A Companion to Schopenhauer

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Edited by Matthew Stuart
To Veerle, Sarah and Eline
with all my heart
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I would like to express my gratitude to the Arts and Philosophy Faculty Board of Ghent University and especially to the Dean of the Faculty, Freddy Mortier, for granting me research leave in 2008, without which the pieces of this volume might never even have come together. I would also like to thank the contributors to this volume for their excellent chapters, and Jeff Dean, Tiffany Mok, Leah Morin, Rebecca du Plessis, and the other collaborators at Wiley-Blackwell for their patience, support, helpful suggestions and kind nudges. I am especially grateful to Stijn Van Impe for his editorial assistance. I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to my wife, the incomparable Veerle Rotsaert, for kindly holding the mirror, and to our great daughters, Sarah and Eline, for appearing in it. I wholeheartedly dedicate this book to her and to our two gorgeous daughters.

B.V.

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A system of cross-referencing has been deployed throughout the volume. Only chapters outside the section in which a particular chapter appears are cross-referenced. Readers are advised to examine all chapters in any given section where a chapter they wish to consult appears. The decision of where to place a chapter was made on the basis of where it would gain its greatest pertinence and relevance.
The following abbreviations are used for Schopenhauer’s writings:

BM  On the Basis of Morality
EFR  On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason [i.e. Schopenhauer’s Early Fourfold Root, 1813 edition]
FR  On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason [second edition, 1847]
FW  On the Freedom of the Will
MR  Manuscript Remains
PP I; PP II  Parerga and Paralipomena, vols. 1 and 2
VC  On Vision and Colours
WWR I; WWR II  The World as Will and Representation; vols. 1 and 2
WN  On the Will in Nature

Unless otherwise specified, the number immediately following the work’s abbreviation gives a volume and page reference to the work listed here. The contributors to this volume have used different editions of Schopenhauer’s texts, but have sought to provide reference to an English source where available. Some have relied exclusively on their own translations. Exact references are given at the end of each chapter.
It is safe to say that Arthur Schopenhauer, who was born in Danzig (now Gdansk) in 1788 and died in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1860, was always an outsider among philosophers. He was considered as too literary and rhetorical by analytical philosophers, too metaphysical by the logical positivists and scientific naturalists, and was too unhistorical and apolitical for the Hegelians and phenomenologists. Moreover, he was totally neglected or dismissed by philosophers such as Russell, Sartre, Heidegger, Adorno and Levinas, and by “postmodern” authors such as Derrida and Lyotard. And, although recent scholarship has begun to show a change of attitude, it is still often the case that, if contemporary philosophers study Schopenhauer’s oeuvre at all, they are often more interested in its influence on Nietzsche, Freud or Wittgenstein than in reading his work for its own sake.

Engaging with Schopenhauer’s philosophy is, however, a tremendously rewarding experience. Not just because of the extraordinary qualities of its prose, but perhaps even more so because of the generous cosmopolitan world view it conveys, the relentless search for truth it displays, the clarity of its arguments and its deeply human concern with the sufferings, pleasures and values of human (and animal) existence. It will be hard to find a more genuine and comprehensive example in the history of philosophy of such an honest quest for truth, human value and inner peace and salvation, for it does not refer solely to Western philosophies (above all Plato’s and Kant’s theories of knowledge, being and value), but is also deeply and passionately engaged with the Vedic, Hindu and Buddhist outlook on perception and consciousness, asceticism and mysticism, and animal and human life and death (see Chapter 18 by Cooper).

The kernel of his thought is to be found in his *magnum opus*, *The World as Will and Representation*, which was published in 1818 – when Schopenhauer was hardly 30 years old. This extraordinary work is undoubtedly one of the richest philosophical books in Western history. It not merely offers a complicated metaphysics of the will – the blind drive that pervades everything – but also expounds intriguing theories of nature,
the self, art, and scientific, religious, aesthetic and ethical values, and yields a fascinating naturalistic account of knowledge and perception, which severely criticizes Kant’s epistemology (see Chapter 1 by Bozickovic, Chapter 2 by Guyer and Chapter 5 by McDermid).

