Schopenhauer’s Intuitions, Sensations and the Law of Causality

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Imagine that a rose bedecked with dew lies close to the tip of your finger. At the tip of your finger, petals embrace each other under the caress of the dew. You now engage yourself in direct contact of the rose and the dewdrops. You can hear the sound of dew dropping and you can feel the moisture that is reluctant to leave. What your ears, eyes, and hands sense are mere sensations.1 Meanwhile, in your mind, you must have an immediate representation of the dew dropping from the rose. Such representation is your intuition. Are mere sensations the same as intuition? If not, what transformed mere sensations to intuition?

Arthur Schopenhauer, in volume one of The World as Will and Representation discusses how the role of understanding, i.e., the capacity to cognize causality, offers insight into the transformation from mere sensations to intuitions. Douglas James McDermid, in “Schopenhauer as Epistemologist: A Kantian against Kant,” argues that while the law of causality may be necessary for intuition, it is insufficient to support the dramatic shift from subjective mere sensations to spatio-temporal intuitions. I argue that the application of causality on mere sensations is not just necessary but sufficient for us to have intuitions (in Schopenhauer’s sense).

In this paper, I will first explain Schopenhauer’s discussion about the transition from mere sensations to intuitions through understanding, i.e., the application of the law of causality. Then, I will present McDermid’s argument that the law of causality is insufficient to account for the transition from sensations to intuitions with mere understanding. After that, I will give my argument that understanding, merely as to have the cognition of causality, is sufficient to support the transition from sensations to intuitions on the ground that causality itself

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1. Pointed out by Colin Marshall in personal communication, Schopenhauer may suggest our sense organs themselves having sensations in a poetic sense. Strictly speaking, it may still be the subject who has those sensations.
entails time and space and thus to have a cognition of causality is to have a spatio-temporal interpretation of sensations.

II

The law of causality entails that any effects must presuppose a cause; and given the cause, the effect necessarily follows. Schopenhauer explains, “every such object stands in a necessary relation to other objects, on the one hand as determined and on the other hand as determining” (WWRI 26). Recall the dew on the rose: on the one hand it drops as determined by you touching the rose, and on the other hand, it determines the sound of dewdrops.

When Schopenhauer discusses the law of causality, it is always in reference to matter. In fact, he states:

Matter, that is to say, the law of causality: matter is, in its entirety, nothing other than causality, which is immediately apparent to anyone who thinks about it. This amounts to saying that for matter, its being is its acting: and it is inconceivable that matter has any other being. Only by acting can it fill space and time . . . The whole being of matter therefore lies in cause and effect: for matter, its being is its acting.” (WWRI 29)

Therefore, without an intuition of the acting of the matter, we cannot have an intuition of the being of the matter at all. Recall the rose. In order to intuit the rose, we have to intuit the shape and the color. The rose reflects light with specific range of wavelength that reaches us. Thus the area of where the light reflects corresponds to its shape on our retinas. And the range of the wavelength “portrays” its color based on the sensitivity of cells in our retina to light of different wavelengths. We can only intuit the shape and the color of the rose through its action on our body. Otherwise, it is hard to imagine how we can have an intuition of the rose at all.

Schopenhauer further distinguishes sensations from intuition. “What the eye, the ear, the hand senses is not an intuition: it is merely data” (WWRI 33). Schopenhauer seems to suggest that intuition, compared to sensations, has richer content. Mere sensations, e.g., the mere activities of particular cells in our retina, seem only to offer insights that are limited within our body. In other words, the mere sensation seems insufficient to convey any information regarding external
matters. Schopenhauer describes that the mere sensations can bring “only a dull, plant-like consciousness of alterations in the immediate object” (WWRI 33). Note “the immediate object” refers to our body. Mere sensations, offering insights of nothing but alterations within our body, seem trivial.

Then how can we have an intuition that entails richer content of external matters? Schopenhauer claims that only through understanding, i.e., cognition of causality, by interpreting mere sensations as effects caused by external matters can we have intuitions of external matters. He states, “only when the understanding proceeds from the effect back to the cause is the world present in intuition” (Schopenhauer, WWRI 33). Thus, our intuitions presuppose the law of causality. “Intuition is, in every case, not based merely on the senses, but is intellectual: it is pure understanding-based cognition of the cause, given the effect, and hence it presupposes the law of causality” (Schopenhauer, WWRI 34). For example, mere sensations of the rose, i.e., mere alterations of particular cells in our retina, do not convey the rose as an external matter. We can only trace the effect back to the cause through our understanding. That means only by applying the law of causality on our sensations can we trace the alterations of particular retina cells to the rose. Or consider how you intuit the rose, the dew and you. You may feel the moisture of the petal, see the dew leaving the rose and hear the sound of dewdrops. But you can only intuit, i.e., have an immediate representation of, the rose, the dew and you through understanding by applying the law of causality to “map” your different sensations back to the cause: the rose, the dew and you.

However, McDermid claims, “the mere application of the law of causality may be necessary for perception, but it is surely insufficient to account for the dramatic transition from the purely subjective and non-spatial raw materials furnished by sensation to a detailed spatio-temporal picture of external objects and events that perception provides” (216). Note here due to a difference in translation, the term “perception” McDermid uses is translated as “intuition” in Janaway’s translation. McDermid poses this puzzle based on: (i) the meagerness of mere sensations and (ii) the insufficiency of understanding.

