

What can we Learn from Arthur Schopenhauer?

For an introductory talk please see: Schopenhauer (In Our Time) - YouTube

The following two quotes caused me to start reading Schopenhauer:

“So long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are subject to willing, we will never attain lasting happiness or peace....”

“I do not believe my doctrine could have come about before the Upanishads, Plato and Kant could cast their light simultaneously into the mind of one man.”

Arthur Schopenhauer lived from 1788 to 1860. He was, therefore, unaware of the future work of Charles Darwin but Darwin may have benefited from his identification of the blind forces of ‘The Will to Life’. He was born into a wealthy merchant family, remained independently wealthy throughout his life and chose to live as a philosopher. He was notoriously outspoken. He described approaching Hegel as like approaching a cuttlefish – ‘one disappears in a cloud of black ink’.

He made many unfortunate observations about women. If he had claimed inspiration by a divine being (as in the case of Martin Luther when he wrote ‘On the Jews and their Lies’) then this would be a fatal criticism; but unlike Martin Luther (who was clearly not inspired by any God, or at least not a good God) Schopenhauer makes no claim to divine inspiration. He was an atheist. However, it remains a concern that he adopted the views and opinions of his era. We might have expected greater insight.

He claims that ‘the Will’ is what Kant meant by ‘the thing in itself’. It seems nearly all (perhaps all?) actual philosophers find him unconvincing on this point.

Schopenhauer’s major work was ‘The World as Will and Representation’ (sometimes translated as ‘Will and Idea’). Representation is the way the world appears in our minds as a result of (external? Schopenhauer was an idealist) stimulation processed by our subjective experience. Accordingly, the same external experience can appear differently to different individuals. The Will does not have a rational purpose or consciousness but is a blind striving found in the forces of nature. We are driven by Will to a world of pain, conflict and frustration. Normally the intellect serves the will but to be free must transcend it. This is in marked contrast to Nietzsche who argues that we must embrace the ‘Will to Power’.

Schopenhauer’s methods for transcending the will seem vague and unconvincing. He suggests aesthetic appreciation of art, the natural world and above all music. For a very few, the best path is an ascetic life of contemplation. Art allows us to access Platonic forms, something universal.

We should not see ourselves as individuals in time and space but rather as part of a greater whole – for example humanity. Hence, we should expect to suffer as humans suffer and not suffer because of the nature of our individual circumstances. In this he seems to be suggesting a path similar, but more poorly defined than is found in Buddhism.

I am a fan of Schopenhauer, but could it be said he was an unconvincing metaphysicist who borrowed his wisdom from a partial understanding of Buddhism and the Upanishads?

The following are direct quotes from Will and Representation and the Essay on The Wisdom of Life which I found especially interesting. They probably need reading in their entirety and then re-reading with the overall picture in mind. I have divided them along the lines of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths – an approach of which I think Schopenhauer would have approved. (Please note that I dictated them as I read using voice recognition - so there may be a few errors)

1.0 THE PROBLEM

'This is the life of almost all men; They will, they know what they will, and they strive after this with enough success to protect them from despair, and in a failure to preserve them from boredom and its consequences.'

'Only the will is a thing in itself. It is that of which all representation, all object, is the phenomenon, the visibility, the objectivity. It is the innermost essence the kernel of every particular thing and also of the whole. It appears in every blindly acting force of nature, and also the deliberate conduct of man, and the great difference between the two concerns only the degree of the manifestation not the inner nature of what is manifested.'

'Teeth, gullet, and intestinal canal are objectified hunger; The will to know, objectively perceived is the brain, just as the will to walk, objectively perceived, is the foot.'

'We see at once from the instinct and mechanical skill of animals that the will is also active where it is not guided by any knowledge... The one-year-old bird has no notion of the eggs for which it builds the nest; The young spider has no idea of the prey for which it spins the web; the Ant lion has no notion of the Ant for which it digs a cavity for the first time... Even in us the same Will in many ways acts blindly; As in all those functions of our body that are not guided by knowledge, in all its vital and vegetative processes, digestion, circulation, secretion, growth and reproduction.'

'Virtue is as little taught as is genius: indeed the concept is just as unfruitful for it is as it is for art, and in the case of both can only be used as an instrument. We should therefore be just as foolish to expect that our moral systems and ethics would create virtuous, Noble, and holy men, as that our aesthetics would produce poets, painters, and musicians.'

