

Schopenhauer

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Hegel claims lecturing to his students *Meine Herren, ich kann wohl sagen: Ich rede nicht nur die Wahrheit, ich bin die Wahrheit*. While Schopenhauer is content with saying *Die Menschheit hat Einiges von mir gelernt, was sie nie wieder vergessen wird*. The first is, as Mann rightly observes, risible, such an ego; while the latter bespeaks a certain modesty, yet unsettling in its relentlessness. You cannot do everything, at most what you can hope for is to do something. Schopenhauer knows that he has done something, and that no one can take it away from him. While Hegel believing he has done everything, will have everything taken away from him.

In this specifically philosophical essay of Mann, the most philosophical I have read by him so far, presents with commendable clarity the position of Schopenhauer from the viewpoint of humanism. To humanism Schopenhauer brought two things. First a deeply pessimistic view of the human condition, a pessimism never before encountered in connection with man. Secondly a ray of hope as how to extricate yourself from the imprisonment that is the lot of humankind. As this salvation consists through art, makes Schopenhauer a very congenial philosopher to the artist, who not surprisingly thinks that he needs no other. But let us begin from the beginning.

Mann starts out by a pedagogical survey of the sources of Schopenhauers philosophy. Those can be summarized by two names, namely Plato and Kant. With Plato Western philosophy takes off the ground, and incidentally many may argue that Plato is still unsurpassed. His teachings are paradoxical, Mann explains, because he taught that what was real was not what was immediate to our senses, but the eternal forms that generated them. Like Jesus, Plato was primarily a pedagogue, constantly explicating his ideas in dialogues and parables. His influence was profound, as Mann acknowledges. First his emphasis on an otherworldly existence, that real life did not take place here on earth, but in some distant heaven, provided Christianity with crucial inspiration. Secondly, and maybe even more decisively, modern science is Platonic in its quest, namely it does not look for mere surface phenomena, but what lies behind, what forms decide. Mathematics is the most striking manifestation of the world of Platonic forms, although one should not expect Mann to bring this up, and he does not. On the other hand he dwells on the poetic image of the Moon. The Moon being the intermediate between the two worlds. The heavenly one, and the earthly one. As a celestial object it is the most earthly of them all¹. But as an object of the earth it is of course the most celestial, placed on the celestial sphere, inaccessible to the touch.

With Kant we had the three pillars of *Zeit, Raum und Kasualität*. Those were not part of the world proper, only constructs of the human mind with which we made sense of

¹ The imperfections of the surface of the Moon must have been obvious to most ancient observers, also that it is palpably reflecting the light of the sun, unable to shine on its own.

the world. The external world was something different, *Das Ding an sich* was something fundamentally unknowable.

Schopenhauer took from Plato and Kant what he needed. He took for granted the world as elusive, just a conception - *eine Vorstellung*. To the sober and rational Kant he added a crucial element of mysticism. He identified *Das Ding an sich* with *die Wille*. The world impinges on us through its blind will. The will to live, the will to exist, the will to procreate. The sensual world in which we dwell is a manifestation of will. The will has no motive, nor any justification. It is its own motive, its own justification, and cannot be reduced to anything simpler. It is elemental. Just as with the fundamental particles - the atoms, of the Greek materialists, it has no parts, it is irreducible. Everything bends under the will, including our intellect, whose purpose it is merely to *a posteriori* justify the deeds of the will. The vision of a life dominated by a blind will is of course deeply pessimistic. It is of course also an ancient vision, obviously articulated in Buddhism, the religion without a deity. The religion of total abnegation, of the extinguishing of all desire. It is hard indeed not to see Schopenhauer being influenced by Buddhism. But Mann wants it almost the other way, the religious aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophy, are *a posteriori* they are mere confirmations that he is indeed up to something. What one can fault Schopenhauer with is his successive concretization of 'will' of having a tendency to identify it with the human sexual desire. That the will is reduced to something which is not much more than the drive to procreate. Mann speculates that Schopenhauer must have been driven by a strong sexual impulse, for which he needed all energy to suppress and control. That it is this drive, this more demonic temperament, which forced him to part ways with the more sexually aloof Kant. Such speculations are of course interesting and charming but ultimately diverting and trivializing.

