The Art of Living in a Nihilistic Age

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Afterthoughts and Essays

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Great enough to gild the despised:
spiritual enough to understand
the physical as superior—
that is the future of morality!

Friedrich Nietzsche (1883)

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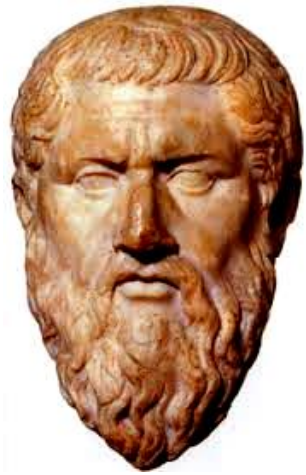

AFTERTHOUGHTS
ON THE LOVE OF WISDOM

After more than 2,000 years of Platonistic philosophy — and what is philosophy if not essentially Platonistic? — we may be excused for having some second thoughts on what has been so reverently called our "love of wisdom". Second thoughts, as it were, on the wisdom of our love. For we have had ample time to reflect — and what is philosophy in the Platonistic vein if not reflection?

We may therefore be excused for looking at wisdom no longer with our loving eyes of yore, but more warily, and maybe more wisely after all. Our thoughts now are tempered by years of passion and curiosity, by lust and impotence alike. We believed in the goodness and beauty of our love, and trusted its truthfulness. But our pursuit has brought forth no offspring — only the knowledge that was there from the start: that we know nothing and that what we found was fleeting and forever leading us on.

But the stronger one's love, the blinder it is, and today we know that it is not wisdom that deceived us, but only our love of it. And if indeed we should have become any wiser, it is because we do not love so ardently anymore.

And so our thoughts have become afterthoughts — thoughts that tell us that we have come to the end of an

affair. And as we shrug and walk away, we may be forgiven for having played the fool for so long. Had we not always said that to live was to philosophize? Had we not done anything to *prove* that our love was true? But if living is loving, we fear nonetheless that the love of *wisdom* has made a sterile tautology out of it. Or, as someone who suffered long before us put it: our wisdom was like "a sleep without dreams".*

A veritable sleeping sickness, we feel free to add. So that awakening from it required the dawn of yet another consciousness, a reflection overcoming the pretense that has heretofore shaped our lives. But perhaps the time has come to no longer please ourselves to have been faithful, and to realize that the real wisdom is to turn away from wisdom. So that where we once looked foolish in our love, we might now love our foolishness and look wise.

Our thoughts, therefore, go in another direction. We think that knowledge is not the condition, but the consequence of action, and that life is a profoundly irrational enterprise. We do not believe anymore in sages and other brokers of the known. We consider their wisdom but a form of prudence, an attempt to avoid suffering and death. But we now say that there is no knowledge without suffering, and no life without death, and that a wisdom that seeks to avoid either is but an attempt to obfuscate the human condition. And we ask if, in order to live truly, it would not be better to ignore rather than to ascertain.

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* Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra,* I, "Of the Teachers of Virtue".

And so we abandon the Platonistic position that still casts shadows on our age and step out into the sun — the kind of thoughtlessness that suits us if we consider that, in general, only asses and occidentals stay in the sun voluntarily. But that precisely is our suspicion: that a love delivered from wisdom — not just from evil — a love which is no longer looking for truth, and maybe not even for goodness — that such would be the love for a life lived unreasonably, inefficiently, and without any purpose at all.

From a rational point of view our enterprise will surely seem mad. But we maintain: has love not always been like this — unreasonable and full of dangers for the heart and soul? Have we not all discovered that in love there is no justice or truth, that so-called 'true love' is but a delusion, unless it is an egotism, a weakness, or a lie? And have we not, in spite of it, fallen in love all over again? Have we not come to accept that love thrives on appearance rather than reality, so that even that other idea of Plato, the idea of an objective beauty, has become suspect in our eyes?

In love, we say now that we have fallen out of love, we are far from seeing things that are beautiful. Rather, we realize that it was our love that made them look beautiful in the first place and that, if one is in love with ideas, they too will seem beautiful. Only that such a love strikes us more like an antidote to love, even like a perversion. And we suspect that it wasn't by accident, after all, that philosophy first flourished in post-Periclean Greece, at the beginning of a cultural decline that has continued to this day. We have come to think that the rationalization of love — the idea of

the good — was but an aberration of instinct; that wisdom marked a decline in vitality, that it was a prudent deception, a self-deception above all. To argue, as Plato did, that the end of a man's life is the love of beautiful ideas — why, does that not amount to saying that the end of life is physical death? And granted the *truth* of that proposition, does it not discredit all the ideas and promissory notes of all religions and philosophies that, through the ages, have masqueraded as truths?

