not immediately aware; the ancients, therefore, did not notice it, just as they did not observe the earth's motion. On the other hand, once first demonstrated by Descartes, it has ever since given philosophers no rest. But after Kant had at last shown most thoroughly the complete diversity of the ideal and the real, it was an attempt as bold as it was absurd, yet quite correctly calculated with regard to the power of judgement of the philosophical public in Germany and thus crowned with brilliant success, to try to assert the *absolute identity* of the two by dogmatic utterances referring to a so-called intellectual intuition. On the contrary, a subjective and an objective existence, a being for self and a being for others, a consciousness of one's own self and a consciousness of other things, are in truth given to us immediately, and the two are given in such a fundamentally different way that no other difference compares with this. About *himself* everyone knows directly, about everything else only very indirectly. This is the fact and the problem.

On the other hand, it is no longer the essential point here, but one of secondary importance, whether, through further processes in the interior of the brain, universal concepts (*universalia*) are abstracted from the representations or pictures of perception that have arisen in the brain, for the purpose of further combinations, whereby knowledge becomes *rational*, and is then called *thinking*. For all such *concepts* borrow their contents only from the representation of perception, which is therefore *primary knowledge*, and thus is alone taken into consideration when we investigate the relation between the ideal and the real. Accordingly, it is evidence of a complete ignorance of the problem, or at any rate it is very

inapt, to want to describe this relation as that between *being* and *thinking*. In the first place, *thinking* has a relation only to *perceiving*, but *perceiving* has a relation to the *being-in-itself* of what is perceived, and this last is the great problem with which we are here concerned. On the other hand, empirical being, as it lies before us, is simply nothing but being-given in perception; but the relation of this to *thinking* is no riddle, for the concepts, and hence the immediate material of thinking, are obviously *abstracted* from perception, as no reasonable person can doubt. Incidentally, we can see how important the choice of expressions in philosophy is from the fact that the inept expression censured above, and the misunderstanding that has arisen from it, have become the foundation of the whole Hegelian pseudo-philosophy that has engrossed the attention of the German public for twenty-five years.

But if it should be said that “perception is already knowledge of the thing-in-itself, for it is the effect of that which exists outside us, and as this acts, so it is; its action is just its being”; then to this we reply: (1) that the law of causality, as has been sufficiently proved, is of subjective origin, as is also the sensation of the senses from which the perception comes; (2) that time and space, in which the object presents itself, are likewise of subjective origin; (3) that, if the being of the object consists merely in its acting, this means that it consists merely in the changes produced by it in others; consequently, itself and in itself it is nothing at all. Only of *matter* is it true, as I have said in the text and discussed in the essay *On the Principle of Sufficient Reason* at the end of § 21, that its being consists in its acting, that it is through and through only causality, and thus is causality itself objectively perceived, but that it is thus nothing in itself (ἡ ὕλη τὸ ἀληθινὸν ψεῦδος, *materia mendacium verax*); ¹²² on the contrary, as an ingredient of the perceived object it is a mere abstraction, which by itself alone cannot be given in any experience. It will be fully considered later on in a chapter to itself. Yet the perceived object must be something in *itself*, and not merely *something for others*; for otherwise it would be positively only representation, and we should have an absolute idealism that in the end would become theoretical egoism, in which all reality disappears, and the world becomes a mere subjective phantasm.

However, if, without questioning further, we stop altogether at the *world as representation*, then of course it is immaterial whether I declare objects to be representations in my head or phenomena that exhibit themselves in time and space, since time and space themselves are only in my head. In this sense, then, an identity of the ideal and the real might still be affirmed; yet since Kant, this would be to say nothing new. Moreover, the inner nature of things and of the phenomenal world would obviously not be exhausted in this way, but with it we should still always be only on the *ideal* side. The *real* side must be something *toto genere* different from the *world as representation*, namely that which things are *in themselves*; and it is this complete diversity between the ideal and the real that Kant has demonstrated most thoroughly.

