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On the Brink of Futility

Schopenhauer, suffering and the value of abstract painting

Introduction

What is the value of abstract painting? What value does it add to humanity? Is this value purely instrumental, could it be replaced by something else? Or, is this value intrinsic, can abstract painting give us something particular, something that we cannot get from anything else in just this way?

I will argue that abstract painting has a very special way of engaging with the reality of life, demonstrating a value that goes significantly beyond the purely formal or decorative, by drawing on the work of Arthur Schopenhauer and early Buddhist philosophy.

Schopenhauer's Will

The value of art in Schopenhauer's philosophy is closely linked to his concept of the *will* or more precisely, the *will-to-live*. Schopenhauer asserts that we know the will most readily through our own bodies. We see our bodies in two ways, firstly as a representation, 'an object among objects'¹ and secondly, through the will. Schopenhauer explains: 'The action of the body is nothing but the act of will objectified...'²

¹ Schopenhauer, Arthur; 'The World as Will and Representation, Volume I', translated by E. F. J. Payne, Dover Publications, Inc. New York, 2014, p. 100

² *ibid*

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Great artists, according to Schopenhauer, have the ability to temporarily escape the grip of the will and thus freed, are able to see the will represented in the world around them. Another term for this temporary will-free state is aesthetic experience.

Schopenhauer compares the will to Plato's concept of the form. Yet, unlike in Plato, the Schopenhauerian Idea is not a divine thing-in-itself but a representation, the representation of the will. In her painting, the artist is able to transmit something of her vision of the Idea, and thus the will, to the spectator.

After seeing how the will manifests itself in the world, we now ask what exactly *is* the will? Schopenhauer describes the will as desire or craving. All our actions seem to be motivated by some craving, from the most basic, such as hunger for food or sex, the desire for sleep, etc, to complicated cravings such as wishing for that positive feeling one gets when helping others. The will is the endless seeking for gratification. Gratification can be found temporarily, but will always be followed by further craving.

Schopenhauer was deeply interested in Buddhist and Hindu philosophy and often referred to the ancient scriptures of these traditions to underscore his own philosophy. One such parallel is to be found in the concept of the will. According to Buddhist thought, it is craving that keeps a being trapped in the samsara, that is the wheel of rebirth, and only once someone has become free of craving can they enter nirvana.

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Suffering and Futility

Schopenhauer tells us that the will has no goal or purpose. Willing will not lead us, after willing hard enough for long enough to a place where we can be eternally happy. Suffering is inevitable, it is an intrinsic part of life. It is clear to us that we cannot escape suffering, we get ill, we grow old, we lose things and people we love, we die.

Schopenhauer believed that life is fundamentally futile, there is no purpose to it and this is so because of life's ceaseless subservience to this aimless will.

To recap, so far, Schopenhauer's thesis is that the world consists of suffering and that this suffering has its roots in the will, i.e. craving. This parallels the first two of the four noble truths of Buddhism. The question then is what to do with this knowledge. This is the point where art enters Schopenhauer's work.

Schopenhauer's conclusion is that we need to strive to become free of the bondage to the will. Art, according to Schopenhauer, can help us towards such a freedom. We have already said that, according to Schopenhauer's thesis, an artist, through a temporary will-free state, was able to glimpse the will in the world and thus transmit some of the nature of the will to her spectators who may, if they are sensitive enough, also have an aesthetic experience.

Art and Suffering

Art can help in two ways, firstly, there is the temporary release from the will in the aesthetic experience. This is valuable in itself as it is a respite from the suffering of life. The more important value, though, is that seeing the will

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represented might eventually give the spectator insight into the true nature of the will, that is aimless and endless craving, and inspire a life of renunciation.

There is logic to this but it sounds farfetched that a gallery visitor would eventually, as a result of having looked at art regularly, recognise the will and turn to a life of renunciation. Indeed, Schopenhauer would say that only few people are sensitive enough to be able to recognise the will. A value of art that only benefits a very few is not tenable in a post-20th century art world.

Schopenhauer's goal was to aim for freedom from the will not freedom from suffering. This is the place where Schopenhauer differs from early Buddhism. Buddhism looks to find freedom from the will in order to gain freedom from suffering. Let us untangle the word suffering and understand its usage in the Buddhist context. The Buddha used the simile of being hit by two darts to explain suffering³. The first dart of suffering is unavoidable. It is inherent in life, it is loss, sickness, aging... This is the suffering that Schopenhauer understood as inherent in life, too. The second dart is the mental part of suffering that we add ourselves. It is the 'why me? why is this happening to me?' This is the suffering that is avoidable, it is the suffering the Buddha sought freedom from. It is also this suffering that is linked to craving, such as the craving for things to stay a certain way, such as staying young and healthy. Schopenhauer did not make a distinction between these two types of suffering.

