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SCHOPENHAUER ON IDEALISM, INDIAN AND EUROPEAN



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Introduction

Studies of Western philosophical receptions of Indian thought often begin by noting the contrary evaluations of Hegel and Schopenhauer: whereas for Hegel the cultural products of the subcontinent were merely records of humanity's first rude attempts to liberate thought from immersion in its material environment,¹ Schopenhauer maintained that Hinduism possessed "the wisest of all mythologies"² and the *Upaniṣads* "the highest human wisdom".³

However, it is rarely noted in studies of their respective receptions of Indian thought that Schopenhauer, in agreement with Hegel, similarly excluded it from the history of philosophy and denied it proper philosophical status.⁴ Although the theoretical assumptions supporting this common categorization were slightly different in the case of each thinker, the effects were identical in practice, insofar as they equally resulted in relegating Indian thought to the status of a precursor to European philosophy.

Schopenhauer's criteria for doing so were two: initially, he argued that the profound insights of Indian wisdom were articulated in myths and allegories (such as *māyā*) that required decoding into the clear and precise technical language proper to philosophy.⁵ In addition to this, he tended to suggest that the narrative medium of India's most ancient texts, such as the *Upaniṣads*, was intrinsic to the way in which its thinkers entertained their idealistic doctrines, as "utterances" stemming from an "immediate illumination" of their minds.⁶ In lieu of logical proofs, Indian texts offered "pictorial and even rhapsodical" narratives,⁷ in which a sage communicates esoteric wisdom to a disciple—such as when Uddālaka Āruṇi employs a series of kinesthetic pedagogical strategies to awaken Śvetaketu to the mystery that the *ātman* is the unseen essence of the cosmos, as undetectable but all-pervasive as salt dissolved in water.⁸

Schopenhauer thought that the non-philosophical character of Indian wisdom was especially evident in what, for him, was one of its most profound teachings—its doctrine of idealism and the related contrast between appearance and reality. Although he acknowledged that ancient India had been the birthplace and fount of idealism,⁹ he also regarded it as specifically "*the philosophy of modern times*",¹⁰ insofar as it had not been established as a permanent philosophical possession until Kant. The ancient sages of India may have been the first to grasp the distinction between appearances in our heads and objective reality, but they "based their con-

tentions merely on a universal perception of the world; they produced them as the direct utterance of their consciousness, and presented them mythically and poetically rather than philosophically and distinctly." Kant "expressed the same doctrine in an entirely new and original way," and thus made it "a proved and incontestable truth through the most calm and dispassionate presentation."¹¹

This was, at least, Schopenhauer's 'official' or directly expressed view; in the present article I propose to investigate whether his system contains sufficient philosophical resources to sustain it. Schopenhauer never explicitly outlined or defended his criteria for elevating Kant's rational and conceptual idealism over the intuitive and poetic idealism of India, but examination of the epistemological and metaphysical portions of his writings throws some light on his view. I will therefore begin with an outline of Schopenhauer's understanding of the logical and epistemological warrants of transcendental idealism, before passing over to his metaphysical theory of the causal obstacles that have prohibited its general acceptance—both the psychological causes embedded in human nature as such, and the cultural conditions that have specifically conspired to marginalize idealism in Europe. After this, I will summarize his account of the origin and status of idealism in India, and then close by returning to the question whether his official view of the contrast between these two species of idealism holds water *on its own terms*, or whether—in the absence of substantive philosophical reasons—it stands as evidence of a residual and rather cavalier bias in favor of modern Occidental philosophy on Schopenhauer's part, a bias that belies his otherwise indisputable enthusiasm for and veneration of Indian thought.

The Epistemological Warrant of Idealism

Schopenhauer opened his "chief work" with the remark that idealism is indubitably true: we know not "a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth", so that "everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word, representation."¹²

This is a very bold introduction to a work of philosophy, but a direct and philosophically satisfying proof of it is not found in *The World as Will and Representation*. In lieu of proofs or arguments, Schopenhauer's readers are periodically confronted with the mantra that subject and object are mutually implicative—that a subject is, by definition, something that represents objects, and that an object is, in turn, necessarily represented by a subject.¹³ Alternatively, Schopenhauer referred his readers to the works of Kant, specifically the Transcendental Aesthetic in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, whose "proofs" that space, time, and the causally active parts of matter are appearances in a subject are claimed to "have such a complete power of conviction that I number its propositions among the incontestable truths."¹⁴

However, having attributed incontestability to Kant's idealist "proofs", Schopenhauer qualified this in the following sentence with the remark that, properly understood, Kant's works consisted less of proofs than "the distinct expression of the fact"

of idealism itself.¹⁵ At this point, the exasperated reader is likely to conclude that Schopenhauer's equivocation over whether Kant *proved* that the world is my representation or merely *indicated* it as a fact is a rhetorical smokescreen, employed to conceal the poverty of idealism's epistemological warrant.

