Analysis of Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer begins by defining his terms, that is, he gives us his definition of freedom. He views this as something negative, freedom from something, and divides freedom into three categories - physical, intellectual and moral - depending on the positive force that is being evaded. Physical freedom refers only to freedom from physical constraints on the exercise of the will, of an animal or human being, and is uncontroversial. Schopenhauer says he'll define intellectual freedom near the end of his essay, though he doesn't seem to do so in the extracts before us. Moral freedom is "freedom of the will".

In considering moral freedom, Schopenhauer says that it is in some sense like physical freedom, in that we are talking about freedom from things resisting the will. However, in this case the impedances are not physical but moral countermotives such as threats etc. Whereas a physical obstacle may be impossible to overcome, so be an absolute constraint on the freedom of the will, Schopenhauer doubts whether this can be the case with moral constraints. He thinks that, in principle, a yet stronger countermotive may overcome the weaker constraining countermotive, at least for those of the right character. However, for the person concerned, without the requisite character, the countermotive may not be available in sufficient strength, so the question remains whether the will is free - are we free to will and perform what we like, or only that which is within the scope of our character.

In introducing freedom, Schopenhauer has considered only whether we are free to execute what we will, not whether we are free to will what we want. The definition of freedom ended with an act being free if it was in conformity with one's will. However, freedom to will what we want is equivalent to having freedom to will what we will to will, and this leads to infinite regress as we seek freedom to will what we will what we will …. So, we are left simply with the question "can you will ?". This shows that the empirical approach from "doing" doesn't work for the will. Schopenhauer suggests an alternative which involves the freedom from *necessity*.

Introducing necessity, Schopenhauer rejects the standard definition "that is necessary which cannot be otherwise" as merely verbal and suggests "necessary is that which follows from a given sufficient ground" (though wouldn't he have to say "necessarily follows", hence introducing circularity ?). He then distinguishes three forms of necessity - logical, mathematical and physical. The latter is the form of interest here and is taken to be causal. As soon as we see that an effect is the consequent of a cause, we see it as necessarily so. For Schopenhauer, something is necessary iff it is consequent on a given sufficient ground.

Schopenhauer then defines the *contingent* as the opposite of the necessary, but thinks that all things (events / states of affairs ?) are contingent relative to one another except in so far as one thing is the cause of another. Taking the free to be free of necessity, the free would have to be absolutely uncaused and absolutely contingent. Schopenhauer personally doubts the coherence of this understanding of freedom, but thinks it coincides with our usual understanding. With Kant in support, Schopenhauer states that free will can initiate

of itself a series of changes. This is equivalent to the free will being determined by nothing at all. This is a very strong claim ! Schopenhauer tries to make plain that this 'Free choice of indifference' is the only clear conception of free will, because one cannot adopt a hazier definition such as "grounds that do not necessarily bring about their consequents" because, for Schopenhauer, something is a ground iff it is necessary. The definition of free-will is that in identical circumstances, two diametrically opposed outcomes are possible (this is true in Quantum Mechanics, hence, presumably, the attraction of bringing QM into explanations of free will).

Having decided what freedom of the will is, Schopenhauer now gets down to the main subject of his essay, whether self-consciousness is of any assistance in demonstrating its possibility. Schopenhauer states that our intuition - that we can do what we will - tells us that we can do this or that, but the grounds for this intuition come from "the dim depths of our inner being". However, doing what we will is not what Schopenhauer means by freedom of the will, because it presupposes, he says, that the will is already formed. Schopenhauer is not interested in the consequences but in the grounds of the will.

Schopenhauer readily admits that one can do one thing or another, but doubts whether one can will one thing as easily as another. By saying we can will what we will, we are relying on identity, uttering a tautology and therefore saying nothing significant. The I and the will are indistinguishable. Schopenhauer states that, for the untutored person, the question whether the willing itself is determined, given the person willing and the object of desire, is unnatural. The philosophically untutored is confident that 'what I will I can do, and I will what I will,' and is unconvinced that he is not an exception to the rest of the natural world. Our immediate self-consciousness gives us no information on the origin of our will, as is demonstrated by attempted explanations people give, which are not based on self-consciousness but on various general rules dreamt up for the occasion.

