The Philosophy of Schopenhauer

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Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was the son of a merchant in Dantzic and his wife Johanna, *née* Trosiener, who subsequently became known as a novelist. His early training was gained from foreign travel, but after the death of his father he exchanged the mercantile career, which he had begun at his father's request, for that of a scholar, studying under G.E. Schulze in Göttingen, and under Fichte at Berlin. In 1813 he gained his doctor's degree in Jena with a dissertation *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*. Then he moved from Weimar, the residence of his mother, where he had associated considerably with Goethe and had been introduced to Indian philosophy by Fr. Mayer, to Dresden (1814-18). In the latter place he wrote the essay *On Sight and Colors* (1816; subsequently published by the author in Latin), and his chief work, *The World as Will and Idea* (1819; new edition, with a second volume, 1844). After the completion of the latter he began his first Italian journey, while his second tour fell in the interval between his two quite unsuccessful attempts (in Berlin 1820 and 1825) to propagate his philosophy from the professor's desk. From 1831 until his death he lived in learned retirement in Frankfort-on-the-Main. Here he composed the opuscule *On Will in Nature*, 1836, the prize treatises *On the Freedom of the Human Will* and *On the Foundation of Ethics* (together, *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, 1841), and the collection of minor treatises *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 2 vols., 1851 (including an essay "On Religion").

In regard to subjective idealism Schopenhauer confesses himself a thoroughgoing Kantian. That sensations are merely states in us has long been known; Kant opened the eyes of the world to the fact that the forms of knowledge are also the property of the subject. I know things only as they appear to me, as I represent them in virtue of the constitution of my intellect; the world is my idea. The Kantian theory, however, is capable of simplification, the various forms of cognition may be reduced to a single one, to the category of causality or principle of sufficient reason—which was preferred by Kant himself—as the general expression of the regular connection of our representations. This principle, in correspondence with the several classes of objects, or rather of representations—viz., pure (merely formal) intuitions, empirical (complete) intuitions, acts of will, abstract concepts—has four forms: it is the *principium rationis essendi, rationis fiendi, rationis agendi, rationis cognoscendi*. The *ratio essendi* is the law which regulates the coexistence of the parts of space and the succession of the divisions of time. The *ratio fiendi* demands for every change of state another from which it regularly follows as from its cause, and a substance as its unchangeable substratum—matter. All changes take place necessarily, all that is real is material; the law of causality is valid for phenomena alone, not beyond them, and holds only for the states of substances, not for substances themselves. In inorganic nature causes work mechanically, in organic nature as stimuli (in which the reaction is not equal to the action), and in animated nature as motives. A motive is a conscious (but not therefore a free) cause; the law of motivation is the *ratio agendi*. This serial order, "mechanical cause, stimulus, and motive," denotes only distinctions in the mode of action, not in the necessity of action. Man's actions follow as inevitably from his character and the motives

which influence him as a clock strikes the hours; the freedom of the will is a chimera. Finally, the *ratio cognoscendi* determines that a judgment must have a sufficient ground in order to be true. Judgment or the connection of concepts is the chief activity of the reason, which, as the faculty of abstract thought and the organ of science, constitutes the difference between man and the brute, while the possession of the understanding with its intuition of objects is common to both. In opposition to the customary overestimation of this gift of mediate representations, of language, and of reflection, Schopenhauer gives prominence to the fact that the reason is not a creative faculty like the understanding, but only a receptive power, that it clarifies and transforms the content furnished by intuition without increasing it by new representations.

Objective cognition is confined within the circle of our representations; all that is knowable is phenomenon. Space, time, and causality spread out like a triple veil between us and the *per se* of things, and prevent a vision of the true nature of the world. There is one point, however, at which we know more than mere phenomena, where of these three disturbing media only one, time-form, separates us from the thing in itself. This point is the consciousness of ourselves.

On the one hand, I appear to myself as body. My body is a temporal, spatial, material object, an object like all others, and with them subject to the laws of objectivity. But besides this objective cognition, I have, further, an immediate consciousness of myself, through which I apprehend my true being—I know myself as willing. My will is more than a mere representation, it is the original element in me, the truly real which appears to me as body. The will is related to the intellect as the primary to the secondary, as substance to accident; it is related to the body as the inner to the outer, as reality to phenomenon. The act of will is followed at once and inevitably by the movement of the body willed, nay, the two are one and the same, only given in different ways: will is the body seen from within, body the will seen from without, the will become visible, objectified. After the analogy of ourselves, again, who appear to ourselves as material objects but in truth are will, all existence is to be judged. The universe is the *mac-anthropos*; the knowledge of our own essence, the key to the knowledge of the essence of the world. Like our body, the whole world is the visibility of will. The human will is the highest stage in the development of the same principle which manifests its activity in the various forces of nature, and which properly takes its name from the highest species. To penetrate further into the inner nature of things than this is impossible. What that which presents itself as will and which still remains after the negation of the latter (see below) is in itself, is for us absolutely unknowable.