At the instigation of his cosmopolitan father, who abhorred Prussian nationalism and was very ambitious for his son, Arthur studies French and English at an early age, and later also Italian and Spanish. He receives a broad and enriching education at school. In The World as Will and Representation, he frequently quotes ancient Greek texts and offers his own Latin (!) translations – to help the ignorant reader. At a fairly early age, he also visits most important museums in the European cities. When he turns 14, his parents offer him to join them on a tour around Europe, but only on the condition that he abandon his plans to become an academic and agree to commence an apprenticeship in the trading business. Young Arthur does not hesitate and joins his parents on their European tour. It is hard to imagine nowadays what such a long journey through Europe must have meant to a young boy in those days, but – as we can learn from his letters and notes – it clearly deeply affected him. During this European tour, he becomes not merely impressed with the rich European cultural and artistic heritage, but also significantly astonished at the wretched circumstances in which so many people live. It makes him lose his faith in God for the rest of his life, and this strong concern with the suffering of human beings and animals never leaves him and pervades his whole philosophy. Schopenhauer has to keep his promise to his parents and starts his business apprenticeship. Meanwhile, however, he develops a much keener interest in natural sciences and independently reads several scientific books.

On April 20, 1805, when Arthur is 17 years old, his father – whose intense and formidable personality he has inherited – is found dead in a canal in Hamburg. His father’s death is officially the result of an accident, but more probably the man committed suicide. This is a terrible shock to Arthur, and he vigorously blames his mother for his father’s death. Relations with his mother have never been good, but after his father’s death, his relationship with his mother becomes more and more problematic. In one of her letters (dated May 17, 1814) his independently minded mother, Johanna, who has now become a successful novelist and who runs an artistic salon, writes that she cannot tolerate Arthur’s behavior any longer and threatens him that the door that he has slammed behind him, will forever remain closed. She complains that meeting up with her son again will severely damage her health and does not want to see him again.

In 1809, Schopenhauer moves to Göttingen to study natural sciences and two years later to Berlin, where he attends Johann G. Fichte’s philosophy classes (see Chapter 25 by Zöller). Under the influence of the Göttingen philosopher Gottlob Ernst Schulze (1761–1833), he now especially concentrates on the work of Kant and Plato. This influence will last for a lifetime: he will desperately (though not always successfully) aim to combine Plato’s and Kant’s theories. In 1813, he moves to Rudolstadt, near Weimar, to complete his first essay, entitled The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which gains him a doctoral degree in philosophy at the University of Jena, followed by his underestimated essay On Vision and Colours (1816), in which he develops a fascinating theory of the nature of color, influenced by Goethe, who did not appreciate Schopenhauer’s criticism of his own earlier views on the subject.
His earliest work, the dissertation on *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, analyzes the principle that “nothing is without a reason for its being,” which Schopenhauer considers to be the best general formulation of the principle of explanation. In this work, which was first published at the age of 26 and which Schopenhauer considers the “basis of his whole system,” he offers a brilliant analysis of causation and related issues, which definitely rivals the more famous discussions of David Hume, and argues that perception is the product of understanding (Verstand) or intellect (Intellekt). We do not experience the things as they are in themselves but the understanding shapes them according to the subjective forms of space, time, and cause and effect. The empirical objects do not exist independently but are products of the senses and the understanding: the understanding applies the concept of causality to the raw sense data and turns them into intuitions and, thus, into empirically perceived objects. Furthermore, human beings are able to form abstract representations, i.e., concepts, which enable them to engage in abstract thought, which is a major evolutionary advantage compared to other animals but concepts can also degenerate into empty abstractions, in which – as Schopenhauer will not hesitate to stress again and again – German idealist philosophers often lose themselves completely.

Schopenhauer considers this work so crucial for a proper understanding of his whole philosophy that he will add many new ideas to it in later life. Readers, who struggle with the first book of *The World as Will and Representation*, will definitely profit immensely from studying this essay first, as it offers the indispensible tools for his epistemological theory and philosophy of science (see Chapter 1 by Bozickovic, Chapter 2 by Guyer, Chapter 3 by Jacquette and Chapter 5 by McDermid).

