Schopenhauer’s world

by Roger Kimball

A review of *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* by Bryan Magee

**BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE**

*Bryan Magee*

*The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*

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Thomas Mann was in his early twenties—and in the middle of writing Buddenbrooks—when he first read Schopenhauer. The intoxicating effect of “drinking that metaphysical magic potion,” he recalled years later, “can only be compared with the one which the first contact with love and sex produces in the young mind.” For Mann, as for so many writers and artists of his generation, the discovery of Schopenhauer was nothing less than a revelation, a new way of looking at the world and one’s place in it. From Buddenbrooks and Death in Venice to The Magic Mountain and Doctor Faustus, Mann’s work exhibits the stamp and spirit of Schopenhauer’s influence, and it is only natural that he named Schopenhauer, along with Nietzsche and Wagner,
as one of “the three great Germans who were the shapers of my nature.”
Nietzsche and Wagner paid similar homage to Schopenhauer. The young Nietzsche, in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, the third of his *Untimely Meditations*, wrote that “I am one of those readers of Schopenhauer who when they have read one page of him know for certain that they will go on to read all the pages and will heed every word he ever said.” Though Nietzsche later repudiated Schopenhauer’s romantic pessimism as “decadent,” he never denied the formative impact that Schopenhauer had on his own thinking, and he continued throughout his career to extol him as a model of intellectual independence and honesty. Many of Nietzsche’s central philosophical ideas—his doctrine of the will to power, for example, or his celebrated Apollo/Dionysus dichotomy—can be shown to derive directly from Schopenhauer. And Wagner, in his autobiography, recalled the excitement of his first encounter with Schopenhauer’s work: “Schopenhauer’s book was never completely out of my mind, and by the following summer I had studied it from cover to cover four times. It had a radical influence on my whole life.”

By the turn of the century, such tributes to Schopenhauer’s influence were commonplace, especially among artists and writers. Schopenhauer had become an inescapable cultural force, his philosophy epitomizing the mood—at once extravagantly febrile, even enervated, yet bursting with creativity—of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. Indeed, it may be said that Schopenhauer provided a systematic vocabulary for those distinctively modern feelings, perceptions, and experiences that were to transform the artistic and intellectual life of the West from the 1870s to the end of the First World War.

Schopenhauer published the first edition of his major work, *The World as Will and Representation*, in 1818, but it was not until the 1850s, when he was in his sixties, that his work began to exercise any real influence. No doubt the widespread disillusionment that followed in the wake of the revolutions of 1848 helped pave the way for the triumph of his relentlessly disillusioning philosophy. Schopenhauer’s atheism and evolutionism, his insight into the unconscious and irrational dimension of man’s nature, his assertion of the primacy of sexuality, his apotheosis of art and aesthetic experience as a compensation for life: these were the features of his thought that answered to the age’s impatience with Enlightenment optimism and its naive trust in reason and science, its faith in inevitable progress and the perfection of man.

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Yet despite Schopenhauer’s once colossal presence, his influence declined steadily through the Twenties and Thirties. By 1938 Mann could write in his essay on Schopenhauer that he was attempting “to evoke a figure little known to the present generation.” And while there is no question of Schopenhauer’s attaining anything like his former stature—the novel elements of his teaching have been too completely assimilated by conventional wisdom for that to happen—Bryan Magee convincingly argues in his new study of the philosopher that there are “unmistakable signs of a serious revival of interest.” No doubt the renewed interest in fin-de-siècle culture—one thinks, for example, of popular studies like Carl Schorske’s Fin-de-Siècle Vienna or Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin’s Wittgenstein’s Vienna—is in part responsible for the revival of interest in Schopenhauer that Magee discerns. But it is also the case, as Magee argues, that the current disenchantment with positivism—as much in art and literary studies as in philosophy—has helped kindle a renaissance of interest in Schopenhauer as both a cultural influence and a thinker in his own right.

It is appropriate that Schopenhauer, who despised the academy and academic philosophy, should find as his latest champion a decidedly nonacademic man of letters. A Member of Parliament and author of books on Karl Popper, modern British philosophy, and Wagner, Magee sets out in The Philosophy of Schopenhauer to provide an introduction to Schopenhauer’s thought and an overview of his influence. As such, he has succeeded in producing the most comprehensive work in English on Schopenhauer since Patrick Gardiner’s Schopenhauer (1963). (The Philosophy of Schopenhauer, incidentally, is dedicated to Gardiner.) Magee not only outlines his philosophical system but also reminds us of how crucial an ingredient in fin-de-siècle cultural life Schopenhauer was. It is no exaggeration to say that many of the leading figures of that time—including Wittgenstein and Freud—cannot be understood without some appreciation of their debt to Schopenhauer.

