IV

THE ANTINOMY: CAN THE WORLD BE IN MY HEAD, YET MY HEAD BE IN THE WORLD?

a. Schopenhauer and Kant

We have seen in the preceding chapter that Schopenhauer’s profound admiration for Goethe did not prevent him from refashioning Goethe’s theory of colours in a Kantian way, or at least in a way considered by him to be Kantian. But we also recall from the second chapter that his no less profound admiration for Kant had not prevented him either, already in the first version of his dissertation, from making some critical remarks about Kant, too, particularly where the latter’s proof of the *a priori* nature of the law of causality was concerned. However, Schopenhauer did not put together an elaborate, public exposition of his attitude towards Kant until the appearance in 1818 of his own philosophical system, the first volume of which contains a supplement entitled ‘Critique of Kantian Philosophy’. In the main work itself, too, we find an interesting chapter in which (foreshadowing the argument of the supplement) Kant’s four ‘antinomies’ are dismissed as “sham fights” (*Spiegelfechtereien*). These antinomies are the mutually contradictory, yet each in itself equally irrefutable, theses into which any attempt at constructing a ‘rational cosmology’ must necessarily run.* But according to Schopenhauer, only the successive antitheses (namely, the infinity of the world in space and time, its infinite divisibility, and the non-existence of God and of free will) are in accordance with the principle of sufficient reason (the *a priori* form of all knowledge), the chain of conditioning relationships being necessarily infinite. Against these “sham fights” Schopenhauer posits what he takes to be the one and only real, since really insoluble, antinomy — really insoluble in that it does not derive from a pseudo-science like rational cosmology, but rather from the apparently contradictory results of real science and of critical philosophy, respectively.

* I.e., one of the three metaphysical pseudo-sciences which result from Reason’s futile, if inevitable, attempt to transcend the realm of experience (the other two being ‘rational psychology’ — which gives rise to ‘paralogisms’ as we shall see below — and ‘rational theology’, which presents us with ‘proofs’ of God’s existence).
Schopenhauer phrases this antinomy as follows: "Thus we necessarily see, on the one hand, the existence of the whole world to be dependent on the first knowing creature, however imperfect the latter may be; but, on the other hand, and equally necessarily so, this first knowing animal to be fully dependent on a long chain of causes and effects which has preceded it and into which it enters itself as a small link."*158 For, although it is perfectly true that materialism forgets that there is no object without a subject, so that it makes no sense to speak of suns and planets without an eye that beholds them and an intellect that recognizes them, it is equally true that the (a priori certain) law of causality compels us to admit that in the course of time every higher organized state of matter has always been preceded by a more primitive one (animals were earlier on the spot than human beings, fish earlier than land animals, plants earlier than fish, and inorganic nature earlier than organic nature as a whole), so that the original mass had to undergo a long chain of mutations †159 before the first eye could open itself — an eye upon which, nonetheless, the existence of the whole world depends since the latter is nothing but a representation (Vorstellung) and cannot as such be thought of without a knowing subject as its bearer. An antinomy if ever there was one! And in Chapter 22, ‘Objective View of the Intellect’ (‘Objektive Ansicht des Intellekts’) of the second volume (which consists of a range of comments on, and elaborations of, the philosophical system expounded in the first volume) we read that there are two fundamentally different ways of contemplating the intellect: the subjective way takes consciousness as its starting-point and culminates in Kant; the objective way (culminating in Cabanis more than in anybody else) regards consciousness as nothing but a function of a part of the bodily organism, namely, the brain.160 Clearly, the same antinomy reappears here on the ontogenetic level that, in the passage just quoted, we met on the phylogenetic level; only, this time

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* "So sehn wir einerseits nothwendig das Daseyn der ganzen Welt abhängig vom ersten erkennenden Wesen, ein so unvollkommenes dieses immer auch seyn mag; andererseits eben so nothwendig dieses erste erkennende Thier völlig abhängig von einer langen ihm vorhergegangenen Kette von Ursachen und Wirkungen, in die es selbst als ein kleines Glied eintritt."

† This sounds like an anticipation of Darwinism; and indeed, there is an evolutionist streak in Schopenhauer’s thought. However, one should always keep in mind that, for him, processes in time belong only to the phenomenal world, whereas the true philosophical spirit is interested only in that which remains identical under all apparent change (which explains among other things his relatively low opinion of history). To him the different stages of complexity in nature are nothing but objectivations of what he holds to be the Platonic Ideas, which exist from all eternity. Consequently he dismissed Lamarck as a typical representative of a materialist science that fancied itself able to explain higher phenomena (‘life’) from lower, mechanical, physical, and chemical phenomena. When near the end of his life (1860) he made the acquaintance of Darwinism (it was to remain a second-hand acquaintance acquired by reading a review of the Origin of Species which had appeared in 1859), he dismissed it as “vulgar empiricism” and as just another version of Lamarckism (cf. also footnote on p. 113).