'Everywhere in nature we see contest, struggle, and the fluctuation of victory... Every grade of the world's objectification fights for the matter, the space, and the time of another... This universal conflict is to be seen most clearly in the animal Kingdom. Animals had the vegetable Kingdom for their nourishment, and within the animal Kingdom again every animal is the prey and food of some other. This means that the matter in which an animal idea manifests itself must stand for the manifestation of another idea, since every animal can maintain its own existence only by the incessant elimination of another's. Thus the will to life generally feasts on itself, and is in different forms its own nourishment, till finally the human race, because it subdues all the others, regards nature as manufactured for its own use.'

'The intellect is designed for comprehending those ends on the attainment of which depend individual life and its propagation. But such an intellect is by no means destined to interpret the inner essence in itself of things and of the world, which exists independently of the knower.'

2.0 WE CAN ESCAPE THE WILL

3.0 THE SOLUTION

‘Egotistic expression is an exemplar of the will to life which must be transcended.’

‘We cannot deny the will, but rather the will must turn and deny itself.’

‘We no longer considered the where, the when, the why, and the wither of things, but simply and solely the what. We let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be the landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building, or anything else... And continue to exist only as pure subject. As a clear mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception... What is thus known is no longer the individual thing as such, but the idea... At the same time the person who is involved in this perception is no longer an individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself; his pure will less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge.’

‘The gift of genius is nothing but the most complete objectivity... The capacity to remain in a state of pure perception, to lose oneself in perception, to remove from the service of the will the knowledge which originally existed only for this service. In other words, genius is the ability to leave entirely out of sight our own interest, our willing, and our aims, and consequently to discard entirely our own personality for a time, in order to remain a pure knowing subject, the clear eye of the world; And this not merely for moments, but with the necessary continuity and conscious thought to enable us to repeat by deliberate art what has been apprehended.’

‘A timeless reality which is not carved up into individuals neither plurality nor change belongs while individuals in which it expresses itself are innumerable and are incessantly coming into existence and passing away, it remains unchanged as one and the same, and the principle of sufficient reason has no meaning for it.’

‘The bad man everywhere feels a thick partition between himself and everything outside him. The world is to him an absolute non I and his relation to it is primarily hostile... The good character, on the other hand, lives in an eternal world that is homogeneous with his own true being. The others are not non I for him, but and I want more. His fundamental relation to everyone is, therefore, friendly; he feels himself intimately akin to all beings, takes an immediate interest in their wealth and woes, and confidently assumes the same sympathy in them.’

‘The greatest equivocation really lies in the word I... According as I understand this word I can say death is my entire end; Or else this is my personal phenomenal experience which is just as infinitely small a part of my true inner nature as I am of the world.’

‘To die willingly, to die gladly, to die cheerfully, is the prerogative of the resigned, of him who gives up and denies the will to life. He willingly gives up the existence that we know; what comes to him instead of it is in our eyes nothing, because our existence in reference to that one is nothing, the Buddhist faith calls that existence Nirvana – extinction.’

HOW WE SHOULD LIVE

'Injure no one, help everyone as much as you can.'

'I observe that the fundamental differences in human lot may be reduced to three distinct classes:

1. What a man is: that is to say, personality, in the widest sense of the word; which are included health, strength, beauty, temperament, moral character, intelligence, and education.
2. What a man has: that is, property and possessions of every kind.
3. How a man stands in the estimation of others: which is to be understood, as everybody knows, what a man is in the eyes of his fellow men, or, more strictly, the light in which they regard him. This is shown by their opinion of him; And their opinion is in turn manifested by the honour in which he is held, and by his rank and reputation.'

'Compared with genuine personal advantages, such as a great mind or a great heart, all the privileges rank or birth, even of royal birth, are but as kings on the stage, to kings in real life.'

'The most essential thing for a man is the constitution of his consciousness which in most cases is far more important than the circumstances which go to form its contents.'

'Health outweighs all other blessings.'

'to one who has the constant delight of a special individuality, with a high degree of intellect, most of the pleasures which are run after by mankind are simply superfluous; They are even a trouble and a burden.'

'How much there is in the world I do not want.'

'time, comes in and claims its rights, and before its influence physical and mental advantages gradually waste away. Moral character alone remains inaccessible to it. We should choose the position, occupation and manner of life which are most suitable to the development of these advantages.'

'It is a wiser course to aim at the maintenance of our health and the cultivation of our faculties, than at the amassing of wealth; but this must not be mistaken as meaning that we should neglect to acquire an adequate supply of necessaries of life.'

