ARThUR SCHOPENHAUER: ESSAYIST AND PHILOSOPHER

In a foreword to Patrick Gardiner’s recent book on Schopenhauer, Professor A.J. Ayer laments the fact that in Britain, at least, the study of Schopenhauer’s works has “fallen largely into neglect”.¹ This neglect extends throughout the English speaking world.

The present neglect of Schopenhauer by academic philosophers is, on first view, surprising. In the last half of the nineteenth century he was well known in Europe. By the last decade of the century he was attracting readers in Britain and the United States. For example, Josiah Royce, the American Idealist, just before the end of the century expressed the view that Schopenhauer was better known to most general readers than “any other modern Continental metaphysician, except Kant”.² Outside of academic philosophy Schopenhauer’s influence has been recognised in a remarkably wide variety of areas; for example in biological theory, psychoanalysis, aesthetics, and existentialism. And a variety of eminent thinkers have expressed a direct debt to him. Berdyaev owes to him a sense of the “unallayed pain of human existence”. Kierkegaard acknowledged that Schopenhauer “touches me at so many points”. Royce remarks that Schopenhauer is a thinker “to whom I owe...a great deal, for his skillful analysis and for his fearlessly clear assertion of his own significant temperament”.³ In referring to Schopenhauer’s contribution to aesthetics Nietzsche spoke of him as “one of the great thinkers”.

As Gardiner points out, however, the general neglect of Schopenhauer as a philosopher is not hard to explain. He first gained attention through his popular essays, published in 1851, three decades after the publication of his major philosophical work. These essays soon became so popular that Schopenhauer has not outlived the dubious
compliment paid him by Wilhelm Wundt (Mind, October 1877) as “the born leader of Non-Academic Philosophy in Germany”. Secondly, wrongly regarded as an advocate of the “will to power”, Schopenhauer, like Nietzsche, has been unfortunately associated with ideologies that inspired National Socialism in Germany. Moreover his chief work has been generally dismissed as “the most powerful and comprehensive attack ever made upon man’s faith in progress and civilization”. There are other reasons for the neglect of Schopenhauer as a philosopher. But it is perhaps unfruitful to carry this speculation further. It is enough to say that academic philosophy relegated Schopenhauer’s philosophy to the museums of ideas along with other systems of metaphysics. Few English-speaking philosophers even visit the museums now.

Born in Danzig on February 22, 1788, Schopenhauer once wrote it down “for an odd coincidence” that he was born exactly one hundred and eleven years and one day after Spinoza died. His father, a successful merchant, was known for a “cosmopolitan habit of mind” inspired by Voltaire and other “enlightened” English and French writers. Following the second partition of Poland in 1793 the family went into voluntary exile in Hamburg. Twelve years later, when Arthur was seventeen, his father died suddenly, perhaps by suicide. This proved to be what is now fashionably called a traumatic experience. The evidence suggests that Heinrich Schopenhauer was one of the very few persons for whom Arthur had deep and lasting affection. A Dedication drafted for the second edition of his chief work, The World as Will and Idea, read in part:

Thy presiding care hath sheltered and borne me, not merely through helpless childhood and unregarding youth, but even in manhood up to the present day...Therefore shall I praise thee, my noble father. And every one who from my work derives aught of joy, consolation, or instruction, shall learn thy name, and know that if Heinrich Floris Schopenhauer had not been the man he was, Arthur Schopenhauer would have been a hundred times ruined.

It would be difficult to imagine two people more different than Heinrich and his wife Johanna. She was a nineteen year old “romantic” when she married the thirty-eight year old merchant of “a cosmopolitan habit of mind”. She has not been kindly treated by her son’s biographers. Anselm von Feuerbach referred to her as a woman “without heart and soul”, who made a “profession of erudition”. Perhaps as William Wallace remarks, she did hanker after “a sort of
spiritual Gypsydom”, but she was also a talented and interesting person who regularly associated with leading writers, including Goethe, the brothers Grimm, K.L. Fernow, the art critic, and the poet C.M. Wieland. But her son so despised her that he did not even visit her in the last twenty-four years of her life. In later years he accused her not only of squandering his father’s hard-earned money, but of neglecting him even while he lay dying in his bed. “That”, he observed, “is a woman’s love”.

