

Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of the Will and Nāgārjuna's Emptiness

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Introduction

It is well known that Schopenhauer developed strong interests in Indian philosophy and remained committed to it throughout his career. His work, *The World as Will and as Representation*, contains many passages where he openly acknowledged his debts or the similarities of his ideas to much of Indian philosophy, whose writings had just been made available during his time. Many studies have already investigated Schopenhauer's debts to Indian as well as Buddhist philosophies, and in fact much remains to be done in this area. However, in this paper I would like to focus on the philosophical aspects of Schopenhauer's thought, and compare it with one of the most well known masters of Indian Buddhism, Nāgārjuna. Historical points aside, it is, I believe, extremely interesting to see how the thoughts of the two philosophers could be compared and contrasted with each other. It is my contention that Schopenhauer and Nāgārjuna share much more than previously appreciated. This may stem independently from Schopenhauer's own thinking. It is plausible, so I will make clear later on, that Schopenhauer came up independently with the aspects of his view that correspond positively with those of Nāgārjuna and of the Buddhists in general.

I shall focus more specifically on the role of the ultimate reality in both philosophers. For Schopenhauer, it is the Will; it is the blind driving force behind the phenomena, and is in fact the real nature of Kant's unknowable *Ding an sich*. For Nāgārjuna, it is Emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The two do not seem to share much with each other. However, when both are investigated further, they rather surprisingly share much in common, and in fact a lot more that are different from each other.

So in the next section I will provide a brief account of Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the Will. Then I will follow that with another account of Nāgārjuna's view on Emptiness. Then I conclude with the points of comparison and contrast. The key point in the similarity is that both Schopenhauer and Nāgārjuna point out a way toward release from suffering, and the correct understanding of the ultimate nature of reality figures necessarily in such attempt. So I will talk about the nature of both the Will and Emptiness. Then I focus on how the understanding of both necessarily contributes to release from suffering. Then I conclude with a remark on how the account of these two philosophers could in fact lead to actual release from suffering, something that we perhaps may take up as a guideline toward our own eventual liberation.

Schopenhauer and the Will

The title of Schopenhauer's main philosophical output, *The World as Will and as Representation*, sums up his key idea very well. The world as we perceive it is in fact our own representation in the sense that it is only through our means of representing the perceptual data that come through our senses that we form judgments about them and create a coherent picture of the world as it appears to us. This is of course a legacy from Kant that Schopenhauer inherits. Things in the world are cognized to be thus and so only through the use of concepts, and they are something which are able to be related to the perceiving subject only through being represented through perceptual and conceptual means. Hence, in a real sense the world itself is a representation. We cannot get at the world as it

appears without relying on the conceptual and perceptual apparatus.

This is the familiar Kantian picture. The question is, if the world is in fact representation, then how could the objectivity of the world be ascertained? If things in the world, such as tables and chairs, are really representations of an individual, the perceiving and cognizing subject, then what ontological status do these things have on their own without being so related? According to Schopenhauer, the necessary condition of the world appearing as representation is the Principle of Sufficient Reason. There has to be a reason for every occurrence, and the reason for the occurrence of things as they are in the world is that they are governed by the relation between the subject and the object. Indeed Schopenhauer has an elaboration of this subject-object relation as the main Principle of Sufficient Reason. These are the causal, logical, mathematical and motivational. There is not enough space here to elaborate on the details of the four roots of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which formed the subject matter of Schopenhauer's Ph.D. dissertation. But the idea is that there is a correspondence between what is happening in the material world and the relations among the various propositions that comprise logical or linguistic reasonings. Thus, for example, the cause-and-effect relation between a material cause and its effect has as its parallel a relation between two propositions, one of which is the antecedent and the other the consequent. Schopenhauer's view is that these domains are not to be mixed, and he in fact did criticize many philosophers of his time, most notable Hegel, for mixing these domains. For Hegel, the real and the rational are ultimately one and the same, but for Schopenhauer this is a blatant violation of reason. The real and the rational may correspond to each other according to their status as species of the use of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, but they are not to be identified with each other.

Briefly put, then, the world as Representation means that the contribution of the subject is always there in any conception, or any account of the material world. This is a typical idealistic picture, one not too dissimilar on the surface from Berkeley. However, Kant, with Schopenhauer following the Kantian view on this, insists that his argument does not succumb to the charge of "empirical idealism,"

as he terms Berkeley's view. According to Berkeley, the status of an individual object depends essentially on the perception of an individual, but for Kant that is tantamount to destroying the very objectivity of the object itself. So for Kant the objectivity of material things is maintained through the "Transcendental Deduction of the Categories" whereby the Categories of Pure Understanding are shown to apply necessarily to individual objects.