'The preservation of property entails a great many unavoidable anxieties. And still men are 1000 times more intent on becoming rich than on acquiring culture, though it is quite certain that what a man is contributes much more to his happiness than what he has.'

'So if cheerfulness knocks at our door, we should throw it wide open.'

'We can more easily bear a misfortune which comes to us entirely from without, than one which we have drawn upon ourselves; for fortune may always change, but not character. Therefore, subjective blessings, and noble nature, a capable head, the joyful temperament, bright spirits, a well constituted perfectly sound physique, are the 1st and most important elements in happiness; so that we should be more intent on promoting and preserving such qualities than on the possession of external wealth.'

'now it is certain that nothing contributes so little to cheerfulness as riches or so much as health. I need hardly say what one must do to be healthy. Avoid every kind of excess, all violent and unpleasant emotion, all mental overstrain, take daily exercise in the open air, cold baths and suchlike hygienic measures.'

'As Epictetus says, men are not influenced by things but by their thoughts about things.'

'it follows from all this that the greatest folly is to sacrifice health for any other kind of happiness, whatever it may be, for gain, advancement, learning or fame, let alone then for fleeting sensual pleasures.'

'as Aristotle has very correctly observed men distinguished in philosophy, politics, poetry or art appear all to be of melancholy temperament.'

'the most general survey shows us that the two foes of human happiness are pain and boredom. Needy surroundings and poverty produce pain; While if a man is more than well off, he is bored.'

'and so a man's natural bent will lead him to make his objective world conform to his subjective as much as possible; that is to say, he will take the greatest measures against that form of suffering to which he is most liable. The Wise man will, above all, strive after freedom from pain and annoyance, quiet and leisure, consequently a tranquil, modest life, with as few encounters as maybe; and so, after a little experience of his so called fellowmen, he will elect to live in retirement, or even, if he is a man of great intellect, in solitude. For the more a man has in himself, the less he will want from other people, the less, indeed, other people can be to him. This is why a high degree of intellect tends to make a man unsocial. True, if quality of intellect could be made up for by quantity, it might be worthwhile to live even in the great world; but unfortunately, 100 fools together will not make one Wiseman.'

'But what does most people's leisure yield? Boredom and dullness; Ordinary people think merely how they shall spend their time a man of any talent tries to use it.'

'The normal, ordinary man takes a vivid interest in anything only insofar as it excites his will, that is to say, it is a matter of personal interest to him. But constant excitement of the will is never an unmixed good, to say the least; In other words, it involves pain. Cardplaying, that universal occupation of good society everywhere, is a device for providing this kind of excitement, and that too by means of interest so small as to produce slight and momentary, instead of real and permanent, pain. Cardplaying is in fact a mere tickling of the will.'

'On the other hand, a man of powerful intellect is capable of taking a vivid interest in things in the way of mere knowledge, with no admixture of will; Nay, such an interest is a necessity to him. It places him in a sphere where pain is an alien where the gods live serene.'

'Illiterate leisure is a form of death, a living tomb.'

'so the conclusion we come to is that the man whom nature is endowed with intellectual wealth is the happiest.'

'But there is something to be said in opposition to this view. Great intellectual gifts mean an activity pre-eminently nervous in its character, and consequently a very high degree of susceptibility to pain in every form.'

'Being without intellectual needs is the great affliction of all philistines. They have no interest in ideas and to escape being bored they are in constant need of realities. But realities are either unsatisfactory or dangerous; When they lose their interest, they become fatiguing.'

'But a man who does none of these things, who does not even try to do them, who never attempts learn the rudiments of any branch of knowledgeHe will not even be happy because in his case exemption from pain delivers him up to the other extreme of human suffering: boredom.'

'The cheapest sort of pride is national pride; For if a man is proud of his own nation, it argues that he has no qualities of his own of which he can be proud; Otherwise he would not have recourse to those which he shares with so many millions of his fellow men.'

'Individuality is far more important than nationality.'

'Every nation mocks other nations, and all are right.'

'honour is, on its subjective side, other people's opinion of what we are worth; on its subjective side, it is the respect we pay to this opinion.'

'Fame is something which must be won; Honour, only something which must not be lost.'

'Slander is the only weapon by which honour can be attacked from without; And the only way to repel the attack is to confute the slander with the proper amount of publicity, and a due unmasking of him who utters it.'

David.