



Epistemology, Philosophy of Mind and Bioethics

Arthur Schopenhauer and psychiatry 200 years after the publication of *The World as Will and Representation (Idea)*



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ABSTRACT

In 2018 the academy will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the publication of the seminal work of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860): *The World as Will and Representation (Idea)*. Schopenhauer is known as the “philosopher of pessimism” and as the “psychologist of the will”. His thinking is formally absent in the psychiatric education curricula, which could be enriched by the philosopher’s work. Regarding psychiatry’s theoretical foundations, Schopenhauer: a) anticipated several issues of species’ origin and evolution, which are used in the contemporary understanding of disease development; b) anticipated some attributes of the psychodynamic and cognitive unconscious when referring to the irrational features of the will; c) foresaw the current concept of the embodied mind, which emphasizes the role of the body’s structure and dynamics in cognition instead of that of a transcendental reason; d) proposed a simplified and heuristic model of mind, comprising the senses, understanding and reason; at a pragmatic level, particularly concerning psychotherapy, the philosopher e) stated that all human actions spring from three fundamental sources: egoism, malice and compassion; he also speculated about the role of unconscious repression in the genesis of mental illnesses; and finally, f) emphasized the ubiquity of suffering and the insatiability of desire, which unavoidably leads to egocentrism. In this regard he highly valued contemplation of art and nature as a way of dissociating knowledge from desire, and thus allowing the development of compassion and asceticism. This was considered by the philosopher to be “denial of the will”, and a path for individual salvation and well-being. In contemporary psychiatry, this metaphysical proposal may be reformulated in terms of promoting cooperation and healthy austerity as a non-specific component of most psychotherapies and educational models. Schopenhauer’s thinking may enrich psychiatric training and personal well-being.

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Arthur Schopenhauer y la Psiquiatría, a los 200 años de la publicación de *El mundo como voluntad y representación (idea)*

R E S U M E N

Palabras clave:

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En 2018 la academia celebra el bicentenario de la publicación de la obra capital de Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) *El mundo como voluntad y representación (idea)*. Schopenhauer es conocido como el «filósofo pesimista» y el «psicólogo de la voluntad». Su obra está formalmente ausente en el currículo de la formación en Psiquiatría, que puede enriquecerse con las siguientes contribuciones del filósofo. Con relación a los fundamentos teóricos de la Psiquiatría, Schopenhauer: a) anticipó diversos aspectos del origen y la evolución de las especies que hoy se utilizan para la comprensión del desarrollo de la enfermedad; b) anticipó algunos atributos del inconsciente dinámico y cognitivo cuando se refirió a los aspectos no racionales de la voluntad; c) predijo el concepto contemporáneo de la mente corporizada, cuando enfatizó con relación a la cognición el papel de la estructura y la dinámica corporales, en lugar de una razón trascendental; d) propuso un modelo simplificado y heurístico de la mente, que comprende los sentidos, el entendimiento y la razón; en un sentido pragmático, referido particularmente a la psicoterapia, el filósofo: e) afirmó que todas las acciones humanas se originan de 3 fuentes fundamentales: egoísmo, maldad y compasión; también especuló acerca del papel de la represión inconsciente en la génesis de las enfermedades mentales, y para terminar, f) enfatizó la ubicuidad del sufrimiento y la insaciabilidad del deseo, lo que inevitablemente lleva al egocentrismo. En este sentido, valoró la contemplación artística y de la naturaleza como una vía para disociar el conocimiento del deseo y así permitir el desarrollo de la compasión y el ascetismo. El filósofo lo consideraba la “negación de la voluntad” y un camino para la salvación y el bienestar individual. En la Psiquiatría contemporánea, esta propuesta metafísica puede reformularse como la promoción de la cooperación y de una austeridad sana, como un componente inespecífico de la mayoría de las psicoterapias y los modelos educativos. El pensamiento de Schopenhauer puede enriquecer la instrucción en Psiquiatría y el bienestar personal.

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Introduction

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) published the first edition of his capital work *The world as will and representation (idea)* in 1818. He was profoundly influenced by Plato, Kant, and the Hinduism.¹

The philosopher has been praised or vilified: Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) thanked him for “having deciphered the universe”, whereas José-Francisco Ivars (1935-) stated that “His rough empiricism denies complete abstraction; he distrusts all collectives: society, state, nation; the aesthetic of pessimism represents the sarcastic consumption of the ethic of evasion”.²

Schopenhauer presented his philosophy as a single thought: “the whole world is merely a representation of the subject who knows, and on the other hand, the entire universe is the display of a primeval will”.³ With this apparently simple schema the philosopher explored most fields of knowledge.

