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# SCHOPENHAUER ON AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

by

ROBERT MCKINLEY

Under the Direction of Jessica Berry, PhD

## ABSTRACT

Arthur Schopenhauer defends the view that aesthetic experience is disinterested and objective. Traditionally, this view is taken to mean that aesthetic experience involves the suspension of all affective states and a passive attitude toward the object of contemplation. However, A. E. Denham argues that Schopenhauer's view is more complex than traditionally thought. In particular, she claims that he sees aesthetic experience as involving passionate and active engagement with the object of contemplation. In this paper, I argue that a close reading of Schopenhauer's texts reveals that the traditional view is better supported than Denham's. In addition, I consider some objections to Schopenhauerian disinterestedness and objectivity that highlight the extremity of his view in a way that Denham's interpretation fails to appreciate.

INDEX WORDS: Arthur Schopenhauer, Disinterestedness, Objectivity, Friedrich Nietzsche,

Aesthetics, Aesthetic experience

SCHOPENHAUER ON AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

by

ROBERT MCKINLEY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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2018

SCHOPENHAUER ON AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

### Works by Schopenhauer

- FR*    *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, Payne, E. F. J. (trans.) (Peru, Illinois: Open Court), 1974.
- FW*    *On the Freedom of the Will*, in *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, Cartwright, D. and Erdmann, E. (trans.) (New York: Oxford University Press), 2010.
- PP*    *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vols. I and II, Payne, E. F. J. (trans.) (New York: Oxford University Press), 1974.
- WWR* *The World as Will and Representation*, Vols. I and II, Payne, E. F. J. (trans.) (New York: Dover), 1969.

### Works by Nietzsche

- GM*    *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Clark, M., and Swensen, A. (trans.) (Indianapolis: Hackett), 1998.
- TI*    *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, Ridley, A. (ed.), Norman, J. (trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2005



## 1 INTRODUCTION

Arthur Schopenhauer accords a prominent place to aesthetic experience in his system. Indeed, one of the four books of his magnum opus *The World as Will and Representation* is devoted to the nature of art and aesthetic experience and the role they play in human life. Throughout his career, Schopenhauer defends the view that aesthetic contemplation is *disinterested* and *objective*. To say that aesthetic contemplation is “disinterested” is to say that the subject’s focus on the object is independent of the object’s relations to the subject’s personal aims and goals. To say that aesthetic contemplation is “objective” is to say that the representation it renders of the object bears no trace of the subject’s individuality or individual viewpoint. Schopenhauer’s paradigmatic way of expressing this view is to say that the aesthetic contemplator has become “*pure will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge*” (*WWR*, I, 179). The standard way to interpret this view is to say that Schopenhauer sees aesthetic experience as involving the suspension of all affective states along with a passive attitude toward the object of contemplation.<sup>1</sup>

However, in her article “Attuned, Transcendent, Transfigured: Nietzsche’s Appropriation of Schopenhauer’s Aesthetic Psychology,” A. E. Denham argues that “[t]he role of affect or emotion in Schopenhauer’s aesthetic psychology is...more complicated and nuanced” than the standard view suggests, and that for Schopenhauer “[f]irst-personal aesthetic experience is far from being dispassionate and passively receptive” (2014: 175, 178). These unconventional claims fit into her overall project of establishing that Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s views on the nature of aesthetic experience are “essentially continuous” with each other (2014: 164).

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Christopher Janaway writes, “Schopenhauer thinks of aesthetic experience as a kind of altered state of consciousness where desire, emotion, bodily activity, and ordinary conceptual thought are all suspended” (2007: 191).

Nietzsche, in *GM*, III, explicitly criticizes the notions of disinterestedness and objectivity championed by Schopenhauer, and there and elsewhere (for instance, *TI*, IX, 8ff.) portrays aesthetic experience as affectively charged and arousing active engagement with the art object. Aaron Ridley summarizes Nietzsche's views by saying that "the engagement with beauty...is not only essentially *active* and willful, but, indeed, [...] derives from an 'erotic whirl'" (2007: 121). Hence, Denham attempts to bridge the gap between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche by arguing that Schopenhauer sees aesthetic experience as more active and affective than traditionally thought.

If Denham is right, then Schopenhauer's views may be more amenable to a modern audience than traditionally thought. She portrays a Schopenhauer who sees engagement with art as active and willful, involving the passionate, personal absorption in non-pragmatic concerns. She even claims that Schopenhauer's aesthetics contain all the resources for a life-affirming philosophy, and that they can be easily adapted to the project of "resisting a 'moral interpretation' of life" (2014: 199). Her Schopenhauer is a Schopenhauer we today can more readily identify with. However, in this paper I will argue that Denham's interpretation is based on a misreading of Schopenhauer's psychology of aesthetic experience. A close reading of Schopenhauer's texts reveals that the traditional view—that Schopenhauer regards aesthetic contemplation as involving the temporary abolition of all desires and affects—is better supported than Denham's view, and so that Schopenhauer is more distant from us than she supposes.

In this paper, I will first discuss Denham's characterization of Schopenhauerian aesthetic contemplation as involving what she calls "attunement" to the object of contemplation (Section 2.1) before discussing Schopenhauer's interpretation of "attunement" as disinterested and objective (Section 2.2). Then I will argue, *contra* Denham, that Schopenhauer's notions of disinterestedness and objectivity are incompatible with a notion of aesthetic experience as

actively engaged and affectively charged (Section 3). Finally, I will conclude with some remarks on how inextricable Schopenhauer's views on the nature of aesthetic experience are from his system as a whole (Section 4).

## 2 AESTHETIC ATTUNEMENT

### 2.1 Denham's Account of Attunement

Denham claims that Schopenhauer is interested in “exemplary” cases of aesthetic experience—cases that exemplify the ideal state of the creator or spectator when engaged with a work of art.<sup>2</sup> Hence, he is not concerned with the experience of “casual” spectators, who pay no serious attention to the art they are considering, or even with the experience of a seasoned connoisseur who, at some particular moment, is not especially absorbed in or moved by the art. Rather, his “concern is with aesthetic creation and appreciation ‘proper’—namely, acts and experiences which are focused, fully attentive, and wholly involved” (2014: 171).

Having identified “engaged aesthetic experience” as the target of his analysis, she goes on to specify its conditions. She calls the condition I will focus on “*attunement*.” According to Denham, “a subject is aesthetically attuned to a target, experiential object just when *an accurate and detailed phenomenology of his first-personal experience would make no or little mention of anything other than the object itself*” (2014: 172). To take an example, consider a still life of a bowl of fruit—apples, bananas, and grapes. First imagine a “casual” or “distracted” spectator of this painting. What would his phenomenology be like as he indifferently examines it? If he really

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<sup>2</sup> This assessment seems right to me, and accords with Julian Young's claim that “[w]hat interests [Schopenhauer]...is the nature of *great art*. This comes to be treated as equivalent to the question of the nature of *art* because Schopenhauer operates with a dichotomy between ‘genuine’ (WR II: 406) art on the one hand and the work of ‘imitators, mannerists, the slavish mob’ (WR I: 235) on the other” (2005: 106).

is attending to the painting, part of his phenomenology would include a description of the objects in the painting itself—visual experience of three yellow bananas, to the left of a bunch of green grapes, to the left of two red apples, all on top of a rectangular white table cloth against a black background. But since his attention is merely casual, a host of other contents would be present in his consciousness. There may be a string of thoughts, either related or unrelated to the painting; muscular sensations of soreness in his legs and back; a feeling of coldness along his arms and neck, leading to a sense of annoyance; auditory and visual perceptions of the people standing next to him, along with the feelings and thoughts they evoke. In other words, the casual spectator is aware not merely of the artwork but of other stimuli as well, such as other objects and people in his location. In particular, he is still aware of *himself* to a greater or lesser degree: he is aware of his physical, bodily presence in his environment along with his thoughts, feelings, and desires. His awareness of these features pertaining to his individual self reinforces the sense of a distinction between himself and the artwork: he experiences the artwork as something separate from him.

