

On Arthur Schopenhauer and the Life of the Mind  
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Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a German philosopher best known for his book, *The World of Will and Representation*. Schopenhauer's thought focused on the individual person, and more particularly on his (and her, I'm avoiding cumbersome sentence constructions here) use of his will, his power of volition, to overcome what Schopenhauer saw as his fundamental, ontological, dissatisfaction with his state of being. Schopenhauer has influenced many better-known personages, among them, Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Albert Einstein, and Joseph Campbell. If you are interested in the history of ideas, you would do well to spend some time with Schopenhauer.

I've written a previous thought about Schopenhauer for this site, "On Schopenhauer," posted in August of 2008. This first one centered on his unchanging daily personal regimen. This one concerns his ideas. I do here what I did in several previous thoughts—including "On Foucault" and "On Misima"—offer commentaries on quotes from someone's writings. R.J. Hollingdale, the selector and translator of the book *Arthur Schopenhauer: Essays and Aphorisms* (Penguin, 1970) organizes Schopenhauer's later writings into sections on various topics, including ethics, law and politics, the suffering in the world, and aesthetics. Along with *The World of Will and Representation*, the Hollingdale book would be a good way to get into studying Schopenhauer. The section of the Hollingdale book I draw upon in this context is entitled "On Philosophy and the Intellect," pp.117-132.

What follows, then, is a series of Schopenhauer quotes taken from the "On Philosophy and the Intellect" section in the Hollingdale book—set in and in smaller-size type—followed by my comments. In some instances I change Schopenhauer's—or is it Hollingdale's? I have only read the translation--language to terms I feel more comfortable using. For instance, referring to people as "geniuses" and "ordinary," as Schopenhauer (Hollingdale?) does, gets in the way of how I prefer to think about things and points I want to make, so I use other labels that basically get at the same idea.

My frame of reference in what follows, as was Schopenhauer's, is on how each of us can make sense of important elements of our individual and collective lives, as well as decide what actions we personally can take with reference to these understandings and insights. I'm thinking of things like philosophy, political ideology, religion and spirituality, personal development and fulfillment and happiness, love and vocation, determining what is of quality and worth, parenting practices, and schooling. What holds all of this together is Schopenhauer's, and my, concern for how an individual can most effectively and responsibly use his mind with reference to what truly matters in life.

So to the Schopenhauer quotes and my comments:

For intellect in service of the will, that is to say, in practical use, there exist only individual things; for intellect engaged in art and science, that is to say for its own sake, there exist only universals, entire kinds, species, classes, ideas of things. The will aims directly only at individual things, which are its true objective, for only they possess empirical reality. Concepts, classes, kinds, on the other hand, can become its objective only very indirectly. That is why the ordinary man has no sense of general truths, and why the genius, on the contrary, overlooks and neglects what is individual: to the genius the enforced occupation with the individual as such which constitutes the stuff of practical life is a burdensome bore.

Here, Schopenhauer distinguishes an individual's private and public use of his mind, or intellect. The private use of the mind is to inform the will, telling it what is most worth accomplishing in order to achieve personal satisfaction. In contrast, the public use of the mind, the intellect, is to discern reality in a general or all-inclusive way, which is then shared with others for their edification and possible use.

The will, Schopenhauer notes, predisposes one to focus on concrete, empirical realities, that which can be discerned with the senses. In doing so, it overlooks, or misunderstands, general truths, explanations—concepts, generalizations, propositions, and theories. The public use of the mind does the reverse, obscures or misinterprets concrete realities. Schopenhauer sees this state of affairs as problematic: the ordinary man, as he calls him—I'll call him the willful man--gets mired in particulars (or, I might add,

something Schopenhauer fails to note, operates on the basis of generalities he's picked up from somewhere or another and fails to notice that they don't square with reality), and the genius—I'll call him the public man--has his head in the clouds, and thus both fail to comprehend the true nature and meaning of things. In both private and public intellectualization you have to attend concurrently to both abstract ideas and what is happening right in front of you and let each inform and complete the other.

The two main requirements for philosophizing are: firstly, to have the courage not to keep any questions back; and secondly, to attain a clear consciousness of anything that goes without saying so as to comprehend it as a problem. Finally, the mind must, if it is really to philosophize, also be truly disengaged: it must prosecute no particular goal or aim, and thus be free from the enticement of will, but devote itself indvidedly to the instruction which the perceptible world and its own consciousness imparts to it.

Questions direct investigation. If you don't ask the questions, you very likely won't get the answers.

To be a public man, public intellectual (or a true student, in contrast to a dutiful task completer, grade grubber, or teacher- and peer-pleaser), you need to be both intensely curious, even about things that seem a dead certainty, case closed, and highly skeptical.

