

# Descartes and Schopenhauer on Voluntary Movement: Why My Arm Is Lifted When I Will Lift It?

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## **The purpose of this paper**

In the ordinary literature on modern philosophy, there seems to be very little discussion about the relation between Descartes and Schopenhauer, and we may say that this limitation is rather expected. For one, their positions in the history of philosophy are supposed to be very distant from one another. Descartes belongs to the beginning of modern philosophy and is regarded as the pioneer of the so-called continental rationalism, whereas Schopenhauer belongs to the post-Kantian period of modern philosophy and is generally counted among the German transcendental idealists. For another, in his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer mentions Descartes several times but treats him almost incidentally, that is to say, as a thinker who, although of historical importance, constitutes the realist tradition that he thinks should be overcome.

However, I think there is at least one philosophically quite interesting similarity between Cartesianism and Schopenhauerianism, which students of modern philosophy tend to ignore. It is about their outlooks on voluntary movement, that is, the bodily motion that is generally supposed to be caused by volition. The purpose of this paper is to point out their similarity on this subject, without at the same time disregarding their divergences. I would like to illuminate that both philosophers regard voluntary movement as a fundamental fact impervious to any theoretical analysis or rational explanation whatsoever.

## **In the case of Descartes**

Descartes regards voluntary movement to be an instance of action of the soul. In other words, he understands voluntary movement as an effect of mental causation. This means that Descartes' notion on voluntary movement is the same as that of the general populace. Philosophically, there are other ways to regard voluntary movement, a representative of which is

epiphenomenalism. Epiphenomenalists are not materialists in a strict sense, because they acknowledge that there are mental beings distinct from material ones. However, they hold that mental beings, for example, volitions, are only epiphenomena and causally ineffective. In other words, they deny that there are causations from volitions to bodily motions. Descartes is no more an epiphenomenalist than a materialist. To put it more clearly, according to Descartes:

(D1) There is, in fact, mental causation. Operations by a human mental function called will are able to cause or effectuate motions in the human body.

Now, how does he explain mental causation? It may be generally believed that Descartes' explanation on mental causation is based on his well-known theory of the pineal gland. But this belief is off the mark<sup>1)</sup>. It is to be noted that the theory of the pineal gland is not so much an explanation but an exposition of mental causation. As is often mentioned in textbooks on the history of modern philosophy, Princess Elisabeth wrote to Descartes to ask how the mind and body can have a causal relation in spite of their fundamentally different attributes. We have to keep in mind that Descartes' response to the princess in his letter dated June 28, 1643 was not at all the theory of the pineal gland. In the letter, after asserting that there are three primitive notions, namely those of the soul, the body, and the union of the soul and body, Descartes states: "what belongs to the union of the soul and the body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses" (CSMK, p. 227; AT III, p. 691). He adds: "it is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation and from the study of the things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body" (CSMK, p. 227; AT III, p. 692). Moreover, the same line of argument is found in Descartes' letter to Arnauld dated July 29, 1648 in which he says: "That the mind, which is incorporeal, can set the body in motion is something which is shown to us not by any reasoning or comparison with other matters, but by the surest and plainest everyday experience" (CSMK, p. 358; AT V, p. 222).

The point is that for Descartes, mental causation is one thing and physical causation is quite another. He considers that in order to understand the union of the mind and body, we must not theorize about the binominal relation between the mind and, for example, the pineal gland, but

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1) On this point, which tends to be overlooked in the contemporary philosophy of mind, I have been significantly informed by the works of Kobayashi, a representative Japanese specialist on Descartes' philosophy. Cf. e.g. Kobayashi (2009).

attend to our everyday experience itself of the union in question, for example, an experience of my lifting my arm at will. In short, according to Descartes:

(D2) We should definitely distinguish between physical causation, that is, causation from one body to another, on the one hand, and mental causation, that is, causation from the mind to the body, on the other hand. It is impossible to understand mental causation in terms of physical causation.

(D3) The notion of the union of the mind and body, one aspect of which is that of mental causation, is a primitive notion, and therefore, we cannot understand it in any other way than by experiencing it in our daily life, for example, by lifting our arm at will.

### **In the case of Schopenhauer**

As has been shown, Descartes clearly distinguishes between physical causation and mental causation, but in spite of this distinction, he persists in regarding the relation between the mind and body as an instance of causation, a relation of cause and effect. In contrast, Schopenhauer does not take the relation in question as an instance of causation anymore. In his view, the causal relation takes place only in the sphere of representations or phenomena, and there is no causation between will, which is noumenal, and body, which is phenomenal. He states: “Whatever the thing-in-itself may be, Kant rightly concluded that time, space and causality ... could not be its properties, but could come to it only after, and in so far as, it had become representation, in other words, belonged only to its phenomenon or appearance, not to it itself” (WWR, p. 120).

One of the most conspicuous differences between Descartes and Schopenhauer is that the former regards the relation between will and body as an instance of causation in a general sense whereas the latter does not. In this respect, the two philosophers are sharply opposed. Thus, in Schopenhauer’s view:

(S1) There is no mental causation, that is, causation from the will to the body, since any causation whatsoever is obtained only between representations (phenomena) and the will is not a representation but a thing-in-itself (noumenon).

