

**From the *ego cogito, ergo sum* to the World
as Representation.
Schopenhauer as a reader of Descartes**

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*The knowledge of an out-standing individual
cannot have effect while the spirit of the epoch
is not mature to assume it.*
Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer's philosophy is, as he states himself in the prologue to the first edition of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, based on just one idea. This thought, which is the germ and the matter of basically all works of our author, consists of that "will and representation exhaust the essence both of world and man" (W II: 739). With this interpretation of the world, the author pretends to have found what had been looked for during a long time under the name of philosophy (cf. W I: VII). But, in spite of feeling and expressing this to be a climax in the history of philosophy, because of having achieved to solve the problem that gives emergence to an entire era of thought and that so many brilliant minds, amongst which he mentions Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Kant, could not solve, he knows he is not only part of a tradition – the modern –, but also its direct inheritor and, even, its culminating point. Indeed, Schopenhauer perceives in modern philosophy a continuity: the search of true idealism, which possesses three fundamental moments: the thought of Descartes as foundational, Kant's as purifier of this philosophy from the majority of its mistakes and as the first great proposal about it and, as its culmination, Schopenhauer's itself.

The central element in Schopenhauer's analysis of modern philosophy is the way which leads to *authentic* idealism, because he holds that only under this perspective we can solve the problem the world implies. Thus, for Schopenhauer "true philosophy has to be always *idealist*" (W II: 5), because the point of departure in any investigation that tries to give true account of the world can only be the one which appears to our *conscience* immediately. For this reason, everything that is perceived correctly about the world in a mediate way, will have, at most,

just a secondary importance and depend inevitably on what appears in an immediate way. Hitherto, our philosopher complies with the way of proceeding that modern philosophy established: it demands to start from what shows to be immediately and evidently as certain¹. Thus, for Schopenhauer, conscience cannot perceive anything more evident and immediate about the world than that the world is nothing but representation by the one investigating it. Convinced of the truth of this principle, he even tells us that

“The World is my representation”, as Euclid’s axioms, is an assertion that anyone has to recognize as true when he understands it, although it is not an assertion that anyone understands when he listens to it. (W II: 4)

Representation constitutes the basic principle for the construction of any discourse, even if it is constructed without being conscious of it; since there cannot be, illuminated by the light of the knowledge, anything more immediate, evident and certain, characteristics which in Descartes constitute the fundamental rule for the correct attainment of the truth². Even the elements in which, for analysis and comprehension, one tries to separate representation – subject and object – are only possible within representation and in a combined way. Indeed, if representation is the most immediate thing that presents itself to conscience, subject and object can only be understood based on it. For this reason, according to Schopenhauer, any philosophical system that sustains its explanation of the world on only one of these two components of representation is already mistaken. In fact, the problem of the ideal and real toughens up and becomes more enigmatic when we base our explanation on one of the elements that constitute representation and not on representation itself, because subject and object, this is, the intellect and the matter, are *correlative*: one depends on the other. Thus, with Schopenhauer, if we assume that matter is *the* originally given thing, we end up with realism and, if we suppose this about the subject, we decline into a coarse idealism or tend to absolute idealism, which would be just as inappropri-

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- 1 Descartes establishes that the point of departure in any investigation of truth can only be evidence, this is, something which appears itself as certain in a clear and distinct way without the need of any other thing to verify its truth. This element in investigation is a very strong demand of Descartes, to such an extent that it became the first rule of the method. It cannot be abandoned, even when doubt becomes still more radical, because what is obtained complying with it, is the most solid principle, indestructible even by the strongest skeptical batterings: the certainty of the *cogito*.
 - 2 In the third rule of *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, he says: “By intuition I understand [...] a conception of the pure and attentive spirit, so easy and distinct, that there remains no doubt whatsoever regarding that which we understand, or, which is the same: an indubitable conception of the pure and attentive mind that only the light of reason can give birth to, and that, for being simpler, it is even truer than the deduction” (Descartes, A/T X: 6).

ate if we try to unravel the secret of the world³. In fact he holds that the first mistake of his teacher Kant consisted of having neglected this principle.