The equivocation might be clarified (albeit perhaps not solved) with reference to Schopenhauer's conception of the nature of philosophical knowledge and the function of proof within its methodological economy. He claimed that demonstration or proof consists of

a logical deduction of the asserted proposition from one already settled and certain—with the aid of another as second premise. Now that proposition must either have itself direct, more correctly original, certainty, or logically follow from one that has such certainty. Such propositions of an original certainty that is not brought about by any proof, constitute the fundamental truths of all the sciences and have always resulted from carrying over what is somehow intuitively apprehended into what is thought, the abstract. They are, therefore, called evident, a predicate that really belongs only to them and not to the merely demonstrated propositions that, as *conclusiones ex praemissis*, can be called merely logical or consequential.¹⁶

Working from the assumption that proofs are logical inferences from original and unproved facts—implausible as this may seem—Schopenhauer regarded transcendental idealism as founded upon a “fact”, albeit a fact of a very special kind. This “fact” is the datum of immediate conscious experience, which is the “*representation*, which contains and presupposes” both subject and object.¹⁷ When we reflect on the implications of this immediately intuited fact and attain that state of mind to which Schopenhauer gave the name “philosophical discernment” (*philosophische Besonnenheit*),¹⁸ we grasp that, although it might be possible to separate subject and object in the medium of abstract concepts, in actual concrete experience they are necessary correlatives and thus ontologically inseparable. When the necessary and ineliminable relation between these two poles of universal experience has been truly discerned, the philosopher is in a position to sketch out and deposit the implications of his insight in a system of concepts, the propositions of which will be derivatives from the immediate certainty, present to philosophical discernment, that the world is my representation.

Instead, therefore, of attempting to prove or demonstrate idealism, Schopenhauer thought it sufficient to refer to the immediacy of conscious experience and what it implies. His chief work therefore *departs from* an appeal to discernment and emphatic assertion of idealism, because his conception of philosophy's sources and methods entails that it is a position that cannot be argued *to* but only *from*: only he who has “sufficient power of reflection to go back to the first elements of his consciousness of things” realizes that he knows nothing but representations,¹⁹ the universal form of which is the division into subject and object. Their interdependence, Schopenhauer claimed, is like the propositions of Euclid—too immediate, certain, simple, and self-evident to be deduced from any another principle.²⁰ To raise the simplicity and certainty of this immediately known truth or “fact” to the level of re-

flection, and arrange both it and its corollaries in a system of concepts, circumscribes the remit of the philosopher, because

[i]ntuitively, or *in concreto*, every man is really conscious of all philosophical truths; but to bring them into his abstract knowledge, into reflection, is the business of the philosopher, who neither ought to nor can do more than this.²¹

Obstacles to Idealism

However, alongside attributing immediate self-evidence to idealism, Schopenhauer was equally prone to expressing an embattled commitment to *“the philosophy of modern times”*, bemoaning the abiding dominance of commonsense realism within the general culture, as a consequence of which “decided idealism” was derided as a “paradox of certain abnormal philosophers . . . hardly worthy of serious consideration.”²² But if, as he claimed, idealism is immediately and self-evidently true, then the overwhelming predisposition toward transcendental realism—the thesis that objects are independent of the subject—seems enigmatic and in need of explanation.

Since, as we have seen, Schopenhauer thought that a rational proof of idealism was both impossible and unnecessary, the only other option he had for explaining the dominance of commonsense realism was a psychological and causal account, which he conveniently found in his metaphysics of the will. According to this the will, as inner essence of all organisms and objects, strives blindly for survival, preservation, expansion, and duration of individual existence. As an appendage of animal life, the intellect is originally the will’s servant and cares for truth only insofar as it is compatible with the aforementioned principal ends of the will. As a result, the intellect has an innate tendency to ascribe real and independent existence to objects in order to envisage, if only in thought, the possibility of the will’s ultimate satiation through them. In the 1813 edition of his doctoral dissertation, composed while Schopenhauer was developing his metaphysics of will in his notebooks, he claimed that our psychological tendency to assign independent existence to objects

is one of the many proofs of the fact that so little in us is directed towards knowing. In fact everything is directed towards willing, so that, while as knowers we remain children, as willers we may be giants at any age.²³

Realism is therefore the erroneous but “inborn” or “original disposition” of the intellect,²⁴ serving the biological ends of the will-to-live and thus easily commended to those who lack discernment by “appearing to be founded on fact”; but, with the dawning of discernment, we realize that transcendental realism is nothing but “an empty castle in the air, since it skips or denies the first fact of all, namely that all that we know lies within consciousness.”²⁵

It seems, therefore, that Schopenhauer thought that we are less in need of a positive proof of idealism than of a negation or diminution of the corrupting influences of the will’s disposition toward realism; once this has been achieved, discernment is attained and the truth of idealism shines forth, as it were. Idealism only seems

counterintuitive to the natural intellect because this favors theories that satisfy needs rather than truth, which is why Schopenhauer consistently remarked that an intellect shot through with will is unsuited to philosophy.²⁶ The condition for the latter, he argued, is an unnatural superfluity of intellect over will, as a result of which knowledge, not exhausted by the demands of willing, perceives things objectively, rather than as possibilities for the will's satisfaction. Such 'objective' knowledge was, for Schopenhauer, the preserve of genius, whose "true nature . . . must lie in the completeness and energy of the knowledge of *perception [der Vollkommenheit und Energie der anschauenden Erkenntniß]*,"²⁷ or its ability to apprehend simple, immediate and indubitably known "facts". Genius is, of course, a rare state, which is why Schopenhauer acknowledged that not everyone who hears the idealist proposition "the world is my representation" is likely to accept it as true. However, he in whom discernment has arisen, and is therefore able to contemplate the world without attending to the dictates of his will and its nusus toward realism, will immediately see, perceive, or discern the truth of idealism.²⁸

Culture and Idealism: The Case of Europe

Schopenhauer's conception of idealism's philosophical status was therefore twofold: whereas the thesis of subject-object interdependence is self-evident to the discerning intellect, the same thesis appears unsatisfying and implausible to the natural intellect. He considered this twofold attitude toward idealism to be amply illustrated by its contrasting careers in India and Europe, for although he excluded Indian idealism from the history of philosophy, he also credited it with being the first appearance of this "fundamental view" on the planet, central to the metaphysical *Weltanschauung* of India from time immemorial and providing Indians with their basic orientation toward the world and life.²⁹ This contrasts sharply with his account of the advent of idealism in Europe, where the dominant metaphysical outlook has been realist.³⁰

