



Introduction to the Philosophy of Schopenhauer

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The popularity of Schopenhauer with a large unacademic public is easily explained. Part of the explanation is to be found in the extraordinarily vivacious and luxurious discourse that was his medium. He is one of the great German prose writers, and even in translation there is the tang of sense, the pungency of realistic observation in his pages. But there is something more. He seems to the reflective layman to have hit upon the inner essence and divined the essential tragedy of human existence. His philosophy is not the closet dialectic of the schools, though even in the dialectical branches of thought he is nobody's fool; it is philosophy in the old and appealing meaning of wisdom of life. The plain man here recognises something he has long felt and never articulated. This philosophy is the alert, half-sad, half-cynical harvest of a candid eye. That is why lawyers and men of the world, acquainted with the disillusioned realms of experience, why adolescents just waking up from their own dreams, have found in Schopenhauer a philosophy they could feel at home with. Schopenhauer's philosophy is the Pathétique Symphony of nineteenth-century thought. Like that popular piece of musical Weltshmerz, it has its limitations. These any technical student of philosophy is free to point out, as is also any classical critic of the romantic temperament. There is at once in these pages a high hand with the philosophical respectabilities and a soft luxuriance with grief that are the despair of the sober technician in philosophy and the reposeful classicists in literature. But below the carelessness of technique and the irony and pity there is a high, impeccable and irrefutable insight. The Western world has nowhere found a more complete exposition of the essence of things as it appears to those who live by impulse, and the tragedy of things for those who know that impulse must always be partially frustrated, and the life that generates impulse ultimately doomed. Instead of trying, as so many philosophers have tried, to resolve the discords of experience into a smooth and illusory coherence, Schopenhauer faced those discords and built his philosophy upon them. This disillusioning feat of picturesque honesty has impressed those who have found most other philosophies systems of obscure optimism.

The biography of a philosopher is, under the aspect of eternity, irrelevant to his life. What a man says and what that saying signifies is the sole just preoccupation of a philosophical critic. It is, in a profound sense, none of his business why a thinker came to say the things he did or why he chose to say them in the particular fashion for which he is famous. Yet in the case of Schopenhauer, if ever, the life illuminates the doctrine and the philosophy is an expression of the man. The pessimism, the ill-temper, the sallies of poetic insight and of realistic perception, the obsession with the obsession of sex, the fulminations against academic philosophers and the failure to "exemplify their virtues, all seem to be functions of the life Schopenhauer led and the man he was. Born at Danzig, on February 22, 1788, he was brought up in the family of a wealthy merchant. A streak of insanity ran in the

paternal side of the family, and the death of Schopenhauer's father in a canal at Hamburg seemed to be a suicide. In his life, Schopenhauer was moody, high strung, and so great a lover of liberty that when the free city of Danzig lost its independence to Poland, in 1793, he moved to Hamburg. Schopenhauer's mother, one of the popular novelists of her day, on her husband's death moved to Weimar, where her salon became the center of the intellectual and literary colony gathered there. Schopenhauer and his mother could not bear each other's company, and after a definite quarrel during which the mother pushed her son downstairs, he left Weimar, never to see his mother again.

Schopenhauer, on his father's death, took a course in the Gymnasium; later, on an allowance from his mother, a university course. During this intellectual education, he lived the life of a worldling and a man about town. He was almost influenced by Fichte to join a war of liberation against Napoleon, but he himself thought that "Napoleon only gave untrammelled and concentrated utterance to that self-assertion and lust for more life which weaker mortals feel, but most perforce disguise."

Schopenhauer won his doctor's degree by his dissertation on the fourfold root of sufficient reason, published in 1833, which turned out to be the cornerstone of his system. This book is the intellectual foundation of his major work, "The World as Will and Idea." It is a clear analysis of the principle of causation, in its physical, logical, and metaphysical senses. The first edition of Schopenhauer's masterpiece attracted comparatively no attention. In 1836 "The Will in Nature" was published, in 1844 the enlarged edition of "The World as Will and Idea." His final two works were the "Ground Problem of Ethics," published in 1841, and two substantial volumes of "Parerga et Paridipomena," translated into English as the "Essays."

Schopenhauer had a brief, inglorious adventure into academic life. In 1822 he was invited to lecture at the University of Berlin as Privat Dozent. Choosing the same hours as Hegel, then the reigning lord in philosophy, he found his classrooms empty of students. He resigned in disgust, and, a little later, fleeing the cholera epidemic in Berlin, went to Frankfurt, where he settled down for the remainder of his life. He died there at seventy-two. He lived modestly on an income from an interest in his father's firm, travelled a little in Italy, but for the most part lived out his life in a boarding house, having for his sole friend and companion a dog. Despite the fact that the universities ignored him, his philosophy gained fame, and what is more, an ardent personal following among men of affairs and men of the world. Praise came to him from Wagner for his philosophy of music and from Nietzsche for his philosophy of will. At seventy, he was a world figure. At seventy-two he died alone, on September 21, 1860.