Nevertheless Descartes was the one who opened the eyes of philosophy to this problem, which is the reason why Schopenhauer tells us that

Descartes is considered deservedly as the father of the modern philosophy [...] especially and in strict sense, because he was the first to realize the problem with which all philosophizing has mainly dealt with since: the problem of the ideal and real, that is to say, the question of what is the objective and what the subjective in our knowledge, or what is there in knowledge that has to be attributed to things different from us and what to ourselves [...]. That is the problem and, as a result, for two hundred years the fundamental aspiration of philosophers has been to distinguish with brightness [...] the ideal, that is to say, what belongs to our knowledge exclusively, from the real, this is, that which exists independently of it, and to verify, in this way, the relation between both. (P I: 3)

Indeed, according to Schopenhauer, Descartes put us in the correct place to solve the crux of the world mainly because of two central and interrelated elements of his philosophy: 1. He questions, provisionally, the existence of the world because he does not have sufficient elements to assume it undoubtedly, and, 2., after becoming aware of the fundamental problem regarding the subjective and the objective element in our knowledge, this is, the real and the ideal, he puts the *cogito* as the first certainty that we can possess, because, in relation with the first moment that consists of being able to doubt all the contents of our thought and, therefore, being able to discard their *truth*, what immediately appears to conscience as undoubtedly certain is conscience itself – that proves itself by thinking.

Thus, Schopenhauer shares with Descartes not only an exquisite style of writing, or the distrust for the *philosophy of school*, but, mainly, that both privilege the immediate and therefore base philosophy on conscience, because, in fact, only what is *subjective* immediately appears to it. He tells us

Descartes [...] was affected by the truth that we are limited first of all to our own conscience and the world is given to us only as *representation*: with his acquainted *dubito, cogito, ergo sum*, he wanted to highlight the unique certain thing to the subjective conscience in opposition to the problems concerning everything else, and to express the great truth that the only real and unconditionally *given* thing is self-consciousness. Accurately understood, his famous principle is equivalent to the one with which I have started: “The world is my representation”. The only difference is that his principle emphasizes the immediacy of the subject, mine, the mediacy of the object. (P I: 4)

3 To see more clearly what Schopenhauer thinks about this point, he offers to us a dialogue in the *Ergänzungen* to *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. There, he puts to dialogue concisely, didactically and pleasantly subject and matter (cf. W II: 20–22).

The implications of this difference are crucial: by taking the subject as the point of departure without the concurrence of the object, Descartes ends up confining it in itself and opposing it to the object. Furthermore, he defines the object as possessing a nature radically different to the subject's one, after having demonstrated its existence. Consequently, the French philosopher is condemned to dualism and its consequences. On the contrary, Schopenhauer, having emphasized the mediacy of the object, shows that it exists exclusively in the representation of the subject, on whom depends its whole nature. Nevertheless, he does not say that the subject possesses a previous and independent existence in relation to the object, but rather, that the object depends as much on the subject as the subject depends on the object: they constitute the two essential and co-dependent halves into which representation is divided. Both depend, in turn, absolutely on representation.

Hitherto Schopenhauer feels related to Descartes and hence talks about him with all the respect deserved by the great genius of philosophy he is. Nevertheless, with regard to the consequences that the latter derives from his principle and that he establishes as the infallible body of science, our author discovers a series of mistakes that would have to be extirpated from philosophy. These mistakes are fundamentally five and they are intimately interwoven:

1. the absolute and objective reality of the world guaranteed by God;
2. the dualism resulting from the first point;
3. the mechanism deriving from the second point;
4. the rationalism that subsumes the previous points, and
5. the concept that Descartes holds of will as a mere *modus cogitandi* also deriving from points two and three.