Even the "divine Plato" was a realist in Schopenhauer's view, for Plato's Ideas were independent of the knowing subject.³¹ The realist tendencies of classical Greek philosophy had been subsequently confirmed and raised to the status of official teaching in the Middle Ages, as a result of which science and metaphysical speculation had been subordinated to theology and Judeo-Christian realism.³² The metaphysics of Christianity presents the world of objects and knowing subjects as independent of each other and created out of nothing by an omnipotent deity. This cosmogony—completely contrary to the deliverances of discernment—not only appeals to the "inborn realism" of the intellect determined by the will, but has also, argued Schopenhauer, been sustained by the social, political, and educational privileges of the European priestly caste, who have sought to suppress the deliverances of discernment wherever they have arisen.³³

In Schopenhauer's view, the conditions for the possibility of a European version of idealism arose after the Reformation, when Descartes reasserted the independence of philosophy from Aristotle and the Bible and displaced realism by confining philosophical certainty to immediate conscious experience.³⁴ However, Schopenhauer

contended that, once Descartes had discerned the immediate, certain, and indubitable “fact” of idealism, he instantly shied away from its implications by reasserting the mutual independence of object and subject, allotting to each a heterogeneous mode of existence—as *res extensa* in the case of objects and *res cogitans* in the case of subjects. Contrary, therefore, to the standard historical interpretation of Descartes’s role in the history of philosophy, Schopenhauer maintained that the father of modern philosophy’s main contribution to the discipline was to re-establish scholastic realism on a novel footing, independent of Aristotle and the Bible.³⁵

The next figure to take up the cause of idealism in Schopenhauer’s survey was Berkeley, whom Schopenhauer credited as being the first European philosopher to formulate a bold challenge to the hegemony of realism by defining objects in terms of their perceivability (*esse est percipi*). But although Schopenhauer regularly hailed Berkeley as the “originator of the true and proper *idealism*,”³⁶ he also regarded his assault on realism as partial and “confined to *one* point.”³⁷ Parallel to Schopenhauer’s presentation of Descartes’s reaction to the deliverances of discernment, Schopenhauer maintained that when Berkeley attempted to express the content of his idealist intuition in concepts, he could not help but interpret it in accordance with the prevailing realist doctrines of God and the soul, thereby constituting the knowing subject as a substantive entity independent of objects.³⁸ As a result, Berkeley’s immaterialism or spiritualism turns out to be little more than the shadow-side of materialism, and thus another species of noncorrelative realism.

Not until 1781, according to Schopenhauer, on the occasion of Kant’s publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, did “the fundamental idealistic view” obtain “the ascendancy in Europe, at any rate in philosophy”.³⁹ Kant not only confirmed Berkeley’s claim that the object is conditioned by the subject *materially*—with regard to its very existence as object—but improved on Berkeley’s presentation by showing that the *formal* conditions of the object’s appearance—space, time, and causality—were also contributions of the subject.⁴⁰ In addition to this, Kant corrected the one-sidedness of Berkeley’s account by refusing to attribute metaphysical supremacy or independent existence to either subject or object, and thus established the correlativism between them that is faithful to discernment and condensed in the principle of the compatibility of empirical reality and transcendental ideality.⁴¹

Schopenhauer’s reading of Kant’s idealism can hardly be considered orthodox or mainstream, for the majority of Kantian commentators have not similarly distilled from the *Critique* the thesis that objects have no existence apart from their appearance in consciousness: oddly enough, Schopenhauer agreed! He thought that Kant had articulated full-blooded or “decided idealism” in only the first, 1781, edition of the *Critique*, in statements such as “if I remove the thinking subject the whole corporeal world must at once vanish: it is nothing save an appearance in the sensibility of our subject and a mode of its representations.”⁴² In subsequent editions, Schopenhauer alleged that Kant had diluted the originality of his insight to avoid ridicule.⁴³ He thereby “disfigured and spoilt” his “immortal” work, replacing it with a “self-contradictory” second edition “whose sense could not be thoroughly clear and comprehensible to anyone.”⁴⁴

Schopenhauer argued that Kant had suppressed the “decided idealism” of the first edition by introducing a contrast between the ideal object as it appears in perception and the real object apart from perception, thereby burdening his system with a tripartite ontology of represented object, non-represented object, and thing-in-itself.⁴⁵ And, in Schopenhauer’s estimation, Kant’s disfiguring concessions to realism did not cease there, for his surreptitious claim, “concealed under many different turns of expression,”⁴⁶ that the thing-in-itself is the *cause* of bodily sensations, similarly makes the forms and forces of the phenomenon, such as causation, real principles operating independently of the subject.⁴⁷

Schopenhauer’s allegation that Kant lost his nerve and diluted the “decided idealism” of the first *Critique* might be taken as an illustration of Schopenhauer’s theory that realism is the “inborn” and “original disposition of the intellect”,⁴⁸ providing a permanent temptation to deny philosophical discernment and argue one’s way back into the comforting womb of realism. We saw the same tendency at work in his account of Descartes and Berkeley, both of whom similarly drew back from the precipice of idealism to reassert the claims of realism. Schopenhauer evidently regarded the deliverances of discernment as extremely fragile and prone to conceptual distortion, because, as outlined earlier, he thought that the most important truths were “somehow intuitively apprehended” and only subsequently fixed in concepts. His perception of the chasm that separates immediate discernment of truth from its subsequent thematization and proof in concepts, led him to argue that many of Kant’s idealist claims were “correct conclusions from false premises,”⁴⁹ a phenomenon that occurs when

we have an immediate insight into a truth through a correct *aperçu*, but fail to find out and make clear the grounds of our knowledge, in that we are unable to bring them to distinct consciousness. For in the case of every original insight, conviction exists prior to the proof, which is only subsequently thought out.⁵⁰