The world is *per se* will. None of the predicates are to be attributed to the primal will which we ascribe to things in consequence of our subjective forms of thought—neither determination by causes or ends, nor plurality: it stands outside the law of causality, as also outside space and time, which form the *principium individuationis*. The primal will is groundless, blind stress, unconscious impulse toward existence; it is one, the one and all, [Greek: en nai pan]. That which manifests itself as gravity, as magnetic force, as the impulse to growth, as the *vis medicatrix naturae*, is only this one world-will, whose unity (not conscious character!) shows itself in the purposiveness of its embodiments. The essence of each thing, its hidden quality, at which empirical explanation finds its limit, is its will: the essence of the stone is its will to fall; that of the lungs is the will to breathe; teeth, throat, and bowels are hunger objectified. Those qualities in which the universal will gives itself material manifestation form a series with grades of increasing perfection, a realm of unchangeable specific forms or eternal Ideas, which (with a real value difficult to determine) stand midway between the one primal will and the numberless individual beings. That the organic individual does not perfectly correspond to the ideal of its species, but only approximates this more or less closely, is grounded in the fact that the stadia in the objectification of the will, or the Ideas, contend, as it were, for matter; and whatever of force is used up in the victory of the higher Ideas over the lower is

lost for the development of the examples of the former. The higher the level on which a being stands the clearer the expression of its individuality. The most general forces of nature, which constitute the raw mass, play the fundamental bass in the world-symphony, the higher stages of inorganic nature, with the vegetable and animal worlds, the harmonious middle parts, and man the guiding treble, the significant melody. With the human brain the world as idea is given at a stroke; in this organ the will has kindled a torch in order to throw light upon itself and to carry out its designs with careful deliberation; it has brought forth the intellect as its instrument, which, with the great majority of men, remains in a position of subservience to the will. Brain and thought are the same; the former is nothing other than the will to know, as the stomach is will to digest. Those only talk of an immaterial soul who import into philosophy—where such ideas do not belong—concepts taught them when they were confirmed.

Schopenhauer's philosophy is as rich in inconsistencies as his personality was self-willed and unharmonious. "He carries into his system all the contradictions and whims of his capricious nature," says Zeller. From the most radical idealism (the objective world a product of representation) he makes a sharp transition to the crassest materialism (thought a function of the brain); first matter is to be a mere idea, now thought is to be merely a material phenomenon! The third and fourth books of *The World as Will and Idea*, which develop the aesthetic and ethical standpoint of their author, stand in as sharp a contradiction to the first (poëtical) and the second (metaphysical) books as these to each other. While at first it was maintained that all representation is subject to the principle of sufficient reason, we are now told that, besides causal cognition, there is a higher knowledge, one which is free from the control of this principle, viz., aesthetic and philosophical intuition. If, before, it was said that the intellect is the creature and servant of the will, we now learn that in favored individuals it gains the power to throw off the yoke of slavery, and not only to raise itself to the blessedness of contemplation free from all desire, but even to enter on a victorious conflict with the tyrant, to slay the will. The source of this power—is not revealed. R. Haym *(A. Schopenhauer*, 1864, reprinted from the *Preussische Jahrbücher*) was not far wrong in characterizing Schopenhauer's philosophy as a clever novel, which entertains the reader by its rapid vicissitudes.

The contemplation which is free from causality and will is the essence of aesthetic life; the partial and total sublation, the quieting and negation of the will, that of ethical life. It is but seldom, and only in the artistic and philosophical genius, that the intellect succeeds in freeing itself from the supremacy of the will, and, laying aside the question of the *why* and *wherefore*, *where* and *when*, in sinking itself completely in the pure *what* of things. While with the majority of mankind, as with animals, the intellect always remains a prisoner in the service of the will to live, of self-preservation, of personal interests, in gifted men, in artists and thinkers, it strips off all that is individual, and, in disinterested vision of the Ideas, becomes pure, timeless subject, freed from the will. Art removes individuality from the subject as well as from the object; its comforting and cheering influence depends on the fact that it elevates those enjoying it to the stand-point—raised above all pain of desire—of a fixed, calm, completely objective contemplation of the unchangeable essence, of the eternal types of things. For aesthetic intuition the object is not a thing under relations of space, time, and cause, but only an expression, an exemplification, a representative of the Idea. Poetry, which presents—most perfectly in tragedy—the Idea of humanity, stands higher than the plastic arts. The highest rank, however, belongs to music, since it does not, like the other arts, represent single Ideas, but—as an unconscious metaphysic, nay, a second, ideal world above the material world—the will itself. In view of this high appreciation of their art, it is not surprising that musicians have contributed a considerable contingent to the band of Schopenhauer worshipers. A different source of attraction for the wider circle of readers was supplied by the piquant spice of pessimism.