From this viewpoint, then, Platonism — and idealism in general — looks rather like a miscarriage of wisdom, the canon of a life that was born dead. Because for the man who relies on his senses, there is no truth to be found in an ever-changing world. The idea that goodness reigns there is contrary to all his experiences. And he cannot help but feel that behind the beauty he perceives now and then there is but a world sublime in its indifference, and that beauty is merely a reflection of that sublimity, and goodness, the justice of that indifference.

And so we remember what our love was like before it became platonic, when we weren't yet convinced of anything; when every step we took was risky, and evil and ugliness would not frighten us — not anymore than Perseus was frightened by the Medusa. And in that remembrance we recover a taste of life, a knowledge preceding all wisdom, as in the words of a banal song that has stayed on our minds:

> Fools rush in
> where wise men never go,
> but wise men never fall in love,

so how are they to know...?*

And who knows, maybe even Platonistic philosophers will grant us the value of such a remembrance — they who also claim to have come by beautiful bodies on their way to beautiful ideas. And if knowledge is attained through recollection, as Plato also believed, then maybe the best idea of the good is still the one we have of our first love, which was so foolish and so fertile because it was the love of a body beautiful in its appearance, and nothing else.

To conclude: We do not want to *talk* about love anymore. We have become too wise to still be philosophical. There is more beauty on earth than in any world of ideas. Our thoughts have become afterthoughts.

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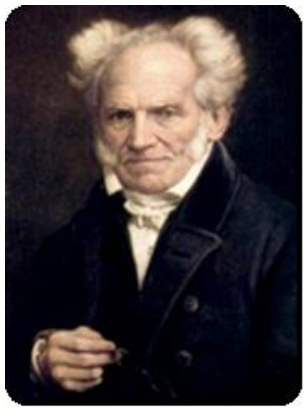
* *Fools Rush In,* by Rube Bloom and Johnny Mercer. First recorded by Bob Crosby in 1940, it reached the top of the charts the same year in a version by Glenn Miller.



LIFE AND *RAISON D'ÊTRE*

I

It has been a commonplace of Western philosophy that the 'good' — the highest good of them all — can be attained by rational deliberation. And even though man has been thrown into the world and carries the burden of his "facticity", as Sartre put it, it appears that in any and all cases he is trying to make the best of it and act rationally, even if in some cases it means turning his back on life. Implicit in this entirely non-Kantian 'good will' is the assumption that what one does will be for the better, and not for worse.

This basically optimistic attitude underlies every moral system that seeks to justify itself by its rationality. Whether the good is individual or general, terrestrial or celestial, the supposition is always that the existence of such a good is the redeeming feature of *all* existence and that it can be attained by a measure of the human will. Optimism and rationalism go hand in hand.

In the history of philosophy it was Kant who relegated the idea of the good to a postulate of practical reason. In the form of an immortal soul it was no longer to be realized within a lifetime, but nonetheless to serve as an indispensable idea for the man of "good will". For Kant believed that man must believe that he will be rewarded for his efforts, be it only after his corporeal death. Without such a reward, he would simply

lack a criterion to call his will "good", and an incentive to act accordingly. And in the unwitting circularity of his thought Kant pretended that he had solved the problem of how to go on living in the absence of any 'proof' that it is worth one's while — in other words, of how to *justify* an optimistic vision of life.

That everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds is indeed the highest claim of optimism, and it was not by accident that this tenet was first formulated during the Enlightenment, when human reason was brimming with confidence that man was the measure of all things. In this respect, the Kantian way of attaining the good was really a step backward. For the postulate of the soul's immortality asked man to act *as if* everything were for the best, reducing to an act of faith what theretofore had been considered proven. And indeed, as the 'proofs' of divine or angelic existence turned out to be fallacies one after the other, the enlightened pietism that Kant espoused and which would henceforth be called 'transcendentalism', opened the door to a form of *rational belief*.