By contrast, what does the engaged spectator experience when she contemplates the still life? According to Denham's definition of "attunement," she is aware of the details of the images in the painting itself—the three bananas, the bunch of grapes, the two red apples, the tablecloth, the background—and little, if anything, else. Crucially, she is not aware of all those contents of consciousness that reinforce the sense of a separate, individual self—unrelated thoughts, bodily sensations, feelings of ease or discomfort, desires or aversions. Her attention is so absorbed in the art object that she is no longer aware of her own individual self as a distinct object in the world. As Denham summarizes this point, "In aesthetic attunement, then, the distinction between the subject and the object is phenomenologically mitigated; the subject ceases (episodically) to

be aware of himself as distinct from the object, and his ability to identify the content of his experience as distinct from the object is correspondingly diminished” (2014: 172). Thus, attunement involves such an intense absorption in the object of attention that, for the subject so attuned, it is as if only the object existed, not even she herself as the perceiver of the object. As Schopenhauer puts it, the subject remains merely as the “clear mirror of the object,” reflecting it without distorting it (*WWR*, I, 178).

Schopenhauer clearly thinks that something like “aesthetic attunement” occurs during genuine aesthetic contemplation. In a passage that Denham quotes to support her case, Schopenhauer writes that in aesthetic experience we

devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein, and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present.... We *lose* ourselves entirely in this object...we forget our individuality, our will...so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception, but the two have become one. (*WWR*, I, 178)

In this passage, Schopenhauer explicitly says that in aesthetic experience our consciousness is filled with the object of our attention to the exclusion of all else, including our own individual selves. He would most likely endorse Denham’s definition of attunement as applying to his own account of aesthetic experience.

## **2.2 Schopenhauer’s Metaphysical Interpretation of Attunement**

While Schopenhauer would likely agree with Denham’s account of attunement, he goes beyond mere phenomenological description to provide a metaphysical *interpretation* of this experiential state. This interpretation of attunement burdens it with philosophical baggage that some find objectionable and even incoherent. In particular, Schopenhauer reads two characteristics into the experience of attunement: disinterestedness and objectivity.

### 2.2.1 *Disinterestedness*

To say that attunement is “disinterested” is to say that the subject’s focus on the object is independent of the object’s relations to the subject’s practical aims and goals.<sup>3</sup> According to Denham, “The aesthetic subject transcends whatever local, instrumental interests he may have taken in the object: he becomes, in a word, *disinterested*” (2014: 181). As Ian D. Dunkle observes, Denham seems to treat the concept of disinterestedness ambiguously, vacillating between “disinterestedness as a detachment or interruption of one’s prior projects, desires, and affects” and disinterestedness “as a detachment from any aims and affects that can be identified as one’s own” (2017: 437). This vacillation likely results from her overall project of demonstrating a continuity between Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s aesthetics, since Nietzsche might be able to endorse the former description as applicable to aesthetic experience, while Schopenhauer would subscribe to the latter. Indeed, I intend to show that Schopenhauer takes an “extreme” approach to disinterestedness, conceiving it as involving a disengagement from *all* aims, affects, and desires altogether. In this way, Schopenhauerian attunement turns out to be a peculiar, in fact exceptional, mode of perceiving the world. For he sees perception, representation, or knowledge in general as arising precisely from our personal aims and goals—in other words, from our nature as *will*. Knowledge, and the organic structures that make it possible, such as sense organs and brains, exist in order to enable individual organisms to attain the ends necessary for their survival—locate and assimilate food, seek shelter, avoid predators, reproduce. An organism, for Schopenhauer, is a concretion of desires—usually unconscious

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Daniel Came writes, “My attitude towards an object is disinterested, if and only if, in attending to it, I focus only on the object and not any relations that obtain between the object and anything apart from the object itself” (2009: 95).

(though occasionally conscious) goal-directed strivings.<sup>4</sup> An animal is simply an organism whose desires are complex enough that, in order to satisfy them properly, the organism requires a representation of its environment. This fact explains the origin of knowledge, perception, or representation as a means to the animal's ends of survival and reproduction. Hence, Schopenhauer writes, "Sensibility, nerves, brain, just like other parts of the organic being, are only an expression of the will...hence, the representation that arises through them is also destined to serve the will.... Thus, originally and by its nature, knowledge is completely the servant of the will" (*WWR*, I, 176). Therefore, for Schopenhauer, the ordinary way of attending to objects is *interested*—i.e., it is constituted through the relations in which the objects stand to the subject's needs, desires, goals, and so on.

These considerations indicate that Schopenhauer sees a connection between ordinary, interested knowledge and awareness of one's own individuality. For he claims that the function of ordinary knowledge of individual objects is to determine their relation to one's individual will. Hence, as Julian Young points out, interested consciousness involves an awareness not merely of the spatiotemporal relations among individual objects, but of the spatiotemporal relations between those objects and my own body: "To know that there is a tiger at latitude X and longitude Y is no use to me unless I know where X and Y are *in relation to where I am*. Hence ordinary consciousness is *self*-consciousness in the sense that I belong *within* my representation of the world" (2005: 108).<sup>5</sup> Consider again the casual observer of the still life. His attention to

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<sup>4</sup> He writes that "the parts of the body must correspond completely to the chief demands and desires by which the will manifests itself; they must be the visible expression of these desires" (*WWR*, I, 108). Janaway explains that for Schopenhauer, even an unconscious biological process, such as heliotropism in plants, can be described as a manifestation of desire or will "because he thinks it can only be understood as goal-directed, even if there is no mind present to entertain the goal" (2002: 44).

<sup>5</sup> Young calls this property of ordinary consciousness "egocentricity" (2005: 109).

the painting is neither attuned nor disinterested: his whole phenomenology, while looking at the painting, is colored by his concern for his individual self, for that assemblage of drives, needs, worries, and desires that Schopenhauer calls his “will.” Instead of focusing exclusively on the formal, aesthetic properties of the painting, he is busy thinking about what the painting is doing for him—whether it bores him or amuses him, whether the fruit it presents looks appetizing or not, whether or not his gazing at it is a productive use of his time. Furthermore, he is beset by distracting observations, such as soreness in his legs or coldness on his neck. His consciousness, in other words, is still serving its merely animal function of orienting his will in his environment. Constitutive of his awareness of the painting is an awareness of how it relates to his individual will.

Bernard Reginster elucidates this point with a helpful analogy. He argues that Schopenhauer thinks of knowledge, or “the activity of the intellect,” as comparable to light:

I cannot see the light, I can only see the objects that reflect it, yet I would not be able to see these objects without the light they reflect. If I were pure intellect, then, I could never become conscious of myself: my consciousness would be filled with the objective world since I would only be the light shining on it. I must therefore be something more than a pure intellect to become conscious of *myself*. That something is the will: it is as will that I become conscious of myself.<sup>6</sup> (2009: 99-100).

In other words, for Schopenhauer, pure knowledge, knowledge considered entirely by itself and unconnected to the will, offers a completely impersonal representation of some state of affairs. In itself, it is not possible to connect this “pure” aspect of knowledge with any particular subject, because it is inherently universal. The nature of gravity is what it is regardless of who might be

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<sup>6</sup> This passage should not be taken to suggest that pure intellect is temporally prior to will, and that one acquires a sense of individuality when will is subsequently added to a previously existing pure intellect. Reginster’s point is rather that we can analytically distinguish pure intellect from will and recognize that pure intellect on its own is insufficient to ground a sense of individual identity.



aware of it, and if my intellect is entirely devoted to representing it to the exclusion of anything else, it is not possible for me to say who in particular I am—the only datum available to my consciousness is the nature of gravity, and that alone is insufficient to identify myself as the individual subject who is aware of it in this particular instance. The only way I could become aware of my individual self is if I were something other than pure light, pure intellect. This other thing imbues the objects illuminated by our consciousness with “an interest that engrosses our whole nature,” so that they “do not march past us strange and meaningless” (*WWR*, I, 95).

