

The notion of *Māyā* in Arthur Schopenhauer's epistemological idealism

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Abstract

The Hindu texts known as the Upaniṣads were written by many different people from approximately 900 B.C. to about 300 B.C. The Upaniṣads represent one of the earliest efforts of man at giving a philosophical account of the world. As such, the Upaniṣads are invaluable in the history of human thought. The writings came to the West in bits and pieces in the first half of the 19th century in Latin, English and German translation. Soon after he finished his doctoral dissertation in 1813, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), took note of the very first European-language translation (or rather a retranslation) of the Upaniṣads by Abraham Anquetil-Duperron, a Parisian Orientalist who had lived in or near India for six years and had mastered Persian. Anquetil-Duperron translated into Latin a Persian translation of fifty Upaniṣads from the original Sanskrit. This influential translation entitled *Oupnek'hat* (1802) held Schopenhauer's great interest for the remainder of his life. Schopenhauer was one of the few serious philosophers who early on read and was profoundly interested in the philosophy coming out of the East in the first half of the 19th century. This contribution will examine his understanding of *māyā* and its role in Schopenhauer's epistemology as revealed in his book *The World as Will and Representation*.

Key words: Schopenhauer, early Indian philosophy, comparative philosophy, epistemology, *māyā*, Upaniṣads

Introduction

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of any field of the humanities is comparing branches of two different civilizations. More than any other thinker, Arthur Schopenhauer played the most significant role in advancing interest in Indian philosophy in the West. In the 18th and 19th centuries, India served "as an opening to a larger worldview and deeper chronology for the past that surpassed the scope of the Bible" (Trautmann 2012: 180). For example, the acknowledgment that most European languages were in fact related to Indian languages was announced by the Welsh philologist William Jones (1746-1794) who coined the ancestral language Indo-European (Franklin 2011: 216-224). In the area of philosophy, Arthur Schopenhauer was one of the few serious philosophers who early on read and was profoundly interested in the philosophy coming out of the East in the first half of the 19th century. Abraham Anquetil-Duperron's influential retranslation *Oupnekhat* (1802-4) held Schopenhauer's great interest from March, 1814, when he first borrowed it from a Weimar library until the end of his life, even after, later in his life, more accurate direct translations from the original Sanskrit into English and German were subsequently published (Cooper 2012: 180). Regarding the influence of the *Upaniṣads*, Schopenhauer did not combine the theoretical criticism of Immanuel Kant with the transcendental thought of Indian religion as represented in Anquetil-Duperron's *Oupnekhat* and then incorporate them into his philosophy; instead, in his "Preface" to the first edition of *The World as Will and Representation*, published in 1819, Schopenhauer writes, "I might assert that each of the individual and disconnected utterances that make up the *Upaniṣads* could be derived as a consequence from the thought I am to impart, although conversely my thought is by no means to be found in the *Upaniṣads*" (Schopenhauer 1958: xvi). However, Urs App contests this view based on a thorough research of Schopenhauer's notes. App

argues that in the Frenchman Anquetil-Duperron's commentaries to his retranslation, a strongly pronounced Kantian perspective taints these early explanations of Sanskrit terminology and Indian notions in the *Upaniṣads*, especially in Anquetil-Duperron's "Parergon De Kantismo," an appendix at the end of the first volume of the *Oupnek'hat* (App 2008: 57).

Schopenhauer held a deep respect for the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, but viewed the other post-Kantian idealists, among them Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, his contemporaries, with disdain. He believed himself to be the only true successor to Kant: "I cannot see that between Kant and myself anything has been done in philosophy" (Schopenhauer 1958: 5). Schopenhauer discovered the second most profound influence on his thought when, in late 1813, he was introduced to Indian thought by an Orientalist scholar and Privatdozent at the University of Jena named Friedrich Majer (1772-1818) soon after his doctoral dissertation was published. He first read Majer's German translation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (the sixth book of the *Mahābhārata*, one of two epics written in Sanskrit after the *Upaniṣads*) and took his first notes about tortoise – "The tortoise can draw in his legs; The seer can draw in his senses. I call him illumined" (Prabhavananda 2002a: 48) which reflects upon the notion of *māyā* and by metaphor how to physically respond to it.