Transcendentalism may be called a qualified optimism as well: if it is true that man cannot *know* that everything is for the best — that a benevolent God exists and the soul is immortal — why conclude that therefore everything is for the worst? Pascal, in his wager more than a hundred years before, was one step ahead of Kant in this. His argument was that it is rational to bet on the infinitely small chance that all the sufferings and sacrifices mandated by religious morality are indeed for the best if the possible gains are also infinite. But this, it turned out, was also fallacious, at least mathematically

speaking. For relative to the zero gain of losing, any finite set of sacrifices must also be considered infinite. In the last analysis, then, it is a matter of temperament — of the degree of one's vitality — on which eventuality one is inclined to bet.

Kant, in trying to give this wager a more solid foundation, did not fare any better. In retrospect one can say that he merely provided us with a sophisticated example of the "power of positive thinking", the discount store wisdom that has managed to attract so many anguished souls of the 20th century, notably in the Anglo-Saxon world. In the process, he recognized that optimism had but a hypothetical foundation, and that its rationality depended on the axioms one chose. And this recognition had to entail a reaction before long.

II

It was the ambivalence of Kantian transcendentalism that paved the way for the two streams of thought that immediately followed him: the ultimate resurgence of optimism in the form of Hegelian idealism, and the pessimistic backlash in Schopenhauer's philosophy. For in spite of their life-long rivalry, both Schopenhauer and Hegel are clearly the heirs of Kant. Together they illustrate the contortions of the human mind when faced with the realization that everything may not be for the best after all, that the human condition may simply not be conducive to attaining the 'good', in this world or any other. For they deny, each in his own way, that life is worth living *as it is* and go on to deduce a moral

— if not an apodictic morality — from it.

Hegelian idealism is optimism in its consummate form. Here all doubt, all the skepticism to which philosophers from Descartes to Kant had paid homage, is simply attributed to the finitude of human understanding. This might have discouraged the run-of-the-mill rationalists and empiricists of his time. But for Hegel, the understanding was not a non-plus-ultra, but merely a unilateral moment in the evolution of consciousness, to be transcended by absolute reason in due time. In the same way, after all, consciousness had been transcended by self-consciousness, natural philosophy by a philosophy of the subject, and by psychology.

"I know that I know nothing" — "I think, therefore I am" — in either of these statements man pretends to accede to a higher truth, a truth that consists no longer in the correspondence of an object with its representation in the human mind — as Kant would have it — but in the correspondence of its content and form. In Hegelian terms, truth is the identity of an object with itself. If that sounds tautological to logicians, it must be remembered that Hegel was not a mere logician. He was a dialectician. To his mind, any divergence of the objective world from the concepts the intellect has fashioned is not due to an inadequacy of that intellect, but to the inadequation of reality to the idea. If Kant thought that the faculty of understanding — consisting of twelve categories — was in itself empty and depended on the experience of reality to be activated, with Hegel it is *reason* which becomes *effective* by realizing itself. "Everything rational is real, and everything real is rational," is his famous formula to describe the process.

Where Kant still complained about a world of appearances behind which the things-in-themselves escape all veritable knowledge, Hegel maintains that appearance is the very truth of a world that is in the process of becoming, i. e. of attaining the unity of object and concept which he calls the "idea". For Hegel, truth no longer poses a problem: in his world, man can know *nothing but* the truth.

The question arises, of course, if such a concept of truth, or such an idea, really corresponds to a cosmic order of things or if it merely reflects the structure of Hegel's mind. Hegel argues, not without merit, that in order to determine the idea of truth, human reason, albeit unconsciously, must already partake of it. In this, as well as in other things, he reminds us of Plato who, in his *Menon*, argued that knowledge is remembrance and that truth is set free in the dialectic of interrogation. For Hegel, universal history is but the evolution of relative consciousness to the absolute self-consciousness of philosophic man.

Not without sarcasm, one has concluded from this that for all practical purposes history came to an end with Hegel himself. It was in his mind, after all, that the objective fused with the subjective and begot an absolute spirit conscious of itself. And thus, even though history has continued, the discrepancy is explained in the treatises he has written. It is due to the contingency of the temporal order of events, which often does not coincide with the effective order of reason. Sooner or later, we are assured, history *will* stop — presumably because sooner or later even the greatest dunce will have understood what Hegel was talking about.