Those who, with E.F. Carritt, see Schopenhauer’s pessimism as the only system “perhaps ever developed at once so unthinkable, unpicturable and undesirable” will be tempted to look for its roots in his extraordinarily troubled relationship with his mother. As another writer “explained”, there was “something in his temperament, in his tragic quarrel with his mother, in his misanthropy, in his disappointments, which nourished and prepared his soul for the doctrine of the Upanishads”. It is one of the curiosities of the liberal mind that it feels a compulsion to “psychologize away” pessimistic systems. But who has seen studies to “explain” the optimism of John Locke or John Stuart Mill? What kind of women were their mothers? Were they so healthy and cheerful as to “doom” their sons to optimistic philosophies? It is indeed a curiosity to observe that the liberal mind takes it as an article of faith that optimistic philosophies are rational, and pessimistic ones visceral. “Schopenhauer’s pessimism is extreme”, the argument goes, “but, you know, he was very unhappy as a child”. It would be more consistent, if not true, simply to note that the child is father of the philosopher, whether the philosopher be Arthur Schopenhauer or Doctor Par gloss.

Schopenhauer’s early formal education was interrupted by two extensive tours, his father being convinced of the superiority of knowledge of affairs and of language. In 1803 he went with his family on a two-year tour of England, the Low Countries, France, Austria and Switzerland. Already on the tour his mother became convinced that her son was destined to “brood over the misery of human beings”. On one day in England he watched a parade in honour of the King’s birthday, and on another saw three criminals executed. At Toulon he witnessed the “hopeless destinies” of six thousand galley convicts. Lyon revealed the horrors of the French Revolution, its citizens gaily strolling across the square where only a few years before their fathers had been cut
down by grape-shot. In his short essay, “On the Sufferings of the World”, he was later to write:

Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and originates in needs and necessities inseparable from life itself, as serving no purpose at all and the result of mere chance.

Unencumbered by “the tight and heavy yoke” of extensive formal education, Schopenhauer at the age of twenty-one entered the University of Gottingen well schooled in the “open book” of the natural and social world. He spent the first year as a medical student, but in the second year began to study philosophy under G.E. Schulze who urged him to master Plato and Kant before he turned to other philosophers. In 1811 he moved to the University of Berlin, where he came in contact with the “sophist” Fichte. Two years later the University of Jena awarded him his doctorate for a thesis soon to be published under the title On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The bare facts of Schopenhauer’s formal education are less interesting and less important than the attitudes toward learning and professors which they induced or confirmed in him. These attitudes later came to light even in his philosophical works, and were expressed with brilliant wit in several essays. In short, he saw in institutions of learning “full confirmation” of truths revealed to him in the “open book” of nature.

The remainder of his life was uneventful in its externals. He lived in Dresden, Berlin, and for the last thirty years in Frankfurt where he died alone on September 21, 1860. He had often referred to the loneliness of men of genius. In what is perhaps his most beautiful essay, “Personality, or What a Man Is”, he had written, “In such a world as this, a man who is rich in himself is like a bright, warm, happy room at Christmastide, while without are the frost and snow of a December night”.

Although his major work, The World as Will and Idea, was published in 1818 when he was only thirty, Schopenhauer first received widespread attention in 1851 with the publication of a collection of popular essays. The immediate popularity of these essays almost ensured that his standing with academic philosophers would remain
low; for university philosophers have looked askance at popular philosophy and especially at evidence of wit or humour. One is almost tempted to say that philosophical writings that touch life directly and are intelligible to the layman are a priori suspect. Philosophy professors do not call Voltaire or Montaigne philosophers. As Patrick Gardiner suggests, the fact that the collections of essays were given such titles as “The Wisdom of Life” and “Counsels and Maxims” also detracted from their author’s status as a philosopher. The essays cover a wide variety of subjects, and while they do not together constitute a “system” of philosophy, they support the author’s strong conviction that in all of his writings there is only “one single idea”. A selected list of essay topics will indicate the range of his interests: The Metaphysics of Fine Art; Psychological Observations; On some Forms of Literature; Style; The Study of Latin; Education; On the Sufferings of the World; Immortality; Free Will and Fatalism; Genius and Virtue. In T.B. Saunders’ edition alone, there are approximately forty essays.