After an initial reading, for the rest of his life Schopenhauer retained a specific interest in the *Upaniṣads* and in particular as they had been translated into Latin as *Oupnek'hat* by Abraham Anquetil-Duperron which he began reading in March 1814: "I feel the most perfect confidence in reading that translation, and that confidence soon receives its most perfect justification. For how entirely does the *Oupnek'hat* breathe throughout the holy spirit of the Vedas! How is everyone who by a diligent study of its Persian Latin has become familiar with that incomparable book, stirred by that spirit to the very depth of his soul! How does every line display its firm, definite, and throughout harmonious meaning! From every sentence deep, original, and sublime thoughts arise, and the whole is pervaded by a high and holy and earnest spirit... In the whole world there is no study, except that of the originals, so beneficial and so elevating as that of the *Oupnek'hat*. It has been the consolation of my life, it will be that of my death." (Schopenhauer 2001: 437). However, the very fact that the *Oupnek'hat* by Anquetil-Duperron are retranslations into Latin (from the Persian language made by Prince Dara Shikoh) has been a mark of criticism by philosophy scholars in the 20th century: Schopenhauer had no facility with Sanskrit and misunderstood much of the Indian philosophy because of his overreliance on Anquetil-Duperron's faulty Latin retranslation and commentary (Berger 2004: 3-9).

***Māyā* and Epistemology**

One striking thought that the *Upaniṣads* and Schopenhauer have in common is the concept of *māyā*. "Brahman, world-soul, world-will, Atman, human soul and human will are one. That which hinders this is the veil of *māyā*, the world of concepts. That which redeems us is becoming free of being bound to the world, of 'thirst' and merging into Brahman" (Störig 1999: 530). Hence, a common distrust of materialism and experience unites both Schopenhauer and Indian thought. Both believe that it is epistemologically wrong to strive for reality by examination of matter first, and then an examination of the thoughts of that examination.

For example, Kant views time (along with space) as one of the pure forms of the intuitive mind, and as such time is *a priori* (or is known prior to experience), but not that of the unknowable *Ding an sich* or "things as they are in and of themselves" in the "Transcendental Aesthetic" section of *Critic of Pure Reason* (Kant 1990: 26-33). Schopenhauer fully supported Kant on this point (unlike his aforementioned contemporaries). Generally, the philosophers of India seem to share the same view – an exception can be noted for Charvaka, the representative of Hindu materialistic hedonism – not in so far as the idea of Kant's categories (or the pure forms of the

intuitive mind) are concerned but rather that “time pertains to the pairs-of-opposites (*dvandva*) which is woven into the play of the *gunas*; hence it cannot be regarded as the nature of eternity” (Zimmer 2020: 450). In other words, while their metaphysics interpret the nature of time differently, both Schopenhauerian and Hindu theories concur that time is not ultimate reality. It is one of many examples of the phenomenal world that one cannot trust to be reality.

