

Philosophical Notes
on
Schopenhauer and Indian Philosophy

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Schopenhauer and Indian Philosophy

Schopenhauer (1778-1860) was one of the few modern philosophers who made a serious study of Upanishads and Buddhist philosophy, not merely to satisfy an intellectual quest but also to derive from them some of the basic elements of his own philosophy as also the grounds for the aim and method of the practice in life. In Schopenhauer, we find an early exemplar in the modern era of the view that the East and West can meet. It is mainly for this reason that we in India look upon Schopenhauer with deep appreciation and we are impelled to make a special effort to trace those elements in the Western philosophy which culminated in Schopenhauer who was the first one to proclaim in its purity the doctrine that Will is paramount, the doctrine which came to be advocated by many subsequent modern philosophers such as Nietzsche, Bergson, James and Dewey. That doctrine has effected a striking change in the temper of philosophy in our own times. Realisation that that doctrine was in some measure the result of the influence on him of the Upanishads and Buddhism inspires us to undertake a fresh look

into the Indian philosophy and to enrich our own critical assessment of the comparative study of Indian and Western philosophy.

Plato and Kant played a dominant role in preparing Schopenhauer up to the point where he could enter into the message of Upanishads and Buddhism with that awakening which is required for entering into the domain of an alien culture. As we all know, Schopenhauer's system, which is expounded in his work the *World as Will and Representation (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung)*, can be seen as adaptation of the system of Kant. Kant maintained that a state of the categorical imperative and experience of moral will or the goodwill can take us beyond the realm of phenomena which alone our categories of pure reason enable us to cognise. According to Kant, goodwill must belong to the real world, the world of things-in-themselves. It is this aspect of Kant's philosophy which led Schopenhauer to assign overwhelming importance to will.

According to Kant, both time and space belong only to phenomena, things-in-them-selves cannot be in space and time. It may, therefore, be reasoned that the Will that operates in categorical imperatives can be designated as something not bound by the limits of space and time, and therefore it is universal. It

can also be identified with the will of the universe. In this light, separateness may be shown to be an illusion, resulting from one's own subjective apparatus of spatio-temporal perception. Secondly, what is real is one vast will. We are thus led to the genesis of Schopenhauer's conception of the whole world as Will.

A central question relating to Schopenhauer's philosophy is regarding the nature of Will. According to Schopenhauer, all processes in nature are fundamentally a kind of striving. He also speaks of unconscious processes of end-seeking. His statement of the world as a Will is not merely empirical but also metaphysical. Will provides Schopenhauer with a kind of nature of the world-in-itself, including the underlying reality of the individual human being. This view is comparable to the Buddhistic view of the world as a constant becoming and of the life of the human beings driven by desire. Schopenhauer's philosophy is anti-dualist, and he paints a vivid picture of the whole of animate nature as for ever striving, struggling, and competing for life and further life by producing offsprings. He maintains that the conscious or rationally caused willing in human beings is merely the highest sophistication of will to life that permeates all nature. Although human beings are organisms whose

brains and other physiological processes enable them to function as subjects of knowledge, applying classification of space, time, and causality, and making rational judgements, yet the innermost core is the Will. He points out that the mental processes are almost always at a deeper level subservient to blind will to life. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that his idea that the intellect is often forced to follow the secret purposes of uncontrollable underlying will was a precursor of Freud's view of the unconscious.

According to Schopenhauer, there cannot be a plurality of things in themselves, since plurality implies individuation, and individuation arises from space and time, and space and time do not apply to the thing in itself. He contends that thing in itself or the will objectifies itself as multiplicity of things itself. This view is comparable to the Upanishadic view that reality is one without the second that it is spaceless and timeless and that it is only in space and time that oneness of the ultimate reality manifests itself or appears in terms of multiplicity.

According to Schopenhauer, will is associated with misery. For will to life impels us on ever-increasing train of desires and goals, but we reach no ultimate point or final satisfaction. The

conclusion is that desires always remain unsatisfied, and to have desires unsatisfied is to suffer. In developing this aspect of his philosophy, Schopenhauer comes closest to the Buddhistic doctrine, according to which there is perennial suffering in the world and that suffering is caused by desire. Upanishads, too, maintain that all human suffering is caused by desire. Both Buddhism and Upanishads, therefore, advocate renunciation of desire. And Schopenhauer, too, maintains that suffering can be alleviated, and this alleviation can come about when one may have the suspension of the will. In elaborating this aspect of his theory, Schopenhauer develops his aesthetic theory. The unifying thought in that theory is that one may have perceptual experience while the will is suspended. He admits that such an occurrence is comparatively rare because the intellect by nature is driven by will and is not prone to contemplating reality with objectivity and freedom from desires that the aesthetic experience demands. In his account of the aesthetic experience, he points out that in that experience we are no longer considering the where, the when, the why, and the whither of things, but simply and solely the *What*. Moreover, in the aesthetic contemplation, the subject becomes unaware of its separateness from that which it

experiences. As he explains, “the person who is involved in this perception is no longer an individual, for in such a perception the individual has lost himself; he is *pure* will-less, painless, timeless *subject of knowledge*.”