With regard to the first point, Descartes discovers that the original certainty is subjective – still, not only in the sense of being a certainty *for* the subject, but also *of* the *subject* (as Ana Isabel Rábade Obradó wisely points out in her book *Conciencia y dolor. Schopenhauer y la crisis de la Modernidad*, 1995: 25). Consequently, he tries to leave consciousness across its own contents in order to assure the real existence of the world independently to consciousness. This way of trying to solve the problem would be, as Schopenhauer says it, to settle a mystery with a enigma, because, having inherited from Anselm of Canterbury the false thought according to which it is possible to infer the existence of the essence, he tries to demonstrate God's existence based on the idea of God which exists in his consciousness. Thus, as he believes to have overcome solipsism on discovering that God exists and that He is something completely foreign to his conscience, he also thinks to have proved that the external world exists independently of the subject because it depends completely, as does he, on divine will. But the base on which he tries to demonstrate the existence of the world is

futile, because it emerges, as Schopenhauer points out as early as in his doctoral thesis, titled *Ueber die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde*, from a confusion between the cause and the reason of knowledge. This confusion can be found clearly in the axiom I of his *Answers to the second objections* of his *Meditationes de Prima Philosophiae*⁴. Hence the mistake basically consists of believing that from the latent immensity in the concept of God, one can derive that He really exists (cf. Diss: § 7 and P I: 76–77) and thus also the guarantee that the world possesses existence on its own.

Regarding the second point, we see that Descartes, once having established a completely different nature of the simple conscience and the extensive world, cannot but end in dualism: mind and body, God and world. In other terms, the subject, after discovering itself as pure conscience that does have nothing in common with the body, except its dependence on the divine substance, can only affirm the existence of two heterogeneous substances whose relationship is formed by means of *influxus physicus*. This, however, results in a betrayal of the Cartesian principle of evidence because there is no way of showing the contact of one substance with the other, which is, for example, an even bigger problem with respect to man, because he takes part of both substances, and this demonstrates the need to explain how they communicate. The result of this fundamental point in the Cartesian philosophy can be seen immediately in some of the proposals that the *followers* of Descartes elaborated, mainly the system of the *causes occasionelles* and the *harmonia praestabilita*. (Cf. P I: 74)

The third unacceptable element of the Cartesian thought for Schopenhauer would be sustained by the second one, that is to say, the thesis of mechanism is based on the dualism supported by Descartes. Indeed, once having separated incisively the thinking substance and the extensive substance, and having assigning to the first one the characteristics of the alive, active and spontaneous, the latter, the extensive substance, is confined to stagnation as its property, and the changes registered in it are reduced to a consequence of the laws of mechanics to which the other sciences of nature are diminished. Even Descartes boasts of having reduced physics to mathematics, and he thinks that in such a way he could give a complete account of the world.

Hitherto we can observe that the schopenhauerian critique to Cartesianism touches several of the fundamental elements of the rationalism that the French philosopher supports. Amongst them we would mention the opposition between reason and experience, where the first one plays the central role and regulates the second one. This results in the belief in the existence of innate ideas, as if these

4 “There is no existing thing for which its cause of existing cannot be investigated. Since even of God himself it can be investigated; not because He needs some reason to exist, but because the immensity itself of His nature is the cause or reason for which He does not need it” (Descartes, *Meditatio de Prima Philosophiae*: 164–165).

ideas did not exist, reason might not be more fundamental than experience, for the latter would provide reason with its own contents, which would relegate reason to a secondary role. Also due to the trust in reason, Cartesianism would have to privilege mathematics as world's organizing agencies, and the world would result to be just an inert substance unable to produce changes in itself and it would need the cooperation of something else to transform it: mechanicism. Therefore, according to Schopenhauer, Descartes' rationalism would also be a mistaken theory, because in philosophy of representation, reason plays a secondary role, referring only to the ability to produce abstract representations, which are derived from the intuitive representations that are the primary matter of conscience and nothing more.

We esteem Descartes' *fifth mistake*, this is, to have reduced the will to a mere mode of thought, to be fundamental from Schopenhauer's perspective. This mistake is also a consequence of the dualism supported by the French philosopher because, after claiming that only two heterogeneous substances exist in the world, one of which – the thinking substance – is essentially active, whereas the other one – the extensive substance – is reduced to passiveness, will can only exist in the first one of these substances.