And, in addition to the permanent possibility that the philosopher’s own discernment will be distorted by the psychological effects of the will’s craving for real objects, Schopenhauer thought that the realist orthodoxies of Europe’s religious, educational, and cultural institutions rendered any spirited, public defense of idealism contrary to prudence: Berkeley’s philosophy invited the ridicule of Swift and Johnson; Kant diluted his idealism to avoid association with Berkeley; while Spinoza suffered persecution and Bruno execution for promulgating a metaphysic that, although not strictly idealist, similarly challenged the prevailing orthodoxy of Judeo-Christian realism.⁵¹ Schopenhauer regarded the history of post-Kantian idealism as further evidence of European culture’s deep commitment to realism. Kant’s realist concession to the extra-phenomenal operations of causation led to Fichte’s philosophy, which Schopenhauer regarded as a flamboyant and purely invented system of concepts, with no foundation in discernment.⁵² Fichte discarded the thing-in-itself altogether and pretended to derive both the formal *and* the material part of the phenomenon from the ideal activity of the subject.⁵³ Although, as Schopenhauer contended, Fichte avoided the use of causal terms to describe this process, the “tortuous

deductions" by which he traced the ego's positing (*setzen*) of the non-ego was mere subterfuge and a cover for the reintroduction of scholastic realism, whereby the laws governing relations between phenomenal objects (such as causation) were once again raised to the status of transcendent *aeternae veritates*.⁵⁴

Having made this step, Schopenhauer maintained that Fichte had been obliged to invent a new power of knowledge called intellectual intuition. Although Kant had dismissed intellectual intuition as a human impossibility,⁵⁵ Fichte deployed it to defend his claim that the reflective philosopher (and he alone) can intuit transcendent processes, and thus catch the ego in its act of positing or causing the existence of an objective world. Schopenhauer thought that it was no accident that the later Fichte had baptized his world-positing absolute ego as "the good Lord," thus giving his system "an extremely Christian complexion" in the interests of avoiding confrontation with orthodox pieties.⁵⁶

Culture and Idealism: The Case of India

But if Schopenhauer considered idealism's introduction into Europe as a labor marked by fits and starts, misinterpretations, ostracism of its proponents, retractions, and the constant possibility of backsliding, then in his embattled commitment to this counterintuitive perspective he took solace in the example of India, where, so he claimed, idealism had prevailed since ancient times. A few passages on from his opening observation that "the world is my representation", he quoted approvingly from an article by Sir William Jones to the effect that

[t]he fundamental tenet of the Vedānta school consisted not in denying the existence of matter, that is, of solidity, impenetrability, and extended figure (to deny which would be lunacy), but in correcting the popular notion of it, and in contending that it has no essence independent of mental perception; that existence and perceptibility are convertible terms.⁵⁷

Schopenhauer glossed this quotation with the remark "[t]hese words adequately express the compatibility of empirical reality with transcendental ideality" or, alternatively, the principle central to Schopenhauerian idealism, "no object without subject".⁵⁸

It appears, therefore, that, irrespective of his categorization of Indian idealism as sub-philosophical, Schopenhauer considered its statement to be more faithful to discernment than the hesitant attempts of Descartes, Berkeley, and the later Kant to pin down the "first fact of consciousness" in clear and distinct concepts. His sources suggested to him that Indian idealism had rigorously insisted on the mutual interdependence of mental perception and the qualities of matter, and that Indian culture had remained faithful to this teaching throughout its history, preserving it from the reversals that had marred idealism's fragile and uncertain appearance in Europe. This was possible because idealism in India had not been merely "the paradox of certain abnormal philosophers",⁵⁹ but the central presupposition of both its esoteric and popular metaphysical traditions:

In India idealism is the doctrine even of popular religion, not merely of Brahmanism, but also of Buddhism; only in Europe is it paradoxical in consequence of the essentially and inevitably realistic fundamental view of Judaism.⁶⁰

Schopenhauer tended to press this dichotomy between realist Europeans and idealist Indians to an extreme, at one point remarking that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* would have been received in a Buddhist country as

nothing but an edifying treatise on the more thorough refutation of its heretics, and the more salutary confirmation of the orthodox doctrine of idealism, namely that of the merely apparent existence of this world that is present to our senses.⁶¹

Schopenhauer developed his conviction that both the exoteric and esoteric forms of Indian metaphysics concur in promulgating idealism on the basis of translations and commentaries published by the British scholars of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. He learned not only from Sir William Jones, but also from Charles Wilkins and Henry Thomas Colebrooke, that the popular literature of Hinduism, the *Purāṇas*, were at one with its intellectual texts, the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*, in teaching that the world is

Māyā, by which is understood nothing but what Kant calls the phenomenon as opposed to the thing-in-itself. For the work of *Māyā* is stated to be precisely this visible world in which we are, a magic effect called into being, an unstable and inconstant illusion without substance, comparable to the optical illusion and the dream, a veil enveloping human consciousness, a something of which it is equally false and equally true to say that it is and that it is not.⁶²