In *On Vision and Colours*, which was first published in 1816 and of which a revised version appeared in 1847, Schopenhauer convincingly defends Goethe’s theory against Newton’s. The first part of the book focuses on visual perception and addresses several key arguments in favor of transcendental idealism and develops fascinating issues concerning the nature of visual perception. In the second part of this exciting essay, Schopenhauer sets out to reduce the problem of the nature of colors and their perception to the strictly physiological (i.e., non-chemical and non-physical) problem of color perception. Clarity, darkness and color are modifications of the eye, which are directly perceived and can be reduced to modifications in the activity of the retina. Anticipating many philosophical and scientific theories and hypotheses (especially those of Wittgenstein and Young-Helmholtz), Schopenhauer expounds a theory of the color spectrum and develops a landmark synthesis of Newton’s and Goethe’s views. He persistently situates the phenomenon of color in the physiological subject – by which he surpasses Goethe’s perception theory and interestingly modifies Newton’s “physical” theory. For Newton characterized color as determined by the properties of light rays and focused on the light sources, and Goethe emphasized the contribution of the physical media which light rays meet as they travel to the eye. Schopenhauer, however, treats color as a physiological phenomenon and focuses on the effects in the retina and not on the physical or chemical sources that cause them (see Chapter 4 by Lauxtermann).

Schopenhauer is already brooding over an even more important project, however, which will result in one of the most important books in the history of philosophy. He is convinced that this book will guarantee him a place in the top ranking of famous philosophers. He is not even 30 years old when he finishes what will indeed become his
most important work: *The World as Will and Representation*. The book – which will become known as the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* – is published in 1818 (although 1819 is mistakenly mentioned on the cover).¹

His *magnum opus* consists of four books: Books I and III address the world as representation, II and IV the world as will. The first book of this unparalleled work treats epistemological topics and aims to prove that “The world is my representation” (WWR I, 3). Schopenhauer further develops his own critical version of a (Kantian inspired) transcendental idealism, i.e., the view that the subject is “the universal condition of all that appears, of all objects, and it is always presupposed” (WWR I, 5). The subject of cognition constitutes a world of representation (Vorstellung) according to the subjective forms of space, time and causality. On Schopenhauer’s account, this implies that there can be no objects without subjects, but not that there can be no subjects without objects. This leads to his notorious theory of the self as “will,” i.e., the thought that there is a mode of being that is purely subjective: the will. The will (and hence, also the self) cannot be objectified, can never become an object for a subject. The will, which is the kernel of the self and analogously also of the whole world, is thus the true “thing-in-itself.” The whole world of representation is ultimately a dream world: the substance of reality, viz. the will, generates the things that appear to us, and since we are also products of the will, we ourselves too produce the objects that we perceive, although we are not conscious of this activity.

Schopenhauer’s will is ultimately cosmic energy that manifests itself objectively, but without being conscious of this objectifying activity (see Chapter 6 by Desmond, Chapter 7 by Neeley and Chapter 10 by Wicks). It is a blind irrational striving, beyond good and evil; raw energy, without any direction. We are all expressions of this amoral, aimless cosmic drive. The cosmic will manifests itself in different layers, the first of which consists of the “immediate objectifications” of the will, i.e., the universal, timeless forms of things, which are called (Platonic) Ideas (see Chapter 9 by White); within the second layer, in which the will manifests itself “indirectly,” human subjects become aware of stimuli, motives, reasons, i.e., those causes Schopenhauer identified as the roots of the principle of sufficient reason (cf. supra). Human beings do not make up a privileged, higher order than other natural beings, but are embodied creatures that are determined by their will, i.e., their affects, desires, urges and emotions (see Chapter 8 by von Tevenar). Contrary to Kant, Schopenhauer does not believe that rationality gives human beings more dignity or moral worth. The subject of cognition is thus ultimately nothing but a manifestation of a blind striving, which is neither individuated nor situated in time–space.