It may be difficult to grasp wholly the idea of what it means that what one sees, hears, touches, smells, or tastes is not in fact reality, the foremost concern in the area of philosophical inquiry known as epistemology. One is born into the world completely dependent on sense perception for gaining knowledge, and it is often impossible to convince people that there is “more reality” in this world than what our five senses detect. One way to rationalize and even substantiate Schopenhauer’s and the *Upaniṣads*’ theory of *māyā* is to consider basic physics. As almost everyone learns in school, visible light is merely a tiny section of the electromagnetic spectrum, and vision constitutes one of the foremost means we use in detection of “reality.” Let us consider the fact that from gamma rays to radio waves, to the higher pitch sounds which dogs perceive but which we cannot hear, there is much charted on the electromagnetic spectrum which we do not perceive. If we could “see” heat, for example, as a camera with infra-red film aids us to do, the impact of temperature would exceed our daily understanding of weather and relationships of phenomena connected with temperature (perhaps we “over-perceive” color with respect to its tangible significance in our lives). If we consider how minute the human “window” of perception (i.e., visible light and audible sound) is on the electromagnetic spectrum among the many wave lengths, we only perceive, technologically unaided, a very small fraction of the spectrum. Consequently, the *Upaniṣads* are not misleading whatsoever when proclaiming that “Man, in his ignorance, identifies himself with the material sheaths that encompass his true Self.” (Prabhavananda 2002b: 55). If man were indeed to identify himself with the material sheaths (i.e., experience), he would fall far short because reality is much more than what he is capable of perceiving through his senses. This thesis of epistemological falsification which Schopenhauer also shares with Platonic Idealism is foundational to the metaphysics and ethics in his book *The World as Will and Representation*.

Metaphysics and the *Upaniṣads*

However, one cannot ignore experience altogether: “To darkness are they doomed who devote themselves only to life in the world, and to a greater darkness are they who devote themselves only to meditation” (Prabhavananda 2002b: 20). It might seem surprising to read in “*Isha*” that greater darkness comes to those who are devoted only to meditation. This is a famously problematic passage which in Anquetil-Duperron’s Latin retranslation *Oupnek’hat* is replicated just like in Prabhavananda’s English rendering. Schopenhauer follows this exact point as well: “No one is more liable to mistakes than he who acts only on reflection” (Schopenhauer 1958: 251).

Schopenhauer’s metaphysical views, one might easily surmise, stem from his criticism of the unsound philosophies of the past rationalists who derived their ideas by reflection. Immanuel Kant himself stated in a famous revelation that it was the Scottish thinker David Hume who woke him up from his dogmatic, i.e., rationalistic slumbers. (Kant 1994: 8). It is intriguing for many to read in the *Katha Upaniṣad* that although Brahman is “soundless, formless, intangible, undying, tasteless, odorless, without beginning, without end, immutable, beyond nature” et cetera (Prabhavananda 2002b: 10), one still cannot reach Brahman through pure meditation or reflection. Like most sacred scriptures, the *Upaniṣads* are evidently not monolithic. Later in the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, for instance, one can find: “By the purified mind alone is

Brahman perceived” (Prabhavananda 2002b: 126). It appears, though, that the best way to lead a practical or pragmatic life would be through a combination of empirical and transcendental reasoning. This reflects Schopenhauer’s “refusal to completely give in to either the thoroughgoing rationalism of the Idealists or the iconoclastic irrationalism of the Romantics and Existentialists (Berger 2004: x). However, this should not be the way to realize the self or will.

***Māyā* and Will**

To Schopenhauer, *māyā* is basically caused by the will. This will is blind, irrational, and insatiable. In man the character of this will appears most clearly, because he can observe its workings in himself. Even one’s reasoning and understanding play a secondary role; they remain slaves to the will. As Matthias Kossler puts it, “The will objectifies itself in a series of levels which correspond with an empirical and thus temporal evolution of species starting with inorganic nature and ending with human beings that are provided with intellect” (Kossler 2013:113). *Māyā*, or the external world, is an expression or an “objectification” of the will. It is subjective, and therefore it is not ultimate reality. Suppression of the will eliminates the subjectivity and ‘objectificationness’ of the world and thus eliminate *māyā*. Yet how one is to suppress the will within oneself is a question better answered by the *Upaniṣads* than by Schopenhauer for right now. The *Upaniṣads* view the cause of *māyā*, as I interpret it, to be life itself. The texts do not really say this outright but give many clues that indicate that life itself, or more specifically, existence separate from Brahman, is the cause of *māyā*. In short, what is suppression of the will to Schopenhauer is to the *Upaniṣads* the unification of Atman and Brahman and the unveiling of the Self. What they have in common is transcendence of the tiny, phenomenal ego-self.