And yes, it takes courage to question everything and keep everything problematic. Those in power at any point in time profit from people's adherence to the current answers to the how things work and ought to work, the accepted truths, which inevitably serve their interests, and do their best to make anyone who goes beyond merely reiterating and giving testimony to correct or proper thinking pay a heavy price for it. Raising the "wrong" questions and problematizing the current orthodoxies is a big no-no and subject to harsh sanctions—demonization, harassment, suppression, exclusion, and loss of or failure to obtain employment.

The public man (and the willful man too) must be disengaged in the sense that he is not in service to furthering any particular dogma, cause, or agenda. But he is very engaged indeed in the pursuit of truth, whatever it turns out to be, and announcing the results of that undertaking to the world (even if he has to remain anonymous in doing so in order to avoid retribution from the

people who want to ensure that they and their surrogates and lackeys do all the talking).

A true philosophy cannot be spun out of mere abstract concepts, but has to be founded on observation and experience, inner and outer. Philosophy must have its source in perceptual comprehension of the world; nor, however much the head needs to remain on top, ought it to be so cold-blooded a business that the whole man, heart and head, is not finally involved and affected through and through. Philosophy is not algebra.

Ideas need to be grounded in, justified by, empirical reality and rigorous personal introspection and reflection, not in off-the-top, easy-does-it, sounds-good banter that plays well at a particular time.

While the public and willful man must ultimately be guided by their rational, discerning minds, they bring all of themselves to their explorations of reality, including their memories and hopes and feelings and emotions. Everything in their beings direct and inform their investigations.

Skepticism is in philosophy what the Opposition is in Parliament; it is just as beneficial, and, indeed, necessary.

The public, and willful, man is not a company man, not a True Believer conformist, not a member of the congregation (religious or secular), not a foot soldier in someone's army. He thinks for himself and lives his way and shares his truth and lets the chips fall where they may.

A dictate to reason in the name we give to certain propositions which we hold true without investigation and which we think ourselves so firmly convinced we should be incapable of seriously testing them even if we wanted to, since we should then have to call them provisionally in doubt. We credit these propositions so completely because when we first began to speak and think we continually had them recited to us and they were thus implanted in us; so the habit of thinking them is as old as the habit of thinking as such and we can no longer separate the two.

What everybody knows as an absolute certainty (because they have heard it from day one in their lives from every source that has had their ear) is the very thing that most needs to be re-thought. That something is unimpeachably the case, no need to even think about it, should be a prompt to re-consider it and explore alternative explanations to it.

Metaphysics will never put forth its full powers as long as it is expected to accommodate itself to dogma. Free investigation of man's most important concerns, of his existence itself, has been hampered and made impossible by this paralysis, and in this way man's most sublime tendency [to comprehend the reality about himself and his world] has been put in chains.

The public and willful man is pressured to support the currently-in-place doctrine, and rewarded if he does so (inclusion, respect, acceptance, accolades, position and status, financial reward, safety and security). It's understandable if, knowingly or unknowingly, he caves in, sells out, under that circumstance and, in effect, licks the face of his trainers/rewarders/punishers, but his challenge as a knower, as a human being, is not to do that.

The discovery of truth is prevented most effectively by preconceived opinion, by prejudice, which as a pseudo a priori stands in the path of truth like a contrary wind driving a ship away from land, so that sail and rudder labor in vain.

The public and willful man needs to attain an anthropological perspective on his own culture and society, and sociological and psychological insight into his own thoughts and values and how he came by them and how they are maintained in him. He needs to stand outside of the world and himself and ask: What are these people—which includes me—like, what do they assume is true and right, and how did they, how did I, get that way, and what keeps it going? What's happening here, what is this circumstance, how did it get like this, who profits from it, who loses? What is going on with other people, with me, and why? All to say, he needs to see his world and himself with new, clearer, eyes, and the clearer the better.

Every general truth is related to specific truths as gold is to silver, inasmuch as it can be converted into a considerable

number of specific truths which follow in the same way as a gold coin can be converted into small change.

In the process of coming to either willful truth, call it that, or general truth, there needs to be the constant interplay between the abstract and the particular. How does this general truth, concept, conclusion, give meaning to this observed-with-the-senses phenomenon? How does this reality, this fact, serve the formulation of a general truth, or modify or refute one that already exists? Never just concrete reality, never just theory; always both at the same time.

Normal men, despite their individual diversity, all think along certain common lines, so that they are frequently in unanimous agreement over judgments which are, in fact, false. This goes so far that they have certain basic views which are held in all ages and continually reiterated, while the great minds of every age have, openly or secretly, opposed these views.