³ Sallatha Sutta: The Dart, Samyutta Nikaya 36.6

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Schopenhauer states after insight into the nature of the will: 'Misfortunes of every sort and size will no longer surprise him, although they cause him pain; for he has seen that pain and trouble are the very things that work towards the true end of life, namely the turning away of the will from it.'⁴ Elsewhere he states: 'In fact, suffering is the process of purification by which alone man is in most cases sanctified, in other words, led back from the path of error of the will-to-live.'⁵ It is very interesting to see how in tune Schopenhauer is with Buddhist thought to a point and then diverges from it in a rather baffling way.

Schopenhauer's way is one of extreme asceticism. He takes for an example the Indian ascetics who lived in extreme self-denial. The Buddha considered this to be a 'wrong view', this extreme wishing away of anything worldly is in itself a kind of craving, a craving for things to be a specific way, like the craving to stay young, the craving for the non-existence of anything worldly will also lead to suffering. Extreme self-denial is still living under the grip of the will.

I am convinced by Schopenhauer's analysis of suffering being in the world and that this suffering comes from the will-to-live or more precisely, craving, but I find it difficult to swallow his conclusion. In Christianity, it is not suffering that brings salvation but faith in God. Schopenhauer goes on to say: 'Dying is certainly to be regarded as the real aim of life; at the moment of dying everything is

⁴ Schopenhauer, Arthur; 'The World as Will and Representation, Volume II', translated by E. F. J. Payne, Dover Publications, Inc. New York, 2014, p. 635

⁵ *ibid*, p. 636

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decided which through the whole course of life was only prepared and introduced.’⁶

Mindfulness

Schopenhauer shows us the futility of life and claims the only option left is to deny the will-to-live and turn the life of extreme self-denial of the ascetic. Art helps to bring us to this level of insight, value of being able to show us the nature of the will.

Is there a way back from the brink of futility? We saw the close correspondence between Schopenhauer’s thesis and the first two of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. The Buddhist conclusion is rather more hopefully. The third noble truth is the prognosis that suffering (of the second-dart type) can end, followed by the fourth noble truth which consists of a detailed explanation of how the suffering can be ended.

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism

1. Dukkha
2. The Origin of Dukkha is Craving
3. The Cessation of Dukkha
4. The Path that leads to the Cessation of Dukkha is the Noble Eight-fold Path.

Let us now get back to art. We have seen that according to Schopenhauer’s narrative art has the two-fold value of, firstly provide us with temporary release from the tyranny of the will by providing us with an aesthetic experience and

⁶ Schopenhauer, Arthur; ‘The World as Will and Representation, Volume II’, translated by E. F. J. Payne, Dover Publications, Inc. New York, 2014, p.637

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secondly, if the aesthetic contemplation has the chance to be brought to full fruition, lead us to insight of the true nature of the will and thus inspire us to deny the will-to-live and turn to a life of asceticism.

I have pointed out two main problems with this account. Firstly, the elitist assumption that only few people are sensitive enough to experience aesthetic emotion in the first place and the bigger problem that embracing suffering, in the way suggested by Schopenhauer only leads to further suffering: the will is still active in the willing to deny.

So, a new value would need to, firstly, be more inclusive and secondly, would have to help towards reducing suffering rather than aiming towards embracing suffering as the source of salvation.

The Noble Eight-Fold Path

Right View
Right Resolve
Right Speech
Right Action
Right Livelihood
Right Effort
Right Mindfulness
Right Concentration

The fourth noble truth points out the noble eight-fold path as the path towards liberation from suffering. There is one component of this path in particular, that I believe is relevant to the value of art, and that is *mindfulness*.

I could not find any mention of the term *mindfulness* in Schopenhauer's writing, although, he does appear, at times, to allude to it.

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In Buddhist literature, mindfulness is sometimes compared to the town watchman, always ready to alert the town of anything that comes up.

Mindfulness is the capacity that allows us to become aware of our own cravings and to see their causality with suffering. This insight gradually weakens the craving to the point where the causality with suffering is so clear that the craving vanishes. (When we realise that touching the hot stove burns our hand, we no longer want to touch the stove.)

Mindfulness is a hot topic in medicine, psychology, neuroscience, health care amongst other fields at the moment. The amount of research being conducted has been exponential in recent years with more and more evidence coming to light to show the effectiveness of mindfulness to help with such problems as depression or coping with chronic pain, suggesting that mindfulness really does reduce suffering.

Mindfulness can be an active practice but it can also be experienced unintentionally. Indeed, we all experience it at times, even if we do not use the term mindfulness. Perhaps we noticed clearly a feeling of love arising in us the moment our child comes through the front door or we notice the warmth of the sun touching our skin the moment the cloud moves away.

Mindfulness as a practice seeks to see the arising of all things in our experience, and their duration and their passing away. To put it back into Schopenhauer's language: mindfulness is not only seeing the will but also seeing it at work,

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seeing its causality. The result is the gradual weakening of craving with an eventual goal of freedom from craving and thus freedom from suffering.

The value of abstract painting

I believe abstract painting is especially suited to encouraging such moments of unintentional mindfulness. Abstract painting, even when limited to Western art from the modernity and what came after, is a huge field with many very diverse intentions, motivations and philosophies. Yet this paper is not about what the painters intended it is about the specific nature of abstraction and why this might encourage moments of unintended mindfulness.