Schopenhauer compares the pure subject of knowledge to “a winged cherub without a body,” an image that indicates the importance of the *body* in acquiring a sense of individual self (*WWR*, I, 99). Indeed, Schopenhauer claims that the subject of knowledge “appears as an individual only through his identity with the body” (*WWR*, I, 100). One’s own body is such a special object because there are two radically different ways one can know it. First of all, one can know it in the same way one knows any other physical object—through the mediation of one’s sense organs and brain. In this way, one knows one’s body as an individual spatiotemporal representation causally connected with other such representations. However, if that were the *only* way one knew it, it would merely be “an object among objects” (*WWR*, I, 100). That is, it would have no features that could distinguish it as *one’s* body as opposed to just another body. What allows one to identify with a single body among all others is the second, special kind of knowledge one has of it as the appearance of one’s *will*. One of the things Schopenhauer means by this claim is that one is aware of every voluntary movement of one’s body as an act of one’s will. The act of will does not *cause* the voluntary movement; rather, the two are one and the

same thing, apprehended in two different, complementary ways.<sup>7</sup> Hence, I can know the movement of my arm as I reach out to grab a water bottle not merely as an interaction among physical objects (one of which is a human body), but as *my striving* for a particular end.

Schopenhauer holds that the duality of will and body can be extended to every movement one's body initiates, both voluntary and involuntary: everything one's body does is an expression of one's conscious and unconscious will. Moreover, everything that impinges on one's body affects one's will either painfully or pleurably, depending on whether it thwarts or accords with one's desires (*WWR*, I, 101). Hence, Schopenhauer seems to think that the experience of will, whether in terms of acting or being acted on, carries with it an immediate sense of individual self: I immediately know my actions and my feelings as my own, and only mediately—through recognizing certain changes in a certain object of perception (i.e., my body) as corresponding to these states of my will—do I identify myself with my body. In this way, the experience of will brings the heavenly detachment of pure perception down to earth and saddles it with a sense of individuality.

In sum, Schopenhauer sees knowledge primarily as a tool to aid the will in satisfying its ends. In this interested capacity, knowledge presents objects in terms of their relations to the will—to one's desires, aims, inclinations, and so on. The will is the source of the sense of individuality, and to satisfy its needs, its efforts must be directed toward individual objects. Knowledge as thus subordinate to the will therefore reveals a world of individual objects related to each other in various ways, and all ultimately related to the will of the individual who has this

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<sup>7</sup> Schopenhauer's punchy way of making this point is worth mentioning: "The action of the body is nothing but the act of will objectified, i.e., translated into perception" (*WWR*, I, 100).

knowledge.<sup>8</sup> However, even though knowledge *came about* in order to serve the will, and so in order to represent a world of individuated objects, in isolation from an individuating will it is capable of representing objects differently. In such a case, knowledge renders universal, impersonal representations free from the sense of an individual self. Hence, Schopenhauer claims that “our consciousness has two sides; in part it is consciousness of *our own selves*, which is the *will*, and in part consciousness of *other things*, and as such primarily knowledge of the external world *through perception*, apprehension of objects” (WWR, II, 367). Moreover, Schopenhauer seems to think that consciousness is a zero-sum game, in the sense that the more one is aware of one of these two sides, the less one is aware of the other (*ibid.*). These remarks help explain why Schopenhauer interprets attunement as disinterested. In attunement, the subject is so wholly focused on the object that nothing else fills her consciousness, not even her own self. But Schopenhauer appears to equate one’s self with one’s will, so that in attunement her will must also be absent. If the will is gone, then the intellect is no longer representing objects in terms of their relations to the will, to whether or not they are satisfying or thwarting one’s desires. Therefore, any satisfaction that the subject experiences in this state of attunement must be independent of her antecedently given aims and desires. Hence, such knowledge is no longer interested, as is ordinarily the case, but disinterested.

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<sup>8</sup> One may wonder how, on this view, I can recognize an object *as an object* even if it does not present itself to me as either alluring or threatening. Schopenhauer apparently regards interestedness as a matter of degree (WWR, II, 367). Even if I don’t feel noticeable aversion or desire toward the objects on my desk, still the very fact that I see them as *individual* objects, and have some sense of my own position *in relation to* them, indicates that “will,” even in a relatively tranquil form, underlies my present conscious state. “[T]he ordinary way of considering things,” according to Schopenhauer, involves perceiving “their relations to one another, *whose final goal is always the relation to our own will*” (WWR, I, 178; my emphasis). Hence, Schopenhauer holds that a degree of egocentricity is present whenever we perceive an object as an individual object.

### 2.2.2 Objectivity

Moreover, Schopenhauer characterizes attunement as *objective*—i.e., the representation it renders of the object bears no trace of the subject’s individuality or individual viewpoint. The link Schopenhauer sees between will and individuality helps explain this interpretation of attunement as well. For Schopenhauer’s account of knowledge implies that, without a sense of will to tie it to an individual, knowledge renders a universal, impersonal representation of its object. At the same time that I become aware of myself as an individual subject in the world, I become aware of the objects around me as individual, discrete spatiotemporal entities. On the other hand, when the will recedes from consciousness and my sense of being an individual self is dissolved, objects likewise lose their character as individuals and take on a universal aspect. Schopenhauer calls this universal object a “Platonic Idea,” describing it as the object’s “eternal form” or “prototype” (*WWR*, I, 130). This precise correlation between the nature of the subject and the nature of the object is a consequence of Schopenhauer’s epistemology. In Book I of *WWR* he argues that “the world as representation...has two essential, necessary, and inseparable halves,” namely, subject (knower) and object (known) (*WWR*, I, 5). They are the inseparable aspects of a knowledge-event, as the north and south pole are the ineliminable sides of a magnet: “these halves are inseparable even in thought, for each of the two has meaning and existence only through and for the other; each exists with the other and vanishes with it” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the capacities for knowledge inherent in the subject correlate precisely with the possible known properties of the object, and vice versa.<sup>9</sup> In short, to say that objects *are*

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, speaking of space, time, and causality, he writes, “we can with equal reason call them modes of perception or intuition of the subject, or qualities of the object *in so far as it is object*...in other words, representation” (*WWR*, I, 119).

*represented*<sup>10</sup> in such and such a way is equivalent to saying that the subject *represents* in just such a way. When the will drops away in aesthetic contemplation and the subject loses its individuality, the objects contemplated correspondingly become universals. In such a case “we no longer consider the where, the when, the why, and the whither of things, but simply and solely the *what*” (*WWR*, I, 178). Thus, “simultaneously and inseparably, the perceived individual thing is raised to the Idea of its species, and the knowing individual to the pure subject of will-less knowing, and now the two, as such, no longer stand in the stream of time and of all other relations” (*WWR*, I, 197). As Young succinctly expresses this point, since the objects of aesthetic contemplation “are not seen *from* a place in the space-time world they are not seen *at* a place in it. So they cease to be seen as individuals” (2005: 127). Therefore, for Schopenhauer, the presence of the will makes the subject an individual, to which there correspond individual objects, while the suspension of the will abolishes both the subject’s and the object’s individuality in one stroke.