The will is the totality of the universe and is a blind imperative to exist and/or live. Schopenhauer conceived several levels of the will: a) an unknowable primeval level; b) the basic forces of nature (e.g., electricity, magnetism, etc.); c) the Platonic ideas; d) all the inorganic and organic phenomena, and e) the deliberate human actions as the pinnacle.¹⁻⁵

By “representation” Schopenhauer meant the knowledge that we, humans, have of the will. As a rather simplistic summary, the will is ‘desire/wishing’ and representation is ‘knowledge’ in contemporary terms.⁵

Humans, as all living beings, tend to be self-centered, selfish and insatiable. Schopenhauer used the Hindu myth of the ‘Veil of Maya’ to refer to the sieve standing before us that does not allow the recognition of the unity of all phenomena. Consequently, the philosopher had a pessimistic view of collective life and did not develop a social project. But the existential (individual) salvation is possible, although as a sort of illumination or “state of grace”, by dissociating knowledge from desire through the disinterested contemplation of art, and by realizing the ubiquity of suffering and of endlessly desiring. These experiences may lead to a profound inner peace and to the appearance of compassion and asceticism, these last virtues happening as an exclusively human capacity that the philosopher entitled as the “denial of the will”.¹⁻⁵

Schopenhauer and Psychiatry

Schopenhauer applied his metaphysical epistemology in numerous areas of interest for psychology and psychiatry,

ranging from the origin of life and of species, to a model of mind, art, aesthetics, ethics, individual freedom, the origin of mental disorders and a path for individual salvation, among many others. While my primary goal is to explore the potential application of Schopenhauer's thought in contemporary psychotherapy, it is worthy to briefly describe some of the other areas described above.

The Origin of Life and Species

The contemporary evolutionary field explores how evolution yields vulnerability to disease and the adaptive value of symptoms.⁴ The philosopher set the display of the diverse will's levels in geological time following the model of Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) and like this thinker, accepted species' extinction. Schopenhauer did not read Darwin, and died one year after publication of *The Origin of the Species*.⁴ He conceived species' evolution but not as Darwin and Wallace postulated some years later, since the philosopher did not consider inter-individual variations and population mathematical analysis. Schopenhauer's approach to evolution is closer to orthogenesis than to natural selection, as he considered each species as a Platonic idea. Accordingly, the pressure to evolve would be relatively independent from the environment.⁴

A Model of Mind

Schopenhauer considered the intellect as subordinated to the will, and simplified the complicated Kant's cognition scheme as follows: a) the Senses which organize object succession and position as the innate knowledge of time and space, respectively; b) the Understanding, which provides the also innate conception of causality, and c) Reason, which allows concepts, that is, the maximal cognitive human capacity.¹⁻⁵

As a purposeful simplified model aiming at setting a bridge with contemporary terminology, the 'will' may be partially associated with the 'emotional mind' and 'representation' to the 'rational mind'.

The philosopher anticipated in metaphysical terms the present-day concept of embodied mind. This concept, was introduced by the philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and John Dewey (1859-1951), and was recently assimilated as a core notion of modern cognitive science by Varela et al.⁶ and Lakoff et al.⁷ In this context, embodiment means that human cognition is based on our physical body development, functioning and organization, in a co-construction (reciprocal) interaction with the environment.⁶ Consequently, the most abstract and elaborated concepts such as moral, causality, the self, time and events would not be the product of a transcendent reason, but are conceptualized as metaphors or metonymies related to our bodily configuration and requirements.⁷

Schopenhauer and the Arts (Esthetics)

Schopenhauer's approach to the artistic experience is valuable in itself for the field of esthetics. However, I will exclusively consider it here in relation to its potential application in

psychotherapy. For this purpose, I must express his metaphysical proposal in psychological terms.

