

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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CONTENTS:

<i>Frontispiece.</i> ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER.	
<i>The Prophet of Pessimism.</i> With Reproductions of Four Portraits of Schopenhauer. EDITOR	257
<i>Historical Sketch of the Jews Since Their Return from Babylon.</i> With Illustrations of Jewish Customs and Life. THE REV. BERNHARD PICK, PH. D., D. D.	265
<i>Developmental Ethics.</i> (Concluded.) ANTONIO LLANO	280
<i>Is Ethics Possible?</i> Editorial Reply to Mr. Llano.	295
<i>Elisabet Ney.</i> The Sculptress. Reminiscences	309
<i>Prof. Edward Drinker Cope.</i> Obituary	310
<i>Count Hoenbroecht.</i>	311
<i>An Evening Prayer.</i> EMILIE H. DARROW.	312
<i>Book Reviews, Notes, etc.</i>	313

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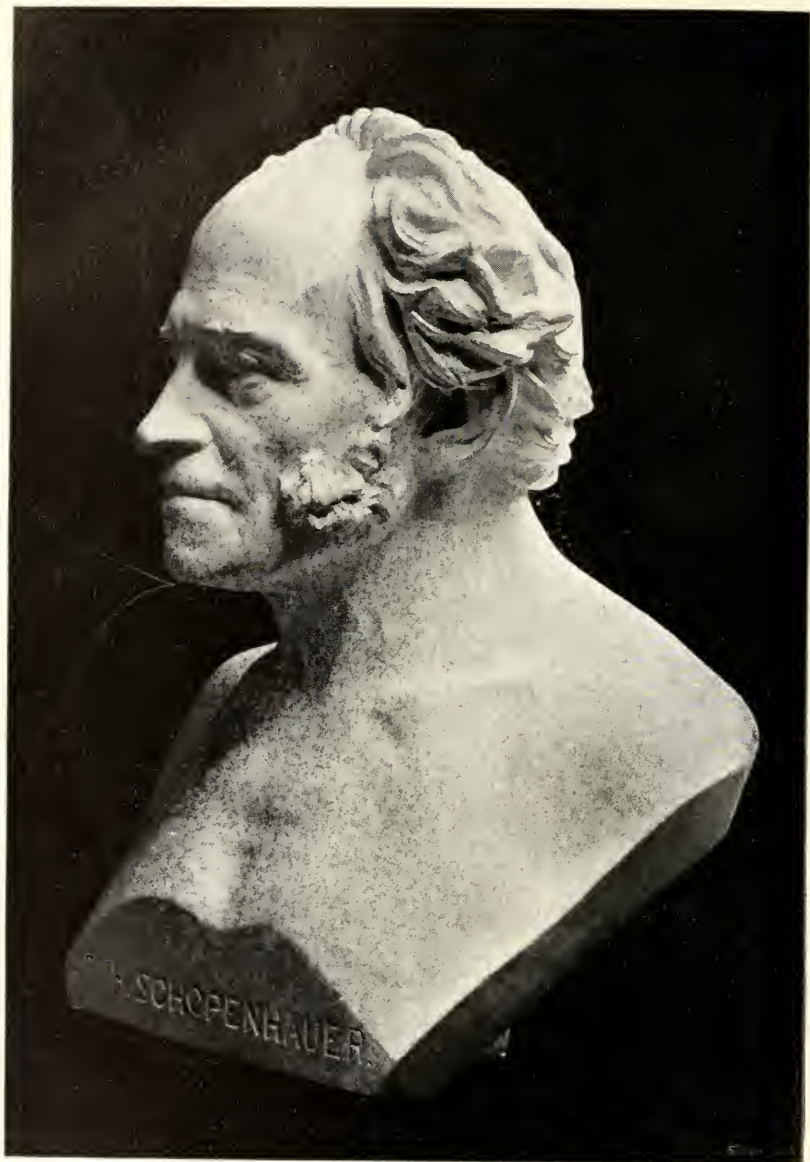
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Elisabet Ney, Sculpt.