Hence, Schopenhauer writes that “the person who is involved in this [aesthetic] perception is no longer an individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself; he is *pure* will-less, painless, timeless *subject of knowledge*” (*WWR*, I, 179). Schopenhauer reasons that, now that one’s individual subjectivity has been suppressed, one’s apprehension becomes purely objective, unclouded by the inclinations of our needy will: “the attention is now no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things *without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively*” (*WWR*, I, 196; my emphasis). So the kind of perception one has in this disinterested, will-less state cannot by its

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<sup>10</sup> Schopenhauer’s idealism entails that objects are representations, so to say that an object is represented as being, e.g., spatiotemporal, is equivalent to saying that an object *is* spatiotemporal (see *WWR*, I, 3-6).

nature be attributed to any particular individual, but rather has a universal significance. In that sense, it is objective.

It is worth noting how unconventional Schopenhauer's views on objectivity are. As Bart Vandenabeele notes, "On Schopenhauer's view, the artist—and *not* the scientist—provides objective knowledge" (2012: 220). The artist has objective access to the world because "[w]hereas scientific investigation is, according to Schopenhauer, merely a kind of systematic extension of our ordinary way of treating objects"—where this ordinary way is conditioned by our will, and so by our individual subjectivity—"[...] aesthetic and artistic treatments of things offer us the most objective perception of the world" for the reasons just indicated (2012: 220-21). Scientific investigation generalizes our knowledge of the relations among individual spatiotemporal things, and, as discussed above, Schopenhauer thinks the ultimate framework for such relational knowledge is egocentric, in the sense that the fundamental aim of relational knowledge is to orient one's individual self relative to potential threats or desiderata. Aesthetic contemplation, on the other hand, bypasses the egocentric framework altogether along with its relational knowledge of individual things, and renders an awareness of the objective, "absolute essences"<sup>11</sup> of the objects of perception.

Young explains that the aesthetic observer gains access to these objective, absolute essences through the disappearance of what Schopenhauer calls "relative essences" (2005: 109). An object's "relative essence" derives from its relation to our will, and so represents a fabricated, subjective addition to the object itself. Hence, Schopenhauer holds that, under ordinary circumstances, the will exerts a distorting influence on perception in general. When we perceive

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<sup>11</sup> Schopenhauer discusses the "relative" and "absolute essence and existence" of things in *WWR*, II, 372.

things under the influence of the will, we do not see them as they really are, but merely as our desire or aversion depicts them. Thus, “every emotion or passion obscures and falsifies knowledge, in fact...every inclination or disinclination twists, colors, and distorts not merely the judgment, but even the original perception of things” (*WWR*, II, 373). This distortion occurs not merely in instances of powerful affect, such as when “the scaffold, the fortress to which we are taken, the surgeon’s case of instruments, [or] the travelling coach [carrying away] loved ones” appear grotesque and assume a “hideous physiognomy,” but even in less extreme cases where the object in question “has only some remote relation to our will, in other words, to our inclination or disinclination” (*ibid.*). In every case of interested perception, therefore, “the falsification of the representation by the will is unmistakable” (*ibid.*). Thus, not only does the will attach a sense of individuality to what would otherwise be a pure, universal representation, but it actively distorts that representation and obscures its true nature.

When discussing the “true nature” or “absolute essence” of an object of perception, it is important realize that Schopenhauer does not conceive of it as mind-independent. Indeed, his idealism entails that “everything that exists for knowledge...is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word, representation” (*WWR*, I, 3). So there can be no mind-independent objects for Schopenhauer. What he has in mind by an object’s “absolute essence” is just what he calls the “Platonic Idea” of the individual thing. It is the archetypal pattern which serves as “the foundation of the various subjective, and thus distorted, perceptions, as that which is common to them all and alone stands fast; it shines through them as the common theme to all those subjective variations” (*WWR*, II, 373). Despite this freedom from *individual* subjective distortions, the Platonic Idea is still an object, albeit a universal object for a universal subject. As Christopher Janaway puts this point, the “objective knowledge” accessible through

aesthetic contemplation “would not consist in knowing the thing in itself in its naked form, which is impossible, but in knowing the timeless patterns of the things that are experienceable by us” (2002: 47). These “timeless patterns,” on Schopenhauer’s view, are not mind-independent, but depend for their existence on some universal aspect of our minds. Hence, as Robert Wicks summarizes it, “the subject-object distinction manifests itself in both general and specific ways. [...] [At one level,] universal subjects become aware of universal objects. [...] [At another level,] individual subjects become aware of individual objects in space and time” (2008: 60). The former corresponds to the level of objective perception, while the latter corresponds to the level of subjective perception.

It is difficult to see, first, how such a universal “view from nowhere” should even be possible, and second, why aesthetic attunement—even to the point of losing track of one’s individuality—should give access to the objective, universal essence of the object it is directed at.<sup>12</sup> Regarding the first point, Daniel Came admits that Schopenhauer “may, of course, overstate his case. That is, one might object that even in deepest aesthetic absorption we never lose all awareness of ourselves or of space and time” (2009: 97). Wicks concurs that Schopenhauer’s descriptions of the aesthetic state are “exaggerated,” but goes further and argues that what Schopenhauer is describing is actually impossible: “if we aesthetically contemplate a tree, for example, it is contradictory to maintain that the experience has *no* time-element, and implausible to claim that we become *entirely* unaware of the tree’s individual perceptual details” (2008: 97-98). Ultimately, these criticisms echo Nietzsche’s powerful attack on the Schopenhauerian ideal of objectivity as “an eye that cannot possibly be thought, an eye that must not have any

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<sup>12</sup> Assuming, of course, that there even is an objective, universal essence of the object, or that such a notion is even coherent.



direction...thus what is demanded here is always an absurdity and non-concept of an eye” (*GM*, III, 12). These criticisms seem decisive to me, but it is still reasonable to hold with Came that “something approaching this kind of experience does seem to occur in aesthetic experience...the deeper one’s absorption the less one is aware of self, space, time, and the relations in which the object of attention stands to other objects” (2009: 97). In other words, while Schopenhauer’s description of aesthetic experience may well be exaggerated, we can regard it as an ideal, asymptotic limit, which the closer we approach, the less pedestrian and more aesthetic our experience becomes. It is one extreme end of a spectrum, at the other end of which lies passionate, furious absorption in individual objects of willing.

Second, Young argues that “Schopenhauer is certainly mistaken in claiming that the transformation of the object into Idea is ‘inseparable’ from the transformation of the subject” into pure, will-less, universal subject (2005: 147). The transformation of the subject can lead to the “pure phenomenological receptivity” of aesthetic attunement, but the focus of this attunement might well be the unique individuality of the target object, not its individuality-obliterating universal essence (*ibid.*). Young avers that Schopenhauer goes wrong “in supposing that egocentric, or as we might say, pragmatic space”—the space revealed to me in interested, willful perception—“is the only space” (*ibid.*). If aesthetic attunement is disinterested, and if disinterested perception involves the suspension of the will, then, while I might not be able to locate *myself* in space or time when aesthetically attuned, it does not follow that my perception of space and time disappears entirely. And if I can still perceive things in space and time, then I can still perceive them as individuals rather than Platonic universals. Young’s objection highlights how Schopenhauer’s interpretation of aesthetic attunement as involving access to objective universal essences follows from his epistemological assumptions. Because of the

“inseparability” of subject and object in general, and the fact that “the object’s mode of appearing is conditioned by the subject’s forms of knowledge,” Schopenhauer *must* conclude that the universalizing change in the subject’s manner of knowing entails (or rather, *is the same thing as*) the universalizing change in the object’s manner of being known (*WWR*, I, 503). To deny that aesthetic attunement is directed toward objective, universal essences, we must either deny that it involves a truly universal, will-less subject—in the strict, “exaggerated” sense that Schopenhauer intends—or reject his doctrine of the correlativity of subject and object. Since the latter seems to me true by definition, and since we already have reasons for rejecting the former, it seems best to me to deny that aesthetic attunement involves an absolutely will-less subject.