Schopenhauer basically follows Kant's view on this. However, he adds an important aspect in that he shows that the Ding-an-sich itself is nothing other than the Will, which is a blind, arational driving force always striving at something else. Schopenhauer equates the metaphysics of the Will with that of the body, which in fact acts as an avenue through which one can get a glimpse of understanding of the Will. Let us look more closely at Schopenhauer's key passage here:

The body is given in two entirely different ways to the subject of knowledge, who becomes an individual only through his identity with it. It is given as an idea in intelligent perception, as an object among objects and subject to the laws of object. And it is also given in quite a different way as that which is immediately known to every one, and is signified by the word *will*.¹

Thus in a sense the Will is nothing but our sense of subjectivity, the knowledge we all have of being the subject. However, since the world of material things essentially is nothing other than projection of the mind of the subject. The material things themselves, as representations, are also projection of the Will. Thus Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the Will is such that the material things and the Will are in a real sense one and the same. Viewed in one way the reality manifests itself as Representation, but viewed in another way, the same reality appears as the Will itself.

1 1.Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. 1, Haldane and Kemp transl. Routledge, 1964, Book II, Sect. 18., pp. 129-130. Later translations translate the title as *The World as Will and as Representation*, which is more accurate.

It is the Will that determines everything, and it seems that human beings are always determined by the Will to such an extent that freedom is not possible at all. The Will is not only the basic reality that underlies all the objective world, but it also is the essence of the mental, subjective reality. Since our bodies are the only objects in the universe that are capable of conscious thought, the Will finds its most direct expression through them. In other words, the human bodies are the nearest approximation of the Will as it is in itself. Schopenhauer even argues that the body itself is the objectification of the Will. In fact it could be argued that the subject-object relation, on which the whole Principle of Sufficient Reason is based, is ultimately informed through the Will itself. The Will is a movement directed toward something. As a movement it has to come from somewhere and has to go to somewhere. Thus the subject-object relation itself presupposes the Will since for the relation to make sense there has to be some kind of relation that is analogous to the movement of the Will, and whose linguistic counterpart is the relation between the subject and the object of a sentence. Since the subject-object relation is the ultimate underlying principle of all perceptible and conceivable reality, both mental and physical, then the Will itself is presupposed by both kinds of realities here.

So our own situation as human beings is such that we are doubly determined by the Will. On the one hand, our physical bodies are determined by the Will because, as material objects, the bodies are representations of some subject, which is always subject to the Will. On the other hand, our own conscious thought, our very subjectivities, are nothing but direct manifestations of the Will itself without any material intervention. This seems to suggest that human beings are always slave to the Will. Since the Will has nothing to do with rationality, Schopenhauer maintains that rationality is not part of our nature. In fact the opposite seems to be the case.

Nāgārjuna's View on Emptiness

Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the Will bears many striking similarities with

Buddhist philosophy. Since there are many versions of Buddhist philosophy, I chose to compare Schopenhauer's view with that of Nāgārjuna, who is perhaps the most well known Buddhist philosopher apart from the Buddha himself. Basically speaking, Nāgārjuna elaborates on the Buddha's teaching without adding any substantive ideas of his own. This is a rather contentious point among Buddhist scholars, but it is clear in any case that Nāgārjuna's intention in his works is not to propound his own view, but to clarify and systematize the Buddha's teaching so as to achieve the soteriological goal of Buddhism itself.

According to Nāgārjuna, the whole world is characterized by being "empty." This is a complex philosophical position. The idea is that things as we perceive them are ultimately speaking nothing other than projections of our own mind through conceptualization. The typical Buddhist position is that things in the perceptual world do not possess "inherent characteristics." What this means is that individual objects depend for their being what they are taken to be through other, external factors, and it is not the case that they do possess any features on their own that make them what they are. One might understand this point better if Nāgārjuna's view here is contrasted with that of Aristotle. For Aristotle, individual objects possess some kind of "essential forms" that make them what they really are. Aristotle calls them "the what it is to be" (*to ti en einai*). Thus the what-it-is-to-be a thing X is just the thing that makes X an X rather than a Y. For Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, one cannot find anything such that it corresponds to the Aristotelian what-it-is-to-be, because what it is to be anything cannot be found in that thing itself. What it is to be an X for Nāgārjuna and the Buddhists depends crucially, but not solely, on the conceptual apparatus of the perceiver and cognizer such that the thing is perceived to be an X. It also depends on other external factors. Thus a table, for example, is a table only because it fits with a conceptual category of "being a table" in someone's mind. Ultimately speaking, the table is not what it appears at all, for when one breaks it down, no components remain that can be identified as "the table." Even when the components, such as the legs, the top of the table, and so on, are put together in a certain way, the form in which these components are put together itself does not constitute the essential feature of the table because they do not exist

"inside" the table, so to speak, and exists as a form in the mind of the perceiver. Thus the relation between the object and the perceiver or the subject is crucial.