Frankfurt a. M. d. 12. Dec.
1859.
Arthur Schopenhauer

The signature is from Elisabet Ney's autograph copy of Schopenhauer's works.

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THE PROPHET OF PESSIMISM.

BY THE EDITOR.

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER was born at Dantzig, Feb. 22, 1788, the son of a well-to-do merchant. His father had destined him for a business career, and placed him in the office of a Dantzig broker. The youth, however, had higher ambitions. After his father's death he began the serious study of philosophy, which he pursued at the universities of Göttingen, Jena, and Berlin. He took his degree, in 1813, with a dissertation on causality in which he distinguished four kinds of causes, which he called *principium rationis sufficientis*, (1) *fiendi*, (2) *cognoscendi*, (3) *essendi*, and (4) *agendi*; i. e., the principle of a sufficient reason for (1) becoming, (2) for comprehending, (3) for being, and (4) for acting. His main work *The World as Will and Representation* was completed in 1818, in the same year the fundamental work of his great rival Hegel was given to the public. Schopenhauer settled in Berlin as a *Privatdocent* of the university, but failing both in attracting disciples and in obtaining a professorship, he withdrew from university circles and led from 1831 on, a retired life in Frankfort on the Main, where he wrote his second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, in the form of additions to the various chapters of the first volume, and several other books among which the best known are *On the Will in Nature* (1836), *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics* (1841), and *Parerga and Paralipomena*, a collection of popular articles on realism and idealism, religion, university philosophers, the vanity of existence, the indestructibility of our being, women, worldly wisdom, etc., etc., all of them full of bitterness and disdain of the world and everything in general, especially the philosophy professors of the German universities, Hegel at their head, in particular.

Hegel was the man of the day during Schopenhauer's life-time,

and when Hegel's fame began to wane Schopenhauer's came to the front. His influence increased until he became the most popular philosopher in Germany, and it is only of late that his philosophy begins to lose its hold on the people in the Fatherland. But his star is now rising among the English speaking races, and his works are being made accessible to the public in good translations.

Schopenhauer's merit consists in having called attention to the main problem of philosophy, "Is life worth living?" And he will perhaps for all time to come remain the classical representative of that philosophy which answers this question in the negative. There can be no doubt about it that Schopenhauer exercises upon immature minds a baneful influence, but we must at the same time recognise that he raised a problem which demands a solution. It is the great religious problem, it is the *Œdipus* question as to the purpose of man's life.

* * *

Schopenhauer's philosophy is characterised by two words, Idealism and Pessimism. The objective reality of the world is will, which appears in the stone as gravity, in the chemical elements as affinity, in man as a desire to be, manifesting itself in his various intentions and actions. The reverse of the medal is the realm of subjective existence, which is the world as we intuit it, as we picture it in representations or ideas. It is, in appearance, extending outside of us in space; this world, such as it lives in our conception, Schopenhauer calls the world as it is represented, *die Welt als Vorstellung*, and it is mere representation, not reality. Space is a function of the conceiving mind, and with it the whole material universe is nothing but thought, idea, imagination, a heavy dream. The sole difference between objective existence and dreams consists, according to Schopenhauer, in the continuity of the former and the discontinuity of the latter.

We do not intend here to criticise the weak points in Schopenhauer's system; they become more apparent to those who are not personally interested in his peculiar dislikes and can therefore judge his denunciations with impartiality. The notion that causation has a fourfold root is on the very face erroneous, for there is only one kind of causation, which is the law of change, and every change is a transformation that produces a new arrangement, leaving in the whole system the same amount of matter and energy as before. While there are not several causes, there is a difference between the *cause* which is the *primum movens* in a process of transformation, and the *reason why* this cause takes effect. The cause

is one definite fact, an event, an act that happens; the reason why it happens is a natural law, a description and explanation concerning the interconnexion of things. The reason why, is not a single fact but a universal truth. Further, while there are not several roots of causation, there are several kinds or species, according to the various reasons that condition the effectiveness of the cause. In mechanics the cause takes effect according to mechanical laws, in chemistry according to the affinity of the elements, in the lower domain of physiology, in plants, and in unconscious animal movements according to the nature of a physiological irritation, and in psychology according to the significance of representative signs, according to ideas and the meaning that ensouls words. These kinds of causation, however, are not comparable to so many roots but to branches.