The essays on education reflect Schopenhauer’s own experience in turning to the “book of nature” for his first education. They also reflect his disappointment with German philosophy since Kant, and especially with Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. The delightfully witty criticism of academic philosophers is not simply a case of a brilliant pen out-stripping judgment. The same criticism, here directed to laymen, is implicit in his chief work, where it is argued that the genius, perhaps the untutored genius, has the best insight into reality. “Men of Learning”, as the essay on thinking for oneself puts it, “are those who have done their reading in the pages of a book. Thinkers and men of genius are those who have gone straight to the book of Nature”. Under such dissimilar influences as Rousseau, Hume and Oriental philosophy, Schopenhauer argues that perception provides the content of all thought; “wherever they are wanting we have not conceptions but mere words in our heads”. Although he was deeply influenced by Hume, the “perceptions” are not those of the empiricists only; they include intuitions, especially those of the artist and saint. As he puts it in the essay on authorship, when writers, lacking perceptions of their own, take their information out of books “the material goes straight to their finger-tips without even paying freight or undergoing examination as it passes through their heads”.

Schopenhauer's criticism of "men of learning" can be explained in part as an attack on the "verbiage" of German philosophers. It is rooted, however, in his deep conviction that in beginning our education with books we begin at the "wrong end". The brilliant essay "On Men of Learning" notes that "he who holds a professorship may be said to receive his food in the stall: and this is the best way with ruminant animals". The point is made more seriously in the essay "On Education". Instead of beginning with an "extended acquaintance" with the world, the child is encouraged to "hear what other people say, to learn to read", and so get his head crammed full of "general ideas" before he has "particular observations" or content. This, in contrast to Rousseau's, is the "artificial method" of education. It may be argued, with some truth, that the particular observations which "go to make these general ideas" will come later. Meanwhile, however, "the mind is perverted".

The mind is perverted in the sense that "artless ignorance of things" and empty general ideas can rarely be overcome. Worse still, however, book learning is damaging to the mind itself. When we read, the author thinks for us. As Schopenhauer remarks in the essay "On Books and Reading", "Thoughts put on paper are nothing more than footsteps in the sand: you see the way the man has gone, but to know what he saw in his walk, you want his eyes". The thought is reminiscent of Plato's Seventh Letter. Reading forces alien thoughts on the mind "as foreign to the drift and temper in which it may be for the moment, as the seal is to the wax on which it stamps its imprint". Whereas to think for oneself is always "to aim at developing a coherent whole"; the thoughts of others, "belonging to different systems", and "tinged with different colours", "never form a unity of knowledge, or insight, or conviction", but "fill the head with a Babylonian confusion of languages". This explains why so many professors are "inferior in sound sense, correct judgment and practical tact to many illiterate persons". Many learned persons "have read themselves stupid". Their heads are "like a stomach and intestines which let the food pass through them undigested". In the essay "On Thinking for Oneself" it is suggested that "to take up a book for the purpose of scaring away one's own original thoughts is sin against the Holy Spirit".

Of course men of learning must rely on book learning if they lack the capacity to think for themselves. "The wig is the appropriate symbol of
the man of learning, pure and simple. It adorns the head with a copious quantity of false hair, in lack of one's own”. When I hear of “These portents” of learning, Schopenhauer observes in the essay on men of learning, I sometimes ask myself:

Ah, how little they must have had to think about, to have been able to read so much! And when I actually find it reported of the elder Pliny that he was continually reading or being read to, at table, on a journey, or in his bath, the question forces itself upon my mind, whether the man was so very lacking in thought of his own that he had to have alien thought incessantly instilled into him; as though he were a consumptive patient taking jellies to keep himself alive.