The convergence that Schopenhauer detected between the higher and lower traditions of Indian metaphysics was, in his view, a consequence of the fact that the latter had been properly subordinated to the former throughout Indian history, while European metaphysical speculation had been obliged, under threat of force, to confirm the allegorical doctrines of Judeo-Christian realism.⁶³ Indian culture had managed to retain the proper balance and sustain the true view of the world and life because, from its origins, its entire metaphysical orientation had been founded on the authoritative discernment of the *ṛṣis*, those ancient sages who had not only been gripped by the wonder that is the mother of all genuine metaphysics,⁶⁴ but equipped with the intuitive and speculative capacities to escape it:

those who stood considerably nearer to the beginning of the human race and to the original source of organic nature than do we . . . possessed both greater energy of the intuitive faculty of knowledge, and a more genuine disposition of mind [*größere Energie der intuitiven Erkenntnißkräfte, theils eine richtigere Stimmung des Geistes*]. They were thus capable of a purer and more direct comprehension of the inner essence of nature, and were thus in a position to satisfy the need for metaphysics in a more estimable manner. Thus there originated in those primitive ancestors of the Brahmins, the *ṛṣis*, the almost superhuman conceptions recorded in the *Upaniṣads* of the *Vedas*.⁶⁵

The language of this passage makes use of themes that we encountered previously in Schopenhauer's definition of genius. In both, the capacity to attain knowledge (*Erkenntniß*) of the conditioned nature of objects is attributed to a greater "energy" of

the faculty of intuitive perception (*Anschauung*), which releases the mind from its cramped absorption in individual concerns. But his description of the *ṛṣis* also indicates that, in his view, the quality of their reflective minds (*Geistes*) was also “more genuine” than that of later generations, insofar as their thinking had not yet been obscured by an *a priori* web of concepts taken from an erroneous metaphysical tradition, enforced through state law, education, and social mores. This facilitated the development of their “superhuman conceptions”, such as that the world is *māyā* or representation conditioned by consciousness, animated by an inner force to which they gave the name *Brahman*. Their insights were later deposited in sacred scriptures, endowed with the authority of religious tradition, and set up as the basis of Brahminical education.

Schopenhauer’s theory of the founding role that the illuminations of the *ṛṣis* played in establishing idealism within Indian culture implies that, for the majority of faithful Indians, the authority of religious teachings concerning *māyā* have been instruments for correcting the “inborn realism” of their natural intellects. Their fidelity to idealism through the indirect route of *māyā* was therefore vicarious, with the result that someone requesting a justification of these doctrines from a Hindu or Buddhist would be referred not to the first facts of consciousness and the deliverances of discernment, but to the authority of the religious tradition and its exegesis by Brahmins. For the Indian masses, belief in idealism was therefore equivalent to Schopenhauer’s notion of a true conclusion from false premises, with faith in the intuitions of the *ṛṣis* acting as the false (or insufficient) ground of their belief in the dream-like status of the objective world.⁶⁶ Their acceptance of this true but counterintuitive doctrine presupposes alienation of free judgment, whereby idealism is accepted as a religious “doctrine of faith”, while only the *ṛṣis* and others capable of discernment have accepted it as a “doctrine of conviction”.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Schopenhauer’s official view of the contrast between Indian wisdom and European philosophy entails that even esoteric Indian idealism is wanting, insofar as it stems not from philosophical arguments and proofs but from the original evidence of the immediate and intuitive experiences of the *ṛṣis*.⁶⁸

But, contrary to his official view, Schopenhauer’s historical surveys suggest that the “incontestable” authority of Kant’s philosophical proofs has made no material difference to the cause of European idealism. As we saw in the previous section, Kant smuggled realist elements into his philosophy in the second edition of the *Critique*, which led up to Fichte’s doctrine of the subject’s self-reflexivity, by which the philosopher is able to intuit the non-phenomenal “absolute self-activity of the self”⁶⁹ prior to all empirical acts of knowledge. In opposition to this, Schopenhauer contended that Fichte’s conception of the subject’s rational intuition was not only pure invention, insofar as there is no such faculty of rational or intellectual intuition of transcendent processes,⁷⁰ but also an unnecessary obfuscation, insofar as the proposition ‘I know that I know’ adds nothing to the proposition ‘I know’, and is therefore tautological.⁷¹ In support of his point that the subject knows objects but is never an object itself,⁷² Schopenhauer called upon the venerable authority of one of the earliest portions of the *Upaniṣads*:

He is never seen but is the seer, he is never heard but is the hearer. He is never perceived, but is the perceiver. He is never thought but is the thinker. There is no other seer but he, there is no other hearer but he, there is no other perceiver but he, there is no other thinker but he.⁷³

It may seem rather anachronistic for Schopenhauer to assume that this passage is relevant to early nineteenth-century debates concerning the powers of the post-Kantian subject, but one recent Upaniṣadic scholar has similarly maintained that it presupposes the non-reflexivity of the *epistemological* subject.⁷⁴ However, the important point for this study is that Schopenhauer's appeal to the *Upaniṣad* indicates that, even subsequent to Kant's "real and great discovery in metaphysics",⁷⁵ Europe's argumentative and philosophical idealism could still go astray and require correction from the non-philosophical and poetic idealism of ancient India. This is unexpected, since it tends to subvert the hierarchy between the two species of idealism that Schopenhauer so confidently assumed throughout his works. At one point, in the midst of venting his spleen on the vanity of missionary work in India, which presents the crude and realist metaphysics of Judeo-Christianity as an improvement on the idealist religions of India, Schopenhauer confidently predicted that

In India our religions will never at any time take root; the ancient wisdom of the human race will not be supplanted by the events in Galilee. On the contrary, Indian wisdom flows back to Europe, and will produce a fundamental change in our knowledge and thought.⁷⁶

The assumption of this passage is that the "fundamental change" produced by Indian wisdom will be confined to the realm of Europe's popular metaphysics, whereby it will be encouraged to catch up with the idealist "*philosophy of modern times*" and cease to work on behalf of its cultural marginalization. However, Schopenhauer's appeal to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* to correct the faults of the argumentative, conceptual, and philosophical tradition subsequent to Kant suggests that, contrary to his official view, at some level he acknowledged the possibility that India's poetic and intuitive idealism might also exert "a fundamental change" on "*the philosophy of modern times*".