Locke had denied knowledge of things as they are in themselves to the senses; but Kant denied it also to the perceiving *understanding*. Under this name I embrace here what he calls *pure* sensibility and the law of causality that brings about empirical perception, in so far as this law is given *a priori*. Not only are both right, but it can also be seen quite directly that there is a contradiction in the assertion that a thing is known according to what it is in and by itself, in other words, outside our knowledge. For, as I have said, all knowing is essentially a making of representations; but my making of representations, just because it is mine, can never be identical with the being-in-itself of the thing outside me. The being in and by itself of every thing must necessarily be *subjective*. But in the representation of another, it exists just as necessarily as something *objective*, a difference that can never be entirely reconciled. For through this the whole mode of its existence is fundamentally changed; as something objective, it presupposes a foreign subject, and exists as the representation of that subject; moreover, as Kant has shown, it has entered forms foreign to its own nature, just because they belong to that foreign subject whose knowledge becomes possible only through them. If, absorbed in this reflection, I perceive, let us say, lifeless bodies of easily observable size and regular comprehensible form, and then attempt to conceive this spatial existence in its three dimensions as their being-in-itself, and consequently as the existence that is subjective to the things, then I at once feel the

impossibility of the thing, since I can never think of those objective forms as the being that is subjective to the things. On the contrary, I become directly conscious that what I represent there is a picture or image, brought about in my brain and existing only for me as the knowing subject, and that this picture cannot constitute the ultimate, and therefore subjective, being-in-and-by-itself of even these lifeless bodies. On the other hand, I cannot assume that even these lifeless bodies exist simply and solely in my representation, but as they have unfathomable properties, and, by virtue of these, activity, I must concede them a *being-in-itself* of some kind. But this very inscrutability of the properties, pointing as it certainly does on the one hand to something existing independently of our knowledge, on the other hand gives the empirical proof that, because our knowledge consists only in the *framing of representations* by means of subjective forms, such knowledge always furnishes mere *phenomena*, not the being-in-itself of things. From this it can be explained that in all we know, a certain something remains hidden from us as being quite unfathomable, and we must confess that we are unable to understand even the commonest and simplest phenomena. For not merely do the highest productions of nature, namely living beings, or the *complicated* phenomena of the inorganic world remain inscrutable to us, but even every rock-crystal, even iron pyrites, are, by virtue of their crystallographical, optical, chemical, and electrical properties, an abyss of incomprehensibilities and mysteries for our searching consideration and investigation. This could not be so if we knew things as they are in themselves; for then at any rate the simpler phenomena, the path to whose properties was not barred to us by ignorance, would of necessity be thoroughly intelligible to us, and their whole being and inner nature could not fail to pass over into knowledge. Therefore it lies not in the defectiveness of our acquaintance with things, but in the very nature of knowledge itself. For if our perception, and thus the whole empirical apprehension of the things that present themselves to us, is already determined essentially and principally by our cognitive faculty and by its forms and functions, then it must be that things exhibit themselves in a manner quite different from their own inner nature, and that therefore they appear as through a mask. This mask enables us always

merely to assume, never to know, what is hidden beneath it; and this something then gleams through as an inscrutable mystery. Never can the nature of anything pass over into knowledge wholly and without reserve; but still less can anything real be constructed *a priori*, like something mathematical. Therefore the empirical inscrutability of all the beings of nature is an *a posteriori* proof of the ideality, and merely phenomenal actuality, of their empirical existence.

In consequence of all this, on the path of *objective knowledge*, thus starting from the *representation*, we shall never get beyond the representation, i.e., the phenomenon. We shall therefore remain at the outside of things; we shall never be able to penetrate into their inner nature, and investigate what they are in themselves, in other words, what they may be by themselves. So far I agree with Kant. But now, as the counterpoise to this truth, I have stressed that other truth that we are not merely the *knowing subject*, but that *we ourselves* are also among those realities or entities we require to know, that *we ourselves are the thing-in-itself*. Consequently, a way *from within* stands open to us to that real inner nature of things to which we cannot penetrate *from without*. It is, so to speak, a subterranean passage, a secret alliance, which, as if by treachery, places us all at once in the fortress that could not be taken by attack from without. Precisely as such, the *thing-in-itself* can come into consciousness only quite directly, namely by *it itself being conscious of itself*; to try to know it objectively is to desire something contradictory. Everything objective is representation, consequently appearance, in fact mere phenomenon of the brain.