Our instinct, when confronted with a painting, is to *see-in*, as Wollheim described so well in his paper 'Painting as an Art'⁷ We want to see if we can recognise something. Denied this kind of recognition or baffled by shapes that only hint but do not satisfy, we are caught up in a pre-cognitive mental state. This is the mental state just before we recognise something. Imagine you hear a sound and you do not know what it is. This makes you hear its texture, its characteristics. The moment you know it is the neighbour's new robotic lawn mower you stop listening. That moment when we were truly listening to the sound that was mindfulness.

With abstract painting something similar can happen, particularly with abstract painting that feels like it is just on a border to the figurative. Because our

⁷ Wollheim, Richard, 'Painting as an Art', in 'Reading Aesthetics and Philosophy of art' by Christopher Janaway, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2006, p. 245

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cognitive understanding is baffled we are forced to pay attention to the material itself. We start investigating the materiality itself. We start looking at the texture, the thickness, thinness, the fluidity, viscosity, the smears and drips, the brush marks, the cracks in the paint, the bare canvas, we become aware of things as themselves, the painting as an object not as a sign for something else. Seeing the material as material is mindfulness. By drawing attention to its own materiality in this way, the abstract painting can encourage moments of unintentional mindfulness.

How do these moments of unintentional mindfulness reduce suffering? Here I refer back to Schopenhauer, like his aesthetic experiences, these moments of unintentional mindfulness offer a respite from the worries and suffering of life, because, when you are mindful, you are not worrying.

Schopenhauer claims that aesthetic contemplation may eventually lead to insight into the workings of the will. Mindful investigation can lead to a recognition of the causality of suffering and craving but I do not believe that contemplation of a painting will directly lead to such deep insight. It would be ludicrous to claim that contemplating an abstract painting will lead to enlightenment.

I believe that the value of the arts is to provide a nudge in the right direction. All the arts, and abstract painting in the particular way I explained, encourage us to pay real attention for a moment, giving us a respite from being carried off by wildly flickering thoughts, and experience, for a moment at least, the cool calm of the material present.

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This value is, of course, not exclusive to abstract painting. Any art form, especially one that draws attention to its own materiality, could do this, yet, I think it is especially apparent and explainable in abstract painting because of this dichotomy between our expectations of seeing-in and the resulting focus on its materiality.

Examples



Cy Twombly, Lepanto (Panel 5 of 12), acrylic, wax crayon and graphite on canvas, 2001

There are strange shapes on this painting, insect-like and alien, yet when we look closer they are nothing, their animality dissolves into individual marks, scratched, stabbed, a quiet energy, the frenzied rhythm of rain, thin paint drips down, smears over the crayon, slight scratches of graphite, only slight hints of

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colour washed out. Automatically we start to investigate, automatically we follow the drips of very thin paint as it rolls over earlier marks, trails left by snails. Standing in front of the real painting you might be fighting an urge to touch the painting or perhaps you are repelled by it, its muckiness, its dirtiness. The awareness of the material, the awareness of its physicality and our reaction to it, all of this is mindfulness.



Joanne Greenbaum, untitled, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2008

With this second painting, our eyes start wandering around immediately, trying to find a place to rest, a home, a vantage point, trying to see-in. Is it a building? A map? It feels urban, contemporary, a large city? But again, cognition is frustrated. Our eyes start to follow paths, the painting takes us on a journey, we investigate and very quickly we become aware of the material, we follow the qualities of the paint, where it is dry, where it is thin and liquid, where it is thick and lush. We

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see the paint is used like a marker pen, the material is played with, the handling of the material a child's game, an investigation for its own sake. We see where the black is not equally black and notice the little splatters of paint, left alone, like discarded toys. What this painting does is draw attention to the material, its own materiality and also, an exuberant joy in material itself, the stuff of life. It shows us joy in mindfulness, joy in contemplation and investigation.

Conclusion

Abstract painting, by virtue of frustrating our instinct to see-in and thus prolonging a state of pre-cognitive investigation, has the value of being able to encourage unintended moments of mindfulness. This is of value because mindfulness can temporarily relieve certain types of suffering.

Is being able to encourage mindfulness an intrinsic or instrumental value? At first glance it seems to be a merely instrumental value. Something else might also encourage mindfulness, such as a chance encounter with a colourful butterfly. The painting can be replaced with the butterfly. Yet, why is the painting still important? Schopenhauer must have asked himself the same question, when he first place the aesthetic experience in nature and then went on to talk about art. Schopenhauer believed that artists had developed a special skill in being able to distil the Idea they had perceived and thus make it more accessible to the general public. Agreeing with Schopenhauer, I would describe it as a special attention, because the painter has spent so many hours working with the material, she is able to really focus on the material and explain in fine particularity this material as material, making it accessible to someone who has

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not had this experience. This makes being able to encourage mindfulness an instrumental as well as intrinsic value. As the study of mindfulness in neuroscience and psychology is one of the fastest growing fields of study⁸, the future may show just how important this value truly is.

⁸ 'Mindfulness Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning Origins and Applications' ed. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn, Routledge London and New York, 2013, p.2