The third part of *The World as Will and Representation* illuminates how human beings can perceive the universal essences, i.e., the (Platonic) Ideas, through will-less, objective perception of natural objects and artworks, and develops fascinating accounts of artistic creativity, the beautiful and the sublime. Under the influence of Plato and the *Upanishads*, the young Schopenhauer characterized aesthetic perception as a “better consciousness” that transcends ordinary experience, which is typically boring or full of suffering, as it is determined by the will and its frustrations. Now he describes aesthetic experience, and especially contemplating a work of art, as a privileged state of consciousness that brings about objective cognition of universal Ideas. In aesthetic con-
introduction: arthur schopenhauer


THE FOURTH BOOK OF THE WORLD AS WILL AND REPRESENTATION AIMS TO DESCRIBE WHAT KINDS OF ACTION QUALIFY AS MORALLY GOOD. ACTIONS FROM COMPASSION ARE A CASE IN POINT, SINCE THEY SHOW THAT HUMAN BEINGS ARE ABLE TO TRANSCEND THEIR NATURAL EGOLISM – WHICH IS Dictated BY THEIR WILL TO LIFE – AND SYMPATHIZE WITH THE PAIN AND SUFFERING OF OTHERS. THIS KIND OF MORAL AWARENESS DOES NOT, HOWEVER, PROVIDE LASTING SALVATION, AND ONLY WHEN OUR WILL “TURNS AROUND” AND “A REPUGNANCE TOWARDS THE WILL TO LIFE ITSELF” ARISES (CF. WWR IV, § 68), ARE WE ABLE TO REACH A MORE PERMANENT STATE OF A KIND OF (BUDDHIST OR DAOIST) “HAPPINESS,” WHICH CAN ONLY OCCUR IF WE ARE COMPLETELY NAUSEATED BY THE AMOUNT OF SUFFERING IN THE WORLD, EVENTUALLY DENY THE WILL TO LIFE AND ABOLISH THE WILLING SELF ALTOGETHER (SEE CHAPTER 16 BY CAME, CHAPTER 17 BY CARTWRIGHT, CHAPTER 18 BY COOPER, CHAPTER 19 BY GEMES AND JANAWAY, AND CHAPTER 20 BY SOLL). THEN WE HAVE REACHED “A CONDITION,” WHICH “IS INDICATED BY THE NAMES ECSTASY, RAPTURE, ENLIGHTENMENT, UNION AND WHICH SHOULD NOT ACTUALLY BE CALLED KNOWLEDGE, BECAUSE IT NO LONGER HAS THE FORM OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT” AND “IS NOT FURTHER COMMUNICABLE” (WWR I, 410). THIS ASPECT OF SCHOPENHAUER’S PHILOSOPHY HAS OFTEN BEEN SEVERELY CRITICIZED FOR BEING MOROSE AND HOSTILE TO LIFE. SCHOPENHAUER’S ETHICS DOES NOT ULTIMATELY INVOLVE A GRIM OUTLOOK ON THE WORLD AND BLEAK PESSIMISM, THOUGH. ON THE CONTRARY, IT BRILLIANTLY SHOWS THE MORAL VALUE OF A SPECIAL STATE OF COMPASSIONATE AWARENESS IN WHICH ONE IS GENUINELY APPRECIATIVE OF THE WORTH OF HAVING LESS INDIVIDUAL DESIRES.

SCHOPENHAUER IS GENUINELY CONVINCED THAT HE HAS COMPLETED ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT BOOKS IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND LEAVES ON HOLIDAY TO ITALY TO GET SOME WELL-DESERVED REST. HE VISITS VENICE, BOLOGNA, NAPLES, FLORENCE, ROME AND MILAN. WHEN IN VENICE, HE IS VERY KEEN ON MEETING THE NOTORIously CHARMING POET, LORD BYRON, AND HAS MANAGED TO OBTAIN A LETTER OF INTRODUCTION, WRITTEN BY GOETHE, WHO HAS JUST FINISHED HIS ITALIAN JOURNEY. ON ONE OCCASION, DURING A WALK ON THE LIDO BEACH, HIS JEALOUSY PREVENTS HIM FROM ACTUALLY MAKING BYRON’S ACQUAINTANCE, FOR SCHOPENHAUER’S FEMALE COMPANION SCREAMS A BIT TOO ENTHUSIASTICALLY WHEN SHE SEES BYRON RIDING HIS HORSE ON THE BEACH, AND SCHOPENHAUER’S DESIRE TO MEET HIM SUDDENLY DIMINISHES.