Schopenhauer contrasted the psychological state of aesthetic contemplation with that of everyday consciousness¹ (§51 on p. 322-323). The former: a) is not self-centered; b) perceives objects not according to its usefulness to the individual will but as those objects are in themselves (that is, according to their Platonic idea, except for music, which is a direct expression of the will); c) emotions are dissociated: the contemplative subject does not identify his/her emotions with himself/herself, but with all humans beings. Importantly enough too, the dissociated emotions are freed from desire. Since a desire-less state is blissful it is for Schopenhauer a royal road for the individual well-being.

In practical terms, the aesthetic state poses several problems: it is infrequent, even for artists, and is hardly voluntarily induced. As it will be discussed below, it is a clinical challenge to turn these abstract principles into realistic therapeutic tools.

Ethics

Schopenhauer considers ethics the most serious part of his work, "for it relates to the action of men, the matter which concerns every one directly and can be foreign or indifferent to none"¹ (§ 53 on p. 349). It is also the case for our enterprise of linking Schopenhauer to psychotherapy, but before further discussion, it is necessary a brief comment about the philosopher's concepts of 'motives' and 'character'.

According to Schopenhauer, the will in humans (and animals) is guided and driven by 'motives', which are mental events related to phenomena. But importantly, "the particularly and individually constituted nature of a person's will makes up what one calls his character. Then, it is the individual character that mediates between motives and action"¹ (§ 20 on p. 138). The philosopher classified all possible motives under three headings: egoism (the desire for one's own weal), malice (the desire for another's woe) and compassion (the desire for another's weal).^{2,8}

Based on Kant, Schopenhauer describes three character dimensions¹ (§ 28 on p. 207). The intelligible character "is the will as thing-in-itself so far as it appears in a definite individual in a definite grade, outside time, and therefore indivisible and unchangeable". The empirical character, also unchangeable, is named so because one does not know it *a priori* but *a posteriori* by observing one's own behavior along time. The empirical character is "the manifestation of this act of will, developed and broken up in time and space, as it exhibits itself for experience in the whole conduct and life of this man". Self-knowledge is the insight one develops by observing one's behavior and emotions (the empirical character) along time. This self-knowledge may change behavior by modifying the motives that the individual will pursues. This is the acquired character¹ (§ 55 on p. 391).

According to Schopenhauer, the will itself is unchangeable: "Hence, no system of ethics is possible which molds and improves the will itself"⁹ (§ 19 on p. 440); "Therefore he (any man) cannot resolve to be this or that, nor can he become other than he is; but he is once for all, and he knows in the course

of experience what he is. According to one doctrine (other thinkers) he wills what he knows, and according to the other (with my doctrine) he knows what he wills"¹ (§ 55 on p. 378); "Seneca says admirably, 'velle non dicitur' (willing cannot be taught); whereby he preferred truth to his Stoic philosophers, who taught 'doceri posse virtutem' (virtue can be taught)"¹ (§ 55 on p. 379).

Any change in behavior would be thus, mediated through the intellect, that is, by changing the motives at play.

In his capital work, *The world as will and representation (idea)*, Schopenhauer at age 30 conceived the 'road to salvation' as a sort of pilgrim's progress, from egoism, via altruism to mystical asceticism ("denial of the will").¹⁻⁵ As expressed this way, Schopenhauer's path to salvation appears clearly "ideal" and inaccessible for most contemporary human beings.

At age 63, the philosopher published an essay entitled *Aphorisms on the wisdom of life*, where he described a set of 53 practical recommendations for a happy life; for this purpose he coined the term 'eudaimon' (§ 10 on p. 336). In writing these aphorisms, Schopenhauer acknowledged that he had to renounce to the superior ethical-metaphysical point of view of his philosophy. When examining the aphorisms the reader may still feel the philosopher's global pessimism. However, it is also evident the tone for searching of a less-unhappy 'individual' life. The change in mood between Schopenhauer's thought at ages 30 and 63 may be heuristically considered as the existence of two Schopenhauers.

Freedom

Schopenhauer considered that all individual actions are completely predetermined by the chain of causality, by motives and by the influence of the intelligible character¹ (§ 55 on p. 372). In this sense, there is no absolute individual freedom in his philosophical system. As stated above, this does not preclude the possibility of a change in the individual behavior by changing the 'motives' that propel the individual's will. That is, the acquired character¹ (§ 55 on p. 391).

The philosopher considered two metaphysical scenarios for freedom: one that is common for all human beings and derives from the fact that 'we all are the will' and the will is free from time, space and causality¹ (§ 55 on p. 374). The second one refers to the heart of his metaphysical system: the denial of the will that while occurring at the individual level, is rather exceptional.