Because his will is blind and irrational, man is never satisfied and almost always melancholic. As Schopenhauer states in one of his aphorisms, “Life swings like a pendulum backward and forward between pain and boredom” (Barnes 1976: 39). Schopenhauer held a pessimistic view that was unexceptional to the intellectuals in the early 19th century; furthermore, he provided philosophical substantiation for this human state of suffering. The revolution in France and the resulting destruction of Europe held a pronounced influence over Schopenhauer’s generation in Germany. Just as Buddha was in his youth, Schopenhauer as a youngster was seized by the misery of all life. He speaks from experience when he says that even when one is successful, one is still unhappy - - in the form of boredom. Knowledge cannot solve the problem of misery either: “In proportion as knowledge attains to distinctness, consciousness is enhanced, pain also increases, and consequently reaches highest degree in man; and all the more, the person in whom genius is to be found suffers most of all (Schopenhauer 1958: 310).

Similarly, the *Upaniṣads* repeatedly state that Brahman, which is ultimate happiness, cannot be reached through ordinary knowledge (Prabhavananda 2002b: 57). In *Katha Upaniṣad* for instance, “The Self is not known through the study of the scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning.” (Prabhavananda 2002b: 8). Another explanation is advanced in the *Chandogya Upaniṣad* where Narada, who wishes to know more about the Self, is questioned by Swami Sanatkumara:

S. – What have you already studied?

N. – All the branches of learning – Art, science, music and Philosophy, as well as the sacred scriptures. But I have gained no peace. I have studied all this, but the Self I do not know. I have heard from great teachers like you that he who knows the Self overcomes grief. Grief is ever my lot. Help me, I pray, to overcome it. (Prabhavananda 2002b: 81)

Liberation versus Rebirth

As the ultimate pessimist, Schopenhauer has for some interpreters of the *Upaniṣads* (such as Albert Schweitzer) a significant likeness to the way this Hindu literature describes life, specifically among the unenlightened. Those people are ignorant of the “immortal Self,” described as “he” below in the *Svetasvatara Upaniṣad*: “Though he fills the universe, he transcends it. He is untouched by its sorrow. He has no form. Those who know him become immortal. Others remain in the depths of misery” (Prabhavananda 2002b: 142).

Remaining “in the depths of misery” means, of course, being reborn into the world and living another life of hardship and sadness. The reason that he “is untouched by its sorrow” is that karma, an impersonal natural law of moral cause and effect, causes the rebirth of people in the world as punishment for not realizing “*advaita*,” or nonduality, in the last life. Being born again to Hindu thought is reincarnation or rebirth into another miserable life here on earth. It is stated in the *Mundaka Upaniṣad*, “The individual self, deluded by forgetfulness of his true identity with the divine Self, bewildered by his ego, grieves and is sad.” (Prabhavananda 2002b: 45)

Hence, both the *Upaniṣads* and Schopenhauer share a fundamental aspect: the centrality of the pain and suffering in the course of life on earth. It is important to note, however, that it is stated in *Chandogya Upaniṣad* that when one reaches Brahman, one does not receive pleasures infinitely, but rather a complete ceasing of pain/pleasure (Prabhavananda 2002b: 89)

In their soteriological principles, both Schopenhauer and the *Upaniṣads* respectively express that life on earth is so terrible that one should achieve *moksha* (release from the cycle of birth and death) as soon as possible so as to relieve oneself of one’s misery. Accordingly, Schopenhauer expressed this ethics in one of his famous aphorisms: “To desire immortality is to desire the eternal perpetuation of a great mistake” (Schopenhauer 1976: 48). The *Upaniṣads*, however, represent the Hindu position on this topic in a more round-about manner: “The deluded...remain subject to birth and death...attached to works, they know not God. Works lead them only to Heaven, whence, to their sorrow, their rewards quickly exhausted, they are flung back to earth” (Prabhavananda 2002b: 42). The Indian doctrine of rebirth, called *samsara*, is “the endless wheel of redeath and rebirth into other bodies, which the soul is subject” (Trautmann 2016: 52).