IN THE MEANTIME, SCHOPENHAUER’S TRIP THROUGH ITALY NOT ONLY SEEMS OCCUPIED WITH BEAUTY, BUT EVEN MORE STRONGLY WITH BEAUTIES. WHILE TRYING TO FIND A SUITABLE “FEMALE COMPANION,” HE LEARNS ABOUT THE BIRTH OF A DAUGHTER IN DRESDEN, THE RESULT OF A BRIEF AFFAIR, WHO DIES AFTER TWO MONTHS. FURTHER, HE ALSO LEARNS THAT HIS MOTHER’S AND SISTER’S DANTZIG INVESTMENT HOUSE IS ON THE VERGE OF BANKRUPTCY, AND HE DECIDES TO RETURN TO GERMANY IN JULY 1819, SHORTLY BEFORE THE DEATH OF HIS DAUGHTER.

ON RETURNING TO GERMANY, HE FACES ANOTHER SHOCK, FOR HARDLY ANY COPIES OF HIS BOOK HAVE BEEN SOLD. HIS MAGNUM OPUS WILL REMAIN UNNOTICED FOR MANY YEARS TO COME. ARTHUR
is of course tremendously disappointed, and when he learns that his mother is very successful with her novel-writing, and regularly receives important intellectuals in her salon, he becomes even more depressed. Moreover, his archrival Georg W.F. Hegel – who epitomized about everything Schopenhauer abhorred – has become a very successful academic, and has assumed Fichte’s chair at the University of Berlin. Schopenhauer plans to counteract the neglect of his book by aiming to become a university professor himself. Unfortunately, he schedules his first lecture series at the University of Berlin at the same time as Hegel’s, with the result that hardly a few people attend Schopenhauer’s first class, whereas Hegel’s lecture room is packed. Schopenhauer is furious and immediately abandons the plan to become a university professor.

The following years will be extremely hard. Schopenhauer does some translation work: he translates, amongst others, Baltasar Gracián’s great *Oraculo manual y arte de prudencia* (1647) [*The Art of Worldly Wisdom*] from Spanish into German, which will be published posthumously in 1862. In 1831, a cholera epidemic breaks out in Berlin and Schopenhauer decides to leave the city, while Hegel stays. He asks the actress Caroline Medon, with whom he has fallen in love, to accompany him, but she insists on taking her eight-year-old son with her, which he refuses. So he leaves Berlin alone and moves to Mannheim for a year, but then returns to Frankfurt-am-Main in 1833, where he spends his days with writing, walking, playing the flute, dining out, going to the theatre and the opera, and reading *The Times*. He will stay in that city until his death in 1860. He gradually recovers from his depression and in 1836 he publishes the captivating essay *On the Will in Nature*, hoping to show how recent scientific discoveries and advances in anatomy, plant and animal physiology, astronomy etc. corroborate his doctrine of the will (see Chapter 10 by Wicks).

In 1838 – the year of his mother’s death – and in 1839, he enters for essay competitions set by the Royal Norwegian and the Royal Danish Scientific Society, for which he submits two fine essays, dealing with ethical problems. The first, “On the Freedom of the Human Will,” will be awarded the first prize by the Norwegian Society; the second, “On the Basis of Morality,” part of which offers a trenchant critique of Kant’s ethics, expounded in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and other works, will not be awarded a prize, because it contains too many insults against Hegel and other idealist philosophers.

In the remarkable essay “On the Freedom of the Human Will,” Schopenhauer distinguishes three kinds of freedom: physical, intellectual and moral freedom. Physical freedom refers to the absence of material obstacles, intellectual freedom occurs when an individual understands the world correctly, and moral freedom concerns the question whether individuals at a given time are able to take any course of action they will, which ultimately boils down to the intricate issue of whether the human willing is subject to necessity or not. Schopenhauer argues that human willing is determined by the motives that enter into consciousness and, hence, is not free.

