

INDIA AND SCHOPENHAUER IN THE LIGHT OF SANKARA AND SCHOPENHAUER*

INDIA Y SCHOPENHAUER: A LA LUZ DE SANKARA Y SCHOPENHAUER

Arati Barua
Delhi University, India

Abstract

Arthur Schopenhauer was perhaps the first major Western thinker who was so influenced by the Upanishads that he wrote, “In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death”. This view of Schopenhauer about the Upanishads not only shows his familiarity with the Eastern thought, but *it* also reflects his adoration for Indian philosophy, religion and culture, which influenced him in a significant way. Thus, in the *World As Will and Representation* Schopenhauer clearly states that readers can understand his writings better with prior acquaintances with the philosophy of Plato, Kant and that of Hindus.

I propose to examine this relationship between Schopenhauer and Sankara, a great Vedantist of India, in a comparative manner, focusing on the problem of the relationship between the ‘Will and the world as its representations’ in Schopenhauer and of the ‘Brahman and the world of multiplicity’ in Sankara’s philosophy of Monism. I do this in an analytical framework of interpreting the Ontology of the Absolute and its manifestation in the phenomenal world in the literatures of Schopenhauer and Sankaracarya, and then I shall try to figure out a solution to this problem through the application of the Vedantic notion of identity between the Brahman and the atman in both these thinkers.

Keywords: Advaita, Sankara, Brahman and Maya, Schopenhauer, Will and representation

Resumen

Arthur Schopenhauer fue quizá el primer gran pensador occidental que se sintió tan influido por los Upanishads que escribió: “En el mundo entero no hay estudio tan beneficioso y tan elevador como el de los Upanishads. Ha sido el consuelo de mi vida, será el consuelo de mi muerte”. Esta opinión de Schopenhauer sobre los Upanishads no sólo muestra su familiaridad con el pensamiento oriental, sino que también refleja su adoración por la filosofía, la religión y la cultura indias, que le influyeron de manera significativa. Así, en *El mundo como voluntad y representación* Schopenhauer afirma claramente que los lectores pueden comprender mejor sus escritos si conocen previamente la filosofía de Platón, Kant y la de los hindúes.

Me propongo examinar esta relación entre Schopenhauer y Sankara, un gran vedantista de la India, de manera comparativa, centrándome en el problema de la relación entre la “Voluntad y el mundo como sus representaciones” en Schopenhauer y del “Brahman y el mundo de la multiplicidad” en la filosofía del Monismo de Sankara. Hago esto en un marco analítico de interpretación de la Ontología del Absoluto y su manifestación en el mundo fenoménico en las literaturas de Schopenhauer y Sankaracarya y luego trataré de encontrar una solución a este problema a través de la aplicación de la noción vedántica de identidad entre el Brahman y el atman en ambos pensadores.

Palabras clave: Advaita, Sankara, Brahman y Maya, Schopenhauer, Voluntad y representación

* Originally published in: Barua, Arati. “Schopenhauer’s Philosophy of Will and Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta: A Comparative Study.” *Proceedings of the XXII World Congress of Philosophy*, 2008, 8, pp. 23-29.

Arthur Schopenhauer was perhaps the first major Western thinker who was so influenced by the Upanishads that he wrote, “In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death” (*Parerga II*, 397).

Schopenhauer’s view about the Upanishads not only shows his familiarity with the Eastern thought but it also reflects his adoration for Indian philosophy, religion and culture, which influenced him in a significant way. He used to keep a copy of Upanishad in his bed side and he used to read a page every day before going to sleep (Cf. Magee 14-5).

This much adoration he had for Upanishads. Thus, in the *World As Will and Representation* Schopenhauer clearly states that readers can understand his writings better with prior acquaintances with the philosophy of Plato, Kant and that of Hindus.