Moreover, Nietzsche casts doubt on the ability of a purely disinterested subject to gain *any* knowledge, universal or otherwise. He writes that “to eliminate the will altogether, to disconnect the affects one and all, supposing that we were capable of this: what? would that not be to *castrate* the intellect?” (*GM*, III, 12). Nietzsche suggests that the affects, in some form or other, are constitutive of *every* act of knowing, so that an ideally disinterested Schopenhauerian spectator would be cognitively impotent, unable to know anything at all. To put it in Denham’s language, Nietzsche might say that attunement, if it is constitutive of aesthetic experience, must be *interested* absorption, since a purely will-less subject is impossible, or blind. The disagreement with Schopenhauer is real, and shows how significantly different Schopenhauer’s views on aesthetics are from those of anyone who believes that affects play a role in the experience of art, or even in our cognitive activity more generally. As we will see, Denham’s interpretation obscures this deep divide and makes Schopenhauer’s aesthetics appear more amenable to a modern audience than they are. On the contrary, Schopenhauer is one of the most radical representatives of the view that aesthetic contemplation involves a temporary release

from individuality and *all* affects and desires one could identify as one's own.

It is worth noting, however, that Schopenhauer seems to think that, in practice, a completely objective view of things is strictly speaking impossible. In a late work he compares the intellect's act of knowing with a musical instrument's production of a tone. Just as there cannot be an absolutely pure tone, since the specific nature of each instrument adds its own distinctive timbre, so there cannot be an absolutely objective act of knowing, since the individuality of the knower always distorts the "purely objective element" of knowledge to some degree (*PP*, II, 65). The best we can hope for is an intellect where this distortion is least. But "an absolutely objective and thus perfectly pure intellect is just as impossible as is an absolutely pure tone" (*ibid.*). This passage suggests some mitigation in his views, an acknowledgement that pure objectivity, like pure disinterestedness, as mentioned above, is more like an ideal limit than a state that could ever be fully actualized. However, he clearly thinks that geniuses are able to apprehend objective essences to a near perfect degree (similarly, one might say, to how tuning forks can produce nearly perfectly pure tones), and that *if* a subject became fully attuned to an object of contemplation, she would be purely disinterested and aware of universal objects. And for the reasons Young mentions, it is doubtful that disinterested attunement *must* be directed at universals.

In sum, Schopenhauer believes that attunement is both disinterested and objective. When a subject is so absorbed in the perception of an object that nothing but the object, not even her own sense of self, fills her consciousness, this can only be because she is no longer viewing the object in relation to her will; hence, attunement is disinterested. Furthermore, precisely because she is no longer viewing the object in relation to her will, her view of it is no longer distorted by the contingencies of her subjective viewpoint; hence, attunement is objective.

### 3 AGAINST DENHAM'S INTERPRETATION OF SCHOPENHAUERIAN ATTUNEMENT

#### 3.1 Aesthetic Experience as Spectatorial

Despite Schopenhauer's clear emphasis on the "will-lessness" of aesthetic contemplation, Denham argues that most commentators on Schopenhauer's aesthetics have been wrong to think that Schopenhauer characterizes aesthetic contemplation as lacking affective arousal. She cites Janaway, Ridley, Young, and Came as agreeing that, for Schopenhauer, aesthetic experience involves a suspension of emotion and desire (2014: 175). Denham is aware that she is going against the conventional reading of Schopenhauer on this point but argues that "[t]he role of affect or emotion in Schopenhauer's aesthetic psychology is, however, more complicated and nuanced than this consensus would suggest" (2014: 175). She claims that we must look at aesthetic experience, as Schopenhauer did, not from the perspective of the passive spectator but of the active genius or creator of art. In doing so, she departs from another standard reading of Schopenhauer, one that originates with Nietzsche (*GM*, III, 6), which holds that Schopenhauer looked at aesthetic experience from the perspective of the spectator, not the artist. For instance, Ivan Soll argues that "Schopenhauer presents the artist as essentially a *seer* of sorts, who somehow manages to share his vision with us" (1998: 96). He claims that "Schopenhauer does not distinguish sufficiently between the aesthete, who has the ability to see things aesthetically, and the artist, who has the ability to create works of art embodying such visions" (1998: 107). Young likewise stresses the spectatorial nature of Schopenhauerian contemplation: "in Schopenhauer's account the aesthetic state is a condition of pure passivity" (1992: 122). Indeed, Schopenhauer himself, as seen above, says that the aesthetic subject exists merely "as clear mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it"

(*WWR*, I, 178). Passages such as this lend support to the idea that aesthetic experience, for Schopenhauer, is essentially a matter of beholding or passively receiving the world in a certain way rather than actively engaging with it.

Hence, while it might seem like the creator's experience is merely a livelier version of the spectator's experience—lively enough to force the artist to recreate her experience in a new medium—Denham reverses this interpretation. She argues that “the beholder's experience is simply a less emphatic version of the same experience type” as the creative artist's (2014: 177). In other words, the artistic genius and her experiences are of central importance to Schopenhauer, and the aesthete's experiences are interesting only insofar as they present a diminished version of the genius's.

However, it is difficult to agree with Denham on this point. It is true that Schopenhauer privileges the creator. But the creator for him is merely an exceptional kind of spectator, who does not need the aid of an artwork in order to see aesthetically, but does so spontaneously. Schopenhauer is clear that the artist's gift is the ability to *see* the world a certain way; his ability to communicate this vision is of secondary importance. “The artist lets us peer into the world through his eyes. That he has these eyes...is the gift of genius and is inborn; but that he is able to lend us this gift, to let us see with his eyes, is acquired, and is the technical side of art” (*WWR*, I, 195). Moreover, the aim of an artwork is to get its audience to perceive things in a similar way, so that aesthetic experience is simply a special kind of perceptual experience. Thus, the essential characteristic of the artist is that he is a special kind of spectator, and the fact that he learns how to express his vision is a separate matter entirely.

In fact, the very creation of a work of art proceeds from the aim of communicating the artist's vision. In that sense, it involves the engagement of the will, the desire to achieve a certain

end. Therefore, the creative aspect of art is precisely what is *not* specifically aesthetic about it, in Schopenhauer's sense. So he writes, "with the *execution* of the work, where the purpose is to communicate and present what is known, the *will* can, and indeed must, again be active, just because there exists a *purpose*" (*PP*, II, 419). Therefore, Schopenhauer sees aesthetic experience as essentially a form of disinterested spectatorship. The creative artist is someone who is prone to becoming such a spectator, and who is able, *precisely when she is no longer spectating*, to plan and produce an artifact that can serve as a monument of her vision.

### 3.2 Aesthetic Experience as Passive

Connected with this point, Denham also pushes back against the traditional idea that aesthetic experience for Schopenhauer is merely "passive." Ridley, for instance, charges Schopenhauer with "the misconstruction of the engagement with beauty as residing in a quite peculiar form of passivity" (2007: 121). Schopenhauer himself often speaks of aesthetic experience in such terms, writing that it can take place only as long as we are "passive and indifferent spectators" (*PP*, II, 420). Against this traditional reading, Denham argues that "aesthetic engagement, as Schopenhauer describes it, is not a condition of 'passive receptivity', but an intensely active and creative one marked by affective arousal, imagination, and creative activity" (2014: 179–80). For instance, she quotes Schopenhauer's remark that "everyone who reads the poem or contemplates the work of art must of course contribute from his own resources" and that this

cooperation of the beholder, required for the enjoyment of a work of art, rests partly on the fact that every work of art can act only through the medium of the imagination. It must therefore excite the imagination, which can never be left out of the question and remain inactive. This is a condition of aesthetic effect, and therefore a fundamental law of all the fine arts. (*WWR*, II, 407)

She concludes from this passage that Schopenhauer's aesthetic subject "must be capable of *active* attunement, just as in Nietzschean" aesthetic experience (2014: 180). For her, "to be 'liberated from the will' in Schopenhauerian aesthetic experience is decidedly not to become inactive or 'will-less' in every way" (2014: 176). For as Schopenhauer says, aesthetic experience occurs "when, relieved for a while from its service to the will, [the intellect] does not sink into inactivity or apathy but is active...entirely alone and of its own accord" (*WWR*, II, 380). In short, "[t]he psychology of the beholder as much as that of the artist is distinguished not by passivity but by a consciousness that is 'energetically active without being spurred on by the will' (*WWR*, II, 381)" (2014: 177). Denham takes these passages as further evidence that Schopenhauer is primarily interested in the perspective of the active, emotionally engaged creator when analyzing aesthetic experience.