We claim that this *mistake* is fundamental for Schopenhauer because, according to him, unlike Descartes, will mean the only possible way to solve the crux of the world. In fact he thinks that, due to the incomprehension of it, previous philosophers could not arrive to the essential meaning of representation and remained its prisoners. Using an image that Schopenhauer himself offers us, the search for the solution to the problem of the world might be compared with a labyrinth that possesses multiple false entrances and only one is correct: on having used a false entry, after a long journey it would lead us again out of the labyrinth, whereas only the correct one would lead to its center. Amongst the attempts carried out by previous philosophers, there were some who approached the center, others that kept totally remote, but absolutely all of them were expelled from it not having chosen the correct entry. He tells us: "I do not stop thinking that only will in us is the correct end of the tangle, the real entry to the labyrinth." (P I: 73) Indeed, the individual researcher recognizes in himself, even more immediately than representation, will. Even representation is *essentially* will. In fact, precisely this is the one and only possible answer to the enigma of the world, given that, without it, the world would remain diminished to a pure phenomenon of knowledge. In other words, world would only be what in the subject's representation shows to be predetermined by him: a scenery articulated and regulated completely by the principle of sufficient reason which, marginally

to representation, does not possess reality in itself⁵ either but is the authentic sovereign in the interior, because it legislates the behavior of the *a priori* forms of subjectivity, which are immediately responsible of what we grasp as world: the regulated transit of objects, amongst which we have to take into account ourselves as individuals, who appear, push and replace themselves endlessly. But, how can one show this will as more original than representation? And furthermore, what are the implications of that will would be the world's last essence, in the light of the tradition in which this proposal anchors?

To answer the first question, Schopenhauer states that, for any being which lives and cognizes, the world appears immediately as representation. From this seems to follow that representation is the essential mode of the world's way of being. Nevertheless, this essential truth has a condition: it is true for any being that lives and cognizes. That is to say, representation is limited to knowledge; for this reason it consists of two essential and co-dependent halves that permit it: subject and object. The researcher, being subject, will perceive the world only as his representation and there will not be anything more immediate to him than this fact: the world is my representation. And the sense of any representation is determined completely by the principle of sufficient reason. For this reason, any investigation about the essence of the world that is based on representation can only arrive to something which is also representation. But Schopenhauer reminds us that the researcher is not "pure cognizing subject (winged head of angel without body) [... but that] he is rooted in this world, finding himself in it as an individual." (W I: 118) With this, he discovers that his body is a representation but, first of all, will. I. e., consciousness overturned *outwards* cannot perceive anything of the world but that it is representation⁶. Nevertheless, when consciousness is *identified* with the object, this is, when the researcher contemplates himself from inside, he discovers his body to be, rather than an object or a subject, will. Therefore, the ultimate meaning of representation would be granted by will, thanks to which representation takes place.

With regards to the second question, Schopenhauer, with his discovery, revolutionizes *his* philosophical tradition. He does so because, among other things, in his philosophy knowledge is possible thanks to will, and can only exist as its servant, which implies that it loses the status in which the tradition above mentioned had placed it. And the same happens to reason, whose only task consists of producing abstract representations in order to serve their individual holder. Indeed, the purpose that the world as representation has is that the individual

5 "The principle of reason [...] is not previous to everything, as if the entire world existed as a result of it [... rather it is] the form in which the object [...] is known by the subject, in so far as the subject is a knowing individual" (W I: X–XI).

6 "It will never come near to the essence of the things *from outside*: however one tries it, we will never obtain but images and names" (W I: 118).

who cognizes and, hence, supports this world, uses such knowledge to continue living.

Therefore, we conclude that Schopenhauer, as a reader of Descartes, places himself in the tradition that the latter inaugurates, but overcomes its inconsistencies. For this reason, we affirm, as Heidegger, that Schopenhauer with the assertion of “the world is my representation”

[...] has summarized the thought of modern philosophy. [... but also with] his principal work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, from its release in the year 1818, has determined in the most persistent way the thought of all the 19th and 20th century; where this does not become immediately evident and where his assertion is impugned, this is still more evident than where it obtains approval. (Heidegger, *¿Qué significa pensar?:* 45)

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