(S2) It is impossible to understand voluntary movement in terms of causation.

Then, one may naturally ask what relation lies between will and body except that of causality. Is Schopenhauer ready to answer this question? Yes. He holds that the experience itself of voluntary movement reveals to us the answer, namely that the will and body is one and the same thing. He says: “The act of will and the action of the body are not two different states objectively known, connected by the bound of causality; they do not stand in the relation of cause and effect, but are one and the same thing, though given in two entirely different ways, first quite directly, and then in perception for the understanding. The action of the body is nothing but the act of will objectified, i.e., translated into perception” (WWR, p. 100). In brief, in Schopenhauer’s view, the relation between the will and body is not causation but identity. To put it more clearly, since the will is noumenal and the body is phenomenal, the former is a noumenon of the body and the latter is a phenomenon of the will, or, in characteristically Schopenhauerian language, objectified will<sup>2)</sup>. Thus, according to Schopenhauer:

(S3) My experience of voluntary movement reveals to me that the noumenon behind my body, which is a phenomenon, is will. In this sense, my body is objectified will. In other words, my body is the outside and my will is the inside, of one and the same thing.

### **Voluntary movement impervious to reason**

After all, what is the common insight shared by Descartes and Schopenhauer on the problem of voluntary movement? Both philosophers agree that understanding voluntary movement is a problem that cannot be solved by any physicalist model of causation. They treat this problem from a view point quite different from that of physicalists. Of course, there are other philosophers, such as Spinoza and Leibniz, who share with Descartes and Schopenhauer the consideration that voluntary movement cannot be reduced to causation between physical beings. But whereas Spinoza and Leibniz believe it is possible to solve the problem intellectually by way of some metaphysical theories, that is, psycho–physical parallelism (Spinoza) or doctrine of preestablished

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2) Hannan eloquently reformulates this view in her strikingly enlightening introduction to Schopenhauer. She says: “It is important to note that for Schopenhauer, the act of will and the bodily motion that carries it out are the noumenal and phenomenal aspects of one and the same event” (Hannan, 2009, p. 28).

harmony (Leibniz), Descartes and Schopenhauer, in contrast, refuse to have such an intellectualist attitude and regard voluntary action as, so to speak, a door leading to a world other than the world that the human mind can theorize about. To put it briefly, both Descartes and Schopenhauer hold that voluntary movement is impervious to reason<sup>3)</sup>.

At the same time, they are opposed in some respects of considerable importance. First, as has been remarked, they sharply disagree with regard to whether or not the concept of causation should be maintained. In the case of lifting my arm at will, Descartes considers that I lift my arm whereas Schopenhauer holds that my arm lifts itself. True, this is a remarkable divergence. However, to reiterate, they have something philosophically very important in common, that is, the consideration that the fact of my arm being lifted at will is not to be interpreted as that of some physiological impulse from my brain causing my arm to lift itself. For both of them, voluntary movement is totally impervious to scientific or theoretical explanation whatsoever.

Second, Descartes and Schopenhauer also disagree about individuality. Descartes has no doubt that the human soul united with the human body exists as an individual being, even to such an extent that one may be inclined to think he commits a so-called homunculus fallacy. In contrast, Schopenhauer regards will as the unique thing-in-itself existing behind diverse phenomena. For him, the multiplicity of things belongs only to the phenomenal world, and behind that world lies only one thing-in-itself, namely the unique will. As it were, Schopenhauer lumps phenomenal individuals into one undifferentiated noumenal being.

### A prospect

The purpose of this paper has been to compare Descartes and Schopenhauer on the problem of voluntary movement, which is whether to understand voluntary movement in a binominal or a two-term relation. Descartes understands the concept binomially, never disposing of the notion of causation, and in that sense, he remains in the common sense position. In contrast, Schopenhauer dispenses with the binominal framework and even asserts that the metaphysical will is the one thing-in-itself into which everything, whether organic or inorganic, is absorbed.

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3) Of course, it is to be noted that Descartes, who is a rationalist in a full sense, treats reason quite differently from Schopenhauer, who is an irrationalist in a sense. For the latter, the function of reason is not so much epistemological as practical. In other words, for him, reason functions for life rather than for knowledge. With regard to this, according to Copleston, Schopenhauer may be considered to anticipate Bergson. Cf. Copleston (1975), pp. 56–9.

From his assertion, we can certainly find a sort of mystical element. True, this mystical element appears very attractive as far as it has much to do with a certain position in contemporary environmental ethics or animal ethics, which is commonly called anti-anthropocentrism. However, it cannot be denied that the type of argument to which Schopenhauer appeals, namely analogy, is very weak from the logical point of view, and that his doctrine of the metaphysical will lacks in the power of assertion as far as it depends on analogy.

Yet, after all, we can say that to pay attention to Descartes and Schopenhauer on the problem of voluntary movement provides us very important material when we deal with the mind–body problem in contemporary philosophy. In treating the problem, both of them refrain from any physicalist model of causation. Their discussion clearly shows us that there is no *a priori* necessity to subscribe to physicalism when we inquire into the riddle of voluntary movement.

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