Kant's principal result may be summarized in its essence as follows: "All concepts which do not have as their basis a perception in space and time (sensuous perception), or in other words, have not been drawn from such a perception, are absolutely empty, that is to say, they give us no knowledge. But as perception can furnish only *phenomena*, not things-in-themselves, we too have absolutely no knowledge of things-in-themselves." I admit this of everything, but not of the knowledge everyone has of his own *willing*. This is neither a perception (for all perception is spatial), nor is it empty; on the contrary, it is more real than any other

knowledge. Further, it is not a *priori*, like merely formal knowledge, but entirely a *posteriori*; hence we are unable to anticipate it in the particular case, but in this are often guilty of error concerning ourselves. In fact, our *willing* is the only opportunity we have of understanding simultaneously from within any event that outwardly manifests itself; consequently, it is the one thing known to us *immediately*, and not given to us merely in the representation, as all else is. Here, therefore, lies the datum alone capable of becoming the key to everything else, or, as I have said, the only narrow gateway to truth. Accordingly, we must learn to understand nature from ourselves, not ourselves from nature. What is directly known to us must give us the explanation of what is only indirectly known, not conversely. Do we understand, let us say, the rolling away of a ball when it has received an impulse more thoroughly than we understand our own movement when we have perceived a motive? Many may think so, but I say that the reverse is the case. However, we shall arrive at the insight that in both the occurrences just mentioned what is essential is identical, although identical in the same way as the lowest audible note of harmony is identical with the note of the same name ten octaves higher.

Meanwhile it is to be carefully noted, and I have always kept it in mind, that even the inward observation we have 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 observation. But such observation is brought about by the will, with and by means of corporization, providing itself also with an intellect (for the purpose of its relations with the external world), and then through this intellect knowing itself in self-consciousness (the necessary reverse of the external world); but this knowledge of the thing-in-itself is not wholly adequate. In the first place, such knowledge is tied to the form of the representation; it is perception or observation, and as such falls apart into subject and object. For even in self-consciousness, the I is not absolutely simple, but consists of a knower (intellect) and a known (will); the former is not known and the latter is not knowing, although the two flow together into the consciousness of an I. But on this very account, this I is not *intimate* with itself through and through, does not shine through so to speak, but is

opaque, and therefore remains a riddle to itself. Hence even in inner knowledge there still occurs a difference between the being-in-itself of its object and the observation or perception of this object in the knowing subject. But the inner knowledge is free from two forms belonging to outer knowledge, the form of *space* and the form of *causality* which brings about all sense-perception. On the other hand, there still remains the form of *time*, as well as that of being known and of knowing in general. Accordingly, in this inner knowledge the thing-in-itself has indeed to a great extent cast off its veils, but still does not appear quite naked. In consequence of the form of time which still adheres to it, everyone knows his *will* only in its successive individual *acts*, not as a whole, in and by itself. Hence no one knows his character *a priori*, but he becomes acquainted with it only by way of experience and always imperfectly. Yet the apprehension in which we know the stirrings and acts of our own will is far more immediate than is any other. It is the point where the thing-in-itself enters the phenomenon most immediately, and is most closely examined by the knowing subject; therefore the event thus intimately known is simply and solely calculated to become the interpreter of every other.

For in the case of every emergence of an act of will from the obscure depths of our inner being into the knowing consciousness, there occurs a direct transition into the phenomenon of the thing-in-itself that lies outside time. Accordingly, the act of will is indeed only the nearest and clearest *phenomenon* of the thing-in-itself; yet it follows from this that, if all the other phenomena could be known by us just as immediately and intimately, we should be obliged to regard them precisely as that which the will is in us. Therefore in this sense I teach that the inner nature of every thing is *will*, and I call the will the thing-in-itself. In this way, Kant's doctrine of the inability to know the thing-in-itself is modified to the extent that the thing-in-itself is merely not absolutely and completely knowable; that nevertheless by far the most immediate of its phenomena, distinguished *toto genere* from all the rest by this immediateness, is its representative for us. Accordingly we have to refer the whole world of phenomena to that one in which the thing-in-itself is manifested under the

lightest of all veils, and still remains phenomenon only in so far as my intellect, the only thing capable of knowledge, still always remains distinguished from me as the one who wills, and does not cast off the knowledge-form of *time*, even with *inner* perception.