The popularity of Schopenhauer is certainly not due to his idealism which is quite unintelligible to average readers, who constitute his most zealous disciples. It is based upon unproved declamations as to the non-existence of space and time and of the whole material universe in their objective reality, which are declared to be mere representations. This proposition is mixed with a belief in the genuineness of various phenomena of mysticism, such as telepathy, second sight, magic, etc.; for Schopenhauer's Will is, like the Creator, omnipotent and omnipresent; the Will can at pleasure produce worlds out of nothing; it can produce effects at the most distant places, and its vision is not veiled by the illusion of time. In spite of the spiritualistic tendencies of this view, Schopenhauer advocates an almost crude materialism which regards matter as the thing-in-itself, the bearer of the metaphysical will, and the source of all life. It is quite natural that a philosopher who himself lacks all system and consistency should exhibit a sovereign contempt for everybody who tries to treat philosophical problems in a methodical way. Yet, with all his faults, Schopenhauer is great in his incidental remarks, and even in his worst and most undignified aberrations when he rails like an old scold at the school-philosophers, impugning their honesty, he remains fascinating and becomes sometimes even refreshing.

By far of greater importance than his theoretical philosophy is Schopenhauer's pessimism which draws its power from the misery of life, such as it actually exists, pointing out that its presence is an intrinsic and unavoidable feature of existence. What a fund of truth, one-sided though it may be, lies in the following description of human fate (*Die W. a. W. u. V.*, Vol. II., Chap. 46):

“Having awakened to life from the night of unconsciousness, the will finds itself as an individual in an endless and boundless world among innumerable individuals, all striving, suffering, erring; and as though passing through an ominous, uneasy dream, it hurries back to the old unconsciousness. Until then, however, its desires are boundless, its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied wish begets a new one. No satisfaction possible in the world could suffice to still its longings, put a final end to its cravings, and fill the bottomless abyss of its heart. Consider, too, what gratifications of every kind man generally receives: they are usually nothing more than the meagre preservation of this existence itself, daily gained by incessant toil and constant care, in battle against want, with death forever in the van. Everything in life indicates that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated or to be recognised as an illusion. The conditions of this lie deep in the nature of things. Accordingly, the life of most of us proves sad and short. The comparatively happy are usually only apparently so, or are, like long-lived persons rare exceptions—left as a bait for the rest.

“Life proves a continued deception, in great as well as in small matters. If it makes a promise, it does not keep it, unless to show that the coveted object was little desirable. Thus sometimes hope, sometimes the fulfilment of hope, deludes us. Whenever it gives, it is but to take away. The fascination of distance presents a paradise, vanishing like an optic illusion when we have allowed ourselves to be enticed thither. Happiness accordingly lies always in the future or in the past; and the present is to be compared to a small dark cloud which the wind drives over a sunny plain. Before it and behind it all is bright, it alone casts a shadow. The present therefore is forever unsatisfactory; the future uncertain; the past irrecoverable. Life with its hourly, daily weekly, and yearly small, greater, and great adversities, with its disappointed hopes and mishaps foiling all calculation, bears so plainly the character of something we should become disgusted with, that it is difficult to comprehend how any one could have mistaken this and been persuaded that life was to be thankfully enjoyed, and man was destined to be happy. On the contrary the everlasting delusion and disappointment as well as the constitution of life throughout, appear as though they were intended and calculated to awaken the conviction that nothing whatever is worthy of our striving, driving, and wrestling, that all goods are naught, the world bankrupt at all ends, and life a business that does not pay expenses,—so that our will may turn away from it.

“The manner in which this vanity of all the aims and objects of the will reveals itself, is, in the first place, time. Time is the form by means of which the vanity of things appears as transitoriness; since through time all our enjoyments and pleasures come to naught; and we afterward ask in astonishment what has become of them. Accordingly our life resembles a payment which we receive in copper pence, and which at last we must receipt. The pence are the days, death the receipt. For at last, time proclaims the sentence of nature’s judgment upon the worth of all beings by destroying them.