Denham has indeed identified a fascinating puzzle in Schopenhauer's aesthetics: how are we to reconcile his apparently contradictory claims of activity and passivity in aesthetic experience? One way to unravel it is to reconsider Schopenhauer's views on the nature of perception. *Perception* is inherently never "passive," but always requires an active contribution by the knowing subject in order to occur. *Sensation*, or the affection of the sense organs, is passive in the sense that it involves the mere receipt of sensory information: whenever an appropriate cause is presented to the appropriate sense organ, the sense organ responds in its characteristic way, thereby conveying information to the brain. But the brain must then actively process this information in order to convert it into an act of perception. As Schopenhauer writes,

One must be forsaken by all the gods to imagine that the world of intuitive perception...had an entirely real and objective existence *without our participation*, but then found its way into our heads through mere sensation.... It is only when the *understanding* begins to act...that a powerful transformation takes place whereby subjective sensation becomes objective intuitive perception. (*FR*, §21; first emphasis mine)

Therefore, perception itself is an active process—the activity of the intellect.<sup>13</sup> Hence, aesthetic perception in particular presupposes an active intellect. Moreover, since aesthetic contemplation supposedly presents the objects themselves, independent of their relation to the individual will, it really results from an *excess* of intellectual activity. Aesthetic knowing “is an abnormal activity, unnatural to the intellect; accordingly, it is conditioned by a decidedly abnormal and thus very rare excess of intellect ... beyond the measure required by the aims of the will” (*PP*, II, 419). Therefore, an “energetically active” intellect is a precondition of aesthetic experience.

Nonetheless, insofar as this abnormal activity can come about only in the abnormal case where all concern for personal aims and interests is temporarily suspended, it requires one’s *will* to assume a passive role. We become “passive and indifferent spectators” with respect to our egocentric ends and desires, but to be spectators at all our minds have to be active (*PP*, II, 420). Hence, Ridley is right to say that Schopenhauer’s aesthetics involve “a quite peculiar form of passivity” (2007: 121). While the intellect is energetically engaged, the will, and hence emotions and passions, must be left out of the picture. Therefore, *contra* Denham, it is more accurate to

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<sup>13</sup> For Schopenhauer, the term “intellect” refers to a sentient organism’s cognitive faculty in general, its capacity to produce representations. The intellect “is the brain’s product, or rather its activity” (*WWR*, II, 200). In human beings, the intellect is divided into two subordinate faculties based on the kind of representations each faculty deals with. The first is called the “understanding” (*Verstand*). The representations it produces are perceptions or intuitions—i.e., concrete, individual, spatiotemporal, causally interconnected material objects. The function of the understanding is to grasp the causal relations between spatiotemporal objects (*WWR*, I, 11). Consequently, perception is intellectual in the sense that it results from the intellect, and specifically the understanding, grasping the causal relations between changes in one’s sense organs and the material objects that caused those changes. The second faculty is called “reason” (*Vernunft*). The representations it produces are abstract, discursive, universal concepts. Concepts “have their whole content only from...knowledge of perception, and in relation to it” (*WWR*, I, 35); i.e., concepts merely repeat intuitive, perceptual knowledge in an abstract, discursive form. Consequently, reason does not *add* any content to our knowledge of the world, which is furnished entirely by the understanding. All animals possess understanding, but only human beings have reason.



call Schopenhauerian aesthetic experience “passive” rather than “active.” However, in order to challenge her interpretation more completely, it is necessary to examine Schopenhauer’s use of the term “will” more closely.

### 3.3 Schopenhauer’s Use of the Term “Will”

Denham suggests that Schopenhauer uses the term “will” ambiguously in his discussion of aesthetic experience. This ambiguity is supposed to explain how he can see aesthetic experience as affectively charged while maintaining that it involves a suspension of all willing. She argues that when Schopenhauer speaks of the subject as becoming “liberated from the will,” “the subject is liberated only from a particular species of will, leaving behind or transcending a certain ordinary *species* of activity, viz., the fulfillment of individual and egocentric aims and desires” (2014: 176). On her account, Schopenhauer holds that an inspired artist no longer pursues goals related to her individual, personal self, but rather goals of an impersonal nature. She takes an *intrinsic* interest in the objects of her contemplation *for their own sake*, and not for the sake of fulfilling her own egocentric ends. In this way, her will is still engaged, but it is no longer concerned for her personal well-being. Therefore, her aesthetic engagement with objects can still be passionate and emotion-laden. Denham thinks that Schopenhauer’s rigid “dichotomy of ‘will’ and ‘intellect’ leaves him with few resources to articulate this point. Having signed up to their ‘complete independence’, as he puts it, he finds it difficult to articulate the ways in which emotion, cognition, and imagination work together in Book III” (2014: 179). She charges that Schopenhauer’s conceptual apparatus blinds him to the real nature of the phenomenon he is trying to describe, namely, aesthetic experience. On the one hand, he senses that aesthetic experience involves the engagement of the emotions, but on the other, he sees it as involving the

suspension of practical, egocentric concern. Since he equates the latter with the “will” in general, he declares wholesale that the “will” in all its senses (and in particular, in the sense relating to affect) is absent in aesthetic experience. However, his own descriptions of aesthetic experience supposedly betray his unacknowledged conviction that it is in fact affectively charged.

When writing about aesthetic experience, Schopenhauer does indeed often, and explicitly, equate the “will” with our existence as persons. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this point. There are several passages where he seems to treat “will” and “person” as synonyms. For instance, he talks about “the objective tendency of the mind, as opposed to the subjective directed *to our own person, i.e., to the will*” (*WWR*, I, 185; my emphasis). Later on he writes, “As soon as any relation *to our will, to our person*, even of those objects of pure contemplation, again enters consciousness, the magic [of aesthetic beholding] is at an end” (*WWR*, I, 198; my emphasis). And elsewhere he says that “the beautiful, as such, quite obviously gives rise to our delight and pleasure, without its having any reference to our personal aims *and so to our will*” (*PP*, II, 415; my emphasis). These passages, and others it would be superfluous to list, show that when Schopenhauer mentions “will” in connection with aesthetic experience, he explicitly has the person and her aims in mind.