In the second essay, “On the Basis of Morality,” Schopenhauer attempts to demolish Kant’s foundation of morality, and offer his own positive view of the basis of morals. Kant’s foremost error, Schopenhauer contends, is to conceive of morality as a matter of duties and imperatives. Schopenhauer argues that Kant’s categorical imperative is really hypothetical, and he even claims that Kant ultimately realized this. The idea that one cannot will maxims of injustice and unkindness is ultimately grounded in the
hypothesis that human beings are fragile. Schopenhauer argues that if human beings happened to be (or to think of themselves) as sufficiently powerful or reckless, willing maxims of injustice and unkindness would not be impossible. According to Schopenhauer, the highest maxim and ultimate foundation of ethics is not human rationality, but the principle “Harm no one, and help everyone to the extent that you can.” Being morally good implies developing an attitude towards life that consists of Mitleid (i.e., compassion, literally “to suffer with”), which is the very opposite of cruelty. Moral goodness consists in “a deeply felt, universal compassion for every living thing” (BM, § 20). But Schopenhauer’s ultimate foundation of compassion, and hence of morality, is to be situated in his metaphysics: the compassionate man’s outlook of the world is ultimately more “right” than that of the cruel, immoral or indifferent individual, for the separateness of individuals is ultimately illusory (see Chapter 16 by Came, Chapter 17 by Cartwright, Chapter 8 by von Tevenar and Chapter 19 by Gemes and Janaway). The compassionate man “knows” that his outlook on life tallies with the deepest truth about the world: that it is one and the same will. Attuning your character and actions with this ultimate metaphysical truth offers the only real foundation of moral value and good conduct; we imaginatively feel the others’ feelings as our own, and through this a moral community of sentient beings will be formed – a universal social bond between cosmopolitan people, which ideally culminates in the elimination of all individual willing.

The two essays will eventually be published together in 1841 under the title The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics. In 1844, he also completes an additional volume to The World as Will and Representation, which he now publishes along with a new edition of the first volume, and which contains a series of excellent chapters that fall into line with the issues treated in the first volume. The second volume is actually longer than the first, and instead of rewriting his youthful work, both volumes will be published again together in a third edition in 1859, a year before his death.

In 1851, Schopenhauer’s final new work is published: Parerga and Paralipomena [Complementary and Omitted Matters], which contains not only the popular “Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life” but also several other intriguing essays on such diverse subjects as education, suicide, reading and books, language and style, noise, religion, Indian literature, natural sciences, academic philosophy, etc., and which will eventually give him the recognition that he has been yearning for during his whole life. Not without sarcasm, he will say: “The comedy of my fame has finally come.” He now receives visitors from all over the world, and also much fan mail; for instance, from Richard Wagner, who truly adores Schopenhauer’s philosophy and sends him the libretto of the Ring of the Nibelungs. His portrait is painted and Elizabeth Ney comes from Berlin to make his bust.

Arthur Schopenhauer dies peacefully at home at the age of 72 on September 21, 1860. In the decades following his death, he will become one of the most prominent European philosophers in history, deeply influencing not only Nietzsche, but also Bergson, Freud, Horkheimer, Wittgenstein, and numerous artists and creative writers, including Beckett, Borges, Conrad, Dvorák, Gide, Gissing, Hardy, Huysmans, Kafka, Maeterlinck, Mahler, Mann, Proust, Schönberg, Turgenev, Wagner, and many others (see the chapters by Atzert, Bishop, Reginster and Schroeder). Over the last decades, interest in Schopenhauer has been growing again, after all too long a period of undeserved neglect of this unique virtuoso voice in the history of philosophy.
Notes

1 The text of Volume I of *The World as Will and Representation* that we now commonly read is not the original 1818 version, but includes many changes made in 1844, including a modified “Critique of Kantian Philosophy” – which was heavily altered on the basis of Schopenhauer’s discovery of the first (so-called “A”) edition of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) – and several fresh polemical charges against the German idealists, especially Fichte and Hegel.