It is clear: we are confronted here with an optimism which doesn't just spring from the vanity of human aspirations, but has assumed a divine vantage point. One will remember that Kant subsumed all knowledge to the understanding and took reason for an altogether different faculty — the faculty of desire, namely — in a practical as well as in a theoretical sense. By manipulating the concepts of the understanding, reason may arrive at conclusions — at "ideas" — which in themselves have nothing to do with knowledge, but depend on being verified or falsified by experience. To Kant, the ideas of reason had basically a *heuristic* value: they could serve to develop the parameters of scientific investigation, or optimize human desire by devising a moral code.

But with Hegel, the faculty of desire became completely *rationalized*. It is absolute truth, not a set of postulates, which according to him is incarnate in the ideas. And as for Plato, it is the attainment of this truth that is the condition of moral goodness — that doing what is right amounts to doing what is rational.

But in this as in other respects the question arises if Hegelian reason isn't just a manifestation of *Hegelian* desire — that is to say, if in the last analysis Hegelian philosophy is not just an anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism, but an egocentrism of the widest scope. For it seems odd, to say the least, that this absolute reason which knows so well to abstract from the contingency of experience nevertheless ends up corroborating the contingent situation of Hegel himself — the situation of a professor of philosophy in an ecclesiastical monarchy of the 19th century. After all, it was Hegel who also dis-

covered the *reason* in universal history and saw it reaching its acme in the Germanic state; who declared all philosophy to be but a rational form of theology; and who defined the absolute as a divine spirit conscious of itself.

And so we have come to conclude that the Hegelian dialectic is *in truth* not a manifestation of the rationality of reason at all, but little more than a phenomenology of desire. Hegel's originality was simply to have taken his desire not just for the reality — since he considered everything rational to be *real* — but even for the divinity of the world. It is an illegitimate response to the Kantian question of what man can legitimately hope for, in this life or any other.

In the Hegelian optic, the consciousness of ordinary man is merely a moment in the evolution of universal spirit, a vagary of speculative reason on the way to becoming conscious of itself. But in the end it accomplishes what it presupposes. The "rational theology" Hegel espouses differs little from the notion of divine providence, reflecting a trust that man's actions and desires are part of a cosmic economy which makes this the best of all worlds. It is fatalism with an optimistic touch. Death is but the proof of the inadequation of individual life to the concept of existence. To become adequate is to become immortal. The Kantian postulate implied as much.

But again we ask if it is not a particular form of desire that is at work here — the Christian desire to be delivered from evil, for instance, or the Buddhist desire to be delivered from desire as such. Why merely hope for something if one can be certain that truth and good-

ness will manifest themselves at the end of time? But isn't, upon reflection, such reliance on a divine dialectic merely a case of wishful thinking? Isn't it just another form of belief?

III

The human condition is defined by the consciousness, presumed unique to the species, that death is the end of individual life. But individual death is, on second thought, also the condition that the social, as much as the biological organism, may thrive. Cells die so that the body as a whole will not succumb to cancer. Men die so that their children may live and beget children in their turn. In a changing world entire species have evolved and vanished, and other species have taken their place.

But only man has understood all that and built a culture around it, and developed signs and symbols to express the unimaginable state of death. And in all of this he has sought to transcend or negate his condition, instead of coming to terms with it, even to be delivered from it — to find a 'truth' that would turn reality into a lie, a moral for his life story. He went so far as to substitute pity for desire and, in the name of religion, prefer a collective suicide to individual death.

But the signs and symbols transmitted from generation to generation seem to have taken on a life of their own — a life presumably everlasting and therefore more 'true' than organic life and temporary existence. On the premise of "I think, therefore I am", man has elevated

an auxiliary verb to the concept of 'being' and built an entire science around it, the science of ontology, pretending that 'being' was somehow preferable to 'existing' or 'living'.

But as even Hegel recognized, 'being' equals nothingness. If an object has all attributes imaginable, but none in particular, then nothing can be ascribed to it. It doesn't even *exist* in the way other objects do that have been reduced to concepts. For there are no adjectives to be found in nature, and no auxiliary verbs — no concepts, postulates, or ideas. They are all figments of man's imagination, reflections of the world in the mirror of his consciousness, and it is but by his anthropocentric vanity that he considers them to be superior to what they denote, and more real — or more effective, as Hegel would say. "I'm afraid we can't rid ourselves of God because we still believe in grammar," was Nietzsche's way of describing the phenomenon.*

But at the end of the Christian era, after 2,000 years of vain proofs and spurious postulates, man came to devise a way to make sure that at least the signs and images of his life will survive eternally, to register every word that was ever written, every step he ever took, every road he ever traveled, what he bought and sold, and what he did with the money. So that every life could be reconstituted and virtually lived forever, and the real, the biological life was relegated to a mere analogy, an ephemeral example of what it means to exist rather than 'to be'.