If the purposiveness of the phenomena of nature points to the unity of the primal will, the unspeakable misery of life, which Schopenhauer sets forth with no less of eloquence, proves the blindness and irrationality of the world-ground. To live is to suffer; the world contains incomparably more pain than pleasure; it is the worst possible world. In the world of sub-animal nature aimless striving; in the animal world an insatiable impulse after enjoyment—while the will, deceiving itself with fancied happiness to come, which always remains denied it, and continually tossed to and fro between necessity and *ennui*, never attains complete satisfaction. The pleasure which it pursues is nothing but the removal of a dissatisfaction, and vanishes at once when the longing is stilled, to be replaced by fresh wants, that is, by new pains. In view of the indescribable misery in the world, to favor optimism is evidence not so much of folly and blindness as of a wanton disposition. The old saying is true: Non-existence is better than existence. The misery, however, is the just punishment for the original sin of the individual, which gave itself its particular existence by an act of intelligible freedom. Redemption from the sin and misery of existence is possible only through a second act of transcendental freedom, which, since it consists in the complete transformation of our being, and since it is supernatural in its origin, the Church is right in describing as a new birth and work of grace.

Morality presupposes pessimistic insight into the badness of the world and the fruitlessness of all desire, and pantheistic discernment of the untruth of individual existence and the identity in essence of all individuals from a metaphysical standpoint. Man is able to free himself from egoistic self-affirmation only when he perceives the two truths, that all striving is vain and the longed-for pleasure unattainable, and that all individuals are at bottom one, viz. manifestations of the same primal will. This is temporarily effected in sympathy, which, as the only counterpoise to natural selfishness, is the true moral motive and the source of all love and justice. The sympathizer sees himself in others and feels their suffering as his own. The entire negation of the will, however, inspiring examples of which have been furnished by the Christian ascetics and Oriental penitents, stands higher than the vulgar virtue of sympathy with the sufferings of others. Here knowledge, turned away from the individual and vain to the whole and genuine, ceases to be a motive for the will and becomes a means of stilling it; the intellect is transformed from a motive into a quietive, and brings him who gives himself up to the All safely out from the storm of the passions into the peace of deliverance from existence. Absence of will, resignation, is holiness and blessedness in one. For him who has slain the will in himself the motley deceptive dream of phenomena has vanished, he lives in the ether of true reality, which for our knowledge is an empty nothingness ("Nirvana"), yet (as the ultimate, incomprehensible *per se*, which remains after the annulling of the will) only a relative nothingness—relative to the phenomenon.

Schopenhauer disposes of the sense of responsibility and the reproofs of conscience, which are inconvenient facts for his determinism, by making them both refer, not to single deeds and the empirical character, but to the indivisible act of the intelligible character. Conscience does not blame me because I have acted as I must act with my character and the motives given, but for being what in these actions I reveal myself to be. *Operari sequitur esse*. My action follows from my being, my being was my own free choice, and a new act of freedom is alone capable of transforming it.

If Schopenhauer is fond of referring to the agreement of his views with the oldest and most perfect religions, the idea lies in the background that religion,—which springs from the same metaphysical needs as philosophy, and, for the great multitude, who lack the leisure and the capacity for philosophical thought, takes the place of the former,—as the metaphysics of the people, clothes the same fundamental truths which the philosopher offers in conceptual form and supports by rational grounds in the garb of myth and allegory, and places them under the

protection of an external authority. When this character of religion is overlooked, and that which is intended to be symbolical is taken for literal truth (it is not the supernaturalists alone who start with this unjust demand, but the rationalists also, with their minimizing interpretations), it becomes the worst enemy of true philosophy. In Christianity the doctrines of original sin and of redemption are especially congenial to our philosopher, as well as mysticism and asceticism. He declares Mohammedanism the worst religion on account of its optimism and abstract theism, and Buddhism the best, because it is idealistic, pessimistic, and—atheistic.

It was not until after the appearance of the second edition of his chief work that Schopenhauer experienced in increasing measure the satisfaction—which his impatient ambition had expected much earlier—of seeing his philosophy seriously considered….As we have mentioned above, Schopenhauer's doctrines have exercised an attractive force in artistic circles also. Richard Wagner (1813-83; *Collected Writings*, 9 vols., 1871-73, vol. x. 1883; 2d ed., 1887-88), whose earlier aesthetic writings (*The Art-work of the Future*, 1850; *Opera and Drama*, 1851) had shown the influence of Feuerbach, in his later works (*Beethoven*, 1870; *Religion and Art*, in the third volume of the *Bayreuther Blätter*, 1880) became an adherent of Schopenhauer, after, in the *Ring of the Nibelung*, he had given poetical expression to a view of the world nearly allied to Schopenhauer's, though this was previous to his acquaintance with the works of the latter. One of the most thoughtful disciples of the Frankfort philosopher and the Bayreuth dramatist is Fried rich Nietzsche (born 1844). His *Unseasonable Reflections*, 1873-76, is a summons to return from the errors of modern culture, which, corrupted by the seekers for gain, by the state, by the polite writers and savants, especially by the professors of philosophy, has made men cowardly and false instead of simple and honorable, mere self-satisfied "philistines of culture." In his writings since 1878 Nietzsche has exchanged the rôle of a German Rousseau for that of a follower of Voltaire, to arrive finally at the ideal of the man above men.

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