



Schopenhauer Alfred William Benn

The leaders of the party known in the fourth and fifth decades of the last century as Young Germany, among whom Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was the most brilliant and famous, were more or less associated with the Hegelian school. They were, however, what Hegel was not, political revolutionists with a tendency to Socialism; while their religious rationalism, unlike his, was openly proclaimed. The temporary collapse in 1849 of the movement they initiated brought discredit on idealism as represented by Germany's classic philosophers, which also had been seriously damaged by the luminous criticism of Trendelenburg, the neo-Aristotelian professor at Berlin (1802-1872).

At this crisis attention was drawn to the long-neglected writings of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), which then attained a vogue that they never since have lost. The son of a Hamburg banker and of a literary lady whose novels enjoyed some reputation in their day, he was placed from the beginning in a position of greater material and social independence than usually falls to the lot of German thinkers; and to this, combined with the fact that he failed entirely as a university teacher, it is partly due that he wrote about philosophy not like a pedant, but like a man of the world. At the same time the German professors, resenting the intrusion of an outsider on their privileged domain, were strong enough to prevent the reading public from ever hearing of Schopenhauer's existence until an article in the *Westminster Review* (April, 1853) astonished Germany by the revelation that she possessed a thinker whom the man in the street could understand.

Schopenhauer found his earliest teachers of philosophy in Plato and Kant. He then attended Fichte's lectures at Berlin. At some uncertain date—probably soon after taking his doctor's degree in 1813—at the suggestion of an Orientalist he took up the study of the Vedanta system. All these various influences converged to impress him with the belief that the things of sense are a delusive appearance under which a fundamental reality lies concealed. According to Hegel, the reality is reason; but the Romantics, with Schelling at their head, never accepted his conclusion, thinking of the absolute rather as a blind, unconscious substance; still less could it please Schopenhauer, who sought for the supreme good under the form of happiness conceived as pleasure unalloyed by pain. A gloomy and desponding temperament combined, as in the case of Byron and Rousseau, with passionately sensuous instincts and anti-social habits, debarred him from attaining it. The loss of a large part of his private fortune, and the world's refusal to recognise his genius, completed what natural temperament had begun; and it only remained for the philosophy of the Upanishads to give a theoretic sanction to the resulting state of mind by teaching that all existence is in itself an evil—a position which placed him in still more thoroughgoing antagonism to Hegel.

It will be remembered that Kant's criticism had denied the human mind all knowledge of things in themselves, and that the post-Kantian systems had been so many efforts to get at the Absolute in its despite. But none had stated the question at issue so clearly as Schopenhauer put it, or answered it in such luminous terms. Like theirs, his solution is idealist; but the idealism is constructed on new lines. If we know nothing else, we know ourselves; only it has to be

ascertained what exactly we are. Hegel said that the essence of consciousness is reason, and that reason is the very stuff of which the world is made. No, replies Schopenhauer, that is a one-sided scholastic view. Much the most important part of ourselves is *not* reason, but that very unreasonable thing called will—that aimless, hopeless, infinite, insatiable craving which is the source of all our activity and of all our misery as well. This is the thing-in-itself, the timeless, inextended entity behind all phenomena, come to the consciousness of itself, but also of its utter futility, in man.

The cosmic will presents itself to us objectively under the form of the great natural forces—gravitation, heat, light, electricity, chemical affinity, etc.; then as the organising power of life in vegetables and animals; finally as human self-consciousness and sociability. These, Schopenhauer says, are what is really meant by the Platonic ideas, and they figure in his philosophy as first differentiations of the primordial will, coming between its absolute unity and the individualised objects and events that fill all space and time. It is the function of architecture, plastic art, painting, and poetry to give each of these dynamic ideas, singly or in combination, its adequate interpretation for the aesthetic sense. One art alone brings us a direct revelation of the real world, and that is music. Musical compositions have the power to express not any mere ideal embodiment of the underlying will, but the will itself in all its majesty and unending tragic despair.

Schopenhauer's theory of knowledge is given in the essay by which he obtained his doctor's degree, *On the Four-fold Root of the Sufficient Reason*. Notwithstanding this rather alarming title, it is a singularly clear and readable work. The standpoint is a simplification of Kant's *Critique*. The objects of consciousness offer themselves to the thinking, acting subject as grouped presentations in which there is "nothing sudden, nothing single." (1) When a new object appears to us, it must have a cause, physical, physiological, or psychological; and this we call the reason why it becomes. (2) Objects are referred to concepts of more or less generality, according to the logical rules of definition, classification, and inference; that is the reason of their being known. (3) Objects are mathematically determined by their position relatively to other objects in space and time; that is the reason of their being. (4) Practical objects or ends of action are determined by motives; the motive is the reason why one thing rather than another is done.

The last "sufficient reason" takes us to ethics. Schopenhauer agrees with Kant in holding that actions considered as phenomena are strictly determined by motives, so much so that a complete knowledge of a man's character and environment would enable us to predict his whole course of conduct through life. Nevertheless, each man, as a timeless subject, is and knows himself to be free. To reconcile these apparently conflicting positions we must accept Plato's theory that each individual's whole fate has been determined by an ante-natal or transcendental choice for which he always continues responsible. Nevertheless, cases of religious "conversion" and the like prove that the eternal reality of the Will occasionally asserts itself in radical transformations of character and conduct.

In ethics Schopenhauer distinguishes between two ideals which may be called "relative" and "absolute" good. Relative good agrees with the standard of what in England is known as Universalistic Hedonism—the greatest pleasure combined with the least pain for all sensitive beings, each agent counting for no more than one. Personally passionate, selfish, and brutal, Schopenhauer still had a righteous abhorrence of cruelty to animals; whereas Kant had no such feeling. But positive happiness is a delusion, and no humanity can appreciably diminish the amount of pain produced by vital competition—recognised by our philosopher before Darwin—in the world. Therefore Buddhism is right, and the higher morality bids us extirpate the will-to-live altogether by ascetic practices and meditation on the universal vanity of things.

Suicide is not allowed, for while annihilating the intelligence it would not exclude some fresh incarnation of the will. And the last dying wish of Schopenhauer was that the end of this life might be the end of all living for him.

Alfred William Benn. *History of Modern Philosophy*. London: Watts and Co, 1912.

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