Although relishing Schopenhauer’s wit some readers will perhaps agree with Wilhelm Wundt that his criticism of academic philosophers exhibits a “studied coarseness”. What cannot be denied, however, is that he criticized them out of a deep conviction and not, as sometimes suggested, out of personal animosity. His attack was directed against Fichte, Schelling and Hegel in particular. In his detailed “Criticism of the Kantian Philosophy” he laments the fact that even the great Kant, perhaps because he had been for too long a professor, occasionally resorted to obscure language. Readers of Kant were compelled to see that what is obscure is not always without significance, but in his successors “what was without significance took refuge behind obscure language”. Fichte and Schelling are “masters of obscurity”. But the height of audacity “in stringing together senseless and extravagant mazes of words...was finally reached in Hegel, and became the instrument of the most barefaced general mystification that has ever taken place”. He cites in the same place, an article by Jean Paul, one of his favourite writers, on “philosophical madness in the professorial chair” and ends with a quotation from Goethe:

They praise and teach, and no one interferes;
All from the fellowship of fools are shrinking;
Man usually believes, if only words he hears.
That also with them goes material for thinking.

Schopenhauer’s chief work, The World as Will and Idea, is one of the major works in Western philosophy. Even Wilhelm Wundt regarded its author as Germany’s “last great metaphysician”. It is true enough that as a system Schopenhauer’s philosophy breaks down at more than one point. But it would be silly to rank him among lesser thinkers on that
account; for it is also true that the systems of Plato, Descartes and Kant are far less coherent than their authors supposed them to be. It can be argued, moreover, that the flaws in his system are consequent on the richness of his thought. For unlike many thinkers, especially English philosophers such as Locke, Mill, Russell and their numerous heirs, Schopenhauer excluded no human interest from his work. He felt too keenly what William James called man’s "passional nature" to ignore questions of value or to "answer" them by reducing them to questions of fact. As Bertrand Russell, a most unsympathetic critic, has to admit, Schopenhauer "is a man of wide culture, quite as much interested in art as in ethics". He could have added "and quite as much interested in Western science as in Hindu mysticism". Indeed on the point alone of the breadth of his interests Schopenhauer compares favourably with Plato and Aristotle, with the major difference that he shows almost no interest in politics.

Schopenhauer regarded himself as Kant’s true successor. "I cannot", he wrote in his critique of Kant, "see that between Kant and myself anything has been done in philosophy, therefore I regard myself as his immediate successor". His lengthy appendix ("Criticism of the Kantian Philosophy") to the second edition of The World as Will and Idea is to be taken, then, not as a rejection of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason but as a removal of difficulties from it, and as developing ideas implicit in it. Whether all of Schopenhauer’s developments are compatible with Kant’s system is, of course, a difficult question.

Kant’s most important contribution to philosophy was the "distinction of the phenomenon from the thing in itself", the discovery, as Schopenhauer put it, that "the world is my idea". Space and time are a priori forms of sensibility, i.e. ways in which experience is organized. As Kant put it, "while much can be said a priori as regards the form of appearances, nothing whatsoever can be asserted of the thing in itself". The necessity to "think" things about which nothing can be "known" presented a serious difficulty for Kant, but he was content to let it rest. He was right in so far as "scientific" or ordinary knowledge is concerned. We cannot directly "assault the castle" of the noumenal world.

But Schopenhauer claims to have found a secret or "subterranean passage" to the noumenal world. The thing in itself, the noumenon, turns out to be will, which can be immediately known independently of
the forms of space and time. Kant himself had “dimly recognized” this fact, especially in his ethical works. That reality is will is discovered through “inner consciousness” which reveals that the actions of our own bodies and the volitions from which they are said to result are in fact one and the same thing. “The action of the body is nothing but the act of will objectified, i.e. passed into perception”. Will is knowledge a priori of the body. This “double knowledge” which we have of our own body is “the key to the nature of every phenomenon”. It is argued that “as in one respect they are idea, just like our bodies...so in another aspect, what remains of objects when we set aside their existence as idea of the subject, must in its inner nature be the same as that in us which we call will”. Thus the veil of Maya is rent. Direct and immediate knowledge of our own will is at the same time knowledge of the “world” from which the veil of space and time has been lifted.

The major part of The World as Will and Idea, as well as the later work On the Will in Nature, is concerned with the “objectification of will”. Schopenhauer’s thesis, though ingenious and fruitful is not, of course, free from difficulties. For example, the will as such is immediately known, that is to say it is not subject to the forms of space and time or to the Kantian categories. It cannot therefore be the individual will; for space and time are the principles of individuation. Thus the will that is noumenon must be one and timeless; it cannot consist of particular volitions, and cannot, therefore, be “my will” at all. Further the essence of will is said to be blind striving, but it is hard to give meaning to “striving” apart from the form of time. So far as Schopenhauer is influenced by the doctrine of Maya he can regard the world of appearance as illusory, and accept the loss of individuality. His ethical theory, however, can be taken seriously only if there are in some sense individual wills, for not even in artistic experience and saintliness is individuality fully overcome.