Aesthetics in Schopenhauer and the Upaniṣads

Finally, these two philosophical positions from utterly differing traditions appear to share a similar stance on art. Schopenhauer devoted more than one-quarter of his principal work, *The World as Will and Representation*, to aesthetics. In it he writes: “The genius in creating art communicates the Platonic, unchanging Idea” (194-195). Schopenhauer shows in *The World as Will and Representation* his concept of the artistic work as a “will-less perception which spreads so wonderful a charm over the past and distant” (198). Art is for Schopenhauer a unique perception, then, because it is “will-less,” or not part of *māyā*. This claim requires some explanation. Schopenhauer explains aesthetic impression, again invoking Platonism, thus: “It stops the wheel of time. For it the relations vanish; its object is only the essential, the Idea. We can therefore define it accurately as *the way of considering things independent of the principle of sufficient reason*, in contrast to the way of...science and experience (Schopenhauer 1958: 185).

The “principle of sufficient reason,” which was the subject of Schopenhauer’s doctoral dissertation at the University of Jena, is to Schopenhauer’s philosophy a law of cause and effect in four forms: 1-logical, as the determination of conclusion by premises; 2-physical, as the determination of effect by cause; 3-mathematical, as the determination of structure by the laws of effect by cause; 4-moral, as a determination

of conduct by character. The aesthetic experience of art on the part of the viewer does not fall under the principle of sufficient reason, nor does the objectification of the will. Therefore, art is a temporary escape from the will.

The *Upaniṣads* do not directly approach the question of aesthetics, but there are some relevant quotations from which one can extrapolate their position: “It is not for the sake of itself, my beloved, that anything whatever is esteemed, but for the sake of the Self” (Prabhavananda 2002b: 87). I believe that this means, in agreement with Schopenhauer, that art, defined for argument’s sake here as an entity which is esteemed, is not part of *māyā* because a part of *māyā* would not be “for the sake of the Self.” Rather, *māyā* deceives one from the Self and from Brahman. However, there is a point which can be made that shows that there are also disparities. It would appear that for the *Upaniṣads*, art is for the sake of the Self while for Schopenhauer it is more the view that “the essential, the Idea” (in which he means the Platonic *Idea*) is the aim of art (Schopenhauer 1958: 170). For Schopenhauer, the apprehension of metaphysical truth is possible through art which occurs without the exertions of willing. Hence, the process of aesthetic contemplation transcends the will, and offers perceptual apprehension of natural forms (Plato’s timeless *Ideas*).

It is to Schopenhauer’s credit that in his philosophy of aesthetics there is a clear revelation of how one is to overcome *māyā*. In the *Upaniṣads* it is not detailed precisely how one may become “firmly established in the knowledge of Brahman [to] achieve immortality except the three general duties conveyed at the opening of the *Chandogya Upaniṣad*: 1) sacrifice, study almsgiving; 2) austerity and 3) life as a student in the home of a teacher and the practice of continence (Prabhavananda 2002a: 64).

On the other hand, Schopenhauer offers direct epistemological enlightenment through aesthetic contemplation which reveals the will most objectively. As Schopenhauer scholar Cheryl Foster succinctly puts it, “the contemplation of beauty liberates one to understand the hidden, holistic character of the world” (Foster 1999: 217) though it does so only temporarily. Art unmasks and disrobes truth from its clothing, not in the way science does it merely in isolated details, but through “the greatest possible acquaintance with the totality of being (Foster 1999: 220).