The Origin of Mental Illness

Schopenhauer visited asylums and talked to subjects with severe mental illnesses. He clearly recognized organic and experiential causes of mental disorders.

It has been argued that with his analysis of the will, the philosopher anticipated several key features of psychoanalysis:^{2,3,5} a) the irrational aspects of the unconscious; b) the prominent role of sexuality in psychic life; c) free association, the significance of tongue's slips and the interpretation of dreams, and d) mental processes that could be contemporarily interpreted as 'defense mechanisms'.

A notorious example is 'repression', that the philosopher considered as the cause of madness: "...the origin of madness given in the text will become more comprehensible if it is remembered how unwillingly we think of things which powerfully injure our interests, wound our pride, or interfere with our wishes; with what difficulty do we determine to lay such things before our own intellect for careful and serious investigation; how easily, on the other hand, we unconsciously break away or sneak off from them again. In that resistance of the will to allowing what is contrary to it to come under the examination of the intellect lies the place at which madness can break in upon the mind"¹¹ (§ 32 on p. 168-169).

In an uncompleted story, it has been said that Freud reluctantly admitted his familiarity with Schopenhauer's thought and its influence on psychoanalysis development.^{3,5}

Schopenhauer and Psychotherapy

Philosophy has always been important for psychiatrists. Most practitioners have formal or informal philosophical knowledge. Moreover, philosophical principles are in the root of some standard schools of psychotherapy, as it is the case of Stoicism for cognitive-behavioral therapy. But it was around publication of the Lou Marinoff's iconic book *Plato not Prozac* that philosophical counseling found its niche in this continent.¹²

Marinoff himself has stated that whereas philosophical advice may be simplistically conceived as providing clients with some useful aphorisms, but the method's core is the informed dialogue, the exchange of ideas itself.¹²

Schopenhauer was barely mentioned in Marinoff's books and in other standard texts of psychiatry, psychoanalysis or psychology, perhaps due to his pessimistic view of life, which appears to contradict the spirit of contemporary 'positive psychology and psychiatry'. Other reasons may be his misogyny and the absence of a social project in his thought.² A revival of interest in Schopenhauer's work is noticeable by the recent release of two journals specifically devoted to his thought: *Voluntas: Estudos sobre Schopenhauer in Brazil*, and *Schopenhauerian: Revista Española de Estudios sobre Schopenhauer* in Spain.

I propose to assess the following Schopenhauer's metaphysical insights, either to be incorporated into specific techniques of standard psychotherapies or/and to be used as 'meta-therapy' educational information:

1. The blind and amoral nature of the will, which is the metaphysical foundation for the pervasive human tendency for selfishness and insatiability.
2. The three fundamental springs of human action: egoism, malice and compassion. Egoism is the most prevalent mode of being; malice is less common, and compassion is scarce.
3. The path for individual salvation is a sort of pilgrimage consisting of: a) developing the capacity for dissociating desire from knowledge, through contemplation of art and nature; b) perceiving the ubiquity of suffering, of endlessly desiring and of the Unity of all creatures, and c) developing compassion and asceticism.

I will illustrate items 1 to 3 with verbatim selected excerpts of the philosopher, which could be used as illustrations during the psychotherapeutic process:

“Let us now set about the more thorough investigation of the matter. Egoism is so deeply rooted a quality of all individuals in general, that in order to rouse the activity of an individual being, egoistical ends are the only ones upon which we can count with certainty”¹¹ (§ 44 on p. 345).

When referring to Hinduism: “This wisdom is expressed in various ways, but especially by making all the beings in the world, living and lifeless, pass successively before the view of the student, and pronouncing over every one of them that word which has become a formula, and as such has been called the Mahavakya: *Tat twam asi*, which means You are that”¹ (§ 63 on p. 458-459).

The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk recently affirmed that “It may be that his doctrine of the resignation of the Will must sound even stranger to the hunger for life among the inhabitants of the First World today than it would have to Schopenhauer’s contemporaries”.² Hence, Schopenhauer’s thought should be expressed in present-day terms when applied to psychotherapy. What follows, is a draft of such an adaptation, which could be amenable for empirical testing:

1. Selfishness, while ubiquitous, has a positive side when expressed in Ayd Rand’s words: “the individual should exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself”.¹²
2. Compassion is one of the highest human values; its promotion is the focus on intense scientific search.² However,

given its own nature, it is difficult to operationalize and has to be separated from amoral indulgence. Therefore, compassion may be redefined as intense cooperation with fellows under the model of ‘reciprocal altruism’. Game theory and its practical derivatives, such as the tit for tat model of cooperation have been used in educational psychotherapy, for example by Sara Lipton in Seattle, USA.