Prior to Kant and Plato, the Hindus also upheld the view that this world is an illusion. According to Plato, the world we perceive is only a world of flux; it is illusory since the world is and is not at the same time. Man is deceived by the false knowledge of this world; he believes in the permanent existence of this world which is ever changing; and to realize the truth that the empirical world is in a state of flux is the “true wisdom”.

We Indians have a similar view in ‘the Vedas and Puranas’. It is known in Indian Philosophy as the *Doctrine of Maya*. The Doctrine of Maya, according to Schopenhauer, explains the true nature of the world as both existent and non-existent. Similarly, corresponding to the Kantian view, there is also a distinction between the world of appearance and the world of reality. The world of becoming appears to be constant to the human knowledge. The empirical world, which is only an appearance of reality, is explained as a dream or illusion¹.

Unfortunately, however, though some attempts have been made earlier by others to find out the links between Schopenhauer and the East, not much work has been done so far to find out the connection between Schopenhauer and Indian thought, especially by Indian scholars.

Being so motivated I propose to examine this relationship between Schopenhauer and Sankara, a great Vedantist of India in a comparative manner with a focus on the problem of the relationship between the ‘Will and the world as its representations’ in Schopenhauer and of the ‘Brahman and the world of multiplicity’ in Sankara’s philosophy of Monism.

I do this in an analytical framework of interpreting the Ontology of the Absolute and its manifestation in the phenomenal world in the Literatures of Schopenhauer and Sankara and then I shall try to find out a solution to this problem through the application of the Vedantic notion of identity between the Brahman and the atman in both of these thinkers.

In doing so, I shall focus on the particular problem of bridging the gulf between the ‘Brahman’ and the ‘jivas’ (individual *selves*) in Sankara’s Advaitism or non-dualism and the gap between the Will and the representations in Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of will.

¹ Schopenhauer’s conception of Maya, needless to say, is only partly true. In the view of Advaita Vedanta the world is definitely not an illusion; rather it is an appearance of Brahman which can be neither real nor unreal (Sadasadanirvacaniya).

Being a researcher on Schopenhauer's philosophy and having been exposed to Sankara's philosophy, I *believe* that a comparative study of both these thinkers will be highly illuminating in finding a solution to the problem of bridging the gulf between the Will and the representations in Schopenhauer's philosophy. Likewise, it will be a recognition to Schopenhauer's link with the Indian philosophical thought in a definitive manner as well as an attempt to derive a synthesis between the Indian and the German philosophy.

In Schopenhauer's philosophy there are two sides of the same coin: on one hand there is the world of representations or the world of phenomena, and on the other hand the world as will. The whole world is the objectification of the same will, which is the thing-in-itself. But the same will objectifies itself in different grades and in different degrees. There are four grades of the objectifications 1) the inorganic nature 2) the *vegetable* kingdom, 3) the animal kingdom and 4) the human will.

The human will he takes as the best example of all the objectifications where the will is manifested in its highest degree. However, the difficulty here is to connect the one indivisible will (as the thing-in-itself) to the world of plurality, which is the objectification of that will.

There is a clarification needed here. A question arises regarding the effectiveness of Will, how is the Will objectifies in this world of multiplicity. Like in Sankara it is easy to explain that through the doctrine of Maya it happens. This magical power of Maya creates this world of multiplicity in place of one Brahman. But in Schopenhauer's philosophy there is no such magical power of Maya through which the world of objectification can be explained.

The problem arises because this world of multiplicity is to be explained in and through the will, which as the thing-in-itself is beyond any plurality. We have on the one side the indivisible will, and on the other its objectifications as the phenomenal multiplicity. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer holds that though the will objectifies itself in plurality, it does not mean that the will is *divided* among phenomena. For example, the same will makes itself known as fully in 'one oak' as it is revealed in millions of oaks. It shows that the will, in its objectification in a particular grade, has to express itself fully in each of the object therein (Cf. Schopenhauer Will, 167).