Schopenhauer goes farther, and he points out that the object of the aesthetic experience is not merely the individual spatio-temporal thing, but one of the eternal Ideas fixed in nature. In advocating this view, Schopenhauer has clearly at the back of his mind the Platonic theory of ideas. As in Plato, so in Schopenhauer, individual empirical things cannot be apprehended except when the subject applies to the representations of particular objects the *a priori* Ideas of Forms. He adds, however, that ordinary empirical knowledge is driven by the will and it consists in brain processes whose concurrence subserves the ends of organisms. Consequently, if the intellect breaks away from its service to the will, it must leave behind the forms of space, time and causality. Schopenhauer believes that, by freeing one’s intellect temporarily from the will, one gains a higher form of knowledge, and becomes a pure subject, objectively nurturing reality, and learning behind one’s identification with any individual part of the empirical world.

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One can notice here the reason as to why Schopenhauer felt a great solace in the Upanishads and why he found in Buddhism a great support. Both in the Upanishads and in the Buddhism, the resolution of suffering is in the cessation of desire; in both, the emphasis is on the cessation of the limitation of space and time and in the cessation of the limited individuality. Both speak of the experience in which there is an experience of silence, although in the Upanishads the silence is of the eternal Self and in Buddhism there is the silence beyond silence in which self is transcended.

Schopenhauer is often stigmatised as a pessimistic philosopher, in the same way as many critics of Upanishads and Buddhism regard them as pessimistic. But when we consider Schopenhauer's understanding of the psychology of the saint, of compassion and the value he attaches to striving for liberation without escaping from the struggle by taking recourse to suicide, one is obliged to conclude that his theory exemplifies, not the futility of life, but the possibility of attainment of a state of release from all subjectivity of egoism. Just as we can say that Buddhism is not a petty ideal of escape but of heroic striving towards Nirvana, a state free from suffering, and just as we see the Upanishadic

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teachings as an affirmation of the possibility of the recovery of spaceless-timeless Reality in experience that transcends all subjectivity and objectivity, even so we can say that Schopenhauer advocates the possibility of release from sorrow in the experience of compassion. He rightly holds the view that individuation or egoism is not an ultimate truth in the universe and that therefore compassion is more profoundly justified than egoism. We may recall that according to Schopenhauer, compassion is the impulse is to seek another's well-being and to prevent another's suffering, and is grounded in a vision of the world which sets less store than usual on divisions between individuals. According to Schopenhauer, the good man sees everywhere "I once more". A true understanding of Schopenhauer's philosophy reveals a profound psychology of saintliness, of inner resignation, true composure, true desirelessness. His message is a message of remedy, which lies in achieving a vision of the world which attaches the lowest possible importance to egoism, to one's own individuality which strives in divisions.

Schopenhauer has been rated as one of the greatest prose writers among the German philosophers. He exercised a great influence in his old age on eminent personalities like Wagner,

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Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Hardy, Freud, Jung, Proust, Thomas Mann and Wittgenstein. During the later years of his life, he attained the stature of one the greatest intellectual figures in European culture. In his aesthetic philosophy, he can be seen as a mystic, and considering his intellectual bond with the Plato and Kant, and considering his spiritual bond with Upanishads and Buddhism, he can be regarded as a multifaceted universalist.

Kireet Joshi

Kireet Joshi (b.1931) studied philosophy and law at the Bombay University. He was selected for I.A.S. in 1955 but in 1956 he resigned in order to devote himself to the study and practice of the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother at Pondicherry. He taught Philosophy and Psychology at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education at Pondicherry and participated in numerous educational experiments under the direct guidance of the Mother.

In 1976, Government of India invited him to be Educational Advisor in the Ministry of Education. In 1983, he was appointed Special Secretary to the Government of India, and held this post until 1988. He was Member-Secretary of Indian Council of Philosophical Research from 1981 to 1990. He was also Member-Secretary of Rashtriya Veda Vidya Pratishthan from 1987 to 1993. He was the Vice-Chairman of the UNESCO Institute of Education, Hamburg, from 1987 to 1989.

From 1999 to 2004, he was the Chairman of Auroville Foundation. From 2000 to 2006, he was Chairman of Indian Council of Philosophical Research. From 2006 to 2008, he was Editorial

Fellow of the Project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture (PHISPC).

He was also formally Educational Advisor to the Chief Minister of Gujarat (2008-2010). Currently he is at Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry, engaged in the tasks of research and guidance in themes related to 'Science and Spirituality' and 'Spiritual Education'.

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