Conclusion

In relation to Schopenhauer's Indian interpretation, our study has disclosed a fundamental ambiguity in his conception of the philosophical standing of 'Indian wisdom'. Although his official view asserts an asymmetry between ancient Indian and modern European idealism, the sharp contours of his criteria become fluid under the pressure of insistent critical scrutiny. He categorizes Indian wisdom as pre-philosophical because the *ṛṣis* had articulated their insights in poetic or allegorical terms, employing the obscure figures *māyā* and *Brahman* to convey substantially the same opposition that Kant distinctly expressed as phenomenon and thing-in-itself and Schopenhauer as representation and will.⁷⁷ Yet Schopenhauer's quotations from Jones show that he was simultaneously aware that the later school of Vedānta had expressed the funda-

mental idealist insight conceptually, as the mutual dependence of “existence and perceptibility”, or—in Schopenhauerian terms—subject-object correlativism. If, as he seems to have recognized, subsequent Indians had coined clear terms in which to express the original insights of the ancient *ṛṣis*, then this criterion seems toothless.

Schopenhauer’s second (and perhaps stronger) criterion for excluding Indian wisdom from the history of philosophy was his contention that, although the *ṛṣis* had accurately discerned the central elements of decided idealism, they offered no argumentative or rational defense of these, but had communicated them through myths and narratives backed up by an authoritative religious tradition. As a result, ordinary Indians, incapable of metaphysical discernment, have been obliged to accept the truth of idealism on faith rather than conviction. Schopenhauer claimed that Kant’s statement improved on this by formulating proofs that “so clearly established” idealism, “that to raise even an apparent objection to it has not been possible.”⁷⁸ In other words, whereas the *ṛṣis* had only established idealism as a determining cultural presupposition, Kant made it into a permanent philosophical possession. As Kant’s true philosophical heir, Schopenhauer could maintain that, although it is possible to derive “the individual and disconnected utterances that make up the *Upaniṣads*” as consequences from his own propositions, “my thought is by no means to be found in the *Upaniṣads*.”⁷⁹ This is because the Indian classic does no more than enunciate, in oracular style, the conclusions of Schopenhauer’s system without their argumentative scaffolding. The implication is that his corpus has superseded the literature of Indian idealism, rendering it dispensable to a philosophically attuned reader.

However, this criterion similarly dissolves when we examine it in the light of Schopenhauer’s theory of the relation between intuitive discernment and philosophical proof. As outlined above, he defined proof as a process in which certain and immediately known truths, “somehow intuitively apprehended”, are transformed into universal concepts and systematically related to their evidential bases. But if rational philosophical proof consists of no more than the formal presentation and defense of truths taken from immediate intuition, insight, or discernment, with reason taking no part in the original labor of harvesting these truths itself, then Schopenhauer’s insistence that discernment is specifically philosophical seems mystifying. The simplicity, immediacy, and certainty with which he claimed that discernment grasps the truths of idealism—the mutual dependence of subject and object, and therewith the merely phenomenal nature of conscious experience—makes discernment pre-philosophical. This is confirmed by his claim that every person has a pre-reflective grasp of all philosophical truths *in concreto*, and that the task of the philosopher is to make these explicit to abstract reflection, and that he “neither ought to nor can do more than this.”⁸⁰ But if the same basic process of discernment was equally at work in the *ṛṣis* and Kant, then a definite notion of the added value of Kant’s systematic ordering and demonstration of idealism’s content is still lacking.

This dilemma is thrown into sharper relief after a cursory reading of the Appendix to volume 1 of *The World as Will and Representation*—the “Criticism of the Kantian Philosophy”. Although the opening pages pay tribute to Kant as a philosophical genius and the “all-pulveriser” of prior dogmatic dreaming,⁸¹ it soon becomes clear

that, irrespective of his rhetorical tributes to Kant's philosophy, Schopenhauer accepted virtually none of Kant's proofs. Kant's theories of the thing-in-itself and the *a priori* status of causality were central to Schopenhauerian idealism, but he dismissed Kant's demonstrations of these doctrines as "correct conclusions from false premises."⁸² But if it is questionable whether Kant's formal and demonstrative presentation of idealism constitutes an improvement upon the poetic and disconnected utterances of the same position by the *ṛṣis*, then it is palpable that rational proofs that depart from false premises but somehow contingently alight on the correct point are no improvement at all! At this juncture, Kantian idealism seems to have no philosophical advantage over Indian at all.

Finally, Schopenhauer's historical surveys of idealism in European and Indian culture swing the balance in favor of the latter, for the "doctrine of faith" by which the Indian masses have accepted idealism has, according to Schopenhauer's account, proved more durable than Kant's idealist "doctrine of conviction". Although Schopenhauer detected veiled evidence of discernment in a number of his European predecessors, he regarded all of them—including the "great Kant"—to have falsified the content of their intuitions by the time they fixed them in conceptual philosophical form. Schopenhauer seems to have been especially alive to the vulnerability of passing from intuitive discernment to rational articulation and proof in the medium of concepts, because—in the absence of any logic to guide this alteration—it is always possible that, at some point in the transition, the laws of individual psychology are likely to displace those of judgment. In the case of European thinkers, this permitted the introduction of irrational elements into idealism's conceptual articulation, elements that stemmed from the pressure to confirm deeply entrenched cultural attitudes, or to avoid ridicule or persecution from the social guardians of orthodox belief. On Schopenhauer's account, Indian idealism has been immune to such setbacks: the *ṛṣis* early established idealism as a fundamental cultural presupposition, and their subsequent authority has ensured its status as a permanent possession with far greater success than Kant's philosophical defense.