‘And justly so; for all things from the void
Called forth, deserve to be destroyed.
‘T were better, then, were naught created.’—*Goethe*.

“Age and death, to which every life necessarily hurries, are the sentence of condemnation upon the will to live, passed by nature herself, which declares that this will is a striving that must frustrate itself. ‘What thou hast willed,’ it says, ‘ends thus; will something better!’

“The lessons which each one learns from life consist, on the whole, in this, that the objects of his wishes constantly delude, shake, and fall; consequently



SCHOPENHAUER IN 1852.

From two daguerreotypes, highly prized by Schopenhauer, now in the possession of Elisabet Ney. They represent the sitting when Schopenhauer drank the historical bottle of wine to remove his wonted lugubrious and pessimistic cast of countenance.



From two photographs in the possession of Dr. Lindorme, of Chicago. Date unknown.

they bring more torment than pleasure, until at length even the whole ground upon which they all stand gives way, inasmuch as life itself is annihilated. Thus he receives the last confirmation that all his striving and willing were a blunder and an error.

'Then old age and experience, hand in hand,
Lead him to death, and make him understand,
After a search so painful and so long
That all his life he has been in the wrong.'

"Whatever may be said to the contrary, the happiest moment of the happiest mortal is still the moment he falls asleep, as the unhappiest moment of the unhappiest mortal the moment he awakens. Lord Byron says :

'Count o'er the joys thine hours have seen,
Count o'er thy days from anguish free,
And know, whatever thou hast been,
'Tis something better not to be.' "

"It is indeed incredible how stale and empty are the fates of most people, how dull and heedless are all their feelings and thoughts. Their lives consist of flabby longing, and pining, of dreamy reeling through the seven ages to death, and this is accompanied with a number of trivial thoughts. They are like clocks wound up to go and do not know why. Each time when a man is born the clock is wound up again to play off the same hackneyed tune, bar for bar, measure for measure, with unimportant variations." (*Ibid.*, *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Vol. I., p. 379.)

Or, take the following on the misery of life :

"Nobody is exactly to be envied, but those who are to be pitied are innumerable. . . . Animals are more satisfied in their mere existence than we ; the plant is quite satisfied ; but man only in the degree of his obtuseness. . . . A happy life is impossible ; the highest that a man can attain to is the fate of a hero."

Schopenhauer the idealist will be forgotten, but Schopenhauer the pessimist will survive for all time to come. The misery of life has never before found a more eloquent prophet, and here he finds himself in touch with the two great religions of the world, Buddhism and Christianity. Schopenhauer is an enemy of religion. His article on religion is perhaps the severest and keenest criticism that has ever been made. He hates priests and hierarchical institutions as much as, if not more than, womankind. And yet when he comes to speak of Buddhism and Christianity he does not conceal his profound admiration for the spirit that pervades these two creeds. He regards Buddhism as the purer faith of the two, but Christianity, too, ranges according to his philosophy high above the noblest humanity of the Greek civilisation. The Greeks, he says, were mere children when compared to the age that revealed the truths of Christianity whose symbol is the cross, an instrument of torture and ignominy, employed by the ancients only for putting to death the most contemptible criminals and slaves. Schopenhauer says of Christianity :

"The centre and core of Christianity is the doctrine of the fall of man, of original sin, of the perdition of our natural state, and the corruption of the natural

man, which is connected with the vicarious atonement through the Saviour which is gained by faith. But this characterises Christianity as pessimism. It is therefore opposed to the optimism of the Jewish religion and to Islam, the oldest child of Judaism ; but kin to Brahmanism and Buddhism.

"That all have sinned and are condemned in Adam, and that all have been saved in the Saviour, expresses the truth that the real being of man and the root of his existence does not lie in the individual but in the species which as the Platonic idea of man is laid out in its temporal appearance in individuals."—*Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol. II., § 181.