These difficulties aside, the world of appearance is will objectified, that is perceived under the forms of space and time and the category of causality. This is “corroborated” by science and common sense. Will is recognized not only in those phenomenal existences which resemble our own bodies, but also in the force which germinates the plant, in magnetism, gravitation and all forms of “repulsion and attraction”. In calling these forces “will”, Schopenhauer simply names “the genius after its most important species, the direct knowledge of which lies...
nearer to us and guides us to the indirect knowledge of all other species”. His book *On the Will in Nature* is a detailed “scientific corroboration” of this view.

The most unsatisfactory aspect of this theory from the point of view of Schopenhauer’s hope to present a system of philosophy from “one single idea” is the grafting on to it of Plato’s theory of Ideas to buttress his aesthetic theory. Here he argues that will is not only “objectified” in, or as, bodies, but that it is also objectified in “many different grades”. The grades are “the determined species, or the original unchanging forms and qualities of all natural bodies”. These grades manifest themselves in particulars, and “are related to these as archetypes to their copies”.

In short, they are the Platonic Ideas.

It is a pity that Schopenhauer attempted to bring together his two great teachers, Kant and Plato, in this way, as the attempt introduces an element of artificiality into an otherwise illuminating aesthetic theory. Indeed his insight into the nature and function of art was extraordinarily keen. In art man escapes, or almost escapes, the limitations of phenomenal knowledge insofar as he breaks free from the bondage of the will. Art is one of only two avenues which offer any hope of escape from the tyranny of will. In pure contemplation of the Idea, the mind “plucks the object...out of the stream of the world’s course, and has it isolated before it”. And the knower himself is also a “timeless will-less subject”. To the extent that the individual subject is transcended he sees reality as it is in itself freed from its phenomenal existence. Thus art, like saintliness, is not merely a way to higher knowledge, but is a means of release and salvation. In artistic contemplation man “is pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge”. In other words the artist is the genius who puts to a different use that “knowledge which originally existed only for the service of the will”.

It is in the light of this conception of art that Schopenhauer analyses such concepts as “sublime” and “beautiful” and discusses several forms of art from architecture to music. His “metaphysics” of music is especially interesting, and, as Patrick Gardiner notes, “took a considerable hold upon Wagner”. Music is the only art whose object is not the Platonic Ideas. It has no object at all, nothing that it is about. Unlike architecture, for example, which copies Ideas, music is a “direct copy” of the will itself. This is why the effect of music is “so much
more powerful and penetrating” than the other arts. It somehow parallels the movements of the will. For example:

As quick transition from wish to satisfaction, and from satisfaction to a new wish, is happiness and well-being, so quick melodies without great deviations are cheerful; slow melodies, striking painful discords, and only winding back through many bars to the keynote are, as analogous to the delayed and hardly won satisfaction, sad.17

Schopenhauer is so impressed with this parallel that he concludes, “We might, therefore, just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will”.

The highest poetical art is tragedy, for it, like music, perfectly illustrates the metaphysics of will. It is “the summit of poetical art” because of the greatness of its effect on our will and because of the difficulty of its achievement. In all its forms it manifests the conflict of will with itself. It is, observes Schopenhauer, “significant for our whole system” of philosophy that “the end of this highest poetical achievement is the representation of the terrible side of life”.