There is little in his life to stir one to personal admiration. It is that of a rather sharp, vain recluse, haunted in his earlier years by sex, in his later ones by the lust for fame and an embittered contempt of his academic contemporaries. His fears of poison and of violence, his ungoverned fury about women, his cynical underscoring of all the seamy sides of human conduct, the absence in his life of every tie of affection, do not make an amiable figure. But on the credit side must be placed a genuine metaphysical zeal, a fanatic devotion to his conception of truth, and the passion of a romantic poet.

The philosophy of Schopenhauer takes its cue, almost borrows its technique, from Kant. The latter had instituted "A Copernican revolution" in philosophy by declaring that the apparent structure of nature was truly a structure of appearance: the forms of understanding constituted the apparent order of things. Schopenhauer agreed with Kant, on this general

point, and gave the point his own formulation. "All the furniture of Heaven and earth was an appearance whose constitution was determined by the principle of sufficient reason, that fourfold form of those connections by which the understanding understood," and in understanding which it constituted the phenomenal world. The whole apparently so solid world of matter is simply the nexus of things in time and space, a nexus which is simply another name for the law of causation, itself an unescapable form of the understanding. It is unnecessary to follow Schopenhauer in his detailed analysis of the forms of the principle of sufficient reason, those orders of physical, logical, mathematical, and moral determinants which regulate our knowledge of, which constitute and guarantee the nature of, the world of phenomena. It is unnecessarily superfluous for the understanding of his position to trace his analysis of perception and conception and the relation between them. The whole of Book I, which is concerned with these, is done with engaging lucidity, though its analysis of mathematics is questionable. But the whole of it is aimed to make just one fundamental point. It is the logical prelude to a discussion of the realm of the real. It is an analysis of that intellectual schema of the mind which confines knowledge always to knowledge of appearances.

It is a critique of the world that knowledge reveals. The objective world which seems indeed so objective is indeed truly so. It is object for a subject, and the nature of its objectivity is determined by the nature of that knowledge which the subject may have. The whole of that cosmos which the materialist boasts to be matter, is matter surely enough. But matter is itself simply another name for causation; causation is the union of space and time; space and time are forms of understanding; save that they are the subject's avenues of knowledge, there would be no matter. The world, for each individual, is his "idea" of it. It is not in that "world as idea" that reality is to be found. Reality in the ordinary sense is unknowable, since what is knowable is only the order of appearances. This whole external world is simply a construction of the intellect, and the intellect is simply the instrument that arises in the service of that inner reality which each of us experiences as the desire which he is aware of in his own body, in his physical tensions, in his unconscious strivings, in his will. That Will, which alone is immediately known to us, is recognised, too, in Nature. From the pull of gravitation and the tendency of crystals to Form of a pattern, from the movements of the stars to the consciously directed volitions of man, the inner nature of things is not that world which the intellect knows, but that Will which the individual experiences in his own blind impulses and which he finds exemplified and repeated on a cosmic scale in the inner processes of Nature.

Kant had found the Reality in an Unknowable that was posited as an act of practical reason or Faith. For Schopenhauer, the Unknowable Reality is that Will in the interests of which Knowledge arises, that Will which is a blind striving, in whose service the slavish intellect constructs a practical and illusive world. It is a will toward no rational end. It is a blind will to live. In human beings it cloaks itself with sophistries of intellect and rational excuses. In brute and in unconscious nature, it operates with naked blindness.

"Spinoza says that if a stone which has been projected through the air, had consciousness, it would believe that it was moving of its own free will. I add this only, that the stone would be right. The impulse given it is for the stone what the motive is for me, and what in the case of the stone appears as cohesion, gravitation, rigidity, is in its inner nature the same as that which I recognise in myself as will, and what the stone also, if knowledge were given to it, would recognise as will."

Schopenhauer recognises several important facts as pointing toward the universal and unified reality that is the Will. One is inner teleology, the harmonious connivances of organs to the fulfillment of an end; another is the recognisable types and unities in all the multifarious variety of transient individuals that to knowledge constitute the picture of Nature. Individuals vary in time and space; they are variables and temporal instances of those invariant eternal grades of objectification in which the unitary and universal Will manifests itself.

Schopenhauer finds two grounds for pessimism in the fact that the blind striving will is the inner reality of nature and the essence of life. Those two grounds for pessimism lie first in the fact that the will is doomed to privation. It is striving because it is unfulfilled. Secondly, where it does find fulfillment, that fulfillment turns out to be illusion. Schopenhauer sings a long dirge of sadness, a long lugubrious description of the way in which the human will oscillates between suffering and boredom. Half of life is the stinging pain of frustration, the other half the dull pain of boredom. Schopenhauer is the apotheosis of romantic irony expressing a romantic disgust over a world that does not meet the needs of the assertive will, and the irony of that will which finds the emptiness of what it thought it needed.