Be very suspicious of shared certainties, conventional wisdom. People, in every setting, think along common lines even as they don't realize it; human beings are herd creatures. Those who control people's minds (and thus their actions)—in schools, through the media, from the pulpit, from the dais—foster the notion among the conditioned that, really, there is no other valid way of thinking than the one that's been put into their heads, and that they came to their conclusions and predispositions on their own. The first challenge for the willful and public man is to understand that his mind has been managed along with everyone else's, and to take on the job of expelling the outcomes—perspective, thoughts, values, feelings, impulses—that have resulted from it. Freedom of mind takes conscious, concerted, and persistent effort; it has to be earned, achieved, over a long period of time, years and years.

If you want to earn the gratitude of men of your own age you must keep in step with it. But if you do that you will produce nothing great. If you have something great in view you must address yourself to posterity: only then, to be sure, you will probably remain unknown to your contemporaries; you will be like a man compelled to spend his life on a desert island

and there toiling to erect a memorial so that future seafarers shall know he once existed.

If you want to go over with people, stay within their frames of reference and tell them what they basically already believe; make them feel that they are on top of things and fine just as they are, that they don't need to change anything about themselves; move them a tick forward in the direction they are already going, and do it in an appealing and, at least superficially, impressive way. In return for that, you'll be thought of as great and granted the rewards that come with that label. But you won't be truly great, because greatness of mind is measured by its autonomy and fresh and accurate understandings rather than its ability to play to the crowd.

Pervasive and lasting self-satisfaction--in contrast to superficial and fleeting uptimes--comes from honestly, diligently, seeking the truth, about yourself, about the world, whether or not it's acknowledged and applauded by your contemporaries or by posterity. Posterity may pass right by your memorial, as Schopenhauer terms it, in the same way that current men do. But if you think for yourself with all you have in you, deep down you'll feel good about yourself and be at peace with yourself and how things turn out, however they turn out.

Talent works for money and fame; the motive which moves genius to productivity is, on the other hand, less easy to determine. It isn't money, for genius seldom gets any. It isn't fame: fame is too uncertain and, more closely considered, of too little worth. Nor is it strictly for its own pleasure, for the great exertion involved almost outweighs the pleasure. It is rather an instinct of a unique sort by virtue of which the individual possessed of genius is impelled to express what he has seen and felt in enduring works without being conscious of any further motivation. It takes place, by and large, with the same sort of necessity as a tree brings forth fruit, and demands of the world no more than a soil on which the individual can flourish. More closely considered, it is as if in such an individual the will to live, as the spirit of the human species, had become conscious of having, by a rare accident, attained for brief span of time to a greater clarity of intellect, and now endeavors to acquire at any rate the results, the products of this clear thought and vision for the whole

species, which is indeed also the intrinsic being of this individual, so that their light may continue to illumine the darkness and stupor of the ordinary human consciousness. It is from this that there arises that instinct that impels genius to labor in solitude to complete its work without regard for reward, applause, or sympathy, but neglectful rather even of its own well-being and thinking more of posterity than of the age it lives in, which can only lead it astray. To make its work, as a sacred trust and the true fruit of its existence, the property of mankind, laying it down for a posterity better able to appreciate it: this becomes for genius a goal more important than any other, a goal for which it wears the crown of thorns that shall one day blossom into a laurel-wreath. Its striving to safeguard its work is just as resolute as that of the insect to safeguard its eggs and provide for the brood it will never live to see: it deposits its eggs where it knows they will one day find life and nourishment, and dies contented.

I wonder if the urge from within yourself to honorably, with complete integrity, pursue the real truth about the world, which includes yourself, isn't like grace: you either have in your nature or you don't. You either experience a powerful, inner pressure to make sense of things and share what you've found out with others or you don't. It may be that if, for whatever reason, this urge happens to be there in you, if it's who you are, whether or not the realizations you come to as a consequence are of benefit to posterity, or even to people now, is not the primary motivation for doing what you do; although there may be some of that, or even a good measure of that. Most fundamentally, though, I suspect that you do it, I do it—I'll speak for myself here--because it is a Friday morning as I sit in front of this computer screen and I experience a pressure, it's physical, organic, I can literally feel it, to write down my reactions to what Schopenhauer wrote two centuries ago and I'm responding to that pressure; that's basically what's going on with me.

I hope people read what I've written in these pages and find something useful in it, but if they don't, that's OK too. More than anything, it's simply what I do on this Friday morning; it's the right thing for me to do on this Friday morning. Other people do whatever they do on this Friday morning; I do this. It relieves this pressure from within me to compile these quotes and think through these comments and write them down and make it available to other



people. It feels good now that I have come to the end of this thought and to have done my best to get things as straight and clear as I can. I feel grateful for having had the impulse and the opportunity and the capability to do this writing. Feeling good about myself and about my life before the lunch that's coming up is reward enough for me. I don't need laurel-wreaths from my contemporaries or posterity.