Schopenhauer's uncertainty on the issue of whether idealism is better served when grounded on intuition and authority rather than reason and argument may simply stem from the many-sidedness and innumerable tensions of his own system. His philosophy bears the marks of his vacillations concerning the relative value of intuitive knowledge (*Erkenntniß*) over rational (*Wissen*), and also veers between a descriptive irrationalism (the human intellect *is* determined by the desires of the will) and a prescriptive rationalism (our thoughts and actions *ought* to be determined by knowledge alone). His explicit and official view of the contrast between European and Indian idealism presupposes the norm of Europe's philosophical commitment to rational knowledge, argument, and proof, but this study has exposed his almost unconscious and unthematized recognition of the validity and historical efficacy of intuition and belief. His account of idealism in India indicates that it suffered no disadvantage by being founded on the personal experiences of the *ṛṣis*, and mediated to the people as a true conclusion from the false premise of faith in authority and tradition. In contrast to this, the hesitancy of European reason, as it struggled with

and against the deliverances of discernment, within a framework of cultural hostility, suggests that, historically at least, idealism has had a healthier time of it in India, irrespective of its lack of philosophical scaffolding.

Schopenhauer's official view of the relation between Indian and European idealism assumes that rational knowledge is superior to and an improved form of belief—an assumption that has had a long history in European philosophy. It stems from Plato's characterization of someone who holds a true belief in the absence of a *logos* as akin to a blind person on the right road, while someone who holds the same belief, supported by a *logos*, is a sighted person on the right road.⁸³ However, Plato's conviction of the infallibility of rational knowledge has been one of those luxuries that few philosophers have been willing to indulge, especially in the present time, with the result that we are now presented with the choice of being a blind person on the right road, a blind person on the wrong road (happy in his or her ignorance of the fact), or a sighted person on the right road, whose sight presents so many roads that he or she is terrorized by the doubt that, perhaps, one of those other roads might be the right one after all.⁸⁴ Reason or sight can do no more than present an array of possibilities, without formulating a secure method by which one might distinguish the true from the false. Were it possible to intuit or discern the right road immediately and certainly, then the person's path might have been surer and his or her progress more rapid. But in the circumstance that he or she lacked these mental powers, what better way of correcting this deficiency than to be guided by conventions established by another who enjoyed such insight?

Notes

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- 1 – Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, vol. 1, trans. E. S. Haldane (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 94.
- 2 – Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), vol. 1, p. 275. (Hereafter volume 1 is abbreviated as *WWR1*, and volume 2 as *WWR2*.)
- 3 – Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), vol. 2, p. 398. (Hereafter volume 1 is abbreviated as *PP1*, and volume 2 as *PP2*.)
- 4 – Indicative of this attitude is Schopenhauer's avoidance of the phrase 'Indian philosophy' in favor of coinages such as 'Indian wisdom', 'Indian metaphysics', or 'the religions of India'. His essay "Fragments for the History of Philosophy" begins not with the *Vedas* or *Upaniṣads* but with the Pre-Socratics; see *PP1*, p. 32.
- 5 – *WWR1*, p. 419.

- 6 – *WWR2*, p. 475.
- 7 – *WWR1*, p. 355.
- 8 – *Chāndogyā Upaniṣad* VI.13.1. Schopenhauer referred to this passage and the *mahāvākya* (great saying) *tat tvam asi* on a number of occasions, having read the *Upaniṣads* in Anquetil-Duperron's Latin translation, the *Oupnek'hat* (1801–1802). The literature on Indian thought available to Schopenhauer throughout most of his life was, of course, very limited and of uneven quality. By the time he wrote the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* (published in December 1818), his main sources included (apart from the *Oupnek'hat*) the first nine volumes of *Asiatick Researches*; Mme de Polier's *Mythologie des Indous*; Julius Klaproth's journal *Das Asiatisches Magazin*; and Friedrich Schlegel's *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der indier*. Although the quantity and quality of his sources improved as European Indology developed, they can in no way be compared to those currently available to any casual Western reader. This point needs to be emphasized, since secondary commentators have occasionally taken him to task for allegedly ignoring features of Indian thought of which he simply was not and could not have been aware.
- 9 – Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), p. 207 (Hereafter *BM*).
- 10 – *WWR2*, p. 3 (Emphasis mine. I have italicized this phrase from Schopenhauer throughout this article, to underscore its thesis that Schopenhauer was mistaken, on his own criteria, to claim that philosophical idealism arose with Kant).
- 11 – *WWR1*, p. 419.
- 12 – *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 13 – *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 14 – *Ibid.*, p. 437.
- 15 – *Ibid.*
- 16 – *PP2*, p. 22.
- 17 – *WWR1*, p. 25.
- 18 – *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 19 – *WWR2*, p. 5.
- 20 – *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 21 – *WWR1*, p. 383.
- 22 – Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Will in Nature*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Oxford: Berg, 1995), p. 133 (Hereafter *BM*).
- 23 – Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (1st ed., 1813), published as *Schopenhauer's Early Fourfold Root*, trans. A. C. White (Aldershot, U.K.: Avebury, 1997), p. 19.