In the meantime, of course, they have all died their

* *Twilight of the Idols,* "Reason in History", §5.

analogous deaths, the transcendentalist Kant and the idealist Hegel, the ontologist Heidegger, and Nietzsche — although he was the only one who asked what difference it would make. Nietzsche thought of man as an animal that hasn't been defined yet, that was a bridge or an arrow to a destination as yet unknown. But another century would pass before someone arrived at the generalization that existence precedes essence, and that as far as man was concerned, he is nothing but the sum total of his actions.*

And so the professed love of wisdom had come full circle. It was acknowledged that the power of concepts or ideas hinges on the question of whether they apply to a possible way of living and — more importantly — if whoever propagated them lived accordingly himself. Socrates had done so, and 300 years after him, Jesus Christ. But neither of them had ever committed a single word to paper. It was their physical lives and deaths which inspired others to relate and abstract from how they had lived — until at last the words took on a life of their own and were interpreted or misinterpreted, depending on the exegesis one preferred, and a purpose was imputed to them — a *raison d'être* to pass over the fact that these men had lived the way they had died, and set an analogous example.

2,000 years later the wayward son of a Protestant preacher proclaimed that the last Christian had died on the cross and wondered whether the first philosopher hadn't committed suicide. All this before he himself

* We are talking about Jean-Paul Sartre, of course. Cf. his *L'existentialisme est un humanisme,* Paris 1970.

questioned a life of convention, like Socrates did, and died on the cross of his spirit, like Jesus**. We are talking about Nietzsche again. For the only way in which Nietzsche differed from his ancient examples was in writing down his own gospel, his rhetorical monologues to which nobody replied and few listened. Until someone finally came to realize that the fundamental question for philosophical man was indeed the question of suicide — the question why we should go on living in the face of death. And of course we mean Albert Camus, who even provided us with an answer before a car accident dispensed him from putting it to a test.

IV

It is of some interest in this connection that among all of Nietzsche's writings, among his notes and aphorisms, there is an early essay, "On the Pathos of Truth", which he did not publish, but included in a collection of "Five Forewords to Five Unwritten Books" which he dedicated and presented to Cosima Wagner at Christmas in 1872. Near the end of this particular "foreword", he puts the following words into the mouth of a cold-blooded demon:

> Once upon a time, in a remote corner of the innumerable solar systems flickering in our universe, there was a

** Unless, of course, he died in the fight of his body with other bodies to which man had given the name of *spirochetes pallidae.*

> star on which clever animals developed the ability to know. It was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of world history, but a mere minute nonetheless. After a few breaths of nature, the star froze over and the clever animals had to die. It was high time: for although they had bragged of knowing many things, they had to their great vexation finally discovered that what they knew was all false. They died, and in dying they cursed the truth. That was the way of these desperate animals who had invented knowledge.

A book of the same title was indeed never written, although it can be argued that what Nietzsche did publish over the years was in good part an elaboration of this demonic thought. But just the few lines cited are so disillusioning, so disconsolate, as to constitute a death blow to any idealist or transcendentalist system of thought, and to any religion as well. They do away with optimists of any *couleur*, and with any *raison d'être*. Indeed, the consequence of accepting the truth content of its proposition — the truth that there is no truth — would seem to justify the most radical nihilism, an immediate abdication from life. But of course that goes only for those who have believed in truth to begin with, in absolute ideas and indisputable postulates. The rest will undoubtedly go on living as half-heartedly as they always had, as they had believed or had faith in, turning to pessimism or cynicism to cloak a morbid desire that does not desire anything anymore.

Pessimism in its philosophical form is of course much more straightforward in assessing the human condition than any optimism would ever dare to be. Its strategy to overcome life is to renounce it — without

drinking the hemlock, if possible, and without being crucified. It goes back to Schopenhauer, who lived a generation before Nietzsche and did not confront the demons that plagued the latter in such a categorical way. Rather, he sought deliverance in a Buddhist nirvana and — although contemptuous of idealism of the Hegelian sort — clung to the hope of some kind of "ecstasy" at the threshold to nothingness.