Schopenhauer now proceeds to investigate causality, saying that we know that change arises only from causality a priori of all experience, and that the change is necessary, given the cause. He then divides the possible subjects of causality into the inorganic and the organic and further divides the latter into a gradual advance from simple plants to the most complex animal, man. The three major divisions of inorganic bodies, plants and animals are appropriately causally affected - most narrowly in the case of the inorganic, by stimulus in the case of plants and by motivation in the case of animals.

The narrow sense of causality experienced by inorganic matter (and, Schopenhauer would probably add, by organic, considered as inorganic) is characterised by mechanical, physical and chemical change and by the action of Newton's second and third laws. That is; the laws of equal action and reaction and the proportionality of effect to cause. (Note. Is this as analogy in the case of the 2^{nd} law (F = mA) ?) Inanimate bodies suffer causation exclusively along these lines.

Causative stimulus, experienced primarily by plants, is not subject to the two Newtonian laws - ie. reaction is not equal to action, nor is effect proportional to the cause / stimulus.

Schopenhauer seems to suggest that the connection between cause and effect isn't even law-like (let alone Newtonian) as he says that the size of the effect isn't deducible from the size of the stimulus. He gives examples of over-feeding plants, but these are examples on non-linearity rather than of unpredictability in principle. Maybe this doesn't affect the argument. Predictability and law aside, Schopenhauer asserts (rightly) that the whole life of plants and the vegetative changes in animals are caused by stimuli. In fact Schopenhauer takes causation of change exclusively by stimuli as the defining characteristic of a plant.

The third and final categorisation is that of animals, namely change caused by motivation, the vehicle of which is cognition. Schopenhauer views animals as active, seeking things out rather than passively awaiting stimulus, and therefore needing to be able to represent their environment and consequently needing consciousness. Though infinitely gradated, he seems to view consciousness as common to all animals and defines an animal as one whose movements are caused by motives. He also seems to demand that all animals have self-consciousness and wills in order for their motives to be effective.

Schopenhauer then draws a distinction between the motivations of non-human animals and man. The former are limited to intuitions whereas man can for concepts under the action of reason and thus has a far wider choice of motives. Schopenhauer considers a couple of exceptions - training (taken to be fear operating through habit) and instinct. Human beings, according to Schopenhauer, are liberated from the intuitions or impressions of the moment by portable thoughts. The human being is at least capable of rational action which is governed by well-considered thoughts.

Both thoughts and intuitions become motives as soon as they are able to act on the will. "All motives are causes, and all causality entails necessity". A human being can reflect on his motives and therefore has greater choice than does an animal. He is therefore free from the intuitive compulsions that an animal is subject to - but only thereby relatively free. His motives, once arrived at, are just as causally effective as the intuitions of an animal, so this freedom is only comparative. What differs is the immediacy of the causation, which is proximate in the case of animal intuition but more remote in the case of thought, which is associated with the human brain. Schopenhauer describes the process of decision-making, where the conflict between competing motives of differing strengths occurs - though he sees the outcome as necessarily decided.

In order to clarify matters, Schopenhauer describes an example of someone coming to a decision about what to do, thinking they have complete freedom. By analogy, he thinks of water "thinking to itself" that it can do vaguely analogous things. Schopenhauer's point is that, though in each situation water might, in some conceivable world, do such-and-such, in each actual situation it only does what the antecedent circumstances cause it to do. By analogy, he claims, the same is true of human beings. When we consider the multiplicity of motives of differing strengths, we imagine that we might go one way or another - ie. give in to one motive or another. But, in fact, the strengths of the motives being what they are, and we being what we are, we can only follow the one with the greatest strength. The

hypothesis that "I might will that other thing" is contradicted by the fact that I will something different. He gives the example of willing to shoot oneself, saying that it is fantasy to suggest that one might do so - because we just (in general) do not possess the motive capable on overcoming the fear of death.

The final conclusion is that, while I can do what I will, I can only will what is in accord with my character, so the freedom of the will is an illusion.