There is nothing for Schopenhauer, then, but to seek some method of salvation and escape. Happiness is impossible since where one thought one was going to obtain it, one finds nothing but unhappiness. The most that one can hope for is a Quietistic redemption. That is possible for brief moments in the world of Art, for the world of Art as Schopenhauer describes it in his Book III is the world as Platonic idea. In the quite momentary contemplation of Art and in the productions of genius the human will recognises those eternal grades of the will, its changeless essences which outlive the vicissitudes of change itself, and are shining and implacable archetypes in which the will may escape change and time, suffering and disillusion. In the rapt contemplation of the sculptured essence of man, men may escape the restless striving of their own souls and the restless and innumerable temporal vanities of individual men. In the experience of the eternal types and patterns of love in lyric poetry men may escape the pains and frustrations of their own transient loves and tragedies of life. And in the flow and movement of music the will recognises in the intimate and poignant stream of sound its own intimate and poignant life. If the plastic and the literary arts reveal the eternal forms of the world, it is in music that the will itself is immediately rendered. And so for Schopenhauer music is the most perfect and successful of the arts since it reveals the will with immediacy and urgency to itself.

But the arts provide only moments of escape. From the changing and distracting world of time they permit brief flights into the timeless and will-less perception of artistic contemplation. Scientific and practical knowledge are bounded by the provincial demands, personal cravings, the temporal distractions of the will. In the arts one escapes at once the world of illusion that is the world of knowledge, the world of pain and disillusion, that is the world as will. But one escapes for moments only, one returns with increased bitterness with the world of things in time and space to the rude pressure of desire. There must if one is to attain this, if not happiness, be a more radical way of escape. That is provided in Schopenhauer's analysis not by the momentary escape of the esthete, but by the eternal escape of the ascetic. Since the world out of which all pain and ennui flow is itself an objectification of the will, if one defies the will, one denies the world. To become profoundly and radically ascetic is the way to peace and to Nirvana. By a radical denial of the world, one escapes the world, for with the denial of the will the world is destroyed. That

radical denial is possible through the discovery that Buddha, from whom Schopenhauer learned so much, made so long ago. When through the insight of sympathy it is recognised that one's own sufferings are part of that universal suffering which is the penalty of the assertion of a will doomed to frustration, then the futility of one's own will against that of others, then the misery involved in the assertion of will at all becomes evident. Insight produces sympathy and sympathy produces saintliness. The artist and the ascetic escape from the world into a momentary and paradisaical vision of the eternal quietudes of the arts. A saint escapes by reducing the world to nothingness, the denial of his own imperiousness and blind and indubitably frustrative will. To become a saint by abnegation is to be at "peace. Suicide which might seem a more easy and immediate escape is for Schopenhauer no escape at all, for suicide is simply a more emphatic and petulant assertion of the will. It is a distraction of the body which is simply one instance of the will; it is not the denial of that universal blind striving will which is the source of all suffering. Schopenhauer offers us the choice of two ways out of the sufferings and disillusionings of life. One, the amiable transient way of the fine arts; two, the sanctified and eternal way of the saint.

"The World as Will and Idea" is of course Schopenhauer's masterpiece, but his "Essays," too, have had a singular power of suasion, illumination and charm to innumerable readers whom the ordinary academic philosopher can neither persuade, illuminate nor charm. Some of his essays are famous for a kind of obstreperous cynicism such as his essay on women; some are notable for their sudden incisive light on intellectual method or conception as in his essay on history, But it is his major work that will always remain of the chiefest interest. For all of its extravagance or perhaps because of it he will remain the urbane spokesman of all those who remain throughout life at once wistful and disillusioned, and recognise the facts of experience and wish that they were not so. His rank as a metaphysician has never been very high, his idealism is both second hand and largely borrowed from Kant, and for all its parade of logical apparatus, it is none too consistent or convincing. His delineation of the characteristic dilemma of the romantic will which can never get what it wants and can never love what it gets is unsurpassed in the history of thought. His pages on the insight of genius and the quality of aesthetic perception, his luminous suggestions on the art of music, his dramatic and vivid rendering of that pity and that negation which constitute the life of saintliness will give him a permanent place.

He was the first one, too, in the history of thought emphatically to insist on the primacy of will over intellect, on the instrumental character of mind in life and in philosophy. He started a movement to which James, Bergson, and Dewey owe not a little. And he combines in his writings the elements of three usually distinct and disparate personalities, a man of the world, a man of thought, and a man of letters. The net result in his case was one of the unparalleled works of art in the history of philosophy; "The World as Will and Idea" remains a piece of speculative literature by a writer with the imagination of a poet and the precision of an observing realist. It was his imagination that, borrowing its materials from Kantian idealism, constructed a highly romantic metaphysical world; it was his realism that gave him a sense of the suffering, injustices, and disillusionings of life. It is this combination that has made him appeal at once to the perpetual adolescence of life and to hard-headed middle-aged realists. He remains one of the very great second-raters in the history of European thought, and a permanent exposition of that mood which beginning with the self frets at an unsatisfactory cosmos, and in the midst of which it does not seek what seems impossible happiness, but from which it tries to escape to a heaven of quietude and peace.

It is a quaint irony that Schopenhauer, at heart a cynical epicurean, should have become the vade mecum of the aesthete and the spiritual ascetic. In whatever quarrels one may find with his philosophy, his prose will always remain immitigably convincing.

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