2. For example, I may use a high-tech device to elicit the same alterations of cells in your retina and make you see the same rose. In this case, the rose is not an external matter. If you see me using the device, you may know the rose is not an external matter. Thereby, mere alterations of cells in your retina do not convey the rose as an external matter. You do not know if the rose is an external matter based on mere sensations.
McDermid stresses that the mere sensations are meager because mere sensations do not extend to anything further than our body. He quotes from Schopenhauer:

> What a poor, wretched thing mere sensation is! Even in the noblest organs of sense it is nothing more than a local specific feeling, capable in its way of some variation yet in itself always subjective . . . This feeling cannot possibly contain anything objective, and so anything resembling intuitive perception. For sensation of every kind is and remains an event within the organism itself; but as such it is restricted to the region beneath the skin; and so, in itself, it can never contain anything lying outside the skin and thus outside ourselves.”
(Schopenhauer, FR 75-76)

Sensations fail to entail external matters while intuitions can. Thus, mere sensations, as internal in nature, have meager content when compared to intuitions.

McDermid further argues that sensations, as raw and non-spatial, seem to require more than the application of the law of causality to gain the spatio-temporal content that intuitions have.\(^3\) McDermid seems to suggest that the spatial-temporal relation that intuitions depict requires more than the law of causality. Since Schopenhauer claims, “to have cognition of causality is the understanding’s only function, its single capability,” (WWRI 26) understanding, though necessary, seems insufficient for the transition from mere sensations to intuitions. McDermid seems to suggest that understanding is insufficient to account particularly for the spatio-temporal relation that our intuitions have.

III

I argue that our understanding is sufficient to support the transition from mere sensations to intuitions on the ground that the law of causality itself entails time and space, and is thus able to transform non-spatial sensations to spatio-temporal

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3. The puzzle McDermid raises in his “Schopenhauer as Epistemologist” only appears towards the end of his paper and he does not give a detailed explanation. I interpret his puzzle as a question asking how non-spatio-temporal input—mere sensations—transforms into spatio-temporal output—intuitions.
intuitions. My argument would then counter McDermid’s puzzle by providing a possible demonstration of the sufficiency of our understanding.

The law of causality, rather than having meaning in itself, makes sense only in company of the space and time. Similarly, space and time, rather than having meaning solely in themselves, seem to make more sense in terms of the law of causality. Schopenhauer states:

The law of causality gets its meaning and necessity from this alone: that the essence of alteration is not mere change of state itself, but rather lies in the fact that one and the same position in space contains now this state of affairs, but then later another, and the fact that at one and the same particular time there is one state here but other state over there: only this mutual constraint of space and time lends meaning, and at the same time necessity to the rule that governs the way alterations must proceed. The law of causality therefore does not determine the succession of states simply in time, but in fact determines this succession with respect to a particular space; and it does not determine the existence of states in a particular location, but in fact in this location at a particular time.” (WWRI 30)

The law of causality gains meaning only in company with the form of space and time. As Schopenhauer states, “Alteration always concerns a particular part of the space and, simultaneously and together with this, a particular part of time.” We here must illustrate cause and effect with alteration, “change that takes place according to the causal law” (WWRI 30). Consider the effect of the dew dropping due to the cause of you touching the rose. Specifically the effect of the dew dropping concerns the alteration of the dew’s position in a succession of time.

Now let’s take a closer look at the dew at the particular space and the particular time. The dew, recognized as matter, presupposes the form of space. The activity of the dew presupposes the form of time. Rather than presupposing time and space separately, the dew, as matter, presuppose both simultaneously. Since with mere time, the dew can succeed to itself without disturbance. Then in what context can you identify the dew in time A as the same dew in time B? Similarly, for the presupposition of mere space, the dew can coexist with itself without restriction. Then in what context can you claim the dew in position A is
different from the dew in position B? Therefore, the dew unifies\textsuperscript{4} time and space.
Since the being is its acting, the matter is causality, then the causality unifies time and space.

Applying the law of causality on mere sensations, therefore, is not simply tracing back to the cause; it is interpreting mere sensations in the form of space and time. For example, applying the law of causality on the mere sensations of the moisture you feel, the dewdrops you hear and the dew leaving the petal you see, is not simply tracing back to the rose, the dew, and you. What you feel, hear, and see is put in the form of space and time: the moisture particularly lingers on the top of the petal from the moment the dew drops to the moment you touch it; the sound wave and the light reflection reach you from the position where the dew drops to where you stand within milliseconds. Without the form of space and time, the moisture, the sound wave, the light reflections are inconceivable as a cause. Or we can say that, by interpreting the moisture, the sound wave, the light reflection as the cause of what we sense, we presuppose the moisture, the sound wave and the light reflection having the form of space and time.

To recognize the causality is to recognize the matter that causes sensations. To recognize the matter as a cause is to recognize the form of space and time of such matter. Thus, our understanding transits mere sensations, as the effect, to intuitions that resemble the cause. McDermid fails to realize that our understanding, by the law of causality, is to refer sensations to spatio-temporal matter. We can say that the very reference our understanding makes is matter-alike intuition. While McDermid worries that the spatio-temporal quality of our intuition seems unattainable from sensation, he may have omitted that the law of causality entails time and space. Thus our understanding, by cognizing the law of causality, is sufficient to transmit the raw sensations to spatio-temporal intuitions.

While McDermid realizes sensations as the effect of a cause, he fails to recognize that the law of causality entails time and space. To apply the law of causality, therefore, is to impose the form of space and time on mere sensations. Hence, by cognizing the law of causality is our understanding sufficient to interpret mere sensations to spatio-temporal intuition.

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\textsuperscript{4} Some may find my choice of word "unify" puzzling. The dew is at a particular position at a particular time. A particular time and a particular space are fixed for the dew simultaneously. In this case, I say that the dew unifies time and space.
References