2 I wish to thank Veerle Rotsaert and Stijn Van Impe for helpful comments on this chapter.

Further Reading

Part I

Nature, Knowledge and Perception
1

Schopenhauer on Scientific Knowledge

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There is a good deal of truth in the way in which Schopenhauer describes the contrast between the genuine philosopher and the academic scholar who regards philosophy as a sort of scientific pursuit.

(Schlick 1981, 41)

Philosophy is for Schopenhauer not a sort of scientific pursuit nor is science a sort of philosophical pursuit, and it is in this context that he propounds his view of scientific knowledge and of knowledge in general. Those few philosophers who have given it proper consideration, notably Gardiner (1967) and Hamlyn (1980, 1999), and more recently Young (2005), have pointed out that Schopenhauer’s view presents some serious, seemingly insurmountable, difficulties. In this chapter I try to redress the balance by arguing that Schopenhauer can be credited with a coherent and viable, in some respects indeed very perceptive view of (scientific) knowledge once a couple of misconceptions, which are the source of these difficulties but which are neither required by this view nor are of any use to it, are disposed of. I offer instead some adequate replacements which are to its benefit, much as they are in line with the overall framework and the objectives of his philosophy. This will also enable us to assess this view in the context of the debates that have emerged in the modern-day philosophy of science and epistemology.

1. The Principle of Sufficient Reason and Knowledge

In The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (henceforth FR), Schopenhauer tackles the principle of the same name in the context of the relation that the knowing subject has to the object of knowledge, making his view of knowledge part of his account of this principle. This principle, which he calls the basis of all science (FR, 4),
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has for him four different forms sharing the same root, one of which is of particular interest for his view of scientific knowledge as obtained by the natural sciences. Owing to these interconnections, an examination of his view of scientific knowledge also needs to be an examination of this principle and of Schopenhauer’s conception of knowledge in general. This is evidenced by what he has to say about this principle and its root.

Schopenhauer states the principle of sufficient reason as follows: “Nothing is without a ground or reason why it is” (FR, 6). Then he provides the statement of its root:

Our knowing consciousness, . . . is divisible into subject and object, and contains nothing else. To be object for the subject and to be our representation . . . are the same thing. All our representations are objects of the subject, and all objects of the subject are our representations. Now it is found that all our representations stand to one another in a natural and regular connexion that in form is determinable A PRIORI. By virtue of this connexion nothing existing by itself and independent, and also nothing single and detached, can become an object for us.

(FR, 41–42; italics in the original)

All knowledge thus concerns representations. But no representation can become an object of knowledge if it is not grounded, if it does not have a reason, in other representations.

Schopenhauer then goes on to remark that it is this connection which is expressed by the principle in its universality. This connection takes on different forms according to the difference in the nature of objects, but it is still always left with that which is common to those forms and is expressed in a general and abstract way by the principle. Hence, the relations, forming the basis of the principle, constitute its own root. “Their number can be reduced to four, since it agrees with four classes into which everything is divided that can for us become an object, thus all our representations” (FR, 42). As will become clear, it is two of these forms that are of special interest for the aims and the scope of the present chapter – that of becoming and that of knowing, as Schopenhauer calls them.

2. Some Epistemological Distinctions

According to Schopenhauer, not all of our knowledge is conceptual. Our basic knowledge of intuitive or perceptive representations, i.e., of objects presented to us in our sensory perception, does not involve concepts. In order to have this kind of knowledge it is required by the principle of sufficient reason that objects stand in natural and regular connections, although the knower need not know what they are. Our knowledge of these regular connections, which amount to causal, law-like, relations, is also taken to be non-conceptual. When, on the other hand, it comes to conceptual, abstract knowledge, this principle requires that if a judgment (representation) – itself composed of concepts – is to express a piece of knowledge, it must have a sufficient ground or reason, for which it is further required that it be known by the knower (FR, 156). Non-conceptual knowledge is the business of the faculty of understanding, which has the one function of causal inference, while conceptual knowledge is the business of the faculty of reason, which has the one function of forming concepts. Since the perception of the non-linguistic animals is in relevant respects similar to ours, Schopenhauer