This is a very similar picture with both Kant and Schopenhauer as we have seen. For Nāgārjuna, an object such as a table is "empty of their inherent character" precisely because there is no thing in the object itself that qualifies to be the object it is without being related to any other outside factors. Thus to be an object requires a subject, and this is also Schopenhauer's point as we have seen. Nāgārjuna's view that objects are empty, however, should not be interpreted as saying that ultimately speaking there are no such things as tables, chairs or the like, because for a thing to be "empty of their inherent character" it does not mean that they do not exist. Tables and chairs do really exist in the world, but their ontological status is not an independent one.

For Schopenhauer, objects such as tables and chairs do not exist on their own either. They are projections or manifestations of the Will, and this is where Schopenhauer and Nāgārjuna agree. Another similar point is that for Schopenhauer and Nāgārjuna there is no duality between the things as they appear and the ultimate reality they really are. Thus objective things and either the Will or Emptiness are essentially speaking one and the same. For Nāgārjuna, this is because Emptiness itself is nothing but the fact that all things are interdependent one with another:

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.²

For Schopenhauer, it does not make sense to say that individual objects are separate from the Will, because his whole metaphysical system relies on the idea that there is, essentially speaking, only one entity, namely the Will. So for

2 Nāgārjuna, *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*, transl. Jay L. Garfield (Oxford University Press, 1995), Chapter 24, Verse 18.

Schopenhauer, the Will, being the only one entity there is, appears as many things as perceived by an individual subject because the latter is endowed with the Principle of Individuation, which enables the subject to perceive the world as it appears. This also corresponds to Nāgārjuna's view that it is conceptual imputation that results in our perception of things as being manifold, as being separated one from another.

Although the Will and Emptiness are similar in several ways, there are clear differences. The Will is a blind driving force, which is manifested concretely through our conscious, individual will and bodily action. Emptiness, on the other hand, can't be so described at all and has no individual characteristics whatsoever. In fact this is consistent with Nāgārjuna's claim that Emptiness itself is empty, meaning that Emptiness itself is no different any individual objects in that Emptiness also lacks any inherent characteristics. What this means is that Emptiness itself is also a result of conceptual imputation. It is we who use the term "Emptiness" to call it and to qualify it in such a way that it "lacks inherent characteristics." Thus Emptiness itself is empty. One cannot ascribe any substantive qualification or property to Emptiness. This is in contrast to the Will, which for Schopenhauer has a number of its own characteristics which it does not share with other objects.

This is a key difference, and it stems from the two philosophers' differences toward how their conceptions of ultimate reality come about. Nāgārjuna arrived at the conception of Emptiness through analysis of the concept of a thing. For something to be a thing, it depends essentially on other things and other factors. For example, a thing has to have a boundary beyond which it is not that thing at all. It is inconceivable for a thing to have no limit at all, for that would mean no word can describe it. But if there is a limit then it is that very limit that defines the thing in question (This point is similar to Hegel.). And since the limit, or the boundary of a thing cannot be one and the same as the thing itself, the thing is essentially dependent upon another thing which is not it. This is not the same as Schopenhauer, who models the conception of the Will on bodily conscious act as we have seen.

The Road to Salvation

Schopenhauer's rather pessimistic picture is tempered by his own argument that in fact an escape is possible. In the Section on "The Assertion and Denial of the Will," Schopenhauer argues that it is indeed possible to deny the Will in such a way that it ceases to operate, and that this denial goes hand in hand with an awareness that there is something lying beyond the rational, intellectual knowledge, a direct contact or union with ultimate reality in itself beyond the work of the Principle of Sufficient Reason or the Principle of Individuation. Since the Will is the blind force that always strives toward something and is never ending, it naturally creates a lot of suffering since in most cases there is no satisfaction to the Will. For Schopenhauer there are only two ways to overcome this suffering. One might gain a direct knowledge of reality as it is in itself, thus becomes able to see through the veil of Maya and realizes that the perceptual world is ultimately illusory, thus encountering suffering as an object of immediate knowledge. On the other hand, one might get a direct experience of suffering itself. In either way the Principle of Individuation, the veil of Maya, is eventually destroyed, and for Schopenhauer this is the road to salvation:

... the denial of the will to live, which is just what is called absolute, entire resignation, or holiness, always proceeds from that quieter of the will which the knowledge of its inner conflict and essential vanity, expressing themselves in the suffering of all beings, becomes. The difference, which we have represented as two paths, consists in whether that knowledge is called up by suffering which is merely and purely *known*, and is freely appropriated by means of the penetration of the *principium individuationis*, or by suffering which is directly *felt* by a man himself. True salvation, deliverance from life and suffering, cannot even be imagined without complete denial of the will.³

Thus for Schopenhauer the Will itself is the cause for suffering. Since the Will is

3 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, p. 513. Bk. IV Sec. 67.

everything, and it has the nature of desiring or moving toward something, then the end or the satisfaction which would end the movement results in the Will annihilating itself too. In fact Schopenhauer has an intriguing passage at the very end of Book IV of the *World as Will and as Representation* to the effect that the denial of the Will results in 'nothing:'

Thus, in this way, by contemplation of life and conduct of saints, whom it is certainly rarely granted us to meet with in our own experience, but who are brought before our eyes by their written history, and, with the stamp of inner truth, by art, we must banish the dark impression of that nothingness which we discern behind all virtue and holiness as their final goal, and which we fear as children fear the dark; we must not even evade it like the Indians, through myths and meaningless words, such as reabsorption in Brahma or the Nirvana of the Buddhists. Rather do we freely acknowledge that what remains after the entire abolition of will is for all those who are still full of will certainly nothing; but, conversely, to those in whom the will has turned and has denied itself, this our world, which is so real, with all its suns and milky ways—is nothing.⁴

This important passage deserves a response from the Buddhist. The denial of the Will, which is the only route to salvation and to true happiness, results in *nothing*. Schopenhauer also recommends us to face this nothingness squarely, so to speak and not to flee from it or put it under myths or “meaningless words” such as “Brahma” or “Nirvana.” What Schopenhauer seems to have in mind is that even though the saints who have successfully denied the will for themselves are hard to find, their experiences are valid, and their stories are not mere fictions. The validity can be demonstrated through the arguments presented in Schopenhauer's own work here—that it is possible to deny the Will in such a way that genuine happiness and freedom emerge as a result. However, since the will is essentially everything that comprise the perceptible and cognizable world, in a

4 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and as Idea*, pp. 531-532. Book IV, Sect. 71.

real sense, then, what results after its denial is nothing. Once a thing is specified, this will have already presupposed the Principle of Individuation, and this means that the Will is not denied. So for Schopenhauer what results is absolutely speaking nothing. The key is that "we must banish the dark impression of that nothingness which we discern behind all virtue and holiness as their final goal, and which we fear as children fear the dark." The problem is how exactly to banish it. Schopenhauer might perhaps be saying that the nothingness, which is feared as children fear the dark, can be overcome through living the life of a saint who has completely overcome his desire and his will. In this sense, perhaps Schopenhauer is saying that the saint also overcomes his fear of nothingness, and through this overcoming what appears to us as nothingness is in fact something, and for the saint what appears to us as real as suns or stars are in fact nothing. Since we who have not overcome the will do not understand the true nature of the "other side," or what happens after the Will is completely denied, we fear it rather irrationally like children. However, saints who have overcome their will become at home in it and for them our perceptual world becomes "nothing" because they realize that the principle on which such a world essentially depends is not real. We can then banish our fear of nothingness through the full understanding of reality, that the Principle of Individuation is but a projection of the mind onto unconceptualized reality. When reality is viewed without any conceptual fabrication, namely as it ultimately is in itself, then salvation is possible, since there will be no will nor suffering.

Thus, when Schopenhauer says that one must not flee into myths or meaningless words "such as reabsorption in Brahma or the Nirvana of the Buddhists," he apparently misunderstands the points of either Hinduism or Buddhism. Schopenhauer's own way of banishing the fear and becoming at home with nothingness (in fact the nothingness for *us*) is not possible at all without an account along the line of what the Hindus or the Buddhists are proposing. Since Schopenhauer does not elaborate on exactly how the banishment should be done, his account is incomplete. This is perhaps understandable since he is committed to the usual philosophical methods of reasoning and argumentation. Since reasoning always depends on language, which is simply the medium of the Principle of Individuation, reasoning and language always run into limits when

the subject matter is how language itself could accurately represent reality, and especially how language could describe what is essentially indescribable such as the will in itself, or Nāgārjuna's Emptiness. Hence, what philosophy can do here is only to present a negative picture like what Schopenhauer is doing here.