- 24 – *WWR1*, p. xxiii.
- 25 – *WWR2*, p. 5.
- 26 – *Ibid.*, p. 388.
- 27 – *Ibid.*, p. 376.
- 28 – *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 29 – *PP2*, pp. 37–38.
- 30 – *WWR1*, p. 424. Schopenhauer detected a proto-European idealism in the works of Plotinus, but he attributed this to the influence of Plotinus’s teacher Ammonius Saccus, who, Schopenhauer claimed, had obtained it from an Indian source (*PP1*, pp. 59–60).
- 31 – *BM*, p. 113.
- 32 – *WWR1*, p. 422.
- 33 – *WWR2*, p. 165.
- 34 – *PP1*, p. 3.
- 35 – *WWR1*, p. 423.
- 36 – *PP1*, p. 14.
- 37 – *WWR1*, p. 424.
- 38 – *PP1*, p. 14.
- 39 – *WWR1*, p. 424.
- 40 – *WWR2*, p. 8.
- 41 – *WWR1*, p. 4.
- 42 – Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), A383 (citations to Kant’s works follow the *Akademie* pagination).
- 43 – *WWR1*, pp. 434–435.
- 44 – *Ibid.*, p. 435.
- 45 – *Ibid.*, p. 444.
- 46 – *Ibid.*, p. 436.
- 47 – The criticism that Kant’s argument for the thing-in-itself presupposes the subject-independence of causation was first formulated by Gottlob Ernst Schulze in his anonymous work of 1792, *Aenesidemus*. Schulze had taught Schopenhauer at Göttingen, after persuading him to transfer his undergraduate studies from Medicine to Philosophy.
- 48 – *WWR1*, p. xxiii.

- 49 – Ibid., p. 503.
- 50 – Schopenhauer, *WN*, p. 87.
- 51 – Although occasionally critical of Spinoza, Schopenhauer remarked that he and Bruno “do not belong either to their age or to their part of the globe. . . . Their miserable existence and death in this Western world are like that of a tropical plant in Europe. The banks of the sacred Ganges were their true spiritual home; there they would have led a peaceful and honoured life among men of like mind.” (*WWR1*, p. 422 n. 2)
- 52 – Ibid., p. 32.
- 53 – Ibid., p. 436.
- 54 – Ibid., p. 33.
- 55 – Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B307.
- 56 – *PP1*, p. 141.
- 57 – Sir William Jones, “On the Philosophy of the Asiatics,” in *Asiatick Researches* vol. IV (London: P. Elmsly, 1799), p. 164.
- 58 – *WWR1*, p. 4.
- 59 – *WN*, p. 133.
- 60 – Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (2nd ed., 1847), trans. E.F.J. Payne (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1974), pp. 50–51 (Hereafter *FR*).
- 61 – Ibid., p. 187.
- 62 – *WWR1*, 419.
- 63 – *WWR2*, 165–166.
- 64 – See *WWR1*, p. 32, and *WWR2*, pp. 160–161, for Schopenhauer’s discussion of how existential wonder (Platonic and Aristotelian θαυμάζειν) is the point of departure for all genuine metaphysical speculation.
- 65 – *WWR2*, p. 162.
- 66 – *WWR1*, p. 503.
- 67 – *WWR2*, p. 165.
- 68 – Schopenhauer’s distinction between the idealism of Kant and that of the *ῥσις* is paralleled by his contrast between philosophy and mysticism. In his view, philosophy is methodologically confined to rational interpretation of the data of consciousness and the world that appears in it, so that it has only negative knowledge of what lies beyond the phenomenon. By contrast, mysticism claims positive knowledge of what lies beyond the phenomenon. However, these positive claims of mysticism are evidence of its epistemological hubris and lesser authority, and although we may find mystical reports metaphysically comfort-

ing, they are too individual to convince or to supply a respectable ground for belief (*WWR2*, pp. 610–611).

- 69 – Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 44.
- 70 – *WWR1*, p. 26.
- 71 – *FR*, pp. 208–209.
- 72 – *WWR1*, p. 5.
- 73 – *FR*, p. 208. The passage quoted by Schopenhauer is from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.7.23.
- 74 – Paul Hacker, *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedānta*, trans. Wilhelm Halbfass (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 214.
- 75 – *WWR1*, p. 437.
- 76 – *Ibid.*, pp. 356–357.
- 77 – In his later years, Schopenhauer speculated on the possibility that *Brahman* might be equivalent to his concept of will, on the basis of Max Müller’s etymological explanation of the Sanskrit root *bṛh* as meaning “force, will, wish, & the propulsive power of creation”; see Friedrich Max Müller, *On the Veda and Zend-Avesta* (London: Spottiswoodes and Shaw, 1847), p. 9. Schopenhauer quoted Müller’s explanation in a letter to David Asher, dated November 12, 1856; see Arthur Schopenhauer, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. A. Hübscher (Bonn: Bouvier Herbert Grundmann, 1978), p. 405.
- 78 – *BM*, p. 206.
- 79 – *WWR1*, pp. xv–xvi.
- 80 – *Ibid.*, p. 383.
- 81 – *Ibid.*, p. 420.
- 82 – *Ibid.*, p. 503.
- 83 – Plato, *Republic*, trans. D. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007), 506c (this citation follows the Stephanus pagination).
- 84 – There is, of course, a fourth possibility—perhaps the most dangerous—which is that of the sighted/rational person on the wrong road, who has nevertheless convinced himself, through fallacious proofs, that he is indeed on the right road. His irrational faith in the infallibility of reason renders him immovable to correction.