But Schopenhauer offers a possible release from this endless circle in which man is imprisoned to repeat. He takes up Kant's ideal engagement without any interest. Meaning to be captivated by something regardless of its interest to me. In short an interest so to say, with no ulterior motives. Such a truly intrinsic interest would be an interest that does not serve the interest of the Will. Something that is truly disinterested. One is reminded of Dawkins, who ends his book on 'the Selfish Gene' with the admonition that we should transcend the imprisonment to which we are indebted by our genes. One can see the relentless Darwinian struggle as the will to survive, to propagate, to change. Something that has no purpose, but only happens. Thus Dawkins impulse to escape can be seen as very similar to the desire (?) or even will (??) to escape the relentless will. To Schopenhauer, the release is through art, more specifically and personally - music. Only in art do you have this disinterested desire, not submitting to the will.

This possibility of release, makes his philosophy even more like religion, Mann point out. Especially like Christianity. By getting the insight of the pervasiveness of the will, only then can we escape its clutches. Only by seeing God, can we be born again. But this does not make Schopenhauer a religious philosopher, he is not subservient to any religious impulses, it is more a matter of convergence, Mann appears to argue.

The philosophy of Schopenhauer is the philosophy of youth, according to Mann. Schopenhauer was thirty when his book was published, and clearly he wrote it before, and his philosophy germinated at an even younger age. Mann himself was very young

when he read Schopenhauer. In his early twenties, while writing *Buddenbrooks*. In fact the philosophy of Schopenhauer found its way into the novel. More specifically, as young you are quite aware of the distinction between yourself and the world. What happens to the world when you are dead and no longer around? There seems to be an impenetrable barrier between you and the external world. Sometimes this can be felt as an imprisonment. Being imprisoned in your 'I'. Being banned from the world at large, because you can only partake of it as the person you are. No other perspectives are available to you. You cannot be someone else. When Mann allows his character Thomas Buddenbrook to die, this individual is happy. Finally he will escape himself, be free of that particular individuation of the Will that is he. Now when dead the barrier that has imprisoned him within will be broken, and finally what is good in him will be able to join that which is good in others. Another way of putting it is that when you are dead, it does not mean that life ceases. New lives, new conscias will evolve, and they will become aware of themselves, and that process will be experienced, and thus pure experience will not cease. This will to experience, so highly abstract and communicable, will manifest itself again, will find new individuations. One has been shed, others will develop in its stead. The I will disappear, and once gone, new I's will be able to form. Mysticism? Or just banalities? The distinction is fine.

With this transcendence of the I means that sufferings are communicable. Suffering is the highest form of the intellect, of consciousness, and once the artificiality of the barriers are recognized, the communality of suffering is acknowledged. The evil individual is imprisoned in its ego, in its will, only those who see through them, transcend the satisfaction of desire, can experience true sympathy - *Mitleid*, compassion. And of course once again Schopenhauer touches on the core of Christianity. The ability and the duty to feel compassion, and act accordingly.

Is Schopenhauer's philosophy True? Mann is somewhat at a loss to address the question. What is 'Truth' anyway he seems to say. But he writes *daß eine Philosophie oft weniger durch ihre Moral und Weisheitslehre wirkt, die die intellektuelle Blüte ihrer Vitalität ist, als durch diese Vitalität selbst, ihr Essentielles und Persönliches, - durch ihre Leidenschaft, als mehr durch ihre Weisheit..* And it is in this sense that Wagner understood Schopenhauer. Not intellectually as a philosopher, but as an artist, passionately. Nietzsche was also a student and admirer of Schopenhauer, and even when he rejected him, he followed him. Goethe was different. His temperament was so opposed to that of Schopenhauer. He tried to read him, it is reported, but soon gave up. But this is psychology? What does psychology have to do with philosophy? Schopenhauer was a great psychologist, Mann claims, Nietzsche was even a greater one. The influence of Schopenhauer (and Nietzsche?) on Freud is obvious. What is the 'Id' if not the blind Will? The source of all dreams, desires and drives?

Schopenhauer is a philosopher both of the mind and the body. A philosophy which is neither scorched by 'Vernunftdürre' nor subservient to *Instinktvergöttung*. A philosophy for the artist. And that mankind will never forget.