1
Pessimism, Aesthetic Experience, and Genius

The purpose of the present book is to develop and modify Schopenhauer's doctrine of the sublime so as to establish the sublime as a viable aesthetic concept with a broader existential and metaphysical significance. The first part of this book offers the necessary preliminaries in order to develop Schopenhauer's theory in a more fruitful way, and this first chapter provides the broader philosophical context in which his theory is to be interpreted.

First, then, I will assess Schopenhauer's notoriously pessimistic outlook on man and world and show how, in particular, his pessimism is rooted in his metaphysical and anthropological concept of 'will'. According to Schopenhauer, suffering is inevitable, not because of what we do but because of what we essentially are. The only way to escape from suffering is by transcending and ultimately even abolishing will altogether. Further, this chapter discusses the main flaws of his pessimistic account and argues that his idea of aesthetic, will-less contemplation is bound up not only with his pessimistic view on humankind but also, more importantly, with his overly Platonic doctrine of aesthetic contemplation and artistic creativity.

The inevitability of suffering

Schopenhauer's theory of aesthetic experience is a haven of peace in the midst of Schopenhauer's bleak philosophy. For the central thought of Schopenhauer's view on man and world is hardly reassuring: man and world are permeated by blind, cruel, and restless energy, which Schopenhauer calls 'will', and in human beings this blind, aimless will manifests itself in restless striving and in desires that can never be fulfilled completely and permanently, and which turn life into sheer
hell. Since our desires can never be permanently satisfied, we constantly find ourselves in a state of discontent. For, on Schopenhauer’s account, suffering is due to ‘the will’s hindrance through an obstacle placed between it and its temporary goal’; suffering is a permeating and necessary feature of life, and happiness implies ‘the will’s attainment of its temporary goal’ – satisfaction is thus never permanent (WWR I, 309; 313–314).

Desiring and striving result from a sense of being dissatisfied with our current state at a certain moment – from a lack, which we try to remove. As Schopenhauer argues, ‘every satisfied desire gives birth to a new one. No possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its craving, set a final goal to its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart’ (WWR II, 573). We move from craving to satisfaction, and to craving again. And when a desire has been satisfied, we may also get bored, which is again a state that we experience as unpleasurable, because we have the feeling that nothing interests us any longer, whilst we none the less still feel the urge to desire and satisfy desires. Moreover, satisfying all our desires once and for all is simply impossible.

The essence of human beings is, what Schopenhauer calls, will to life (Wille zum Leben). This is not to be confused with the more common will to live. For Schopenhauer claims that our real self is a willing self, we are will to life, it is the common essence of us all. This means that life is the unchosen goal of our will – we simply must will, desire, and strive for objects to satisfy our wants. And either we do not succeed in satisfying our desires and experience the pain of being dissatisfied, or we do succeed and then experience in the pleasure of satisfaction also the urge to strive for other objects, so that we soon become bored.

Ordinary human life is characterised by unreflective affirmation of the will to life, and thus of one’s bodily needs (see WWR I, 327). However, if we grasp and somehow succeed in accepting that we are nothing but an insignificant manifestation of the will to life, we may develop an unconcern for misery, suffering, and even death, which may enable us to face our own death without fear and knowingly affirm the will to life:

A man who ... found satisfaction in life and took perfect delight in it; who desired, in spite of calm deliberation, that the course of his life as he had hitherto experienced it should be of endless duration or of constant recurrence; and whose courage to face life was so great that, in return for life’s pleasures, he would willingly and gladly put up with all the hardships and miseries to which it is subject; such a man