Thus, as Schopenhauer remarks in the *Fourfold Root.*, the will, a concept, has to deal with many things and yet must remain single. Hence is the problem- how to bridge up the gulf between the Will and the different grades of will's objectification on one hand, and between these grades and the particular phenomenon of them on the other, because the Will does not admit any plurality. This gulf between the Will and the grades, or between the grades and the particular phenomenon of them, is quite similar to the gulf between the 'Brahman' and the 'world of appearances' in the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta of Sankaracarya. But let us see how Sankara tried to figure out a solution to this problem and to see whether the same solution is applicable to Schopenhauer's philosophy of will.

A solution to this problem lies in Schopenhauer's concept of "Platonic Ideas" (168), which he brings into his scheme of mental faculties and identifies them with the grades of the will. Instead of 'idea', he uses the word "Platonic Ideas" in order to clarify that he adopts the meaning *given* to that term by Plato. However, it remains unclear whether Schopenhauer's world of Ideas has an existence separated from the empirical world as it had for Plato. Nor it is clear whether it meant something similar to Kant's "ideas of reason". It seems he did not follow either of them completely (Barua 43).

Schopenhauer regards Ideas as ‘prototypes’ which are identified with the grades of the will. As such, Schopenhauer is more interested in evaluating the logical character of Ideas than in clarifying their ontological status. Hence from the fact that Platonic Ideas are identified with the grades of the objectification of the will, it does not follow that Schopenhauer assigns some kind of separate existence for Ideas in another world. Perhaps, the real reason for Schopenhauer’s identification of the Platonic Ideas with the grades of the will’s objectification should be sought in his urge to establish a relationship between the one indivisible will and the multiplicity of the phenomenon in which it objectifies itself. However, Schopenhauer’s explanation of Ideas as prototypes and its identification with the grades of the will is rather ambiguous. His sudden introduction of Platonic Ideas into his account is termed by Prof. Hamlyn as bringing in “a piece of alien ontology” (Hamlyn 107). But in order to understand the relation of the one indivisible will to the world of plurality we must accept these representations and understand them on the model of Platonic Ideas. Then only we can visualize the phenomena as the expression of the will at some grade or other. At the same time, there is a warning, that we must not imagine these Ideas to be constituting another level of reality apart from the will and its-representations.

Regarding the origin of Ideas, Schopenhauer maintains that they spring from knowledge of relations (Will, 122-23). However, these Ideas though are derived from ordinary representations like relations, they are not bound by the limitations of these representations; Ideas transcend ordinary representations while being derived from them. By saying so Schopenhauer perhaps wishes to emphasize that we can know them through abstraction from ordinary representations or phenomena. Epistemologically viewed, Ideas, therefore, become secondary when compared to other representations. But in so far as the ordinary representations are themselves secondary when compared to the direct knowledge of the will, Ideas can be said to *have* in fact a tertiary status.

Despite all this, Schopenhauer terms Ideas as the “most adequate” (122-23) objectivity of the will identifying them with the grades of the will’s objectification. He also describes Idea as the “thing-in-itself under the form of representation”. While compared to Ideas, phenomena seem to be less adequate objectification of the will. But since these phenomena are capable of reflecting Ideas, they are found to be in great conformity to them. This is how Schopenhauer tries to bring a link between the one indivisible will as the thing-in-itself and the world of plurality which is nothing but the will’s objectification. Hence Ideas work as mediators between the will and phenomena because they constitute a unity which holds, within it an implicit multiplicity. Being the direct objectification of the will, Ideas remain the real aspect of the thing-in-itself, although “under the form of representation”. Hence these Ideas, while “under the form of representations” are in a sense dependent on our representations in general, are still accessible to us without being subject to the conditions that representations general must conform to. Schopenhauer’s attitude to bring a reconciliation between the one indivisible will and the world of plurality through the Ideas, corresponds to Sankara’s attempt to reconcile the Brahman and the world of appearances including the individual beings or jivas through the concept of “veil of Maya”. Now we must examine how far Sankara was successful in his attempt to do so. We must see whether he could establish a proper link between the Brahman and the jivas and the world through his philosophy of Maya.

