

Arthur Schopenhauer

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a German philosopher whose metaphysics were partly shaped by personal psychic experiences.

Life and Career

Arthur Schopenhauer was born on 22 February 1788 in Danzig (today Gdańsk, Poland) to a protestant German family of the patrician class.¹ When Danzig became a part of Prussia in 1793, he moved with his family to republican Hamburg. In the late 1790s he spent two years in Le Harve studying French. Early in the 1800s he briefly attended school in Wimbledon, London. In 1803 he travelled through Holland, Britain, France, and other European countries with his parents, with the expectation of eventually becoming a merchant.

However, following his father's death in 1805 he quit his commercial education and enrolled in the Ernestine Gymnasium, Gotha, in Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg. Four years later he joined the university of Göttingen to study medicine, but in 1810 switched to philosophy. In 1812 he was taking courses on philology and natural philosophy at the University of Berlin and reading Plato, Kant, Bacon, Locke, and other thinkers. At this time he became an atheist.

In 1813 he completed his doctoral dissertation, [*On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*](#). He sent a copy to Goethe, who was highly impressed. The two men began to correspond and collaborated on investigations about [the nature of vision and colors](#). This relation was conflicting, however, and ended in 1816. Schopenhauer moved to Weimar and became acquainted with Buddhist and Hindu texts, notably the [*Upanishads*](#), which deeply influenced his philosophy.

In 1818 he continued his studies in Dresden and published the first volume of [*The World as Will and Representation*](#), his major work. Here he states that his point of departure is [Kant's philosophy](#), presenting a metaphysical doctrine of the Will as the inner essence of everything that appears in the world. The [‘thing in itself’](#) is that very Will and not an enigma, as Kant taught. The Will and its operations can be understood metaphysically. Our experiences are mere representations that express the same restless nature of the Will; the world's evils are effects of a blind, ceaseless will to live. This world is the worst that could exist, and to get free from it one must deny the Will.²

Schopenhauer failed to get an appointment as professor in either Dresden or Berlin and in 1833 took up residence in Frankfurt, where he died on 21 September 1860. Between 1836 and 1851 he published, among other books, the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, *On the Will in Nature*, *The Two Basic Problems of Ethics*, and *Parerga and Paralipomena*; these titles were conceived as complements, commentaries, and proofs to the system presented in *The World...* (1818; third, enlarged edition: 1859).

Psychic Phenomena

A major reason for Schopenhauer's interest in supernormal phenomena were two personal experiences, a 'prophetic dream' in 1831 (which caused him to flee Berlin when a cholera epidemic broke out) and a 'perfectly clear' apparition of his dead father and still living mother (a sign that he would outlive her, as indeed occurred).³

Schopenhauer was convinced that to explain [animal magnetism](#), [magic](#), clairvoyance, telepathy, mediumship, and like phenomena it is necessary to embrace an *idealist* standpoint. His main work on these subjects is his Essay on Spirit-Seeing and Everything Connected Therewith (1851), where he wrote:

[Only from idealism] we can arrive at a correct judgement concerning all these things and so also as regards visions and spirit apparitions ... On the empirical path, animal magnetism has at the same time brought to light *magic* that previously was always shrouded in obscurity ... and in this way it has made spirit apparitions the subject of dispassionate and searching observation and ... criticism ... and I hope that, just as [my own criticism] from the sole reality and omnipotence of the *will* in nature has represented magic as at least conceivable and, when it exists, intelligible, so has it paved the way to a more correct view even of visions and spirit apparitions...⁴

Clairvoyance, says Schopenhauer, confirms the Kantian doctrine of the ideality of space, time, and causality, while magic confirms that the Will is the kernel of all things. Since humans are also part of the Will and represent it phenomenally, they can learn and carry out actions not just from without, but also from within, by an intuitive mediation of the brain, as well as spontaneously. In clairvoyance, for example, this happens through immediate knowledge, and in magic through immediate action (hence his reference of magic as 'practical metaphysics', a term adopted from Bacon).⁵

If metaphysics is the science of experience in general, it should offer a key to explain and harmonize *all* phenomena, including supernormal faculties and events.⁶ Apart from a physical nexus between things, there is a *metaphysical nexus*. In *On Will in Nature* he argued that in animal magnetism, somnambulism and magic the laws of nature with their causal connections are temporarily suspended, because the Will, acting through an individual (say, a 'magnetizer'), comes *directly* to trigger and control whatever happens.⁷

However, Schopenhauer did not extend this view to endorse the reality of ghosts, and he did not believe in post-mortem survival. Following Indian philosophy, death for him meant a reintegration into the Will. A clairvoyant has an intellect, a brain, which acts as physical medium of the Will, but after death nothing physical remains to individualize one person from another. Under such conditions, communication with or vision of any discarnate person seems practically impossible.⁸

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) This section is based mainly on Vandenabeele (2012), 2-7, and Cartwright (2010), ch. 1.
- [2.](#) Cartwright (2005), xviii.
- [3.](#) Cartwright (2020), 176-77.
- [4.](#) Schopenhauer (2000), I, 300.
- [5.](#) Schopenhauer (2000), I, 301. Dongen, Gerding & Sneller (2014), 59-61.
- [6.](#) Schopenhauer (1969), II, 180-81.
- [7.](#) Schopenhauer (1992), 409. Cartwright (2020), 183-84. Cartwright (2010), 450. Johnson (2002), 82-83.
- [8.](#) Cartwright (2020), 185.