

The Philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer

Michal Masny

Description Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was one of the most original and systematic philosophers of the 19th century. This course is a close study of his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation*. We will discuss the following topics: the role of sense perception, understanding, and reason in our representation of the external world; the influential idea that the world is 'will'; the nature and role of aesthetic contemplation; the claim that to live is to suffer; Schopenhauer's approval of asceticism and rejection of suicide; and whether there is room for an optimistic reading of Schopenhauer.

Level Advanced undergraduate course.

Prerequisites No previous work in philosophy is required or assumed.

Requirements This course will be held in a lecture format. You will review the assigned materials in advance of each lecture, and then discuss them in your weekly seminar.

Student grades are determined by five components:

- First paper (1000 words): 20%
- Second paper (1500 words): 25%
- Third paper (2000 words): 30%
- Class participation: 25%

Class participation is very important in this course. I am asking you do two things:

- Post a reaction to at least one of the assigned materials on the course discussion board by midnight on the day before the seminar. You can clarify a tricky aspect of the paper, raise an objection, ask a pertinent question, bring attention to an interesting case study, or simply identify an issue that you would like us to talk about during the seminar. I will read your comments and do my best take them up during the seminar.
- Actively participate in discussions during the seminar. Please bear in mind that the topics covered in this course can be controversial. At the same time, do not hesitate to argue in support of unpopular positions or object to those that are widely held.

Blind grading Please submit your work with no identifying information other than your student number.

Office hours I hold weekly office hours. I welcome you to use this opportunity. You don't need to come with a specific question about the readings or an assignment. We can just grab a cup of coffee and talk about philosophy.

Resources Don't be discouraged if you have difficulty following an argument in an assigned reading or if you misunderstand something. Philosophy is challenging and many philosophers are not gifted stylists. I often read philosophical articles twice and encourage you to do the same. You can find many helpful tips about reading philosophical texts, participating in seminars, and writing essays in this [Pink Guide to Philosophy](#) by Helena de Bres. Another excellent resource, regularly used by students and professors alike, is the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

Preferred translation There are a number of different English translations of *The World as Will and Representation*. Until recently, most scholars used the translation by E. F. J. Payne from the 1950s and 1960s. You are welcome to use this edition if you already have a physical copy. However, I recommend using a newer and superior translation, which was edited by Christopher Janaway and colleagues, and published by Cambridge University Press. This edition might not yet be available in the university library, but I will provide a PDF copy for everyone.

SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introduction

An overview of Schopenhauer's life, writings, terminology, and philosophical influences.

- WWR I, Introduction, pp. xii-xx (9 pages)
- WWR I, Preface to the First Edition, pp. 5-10 (6 pages)
- WWR I, Notes on text and translation, pp. xlvii-lv. (8 pages)
- *Optional:* David E. Cartwright. (2017). Becoming the Author of *World as Will and Representation: Schopenhauer's Life and Education 1788-1818*. In Sandra Shapshay (ed.) *The Palgrave Schopenhauer Handbook*. (23 pages)

Week 2: Perception and Understanding

Schopenhauer examines how bodily senses and understanding work together to create representations of external objects in our mind, and aligns himself with Kant's doctrine of 'transcendental idealism'.

- WWR I, Book I, §1-7 (35 pages)

Week 3: Power and Significance of Reason

Schopenhauer explains how reason gives rise to concepts and knowledge, and argues that this unique capacity opens human beings to a much greater range of sufferings than animals but does not confer on them any special 'dignity' (as Kant thought).

- WWR I, Book I, §8-16 (61 pages)

Week 4: The Thing in Itself as Will

Schopenhauer defends his central idea that the world that appears to us as representation is, in itself, will, and argues that, outside of the subject forms of space and time, the world is not split up into separate individuals.

- WWR I, Book II, §17-23 (25 pages)

Week 5: Metaphysics and Science

Schopenhauer confronts his account of the world as will with the scientific accounts of nature.

- WWR I, Book II, §24-29 (45 pages)
- *Optional:* Marco Segala. (2017). Metaphysics and the Sciences in Schopenhauer. In Sandra Shapshay (ed.) *The Palgrave Schopenhauer Handbook*. (20 pages)

Week 6: Aesthetic Contemplation

Schopenhauer argues that aesthetic contemplation allows us to temporarily escape the ordinary mode of cognition and the painful pressures of willing, and distinguishes between the beautiful and the sublime.

- WWR I, Book III, §30-41 (47 pages)
- *Optional:* Sandra Shapshay. (2012). Schopenhauer's Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art. *Philosophy Compass*. (12 pages)

Week 7: Pessimism

Schopenhauer argues that we have no free will and that life is filled with suffering because we perpetually oscillate between striving and boredom.

- WWR I, Book IV, §53-59 (51 pages)

Week 8: Egoism, justice, and compassion

Schopenhauer contends that egoism consists in the affirmation of the will, that the institutions of law, justice, and punishment exist to deter individual from doing so in a way that impinges on others' expressions of the will, and that the only morally good actions are the one arising from compassion.

- WWR I, Book IV, §60-67 (52 pages)

Week 9: Ascetic resignation and suicide

Schopenhauer suggests that it is possible to attain an elevated state of will-lessness through asceticism and argues that suicide is not an answer to the problem of suffering.

- WWR I, Book IV, §68-71 (35 pages)
- *Optional:* Michal Masny. (2021). Schopenhauer on Suicide and the Negation of the Will. *The British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. (23 pages)

Week 10: Resignation and compassion

Sandra Shapshay suggests that there is an important tension between the Schopenhauerian ideals of resignation and compassion, and offers an 'optimistic' reading of his ethics. Marshall critiques Shapshay's reading of Schopenhauer's view of the role of compassion.

- Sandra Shapshay. (2019). Ch 1: A Tale of Two Schopenhauers. In her *Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics*. (26 pages)
- Colin Marshall. (2021). Schopenhauer on the content of compassion. *Nous*. (18 pages)