The unspeakable pain, the wail of humanity, the triumph of evil, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and innocent, is here presented to us; and in this lies a significant hint of the nature of the world and of existence.18

Aesthetic experience is a state in which knowledge has broken free from the service of the will, where the phenomenal distinction between subject and object is more or less transcended. Yet art affords only temporary relief from “will’s blind striving”. But Schopenhauer also puts great emphasis on self-denial as it is exhibited in the saint. The last book of his World as Will and Idea, in which this doctrine is worked out, is one of the great documents in moral theory. It is, therefore, a curious fact that, Bertrand Russell feels that this doctrine is not “sincere”. The reasons that Russell offers for this judgment are even more revealing: Schopenhauer “habitually dined well”, “had many trivial love-affairs” and was “exceedingly quarrelsome and unusually avaricious”.19 But this is in keeping with the flippancy of Russell’s seven-page treatment of Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer’s greatest influence on recent thought is dependent on his theory of will, and in particular, on the doctrine that intellect is a practical instrument, evolved, “just like any organ of the body”, to serve the will. This view is reflected in such philosophers as Berdyaev,
Bergson and William James, and is perhaps the most important development in post-Cartesian philosophy. Intellect merely serves the end of “self-preservation” of the organism by regulating its relations to the external world. “Originally destined for the service of the will for the accomplishments of its aims, it remains almost throughout entirely subject to its service”. In more general terms, the function of intellect is to throw light on the path already “chosen” for it by will.

The source of conflict among individuals is that they do not see that individuality is only phenomenal, and that, therefore, it is the same cosmic will that expresses itself in each individual. Blindness to the illusory nature of the individual will explains why “every one desires everything for himself, desires to possess, or at least to control, everything, and whatever opposes it, it would like to destroy”. Only artists and saints, who penetrate the Veil of Maya, break the bondage of will. Even for genius, however, relief is only temporary. Knowledge, therefore, must be supported by ethical practice. It is not enough to understand the nature of will, for before it intellect alone is impotent. It is necessary to deny the will, and to walk in the paths of righteousness. We see here the third profound influence—along with Plato and Kant—on Schopenhauer’s thought, Oriental philosophy as represented especially in the Upanishads. With sufficient knowledge at least to see the “horrible side of life” and that indeed “life must be some kind of mistake”, the saint denies life itself; in some sense will turns against itself. Thus “virtue is not exactly a positive weakness of the will; it is, rather, an intentional restraint imposed upon its violence through a knowledge of it in its inmost being as manifested in the world”.

Leaving aside the difficult question of how will can deny itself, it turns out in any case that this way of salvation is open only to a handful of artists and saints. Most of mankind will continue to use “their intellects in the service of their belly” and spend their lives vainly trying to escape the inescapable, never quite understanding that pleasure is negative and only a temporary relief from pain. Willing and striving is the whole being of existence and may be “compared to an unquenchable thirst”. Satisfaction of a particular desire is temporary and is immediately followed by ennui, which in turn is replaced by another desire. “Thus between desiring and attaining all human life flows on throughout. The wish is, in its nature, pain; and attainment
soon begets satiety”.

Apart then, from a brief respite through art and saintliness, all existence is insatiable desire, the manifestation of a blind incessant will. At bottom reality is irrational. Optimism is, therefore, a child of illusion. Perhaps, of course, pessimism is as offensive as optimism. Given, however, that reality in itself is blind will and that individual will makes intellect a servant, there is little room for that optimism that is so characteristic of Western philosophy. In any case the theory that intellect evolved, like the hand and foot, as an instrument for survival, established Schopenhauer as a forerunner of the Darwinian view of man.

From the point of view, therefore, of the history of ideas Schopenhauer’s irrationalism was even more revolutionary than Kant’s critical idealism. It is reflected in Nietzsche and Freud, in Darwin, Bergson and James; and more diffusely in contemporary art and literature. Schopenhauer ranks with Nietzsche and Darwin as one of the architects of twentieth century thought.

NOTES
2. The Spirit of Modern Philosophy, p. 228.
3. The quotation from Nicolas Berdyaev is from his Dream and Reality, p. 83; Kierkegaard is quoted in Gardiner; and this reference is to Royce, ibid., p. 229.
4. Will Durant, Mansions of Philosophy, p. 381.
5. Quoted in W. Wallace’s Life of Arthur Schopenhauer, 1890, from which much of the biographical material is taken.
10. A History of Western Philosophy, p. 753.
13. Ibid., p. 136.
15. Ibid., p. 240.
18. Ibid., p. 326.
22. “Genius and Virtue”, in T.B. Saunders, p. 77. This view is worked out in Schopenhauer’s On the Basis of Morality as well as in his chief work.