Magee’s book opens with a biographical sketch and then proceeds to review the philosophical tradition out of which Schopenhauer emerged. It offers a reasonably thorough exposition of his main philosophical writings, concentrating on The World as Will and Representation. Magee goes seriatim through each of the four parts of that book, treating in turn Schopenhauer’s epistemology, his metaphysics, his theory of art, and his ethics. He concludes with some criticisms and a long series of appendices—they come to more than a third of the book—that investigate various extra-philosophical issues, such as Schopenhauer’s relation to Buddhism, and detail Schopenhauer’s profound influence on thinkers and artists from Nietzsche and Wagner to Tolstoy, Proust, Conrad, and Mann. An entire appendix is devoted to Schopenhauer’s impact on Wittgenstein. The only significant omission here concerns Schopenhauer’s considerable influence on the visual arts—one thinks of the Schopenhauerian pronouncements of the Blaue Reiter group, for example, or the work of Gustav Klimt, or the writings of de Chirico—which Magee has left out of his account.

Magee has thus assembled a great deal of material, and most students of Schopenhauer will find it a useful, if not especially original, synopsis of his philosophy as well as a handy compilation of facts about his life and influence. In many respects the biographical introduction and the
appendices are the most valuable parts of the book. For example, Magee points out that the oft-noted similarity between Schopenhauer’s philosophy and Buddhism is not—as is usually held—a result of Buddhism’s influence on Schopenhauer. On the contrary, Schopenhauer had formulated the central tenets of his philosophy well before he became acquainted with Eastern texts. The important thing was that he arrived at such similar insights independently, for in his mind this argued for the fundamental truth of the ideas in question.

Yet while Magee displays an impressive command of Schopenhauer’s oeuvre, the book is not without serious problems. The more strictly philosophical portions of his text—his discussion of Schopenhauer’s philosophical precursors, his explication of transcendental idealism, even his understanding of Schopenhauer’s doctrine of the will—are neither rigorous nor reliable. And there is the additional question of whether a secondary source, however competent, really provides the best introduction to Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Schopenhauer himself wrote with such clarity and verve—his model is said to have been Hume—that his own works remain the best and most accessible entree to his thought. One may disagree with a lot that Schopenhauer has to say, but one is seldom at a loss to understand what he is saying, a claim that one would hesitate to make for many of his philosophical compatriots.

Schopenhauer is famous above all for his pessimism. As Magee shows, his biography supplies ample support for this dimension of his reputation. After his father died, apparently by his own hand, when Schopenhauer was in his teens, he joined the prosperous family firm as his father had wished, but he found it stifling and soon left to devote himself to learning. “Life is a wretched business,” he remarked around this time. “I’ve decided to spend it trying to understand it.” In 1813, Schopenhauer completed his doctoral dissertation and moved to Weimar, to live with his mother, a socially ambitious woman who had achieved considerable renown for her romantic novels. It was here, in Johanna Schopenhauer’s fashionable salon, that the young Schopenhauer became friendly with Goethe and other literary and artistic figures. Unfortunately, relations between mother and son were at the best of times cool, and now they broke down completely. “She threw him out altogether in the spring of 1814,” Magee writes, “and they never saw each other again during the remaining twenty-four years of her life.”