3. Asceticism may be redefined as ‘voluntary healthy austerity’. Randolph Nesse, a leader in evolutionary medicine, has proposed that the growing access to information in contemporary life may promote depression. In the Schopenhauerian spirit, it would mean that modern information capacity adds to the will’s insatiability to hasten human unhappiness. Education, art and cooperation might rescue us from this fate.
4. People with emotional and mental disorders reportedly may have additional burdens for trusting and cooperating.² Both, compassion and asceticism (or cooperation and healthy austerity thereof) may be the focus of educational psychotherapy.

Practical Applications

Standard (focused) clinical vignettes about psychotherapeutic applications of Schopenhauer’s thought are available elsewhere.² I will present here a scheme containing some Schopenhauer’s insights (certain of them ironic and misogynic, but insightful anyway) to be adapted to couple therapy settings, when such an intervention could be feasible in an educational spirit (table).

table – Some Schopenhauer’s excerpts as examples to be used in couple therapy.

Schopenhauer’s verbatim selected excerpts	Psychotherapeutic and educational goals
“Everywhere in nature we see strife, conflict, and alternation of victory. Every grade of the objectification of will fights for the matter, the space, and the time of the others” ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To acknowledge that an absolute absence of conflicts is unrealistic • Current scientific research speaks about between-sex strife even at the molecular level • Even loving couples compete for resources, status and recognition from relevant others
“In our monogamous continent, to get married means to halve rights and duplicate duties” ¹⁰ * “La Rochefoucauld has cleverly observed that it’s difficult to admire and love someone at the same time. Love is always interested, even though it may take diverse shapes” ¹⁰ *	<p>Contrarily to the will’s propensities, modern marriage means compromise and commitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This complex and controversial issue is suitable for a ‘Socratic dialogue’ workshop as defined by Marinoff¹². In Schopenhauer’s spirit, to love someone, unavoidably means to expect some benefits from her/him. By contrast, to admire someone is disinterested and contemplative. Accordingly, ‘love’ is a ‘will’s affair’, whereas ‘admiration’ is a ‘representation’s affair’
“Thus also no one would be irritated or disconcerted by a misfortune, a disappointment, if reason always kept present to him what man really is: the most needy of creatures, daily and hourly abandoned to innumerable misfortunes, great and small, who has therefore to live in constant care and fear” ⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The sometimes endless and unjust quarrels about ‘unconditional or Platonic love’ may find a way when discussing the ‘insatiability of the blind ‘will’ and the ‘needy’ nature of most humans
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This might be the precise moment to discuss the ideality of compassion and asceticism, as something to be always remembered and searched. But real life may still be meaningful when expressing these ideals as cooperation and healthy asceticism

* Translated by the author from Spanish.

Conclusions

After reading Schopenhauer, Thomas Mann probably remained joyful for his whole life; Friedrich Nietzsche initially considered Schopenhauer as his teacher, later as his antipode; Bertrand Russell complained about Schopenhauer's insincerity.

I would also expect a diversity of emotional and intellectual reactions in therapists and patients after their first approach to the philosopher. Specifically: is it justified such a pessimistic view in this era of positive psychology and psychiatry?

I would say yes and will rephrase the question as: In the search of a meaningful life, which patients do benefit and which do not with Schopenhauer's thought?

Could Schopenhauer's insights be harmful for someone? I would say no. In my defense I will call Carl Jung (1875-1961) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973). The former stated that "Schopenhauer expressed that what many thousands had already obscurely felt and thought".¹³ The latter said that "Schopenhauer exposes the motive for solidarity shared by men and all beings".² Both questions may be empirically tested.

In 2018 the academic world will commemorate the 200th anniversary of publication of *The world as will and representation (idea)*. I think that Schopenhauer's thought may enrich some patients and therapists' life and contribute to a successful psychotherapy. Thus, I invite psychiatrists to become familiar with his work.

Conflicts of interests

None.

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