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Object, Subject, and Representation

Schopenhauer's Argument in *The World as Will and Representation*

Arthur Schopenhauer opens volume I of *The World as Will and Representation* with a famous declaration that “The world is my representation” (3). Over the course of the first book, he elucidates the meaning of this bold statement, with its clear rejection traditional dogmatic realism, while also avoiding what he considers the “grave misunderstanding” (13) of falling into dogmatic idealism or skepticism as a response.

In order to understand what Schopenhauer's thesis *is*, we must first spend some time clearing away underbrush by making clear what it *is not*. His opening assertion that each person “does not know a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth” (3) is easily, but wrongly, associated with the philosophical traditions of *dogmatic idealism* or *skepticism*, both of which Schopenhauer sharply rejects.

For the *dogmatic idealist*, as for Schopenhauer, the entire world of objects around us is one and the same with the representations of the consciousness. But the two views differ starkly once we assess what it means for consciousness to have representations. Whereas the dogmatic idealist “makes the object the effect of the subject” (13), Schopenhauer insists that the relation of cause to effect “always occurs only between immediate and mediate object, and hence always only between objects” (13). Thus, where the idealist makes the representation – and thus the whole furniture of the world – a *creation* of the subject, on Schopenhauer's view, “absolutely no

relation according to the principle of sufficient reason subsists between subject and object” (13). The relationship is merely one of *awareness*, with no further elucidation possible (since further explanation would always invoke some kind of causal story, which Schopenhauer has ruled out of bounds).

The *skeptic*, on the other hand, will agree with Schopenhauer that the ultimate relationship between subject and object is mysterious beyond the brute fact of awareness, but differs from Schopenhauer over his claim that representations are objects. To the contrary, when the skeptic argues that “The world is my representation” she means that *there are no external objects*, or at least she cannot be sure she has any awareness of any objects; and therefore all she has to go on are *illusory* representations. For Schopenhauer, however, “The whole world of objects is and remains representation.... But it is not on that account falsehood or illusion; it presents itself as what it is, as representation” (15).

With Schopenhauer’s difference from these two schools in mind, we can begin to get a grip on what, precisely, *Schopenhauer* means to say by “The world is my representation.” The dogmatic idealist and the skeptic each take the representation to be something residing inside the consciousness reaching outward (even though there really is no outward to reach to). For Schopenhauer, the world of objects around us has “empirical reality” (15) but “transcendental ideality” (15): it is real and separate from the subject but also always representation for some possible subject. Thus, “the whole of the world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word, representation” (3) – and “the perceived world in space and time, proclaiming itself as nothing but causality, is perfectly real, and is absolutely what it appears to be” (14).

Schopenhauer begins his argument for this view by considering the concept of knowledge of the natural world. All knowledge is a form of mental representation, and for every representation of which we are aware, there are two “essential, necessary, and inseparable halves” (5): the *subject* and the *object*. But the subject is by definition “That which knows all things and is known by none” (5), for to any degree to which a term is known it is an *object* of knowledge and not a subject¹. Consequently, in every representation there is necessarily a correlative subject, but the subject itself is not any part of the known representation. Thus, the content of representation is entirely the object, while the subject is a term always implied in the representation as that which represents, but never itself represented.

That the object exhausts the representation does not show, however, that the *representation* exhausts the *object*. With only this behind us one could conceivably make “the demand for the existence of the object outside the representation of the subject” (14) from the standpoint of knowledge. Indeed, this is precisely what the dogmatist and the skeptic each do; the dogmatist asserts that the representation points outward to some object-in-itself, whereas the skeptic asserts that it attempts to and fails. Schopenhauer proceeds to argue this remaining point from Kantian grounds. We know the entire reality around us (*Wirklichkeit*) only through its “action or effect on animal bodies ... the *immediate objects* of the subject” (11), and furthermore from our causal inference from that *effect*² to a *cause* outside our body, without which we would only have “a dull, plant-like consciousness of the changes of the immediate object which followed one another in a wholly meaningless way” (12). But this basic form of cognition “already precedes, as condition, perception and experience, and cannot be learnt from these (as

¹ Thus in our awareness of ourselves through immediate sensation or through introspection, the part of us which is aware is not the part of us of which it is aware. Rather, a knowing subject experiences representations of an *immediate object* (the body) or an *object of inner sense*, but never the subject itself.

² On the *body*, it must be stressed, not on the *knowing subject*.

Hume imagined)” (14)³. Thus the subject always presupposes the principle of sufficient reason prior to any possible experience, and the principle can only be found in the world of objects insofar as the subject puts it there. But all possible forms by which knowledge comes to us are variations upon the principle of sufficient reason – whether in its causal form (mentioned above through its role in perception), its logical form (thought through reasoning from concepts), or in any other form. Indeed, knowledge of objects *just is* determining them within the relational web of grounds and consequents. Thus for any possible object of knowledge, “Knowledge of the nature of the effect of a perceived object exhausts the object itself in so far as it is object, ... as beyond this there is nothing left for knowledge” (14), and we have shown that the object for knowledge merely is the representation. Conjoining our statements – that object exhausts representation and that representation exhausts object – we are left with Schopenhauer’s conclusion that “The world is representation” (3).

Taken in the most sympathetic, which is to say the most Kantian, interpretation possible, Schopenhauer’s argument is persuasive. All knowledge insofar as it is known can only come phenomenally, and therefore only as conditioned by a possible experiencing subject. This just means that we receive knowledge according to certain forms of cognition that do not answer to anything in objects outside of a possible awareness of them. It does *not* mean that the world is an invention or illusion on the part of the subject: the active role of the subject does not mean that the act is one of fabrication. Schopenhauer’s stance upon the other side of all objects, the object-in-itself which is not available to positive knowledge, is far more troubling, but his elucidation of the world as representation successfully solves the problems of traditional realism without throwing out the realism along with the tradition.

³ Schopenhauer leaves the argument on this point to be elaborated by the works of Kant and his own *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*.