After this debacle, Schopenhauer moved to Dresden, where he spent the next four years writing The World as Will and Representation. He published it with great expectations and was bitterly disappointed when it went, virtually unnoticed. Then, after an extended stay in Italy, Schopenhauer moved to Berlin and made his single bid for a university teaching career. In a characteristically defiant gesture, he deliberately scheduled his lectures at the same time that Hegel—who was then at the pinnacle of fashion but whose philosophy Schopenhauer detested—had scheduled his. The consequence was that no one came and the class had to be canceled. Yet Schopenhauer’s amalgam of stubbornness, courage, and intellectual independence—together with the financial independence that he had inherited—enabled him to persevere with his philosophy in the face of almost total neglect. He continued to refine and elaborate his system, bringing out a
Important influences on Schopenhauer’s thought include elements of Plato’s philosophy and British empiricism, but his chief philosophical debt is to Kant, in his estimation “the most important phenomenon which has appeared in philosophy for two thousand years.” All the same, Schopenhauer’s deeply empirical cast of mind and curiosity about the natural world made him an oddity in the dominant strain of post-Kantian German philosophy. His “unmistakable, almost physical, rootedness in lived thought and experience,” as Magee puts it, shows itself as much in the style of his philosophizing as in the substance of his teaching. It also remarkably prefigures the novelties—substantive as well as stylistic— usually attributed to American pragmatism. And given his lapidary prose style and romantic pessimism, it is perhaps not surprising that Schopenhauer would come to exercise a more pervasive influence on the arts and, through Freud, on psychology than on philosophy. For the wellspring of Schopenhauer’s influence lies not in any technical innovation in epistemology—which since Descartes has been the chief interest of most professional philosophers—but in his revaluation of the irrational and unconscious elements of man’s nature.

Adapting Kant’s distinction between phenomena and things-in-themselves, Schopenhauer divided the world into a realm of interconnected, knowable representations and an essentially unfathomable will. In his view, man is not primarily a “rational animal,” “thinking substance,” or “person”—as the traditional epithets would have it—but an animal, a creature of will. In a figure that strikingly anticipates the insights of psychoanalysis, Schopenhauer compares the human mind to a body of water. Conscious ideas are on the surface, but the depths consist of “the indistinct, the feelings, the after-sensation of perceptions and intuitions and what is experienced in general, mingled with the disposition of our own will that is the kernel of our inner nature.” Reason, the intellect, far from being a “pilot” that guides man’s will, is a mere servant of the will, a technician that discovers ways to expedite the will’s directives. “For consciousness,” Schopenhauer insisted,

is conditioned by the intellect, and the intellect is a mere accident of our being, for it is a function of the brain. The brain, together with the nerves and spinal cord attached to it, is a mere fruit, a product, in fact a parasite, of the rest of the organism, in so far as it is not directly geared to the organism’s inner working, but serves the purpose of self-preservation by regulating its relations with the external world.

Schopenhauer thus inverts the traditional, Platonic-Christian image of man, inaugurating an intellectual revolution that looks forward to Darwin (The Origin of Species was published in 1859) and modern evolutionary theory. As he wrote in the second volume of The World as Will and Representation,
in the knowing consciousness. Accordingly, they have conceived and explained the I, or in the case of many of them its transcendent hypostasis called soul, as primarily and essentially knowing, in fact thinking, and only in consequence of this, secondarily and derivatively, as willing. ... My philosophy . . . puts man’s real inner nature not in consciousness but in the will.

Now we should not think primarily of “free will” here. In Schopenhauer’s view, man’s willing speaks first of all with the immediacy of feelings, moods, desires—especially sexual desire—not in deliberate reasoning or conscious motives. And, as Magee rightly stresses, Schopenhauer regards man’s willing as merely one expression of the unfathomable procreant urge that animates all nature. If his reader were to reflect on the inexplicable urgings of his own will, writes Schopenhauer, he would recognize that

the force that shoots and vegetates in the plant, indeed the force by which the crystal is formed, the force that turns the magnet to the North Pole,... and finally even gravitation, which acts so powerfully in all matter, pulling the stone to earth and the earth to the sun; all these he will recognize as different only in the phenomenon, but the same according to their inner nature. He will recognize them all as that which is immediately known to him so intimately and better than everything else, and where it appears most distinctly is called will.

Hence Schopenhauer describes the will as “the thing-in-itself,” the “inner content” or “essence” of the world. An endless and ultimately purposeless striving, the will shows itself as much in the pull of gravity or the germination and growth of plants as in man. In most of the will’s manifestations, then, the question of “intentions” does not arise.

But Magee misses Schopenhauer’s point when he suggests that the term “force” or “energy” would have been preferable to the term “will.” Schopenhauer insists on calling the fundamental animating principle of the world “will” precisely because our understanding of the dynamic reality of nature is rooted in the immediate, intuitive grasp we have of our own dynamic reality as striving, wanting, lacking creatures, as creatures of will. Reading ourselves into nature, we extend the name of the reality we know best to the reality of the external world. “I therefore name the genus after its most important species,” Schopenhauer explains, “the direct knowledge of which lies nearest to us, and leads to the indirect knowledge of all the others.”