However, we should not conclude from this that when talking about aesthetic experience, he uses “will” to refer *merely* to personal ends. For he sees the concern with personal ends as inseparable from all the emotional and affective phenomena that he attributes to “will.” He sees “as manifestations of willing all desiring, striving, wishing, craving, yearning, hoping, loving, delighting, exulting and the like, no less than unwillingness or repugnance, than abhorring, fleeing, fearing, scorning, hating, grieving, suffering, in short, *all affects and passions*” (*FW*, 42; my emphasis). Moreover, “[s]ince these affects and passions...in many ways all refer to the

*accomplishment or lack of what is desired*, to the enduring or overcoming of the abhorrent, they are thus definite affections of the same will that is active in decisions and actions” (*ibid.*; my emphasis). This passage shows that Schopenhauer sees “affects and passions” as resulting from our striving after personal ends, since we experience them only in relation to our success or failure at attaining these ends. Therefore, if personal ends drop away, affective experience becomes impossible. Schopenhauer of course talks about aesthetic *pleasure*, but for him pleasure is merely the absence or disappearance of suffering, not something that exists positively in its own right. But suffering is conditioned by the will, since it is nothing other than the thwarting of the will.<sup>14</sup> Therefore “with the disappearance of all willing from consciousness, there yet remains the state of pleasure, in other words absence of all pain and here even absence of the possibility thereof” (*PP*, II, 416). So whenever Schopenhauer speaks of the *delight* we take in aesthetic contemplation, he is referring merely to the negative space that is left over when all affects are banished from consciousness. Disappearance of personal ends is equivalent for him to disappearance of emotion and passion. Therefore, Denham is wrong to think that Schopenhauer implicitly, in spite of himself, believes affective experiences are separable from the possession of personal ends. For him, it is impossible to have “intense emotion combined with an indifference to the aims of the personal, egocentric will,” which Denham argues characterizes Schopenhauerian aesthetic contemplation (2014: 178).

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<sup>14</sup> Schopenhauer defines suffering as the will’s “hindrance through an obstacle placed between it and its temporary goal” (*WWR*, I, 309). However, in this same passage, he goes on to argue that since the will lacks any final goal that would permanently satisfy it, it is aimless, unfulfillable, striving, and since striving involves a dissatisfaction with one’s present state, the will is perpetually hindered from attaining any final goal. Hence one could also say that the will just *is* suffering, since it is always self-thwarted.

### 3.4 The Role of Affect in Aesthetic Experience

Denham stresses the importance of the genius, the creative artist, in order to support her claim that Schopenhauer sees aesthetic experience as affectively charged. She draws on passages in which he describes the genius as a passionate creature. In one passage, Schopenhauer describes how the massive intellect of the genius leads him to

[direct] all the forces of his mind to one point. He causes them to be united at this point and concentrates them so vigorously, firmly, and exclusively, that all the rest of the world vanishes for him, and his object for him fills all reality.... The result of this is that, by trifles, highly gifted individuals are sometimes thrown into emotions of the most varied kind. To others such emotions are incomprehensible, for they see these individuals reduced to grief, joy, care, fear, anger, and so on by things that would leave the ordinary man quite unruffled. *Therefore genius lacks coolness or soberness, which consists simply in our seeing in things nothing more than actually belongs to them...in respect of our possible aims; hence no cool or sober man can be a genius. With [this] ...is also associated...the vehemence and passionateness of willing, which is likewise a condition of genius.* (WWR, II, 389; Denham's emphasis)

Denham concludes from these remarks that “[f]irst-personal aesthetic experience...is far from being dispassionate and passively receptive,” but instead consists of passionate activity directed to ends beyond the scope of the individual personality (2014: 178). In other words, on Denham's account, aesthetic experience for Schopenhauer is still very willful, in the sense of being affectively charged and driven by emotions. It is simply that these emotions are not directed toward conventional, personal concerns but to an impersonal engagement with the target objects, whatever Schopenhauer might say about the impossibility of such a phenomenon.

Denham's primary mistake here is to think that the passionateness and vehemence that characterize the psychology of the Schopenhauerian genius under ordinary circumstances apply also to the genius while engaged in aesthetic contemplation. However vehement and passionate the genius's everyday psychology may be, for Schopenhauer it is precisely when the genius is momentarily free from that passion that aesthetic experience can occur. The passage Denham

appeals to merely illustrates the superabundance of intellect that Schopenhauer attributes to genius, not the affectively charged nature of a genius's aesthetic experience. Indeed, just as the intellect came into being only in order to guide the will and assist it in achieving its ends, so the power of the intellect is proportional<sup>15</sup> to the power of the will of the creature possessing it. I mean "power of the will" both in terms of the number and range of the creature's needs and the strength of the emotions or passions it undergoes. This relation between the power of the intellect and the power of the will explains the different intellectual capacities not only of different species of animals but also of different individual human beings (*WWR*, II, 282). Therefore the "enhancement of brain-development, and hence of the intellect and of the clearness of the representation...is brought about by the ever-increasing and more complicated *need* of these phenomena of the will" (*WWR*, II, 279). Human beings' needs are so great that they require a particularly powerful intellect to satisfy them.

This enhanced intellect goes hand in hand with an enhanced emotional life. It makes it possible for human beings to experience *passions* as opposed to mere *emotions*, where Schopenhauer conceives of the former as more intense versions of the latter (*WWR*, II, 280). Thus, a genius, with his abnormally enhanced intellect, undergoes exceptionally intense passions when his intellect is goaded on by his will. Therefore "the vehemence of the will keeps pace with the enhancement of the intelligence, just because in reality this enhancement always springs from the will's increased needs and more pressing demands; but in addition to this, the two mutually

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<sup>15</sup> However, it is not *directly* proportional to the power of the will. For Schopenhauer says that in a genius "it is as if a measure of the power of knowledge must have to his lot far exceeding that required for the service of an individual will" (*WWR*, I, 186). Therefore, in genius it seems that an individual possesses a *disproportionately powerful* intellect compared to his will. Nonetheless, as I will explain, he sees the genius as also possessing an abnormally powerful will in comparison with other members of the human species.

support each other” (*ibid.*). So from a physiological perspective, superior intellect can be found only in concert with powerful passion. On the one hand, a genius-level intellect is a result of the intensity of a genius’s will. For “[v]ehemence of the will and passionate ardor of the character are a condition of enhanced intelligence” (*WWR*, II, 203). Moreover, “[g]enius is conditioned by a passionate temperament, and a phlegmatic genius is inconceivable. It seems that an exceedingly vehement and hence strongly desiring will must exist, if nature is to provide an abnormally heightened intellect as appropriate to it” (*WWR*, II, 282). On the other hand, the intensity of a genius’s representations, when they are brought into relation with his will, stir his emotions more violently than in ordinary people, as the passage quoted by Denham illustrates. Thus, it is only natural that a genius-level intellect is inseparable from a stormy emotional life and that “genius lacks coolness or soberness” (*WWR*, II, 389).

However, Schopenhauer is clear and explicit that true aesthetic contemplation is an exception that can occur only when that excessive vehemence and passion die down. Only “when the will is entirely at rest, and no wave disturbs the clear mirror of the world-view” can the genius find time for purely theoretical and aesthetic achievements (*WWR*, II, 283).<sup>16</sup> Thus, a genius becomes aesthetically engaged just when “the storm of the passions” is temporarily silenced. And Schopenhauer indeed believes that this silencing is only temporary. It can occur only through a “great though spontaneous exertion” of the intellect, and “there are long intervals during which men of genius stand in very much the same position as ordinary persons, both as

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, Schopenhauer considers the case of someone who enters the aesthetic state when gazing upon nature. In this state, “[t]he storm of passions, the pressure of desire and fear, and all the miseries of willing are then at once calmed and appeased in a marvelous way. For at the moment when, torn from the will, we have given ourselves up to pure, will-less knowing, we have stepped into another world, so to speak, where everything that moves our will, and thus violently agitates us, no longer exists” (*WWR*, I, 197).

regards merits and defects” (*WWR*, I, 188). During these mundane intervals, the genius will often exhibit all the passionateness and ardor that Schopenhauer attributes to him in Denham’s passage, but we should not conclude from this that “first-personal aesthetic experience” involves “intense emotion combined with an indifference to the aims of the personal, egocentric will” (2014: 178). In fact, as I have argued above, disengagement from the individual will, for Schopenhauer, involves the loss of a sense of self and of the capacity to experience emotions from a first-person perspective.<sup>17</sup> So again, Schopenhauer regards as impossible that combination of passion and disinterestedness that Denham posits. The aesthetic state involves a momentary liberation from preoccupation with one’s person with its personal aims *and therefore* from all emotion.

