Schopenhauer on vision and the colors

ROBERT A. CRONE
Reguliersgracht 1, 1017 LJ Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Abstract. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) published his book, *On Vision and the Colors* in 1816. He started from Aristotle's linear color system and Goethe's three pairs of contrast colors. His work preceded Hering's theory of opponent colors but his path to insight was blocked by his anti-Newtonianism and his neo-Hellenistic attitude toward science. Because of his theory of the subjectivity of colors he was a forerunner of the psycho-physiological variant of neo-Kantianism

Introduction

The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), was known as the prophet of pessimism. His fame came late, but his creative years had been much earlier: when he was in his 20's. In 1813, he wrote his first philosophical work, a dissertation on the problem of causality [1], and in 1818, at the age of 30 years, he completed the manuscript of his chef d'oeuvre *The World as Will and Representation* [2]. Between the two, he wrote his book (1816) *On Vision and the Colors* [3].

Goethe had published his theory of colors [4] in 1810, a book which he considered as his most important work, but which was poorly received by the press. He found a proselyte, who would be able to propagate his unappreciated color theory, in the talented but stubborn young philosopher. Schopenhauer was the son of the popular novelist, Joanna Schopenhauer, who was a friend of Goethe.

In 1813 and 1814, Schopenhauer spent much time with Goethe. He was initiated in Goethe's color theory and soon published his own book on vision and colors, which bears the stamp of Goethe's influence but differs on essential points from Goethe's line of thought. To Goethe's disappointment the young student of color stubbornly maintained his aberrant point of view. He wrote to Goethe: 'I am absolutely certain that I have produced the first true theory of the colors, the first in the history of science. If I compare your theory to a pyramid, then my theory is its topmost point'. Goethe remained polite, but refused to write a foreword to Schopenhauer's book.

The literature on Goethe's color theory is immense, because Germans continue to the present day to be fascinated by the thoughts of their great
The literature on Schopenhauer's color theory is sparse [5–8]. His book has certainly not contributed to the further development of the science of color, but it is still interesting enough for a description in the context of Schopenhauer's person, his theories and his time, and for an analysis of the reason why his theory leads to a dead end, despite some unexpected flashes of insight.

The background of Schopenhauer's color theory

Schopenhauer's line of thought must be considered against the background of the movements influencing German thought at that time. They were Hellenism, Romanticism, and deriving from both of these anti-Newtonianism.

As the result of wars and political subdivisions Germany had fallen behind the West in the eighteenth century. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars stimulated patriotic reflection on the national culture. The Enlightenment with its rationalism and belief in progress, and the atomistic-mathematical line of thought of the western scientific revolution, were dismissed. In their place came acclamation of Greek culture and their own medieval history, and a holistic view of the world based on 'the great coherence of things' [9].

When Winckelmann described the 'noble simplicity and serene greatness' of Greek sculpture, it became clear to the Germans that the level of civilization in the past had been such that the present-day culture compared unfavorably with it. The Germans began to identify themselves to a large degree with the Greeks and considered that they, more than any other nation, were their successors [10, 11]. Hellenism had a great influence on all the arts, and also on the sciences. Greek science was embraced once more, and Plato and Aristotle were considered to have already possessed all the most important knowledge.

Romanticism was also a patriotic protest against the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Romanticism cultivated sentiment and the misty national past, and tried to express the great coherence of things in metaphors and analogies. Kant's teaching, the culmination of the philosophy of the former century in Germany, was altered beyond recognition to become the holistic theories of post-Kantian idealism and Schelling's 'Nature Philosophy'.

Hellenism and Romanticism combined to achieve the proscription of Newton [12]. Newton was the personification of everything that the romantics condemned: mechanicism and atomism, the theory of one uniform system of laws governing both the celestial and sublunar spheres. Hegel's remark is well known, that three apples have been disastrous for the history of the world: the first was picked by Eve, the second thrown by Paris, and the third fell on Newton's head.