According to Schopenhauer, it is the body that, through mood, feeling, and perception, individuates man and roots his experience in the dimension of the will. We experience our body not only as “representation,” as one object among others, but also as the locus of our needs and desires, as the theater of the will. And it is just this bodily relation to the will that accounts for the weight or significance that we attach to our experience. For if we were purely knowing creatures—“winged cherub[s] without a body,” as Schopenhauer put it—then we would view the world completely disinterestedly, as a series of representations that have no real claim on us. Nothing would move or attract or frighten us. But as bodily, willing creatures, the world continually impinges on us. And since we never get to the bottom of the will, we never get to the
bottom of experience. Reality, including our own reality, remains in this sense an inexhaustible mystery, ever capable of surprising us. “We often do not know what we desire or fear,” Schopenhauer observes in another passage that reminds us of Freud:

> For years we can have a desire without admitting it to ourselves or even letting it come to clear consciousness, because the intellect is not to know anything about it, since the good opinion we have of ourselves would inevitably suffer thereby. But if the wish is fulfilled, we get to know from our joy, not without a feeling of shame, that this is what we desired.…

At the center of Schopenhauer’s philosophy is the contention that man’s bondage to the will is just that, a bondage. “Willing,” he writes, “springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering.” And because man is essentially will, he is essentially needy, essentially lacking. Every apparent satisfaction only gives way to boredom or fresh desire. “No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines,” Schopenhauer muses,

> it is always like the alms thrown to the beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow. Therefore, 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 the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace.

But the foundation of Schopenhauer’s gloomy diagnosis of the human condition does not lie in his doctrine of the will alone. Rather, it lies in the combination of that doctrine with his insistence that the only true satisfaction is a satisfaction that “lasts and no longer declines,” a satisfaction beyond the vagaries of time. Together, they are the ultimate source of his pessimism and his view of human life as tragic. For while Schopenhauer rejects the traditional view that locates man’s essential nature in reason, he continues to embrace the traditional Platonic-Christian identification of happiness with completeness, with a final release from all striving.

> What Schopenhauer proposes is less an emancipation of life than an emancipation *from* life.

In what is perhaps his most accomplished expository chapter, “The Flower of Existence,” Magee shows that Schopenhauer’s high estimation of art and aesthetic experience follows directly from his view of man as a prisoner tormented by a relentless, insatiable will. In Schopenhauer’s view, aesthetic experience offers not a *satisfaction* of willing, but a momentary release from the will’s demands. Providing an oasis from time in time, aesthetic experience, he writes, “raises us out of the endless stream of willing, and snatches knowledge from the thralldom of the will … for the moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will. We celebrate the Sabbath of the
penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.” Schopenhauer thus follows Kant in his understanding of aesthetic experience as essentially will-less, disinterested experience. Momentarily suspending the claims of desire or interest, aesthetic experience pleases man by intimating a completeness denied to him as a being-in-time. Disinterested, we are exempt from the imperatives of desire and the will; we are, for the moment, free.

But the episodic nature of aesthetic experience renders it incapable of providing any lasting solution to the problem of the will. For Schopenhauer—and it is here that he is close to the teaching of Buddhism—genuine salvation lies only in the definitive renouncing of the will and the emancipation from the will’s imperatives. Just how this is to be accomplished remains somewhat obscure. Schopenhauer claims that the renunciation of the will “does not proceed directly from the will, but from a changed form of knowledge.” Yet such emancipatory insight does not come about through any effort on the part of the individual; instead, it is said to be something akin to “what the Christian mystics call the effect of grace.”

What Schopenhauer proposes is less an emancipation of life than an emancipation from life. Yet the renunciation of the will he envisions has exerted such an irresistible fascination on so many artists, writers, and thinkers because it promises to relieve one of individuality, of the burden of having to be oneself. What aesthetic experience adumbrates the renunciation of the will fulfills: “we are, so to speak, rid of ourselves,” he writes, gesturing toward a wholeness that mere life, with its kaleidoscope of tasks, projects, and desires, can never achieve.