Nonetheless, Denham argues that the textual evidence supports her claim that Schopenhauerian aesthetic experience, perhaps contrary to Schopenhauer’s stated intentions, is affectively charged. The most compelling example she finds concerns Schopenhauer’s remarks on lyrical poetry. She quotes him as saying,

In the lyrical poem proper, the mere song, in which the deeply felt mood of the present and the impression of the surroundings flow forth as if involuntarily in words, whose meter and rhyme are realized automatically...all these...have the great merit of being the purer work of the rapture of the moment, of the inspiration, of the free impulse of genius, without any admixture of deliberation and reflection. They are therefore delightful and enjoyable through and through. (*WWR*, II, 409)

This passage seems to show that “[a]esthetic creativity...is a matter of affectively charged inspiration” (Denham 2014: 181). The lyrical poem itself is the product of a “deeply felt mood”

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<sup>17</sup> It does not preclude the capacity to experience emotions from a third-person perspective, i.e., to have an emotion as the *object* of one’s contemplation. This can happen in any art which depicts some aspect of human nature, or in music, which presents “a *copy of the will itself*,” so that we are able to contemplate the essence of emotions purely objectively, without subjectively participating in them (*WWR*, I, 257). In this context, Young speaks of “disassociated emotions” (2005: 120), concerning which I will say more below.

and “the purer rapture of the moment,” appearing to support Denham’s claim that Schopenhauer, in spite of himself, sees aesthetic experience as involving a passionate absorption in non-egocentric aims and goals.

However, lyrical poetry is exceptional in Schopenhauer’s aesthetics. He seems to regard the experience of it as a kind of hybrid state of aesthetic and non-aesthetic experience. He writes that with songs,

[i]t is the subject of the will, in other words, the singer’s own willing, that fills his consciousness...always as emotion, passion, an agitated state of mind. Besides this, however, and simultaneously with it, the singer, through the sight of surrounding nature, becomes conscious of himself as the subject of pure, will-less knowing, whose unshakable, blissful peace now appears in contrast to the stress of willing that is always restricted and needy. The feeling of this contrast, this alternate play, is really what is expressed in the whole of the song, and what in general constitutes the lyrical state. In this state pure knowing comes to us, so to speak, in order to deliver us from willing and its stress.... Therefore in the song and in the lyrical mood, willing (the personal interest of the aims) and pure perception of the environment that presents itself are wonderfully blended with each other. (*WWR*, I, 250)

In this passage, Schopenhauer presents lyrical experience as a synthesis of willful and will-less states. It involves an alternation between a properly aesthetic state of pure knowing, in which emotion and desire drop away, and a non-aesthetic state of passion and agitation. Yet even here Schopenhauer makes clear that the specifically aesthetic aspect of this dual state is the disinterested, will-less one. Moreover, he regards lyrical poetry as a kind of immature art form. “In the child [subjective feeling and objective knowledge] are still fully blended....this is why [the youth] is fit only for lyrical poetry, and only the mature man for dramatic poetry” (*WWR*, I, 251). This passage suggests that there is something imperfect or incomplete about lyrical poetry, and that it does not represent the most thorough and consistent elaboration of the human capacity for aesthetic experience. Accordingly, it is not the most appropriate example to use to try to determine Schopenhauer’s view of the nature of aesthetic experience as such. Moreover, as



already discussed, what *is* characteristically aesthetic about it involves a disengagement from emotional experience.

Thus, it seems that Schopenhauer does allow emotions to play a role in aesthetic experience, but only emotions of a rather peculiar kind. The aesthetic subject must be *disengaged* from her emotions, or unable to identify them as her own. Young suggests that, especially in the experience of the sublime and the lyrical, Schopenhauer allows for “*disassociated* emotion, emotion we, as it were, feel for another rather than for ourselves. And because it is thus experienced it does not prompt any act of will... It is not a ‘modification of the will’” (2005: 120). In other words, when emotion does enter into aesthetic experience, “it is not *personal* but rather *universal* emotion that is expressed” (Young 2005: 121). And indeed, for Schopenhauer, it *must* be, since aesthetic experience for him necessarily involves the disappearance of everything personal.

Therefore, Denham is wrong to characterize Schopenhauerian attunement as affectively charged. His own description of it precludes emotions or desires in the ordinary sense from playing any role in it. While it involves a heightened activity of the mind, it is essentially a spectatorial state in which the spectator’s personality assumes a passive role. It is fundamentally characterized by an absence of affect.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Schopenhauer's conception of aesthetic experience as disinterested and objective is not an arbitrary feature of his thought, but is inextricably related to his system as a whole. Hence, Denham misinterprets his account of aesthetic experience because she fails to appreciate the organic unity of his thought and puts one aspect of his system out of step with the rest. Indeed, Schopenhauer explains that the various parts of his philosophy have an "organic connection" with one another because, on his view, his philosophy is the expression of "*a single thought*" (*WWR*, I, xii). I have already discussed how Schopenhauer's view that aesthetic experience is objective follows necessarily from his epistemological assumptions plus the assumption that the subject of aesthetic experience is will-less (Sec. 2.2.2). Moreover, the idea that aesthetic experience involves a *total*, if temporary, disengagement from all desire, affect, and individuality links Schopenhauer's aesthetics with his ethics as tightly as he intends. The very same "pure, true, and profound knowledge of the inner nature of the world" that is revealed through aesthetic contemplation, and that "becomes for [the artist] an end in itself," becomes for the ascetic saint, i.e., the supremely morally gifted individual, "a quieter of the will" (*WWR*, I, 267). That is, in both aesthetic and ascetic experience, the subject becomes totally disengaged from her desires, affects, and individuality; the only difference is that in the former case, the disengagement is temporary, while in the latter, it is permanent. Denham's interpretation obscures this deep continuity Schopenhauer perceives between aesthetics and ethics, since it downplays the degree of disengagement operative in aesthetic experience. Denham suggests that, for Schopenhauer, the aesthetic contemplator is only *partially* disengaged from her personality as well as her aims and emotions (namely, from those unrelated to the object of her contemplation), but gives free play to her feelings and drives *as they relate to* the target object. Not so for Schopenhauer. For him,

the aesthetic contemplator is momentarily dead to her emotions, aims, and even her separate, individual self. In all these ways, her state is identical to that of the ascetic saint, except it is transitory, and does not inspire her to give up the world. Therefore, the traditional interpretation of Schopenhauerian aesthetic contemplation as constituted by a wholesale abolition of individuality, desire, and affect (and not by a mere *realigning* of these to non-pragmatic concerns) both better fits Schopenhauer's account of aesthetic experience and shows how this account coheres with his broader systematic concerns.

Hence, Schopenhauer presents an extreme version of the view that aesthetic contemplation is disinterested and objective. For him, it is not that the subject experiences unique aesthetic emotions during an aesthetic experience, or normal emotions toward objects that don't concern him pragmatically; rather, the subject is wholly disconnected from his own emotional and conative life. Such a radical view is difficult for us to accept today, if only for the reasons discussed in Sec. 2.2.2: it is doubtful that a purely disinterested, self-forgetting state is even possible, or that any sort of cognition would be possible in it, or that, even if cognition were possible, that cognition would reveal the objective, universal essence of things. For all these reasons, we can see ourselves today as fundamentally different from Schopenhauer and the approach to aesthetics that he represents. This contrast can illuminate our own views (whatever they may happen to be) on aesthetic contemplation or even cognition in general by revealing their specific differences from him. Denham's interpretation frustrates such insight, since it proposes to see a continuous plain where there is really a vast canyon.

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