Accordingly, even after this last and extreme step, the question may still be raised what that will, which manifests itself in the world and as the world, is ultimately and absolutely in itself; in other words, what it is, quite apart from the fact that it manifests itself as *will*, or in general *appears*, that is to say, *is known* in general. This question can *never* be answered, because, as I have said, being-known of itself contradicts being-in-itself, and everything that is known is as such only phenomenon. But the possibility of this question shows that the thing-in-itself, which we know most immediately in the will, may have, entirely outside all possible phenomenon, determinations, qualities, and modes of existence which for us are absolutely unknowable and incomprehensible, and which then remain as the inner nature of the thing-in-itself, when this, as explained in the fourth book, has freely abolished itself as *will*, has thus stepped out of the phenomenon entirely, and as regards our knowledge, that is to say as regards the world of phenomena, has passed over into empty nothingness. If the will were positively and absolutely the thing-in-itself, then this nothing would be *absolute*, instead of which it expressly appears to us there only as a *relative* nothing.

I now proceed to supplement by a few relevant observations the establishment, given in our second book as well as in the work *On the Will in Nature*, of the doctrine that what makes itself known in the most immediate knowledge as will is precisely that which objectifies itself at different grades in all the phenomena of this world. I shall begin by producing a series of psychological facts proving first of all that in our own consciousness the *will* always appears as the primary and fundamental thing, and throughout asserts its preeminence over the intellect; that, on the other hand, the intellect generally turns out to be what is secondary, subordinate, and conditioned. This proof is the more necessary as all philosophers before me, from the first to the last, place the true and real inner nature or kernel of man in the *knowing* consciousness.

Accordingly, they have conceived and explained the I, or in the case of many of them its transcendent hypostasis called soul, as primarily and essentially *knowing*, in fact *thinking*, and only in consequence of this, secondarily and derivatively, as *willing*. This extremely old, universal, and fundamental error, this colossal *πρῶτον ψεῦδος* and fundamental *ὑστέρον πρότερον*, ¹²³ must first of all be set aside, and instead of it the true state of the case must be brought to perfectly distinct consciousness. However, as this is done for the first time here after thousands of years of philosophizing, some detailed account will not be out of place. The remarkable phenomenon that in this fundamental and essential point all philosophers have erred, in fact have completely reversed the truth, might be partly explained, especially in the case of the philosophers of the Christian era, from the fact that all of them aimed at presenting man as differing as widely as possible from the animal. Yet they felt vaguely that the difference between the two was to be found in the intellect and not in the will. From this arose in them unconsciously the tendency to make the intellect the essential and principal thing, in fact to describe willing as a mere function of the intellect. Therefore the concept of a *soul*, as transcendent hypostasis, is not only inadmissible, as is established by the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but it becomes the source of irremediable errors by its establishing beforehand in its “simple substance” an indivisible unity of knowledge and of the will, the separation of which is precisely the path to truth. Therefore that concept can no longer occur in philosophy, but is to be left to German medical men and physiologists, who, laying aside scalpel and scoop, venture to philosophize with concepts they received when they were confirmed. They might perhaps try their luck with them in England. The French physiologists and zootomists have (till recently) kept themselves entirely free from this reproach.

The first consequence of their common fundamental error, which is very inconvenient to all these philosophers, is that, since in death the knowing consciousness obviously perishes, either they must admit death to be the annihilation of man, against which our inner nature revolts, or resort to the assumption of a continued existence of the knowing

consciousness. For this a strong faith is required, since everyone's own experience has abundantly demonstrated to him the complete and general dependence of the knowing consciousness on the brain, and one can just as easily believe in a digestion without a stomach as in a knowing consciousness without a brain. My philosophy alone leads us out of this dilemma; in the first place it puts man's real inner nature not in consciousness, but in the will. This will is not essentially united with consciousness, but is related to consciousness, in other words to knowledge, as substance to accident, as something illuminated to light, as the string to the sounding-board; it comes into consciousness from within just as the corporeal world comes from without. Now we can grasp the indestructibility of this real kernel and true inner being that is ours, in spite of the obvious extinction of consciousness in death and its corresponding non-existence before birth. For the intellect is as fleeting and as perishable as is the brain, and is the brain's product, or rather its activity. But the brain, like the whole organism, is the product or phenomenon of, in short a secondary thing to, the will, and it is the will alone that is imperishable.