While the *Upaniṣads* emphasize the need to know Brahman, to know the Self, Schopenhauer indicates for Western readers more precisely how that may be accomplished, if only temporarily. In what I believe has not been linked before, both the *Upaniṣads* and Schopenhauer point the way through sound: “whatever is esteemed ... hear about it, reflect on it, meditate upon it. Through hearing... one comes to know all things” (Prabhavananda 2002a: 87). The auditory is emphasized repeatedly in the *Brihadaranyaka Upaniṣad*. Arthur Schopenhauer likewise places great emphasis on music specifically. While music is not directly mentioned in the *Brihadaranyaka Upaniṣad* the suggestion is made of harmonious noise, perhaps bells or the hymns performed in rites and ceremonies of the Vedas. The significance of audibility in the English translations of the *Brihadaranyaka Upaniṣad* by Prabhavananda (2002a), Easwaran (1987) and Olivelle (1996).

As Foster emphasizes, “Schopenhauer insists on the possibility of genuine if fleeting salvation from willing for even the ordinary intellect” (Foster 1999: 225) through contemplation of beauty through art. I believe that Indian philosophy and Schopenhauer share a view that the auditory is a means to knowing the Self. As Schopenhauer puts it, “This close relation that music has to the true nature of things can also explain the fact that, when music suitable to any scene, action, event, or environment is played, it seems to disclose to us its most secret meaning” (Schopenhauer 1958: 262). Schopenhauer implies that aesthetic experience of contemplation of the arts is a route to the suppression of the will and to *moksha*. Hence for one philosophy art can be understood as operating “for the sake of the Self”

while for the other philosophy art suppresses the will. Hence, art is for both a step in the right direction, a step towards liberation.

Conclusion

Schopenhauer felt that his philosophy was confirmed through his readings of the Indian classical scriptures, in particular the *Upaniṣads*, understood obviously from an outsider's position; that is, Schopenhauer was not born into the society where the Hindu religion was practiced and scriptures were commonly read, nor could he read the scriptures in Sanskrit. He read the *Upaniṣads* for the first time with a Western intellectual's mind, and there are many points in which, as recent critics have shown, Schopenhauer misunderstood specific ideas of these philosophical Hindu meditations, though not epistemologically regarding the notion of *māyā*. Indeed, he found them to be so harmonious with his own philosophy that he found great consolation in them. This experience was not uncommon among intellectuals in the 19th century, though none matched Schopenhauer's success in integrating Eastern philosophy with his Western notions in epistemology, metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics. The unique character of revealing truth through aesthetic contemplation stands out in Schopenhauer's philosophy, a major departure from the Kantian *Critique of Judgment*. One of his German contemporaries in philosophy attempted to apply the *Upaniṣads* as seriously as Schopenhauer did: Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) studied Sanskrit and Indian civilization and contributed to this field of study with his outstanding monograph, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Inder* [Regarding the Language and Wisdom of the Indians] (1808) which Schopenhauer read before writing *The World as Will and Representation* (Berger 2004: 34). Nevertheless, it was Schopenhauer much more than Schlegel who succeeded in spreading the influence of Indian philosophy to a wider public in the West. Today it is often underestimated how profound Schopenhauer's influence on the reception of the *Upaniṣads* was in the West, and not merely by those who study epistemology, metaphysics, ethics or aesthetics. His philosophy-based pessimism in which life on earth was not to be affirmed, but merely tolerated, where *māyā* inhibits truth, and non-recognition of the divine Self leads to dreaded *samsara* or reincarnation, all these notions significantly impacted the West. An incomplete list of influential literary authors who encountered the *Upaniṣads* first through their reading of Schopenhauer and accordingly relayed this philosophical influence in their fiction include Tolstoy in Russian literature, Hardy, Conrad, T.S. Eliot and Golding in English literature, G.B. Shaw in Irish literature, Thomas Mann in German literature, Updike and Roth in American literature as well as the contemporary author J.M. Coetzee in South African fiction. However, Schopenhauer did overestimate the overall Indian influence, for in 1844 he wrongly predicted in the second edition of his *magnum opus* that "the influence of the Sanskrit literature will penetrate no less deeply than did the revival of Greek literature in the fifteenth century" (Schopenhauer 1958: xv).

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