Of course, from life’s point of view, the renunciation of the will is tantamount to annihilation. “We freely acknowledge,” Schopenhauer writes, “that what remains after the complete abolition of the will is, for all who are still full of the will, assuredly nothing. But also conversely, to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is—nothing.” From this perspective, death appears as a form of redemption. Thus Mann’s Thomas Buddenbrook, soon to confront his own demise, can stumble onto a volume of Schopenhauer, sit reading “for four hours, with growing absorption,” and rhapsodize about death and the dissolution of individuality:

What was Death? The answer came, not in poor, large-sounding words: he felt it within him, he possessed it. Death was a joy, so great, so deep that it could be dreamt of only in moments of revelation like the present. It was the return from an unspeakably painful wandering, the correction of a grave mistake, the loosening of chains, the opening of doors .... Individuality? — All, all that one is, can, and has, seems poor, grey, inadequate, wearisome;....

Whatever one thinks of Schopenhauer’s prescriptions for redemption, they make it difficult to accept Magee’s claim that his pessimism is “logically independent” of his philosophy. “Non-pessimism,” he tells us, “is equally compatible with his philosophy. The traditional identification of him as a pessimist is largely irrelevant to a serious consideration of him as a philosopher.” In
fact, Magee here betrays a radical misunderstanding of Schopenhauer’s philosophy. For according to Schopenhauer, man is essentially will; and since he craves a satisfaction beyond the unappeasable urgings of the will, man must deny his essence in order to achieve happiness. “Existence is certainly to be regarded as an error or mistake,” he tells us, “to return from which is salvation.” This is the unavoidable, deeply pessimistic, core of his teaching.

But though pessimism is inseparable from Schopenhauer’s philosophical Weltanschauung, it is possible to credit his description of man as a creature of will without therefore subscribing to pessimism or indulging in romantic Todesliebe. For one thing, as Magee astutely notes, there is a “disparity between the content of what Schopenhauer said ... and the way he said it. The content was so often negative—corrosive, sarcastic, derisive, pessimistic, sometimes almost despairing—yet the manner was always positive, indeed exhilarating.” Schopenhauer’s exhilarating—and often witty—manner is one reason that his pessimism has been so attractive and influential—so, one might almost say, optimistic. For it is the style of Schopenhauer’s pessimism that lets one understand how the young Nietzsche could endorse so pessimistic a thinker as one who exhibits “a cheerfulness that really cheers.” In this respect, Schopenhauer’s writing appeals to us perhaps more as art than as philosophy, affecting us, as Thomas Mann put it, “more through its passion than its wisdom.”

Further, as Magee himself observes in his criticism of Schopenhauer’s position, it is by no means clear that we should follow Schopenhauer in regarding the exercise of the will as something essentially negative. “We are indeed exhilarated by relief from pain or danger,” Magee writes, but in the enjoyment of great art, or love, or friendship, there is something altogether more outgoing than this. These things involve us in a relationship with something or someone outside ourselves, a gratified extension of ourselves which is self-enhancing, and thus life-enhancing.

At bottom, though, we may also want to challenge Schopenhauer’s identification of happiness with a “satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines.” This in effect was what the mature Nietzsche did. In criticizing Schopenhauer’s “romanticism”—what he referred to in Ecce Homo as “the cadaverous perfume of Schopenhauer”—Nietzsche did not take issue with his description of man as a creature of will. For Nietzsche, too, man is will incarnate, always striving, never satisfied. But, he regarded this as the challenge, not the tragedy, of human existence. The tragedy lay in man’s tendency to deny himself as will, in his attempt to extricate himself from the finitude of the human condition. Goethe, who managed to live the world-affirming philosophy that Nietzsche preached, summed it up in an admonitory couplet that he wrote for Schopenhauer when the young philosopher was leaving Weimar for Dresden in 1814:
“If you want to delight in life, then you must grant value to the world.” But by making happiness incompatible with man’s essence, Schopenhauer found himself deaf to Goethe’s wisdom. “The world and life can afford us no true satisfaction,” Schopenhauer insists, “and are therefore not worth our attachment to them.” Saturated with what Nietzsche called the “rancor against time,” Schopenhauer’s philosophy, however fascinating, can only poison life, disparaging its real but always transitory pleasures for the dream of a will-less, timeless satisfaction that human life will never know.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of The New Criterion and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest book is The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia (St. Augustine’s Press).

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