For another, Schopenhauer did not personally practice what he preached. He certainly did not die of starvation — an end he considered to be the ultimate consequence of any veritable reflection. And so one feels justified in calling him as a mere pessimist rather than a downright nihilist, even though he rarely employed the term himself. In his principal work, *The World as Will and Representation,* it occurs only twice: once to characterize Christianity, another time in a footnote describing the behavior of a squirrel that is being hypnotized by a snake.

But the label of pessimism is a suitable starting point for any inquest into an attitude which is categorically opposed to optimism, but in a roundabout way related to it. We want to determine the moral implications of an intellectual posture which could best be described as a "nihilism of bad faith". But before drawing any definite conclusions, we cannot resist paraphrasing with regard to Schopenhauer what Nietzsche once said of Pascal — namely, that he was the most instructive victim of Christianity. Schopenhauer may be called the most instructive victim of Buddhism. He instructs us on the declining vitality of an entire civilization, of the Indo-Germanic peoples, if one prefers, or,

more generally, of what is called the 'West'.

Schopenhauer grabs at love and pity — which he considers to be the supreme virtues of man — albeit without postulating an afterlife or a deity in the Kantian manner. It is in part such equivocality that makes him appear to be a mere pessimist, rather than a die-hard, die-fast nihilist. And yet, by his penetrating analysis and the acuity of his judgment, he impresses us more than any other thinker of his time. If anything, we are surprised because his pessimistic view of existence in general, not just of a particular form of it, seems to be entirely lacking in evidence. A Nietzsche, for example, who also suffered from a malady of the soul and admired Schopenhauer when he was young, outgrew that condition and turned his mentor's insights into a relentless affirmation of life, rather than into renunciation. But what we have also learned from Nietzsche is that a philosophy, in the final analysis, is but the projection and reflection of a man who calls himself a philosopher. And we surmise that, more than the body of his thought, it was Schopenhauer the man who was pessimistic.

To his credit, he recognized that pain is the essential ingredient of pleasure. But in going on to argue that only pain is real and that life consists of an endless series of injuries and setbacks to be suffered, he seems to lack the recognition that life, by definition, is a dynamic phenomenon, a constant struggle with a hostile environment, a string of adversities to be overcome. And even if we grant him that it consists more in the search for pleasure as in the attainment of it, we maintain that it is in this searching, this overcoming, that we feel most alive.

But Schopenhauer, when faced with the argument,

confines himself to repeating almost rhetorically the standard question of moral philosophy since Plato: what is the good of it — the good of a seemingly endless pursuit if each step only brings renewed pain?

Our answer is simple: It is our suffering which is the condition of our pleasures to come. Pain is not an argument against life, as long as we have the force to overcome it. To *have* that force and that desire — that vitality, in brief — is the prerequisite of any living organism. Any dog has it, and any mosquito. For without it, a creature cannot thrive. An illness that is incurable, a pain that becomes unbearable, is the messenger of death. No need to be ascetic here: one dies because one is unable to live — as an individual or as a species. As Nietzsche put it: "Illness must be understood as an untimely approach of old age, of ugliness and pessimistic judgments — all of which go together."*

In this optic, then, it does not surprise us anymore that Schopenhauer defines "overcoming" as the opposite of "conquering", that he considers it synonymous with a certain manner of dying, to be more precise: with starving yourself to death. For that is the preferred mode of dying of the lucid pessimist. The great man overcomes life by staging a hunger strike.

V

What is particularly noteworthy in Schopenhauer's view of the world is the conclusion that by

* *Dawn,* §409

understanding its real nature we are led to renounce it, and that it is not a Kantian "good will", but a blind and irrational force underlying all human action which makes us affirm it. Schopenhauer argues convincingly — though perhaps unintentionally — that knowledge and reflection are antidotes to action, in the long run causing immobility and death.

But while he admits that the essence of existence in general, and of human beings in particular, is an *irrational will* to live, and that the intellect can at best guide that will and impute motives to it, but not stop it, he nonetheless develops his moral philosophy on an entirely intellectual basis, that is to say, on a rational one. It is a non-sequitur that we can only explain by inferring that Schopenhauer's own will to live had already weakened, for only then is it rational to devise a morality that shows the way out of the world. In Kantian terms, Schopenhauer made a universal law out of the personal maxim that an exhausted organism should cease to live.