Sankara says that “Brahman satya, jagat mitthya, jiva Brahmaiva naporah”, meaning that the Brahman is the only and ultimate reality, the world is false and the jivas are non-different from the Brahman. According to Sankara, while the world is false, the jivas are not false, rather jivas are said to

be non-different from the Brahman. So in Sankara's philosophy the jivas are as real as the Brahman is but due to the lack of real knowledge the jivas forget their own real selves as Brahman, so they suffer in this false world thinking of it as the reality. But actually, the world of multiplicity is a false projection of the Brahman who is one and only one but due to the magical power of Maya we see the world of multiplicity instead of one Brahman. When we can attain the real knowledge of Brahman through our efforts we can see the difference of the world of multiplicity and the one Brahman and go back to our original status as we were non different from the one Brahman. It is a kind of realization, a self-realization².

Bibliographic references

Barua, Arati. *The Philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer*. New Delhi, The Intellectual Publishing House, 1992.

Magee, Bryan. *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea. Vol. III*. Tr. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp. London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1964.

_____. *Parerga and Paralipomena, vol. II*. Tr. E. F. J Payne. Oxford, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1974.

Hamlyn, David. *Schopenhauer. The Arguments of the Philosophers*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

² But if we try to understand the situation from Sankaracarya's understanding of self-realization it could be attainable in this very life. As Socrates said "know Yourself." In Ancient Greece, the philosopher Socrates famously declared that the unexamined life was not worth living. Asked to sum up what all philosophical commandments could be reduced to, he replied: 'Know yourself.' Knowing yourself has extraordinary prestige in our culture. It has been framed as quite literally the meaning of life.

When we speak about self-knowledge, we're alluding to a particular kind of knowledge – generally of an emotional or psychological kind. There are a million things you could potentially know about yourself. Here are some options:

Knowing yourself has an extraordinary prestige in our culture. It has been framed as quite literally the meaning of life.

This sounds, when one hears it, highly plausible, yet so plausible it's worth pausing to ask a few more questions. Just why is self-knowledge such a prestigious good? What are the dangers that come with a lack of self-knowledge? And what do we in fact need to know about ourselves? How do we come to learn such things? And why is self-knowledge difficult to attain?

Narada who seeks Jnana from Sage Sanatkumara (Sanat Kumara is a mythical religious figure often referred to as an advanced human master with a consciousness far evolved from a human master as a master human.) in the Chandogya Upanishad illustrates this truth. Narada is well versed in the Vedas, the Upanishads and other texts dealing with spiritual wisdom and the sciences of the age. But he confesses to Sanatkumara that he finds something lacking in all his thorough knowledge. He wishes to know what this need means. Sanatkumara shows Narada that the self or atma is the source of all things such as hope, memory, etc, as well as the source of all power, all knowledge all happiness. Those who know the self are free of sorrow. The Mandukya Upanishad says: 'Having known the self, the sages are filled with joy. They are really blessed and are tranquil of mind and free from passion. Realising everywhere the all-pervading Brahman, deeply absorbed in contemplation of his being, they enter him, the self of all.' Atma Jnana, gained as a revelation when realization comes through deep contemplation, is the path to attain liberation.

Uniqueness of Atma Jnana,

The Upanishads that deal with the esoteric aspects of spiritual knowledge also make it clear that the higher knowledge of the self is not to be known by the study of scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect nor through much learning. They affirm that the self reveals its true being to one who longs to know the self and engages in the right meditation. Since it is natural to become a prey to ego and feel a sense of pride in the process of gaining knowledge, the Upanishads also teach Santi mantras that help to check this trend, said Sri K. Srinivasan in a discourse.

Our Eternal Thirst – "Where are You O' God?"