"Human existence, far from being a boon, is like a debt which we have contracted . . . our life is the payment of the interest of this debt, the payment of the sum itself is made in death. . . . That Christianity regards life in the same light appears from a passage of Luther's comments on the Epistle to the Galatians. 'We all are however in our bodies and possessions subject to the Devil, and are guests only in the world whose lord and god he is. Thus the bread which we eat, the drink which we drink, the garments which we wear, even the air and everything on which we live in the flesh, is under his government.' So far Luther. People complain about the dreariness of my philosophy. The reason is this : instead of proclaiming a future hell as the result of sin, I claim that in this world here, wherever there is guilt, there must be something like hell."—*Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Vol. II., pp. 665-666.

Schopenhauer is one of the most notable characters among the philosophers of the world. His faults are gross and obvious ; his vanity (it is most obtrusively displayed in his letters) is ridiculous ; his practical hedonism forms a strong contrast to his theoretical contempt of pleasure. Nonetheless, he is great and deserves fully the attention which he receives. His sentiments are deep, and he has experienced in his own bosom the shallowness of joy in every form. Read Schopenhauer, and you will no longer be able to adhere to the traditional optimism which found its best representative in no less a man than Leibnitz. If pleasure is the purpose of life, the goal that must be striven for, then indeed the world is a failure, and life is not worth living.

Schopenhauer appreciates Buddhism and Christianity, because these religions recognise the existence of misery and the need of salvation ; but Schopenhauer, the pessimist, has opened his eyes to the first part of the truth only proclaimed by the Buddha and the Christ ; he overlooks the other and more important part. Schopenhauer agrees with Buddha that there is misery in the world, and that there is a cause for misery, which is our thirst for individualisation, our desire, our lust. These are the first and second of the four noble truths. But he blinds himself to the third and the fourth, which proclaims there is salvation from misery and that the eightfold noble path of righteousness unfailingly leads to the attainment of salvation. Schopenhauer believes in the cross

only as a symbol of martyrdom, not as the token in which sin is conquered and death trodden under foot; he knows nothing of the higher life that is gained by him who surrenders the vanity fair of the world and all selfishness, for the sake of laying up spiritual treasures that are incorruptible and not subject to decay. There is a glimpse of this realm of the higher life in his discussion of art and Platonic ideas, but he fails to recognise in it the consummation of life and the aim of evolution. There is no evolution, according to Schopenhauer; Lamarck and Darwin are in his opinion two queer ignoramuses, and everything that is great or noble is, if we abide by Schopenhauer's verdict, abnormal and out of place. Genius and virtue are not qualities that adorn man with some special and rare perfections, but render him unfit for life and change him into a lunatic who deserves both admiration and pity. The world, according to Schopenhauer, is a place for brutal people, for fools, and knaves; it leaves no room for beauty, wisdom, and morality.

* * *

In fine: we do not agree with Schopenhauer, but we appreciate the importance of his philosophy. A study of his works is the best cure for the old optimism so common among large masses of the unthinking who go through life without ever reflecting upon the significance of the duties that it imposes, believing that pleasure is the highest good, and that ethics is nothing but a calculation of how to secure for the greatest number the maximum amount of happiness. We reject optimism, but for that reason we do not accept pessimism. Pessimism is right only in the face of optimism. If life's purpose be the realisation of pleasure, then life is a failure. But for that reason, it is still wrong to proclaim that life is not worth living. Meliorism denies the premise of both optimism and pessimism, that the purpose of life is pleasure. Meliorism looks upon life as an opportunity for realising the higher spiritual life of moral ideals, of scientific aspirations, of the attainment of art. What is all the misery of life in comparison to that bliss which is perceived by those who are instruments in the actualisation of the good, the true, the beautiful, a bliss unattainable to those who brutelike cling to their particular egoity, and become at last the spoil of death.

Pessimism is deeper than optimism, it is a higher and more advanced stage in the recognition of truth. But Pessimism is only a state of transition which opens our eyes to a better, a truer, and nobler conception of life: it leads to meliorism.