Indeed, we believe that Schopenhauer had the chance to do for morality what Kant had done for the intellect: to identify the a priori forms of rational action. Instead, he equated the Kantian *noumenon* with an irrational force underlying all existence and argued that such a force could only be mastered by negating life or, short of that, by foregoing the inconsequence of most moral theories and *suppressing* it. But that sounds just like another inconsequence to us. It is as if Kant, after having identified time and space as the a priori forms of perception, had advised us to no longer perceive in time and space. How could one hope to

muster the strength to calm or kill the irrational will to live, unless it is an already degenerated will which itself does not care to live anymore?

Schopenhauer, thus, is reduced to enumerating the psychic states in which such negations might be possible: at times of grave disappointment, for example, or in the aesthetic experience — which, to him, is an innocuous substitute for real pleasure. He thinks that at times of frustration the intellect may arrive at a true knowledge of the world and find the strength — or the weakness — to renounce life. If Nietzsche said with regard to decadence that it is a case of an organism choosing *instinctively* what hastens its decline, to Schopenhauer it is a state of "grace" of which ascesis is the rational corollary and willful starvation the ultimate remedy.

Let us agree that maybe such a development may appear "gracious" to an organism succumbing to fatigue. But must we not then conclude that Schopenhauer himself was a tired man? Granted that life lacks any ulterior meaning and consists but of alternating states of pleasure and pain — is it therefore reasonable in this senseless game to take the side of pain? For to the extent that living tests our capacity to withstand pain, it also tests our capacity for pleasure. And if Schopenhauer says that the absence of pain leads to a state of boredom, he could have said the same of the absence of pleasure. For either statement is an expression of vitality or, if one prefers, of a certain standard of living. If suffering depends on one's level of consciousness, and a mosquito doesn't suffer from death as much as man suffers from its bite, we add that a man basking in luxury suffers differently from a man living in chronic

want, and that it is the man of want, the man who as yet *desires* something, whose capacity for pleasure is the greatest.

But to Schopenhauer life is suffering, interrupted by moments of relief and longer periods of boredom — a state which he defines as the *continued* absence of pain. Boredom, to him, is the only state in which man is able to bear life. For it is then that he feels it least of all. But by calling pain the essential attribute of existence and deducing from it a philosophy of ascesis and abdication, he merely avows his own decadence. With equal justification we could argue in favor of an unqualified hedonism, to exhaust whatever pleasures life may yet have to offer us.

To summarize: one cannot refute Schopenhauer's propositions on logical terms, not anymore than one could prove their worth. One can argue only on the basis of one's own experience of pleasure and pain — in the aesthetic experience, for example, or in love. As to ourselves, we find it preposterous to say that one is bored in the presence of a work of art, or relieved by the act of making love. Boredom, to us, is the symptom of an objective well-being, not a subjective one; and relief, the satisfaction of a need, incomparable to the pleasure attained in the fulfillment of a great desire.

VI

Pessimism, like optimism, thus turns out to be a mere sublimation of the instincts of declining life. The pessimist retains the vague hope that nothingness,

once attained, will reveal itself as a superior form of being. It is the optimistic residue in pessimism, a final attempt to infuse life with a rationale that it does not have. The Hegelian theodicy, in this respect, is no different from Schopenhauer's philosophy of renunciation. One justifies life as a dialectical *moment* in the spiritual progression toward an absolute idea; the other, as a senseless detour on the way to deliverance from the evil of existence. Where the nihilist becomes destructive, the pessimist is merely bored to death. What all of them have in common, though, is an inability to affirm the *irrationality* of life — the fact that life has no purpose, even though it has an end.

To our mind, then, the affirmation of life in its flagrant absurdity is not so much a symptom of mental deficiency as it is a sign of physiological vigor. It becomes an organism to which pain and suffering are natural concomitants of living, and death the natural consequence of it. That might seem tragic to some; but to whoever has faced up to it, there is nothing tragic about it anymore. The joy of living then becomes the joy of being alive *in the face of death*. And if man is nothing but the sum total of his actions, he is also free to create himself. And if he is not spiritual enough to create works of art, perhaps he is physical enough to engender, so that others may live and partake of the same desire and the same pleasure, and death becomes but a bagatelle.

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