

Fellowship application.

Schopenhauer as Literary Master and Moralist of Compassion.

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Brief Summary.

Arguably, Arthur Schopenhauer ranks with Plato, Pascal, Nietzsche, and William James as one of the greatest philosophical stylists. The significance of compassion and of something akin to pan-vitalism in his work is relevant today. We are confronted with desperate refugees clinging to rafts and species harried into extinction. Anglo-American critics often assess Schopenhauer's philosophy as a set of propositions defensible only on logical grounds. This overlooks the evocative appeal of the author who grounded his thought in *Anschauung* (reflection or intuition). A study of his writing should consult experts in the many fields on which his system draws, ranging from the natural sciences to musicology. To pursue this objective, it is necessary to consult scholars and scientists during an extended period of research. The aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophical writing to be studied include (1) his style compared to that of his precursors and contemporaries; (2) his transition from the use of metaphor to convey "the world as representation" to the use of symbol to evoke "the world as Will"; (3) his selection of sources; (4) the formal impact of his synthesizing of philosophical and religious precursors who in his opinion achieved partial intuitions of his system; and (5) his relevance and limitations.

Narrative.

As a lifelong student of German intellectual history and as the editor-translator of the early modern authors Paracelsus, Valentin Weigel, and Jacob Böhme, I have been attracted during much of my career as a Germanist to the literary brilliance of Schopenhauer's writing. This attraction sometimes

provokes associations with pessimism and cultural conservatism. But why should this be the case? One does not have to be a Christian to appreciate Dante or a Communist to value Brecht. These comparisons are not without relevance. By studying the literary architecture of *The Inferno* in medieval context, one highlights its message of a sovereign rule of justice transcending the balance of wins and losses in this life. By studying Brecht's literary techniques, one appreciates his strategy of confronting accepted ideas and ideals with the selfish material interests that undergird their authority.

Every reader of *The World as Will and Representation* is familiar with its perspectival shifts back and forth between the phenomenal and the noumenal. These shifts plunge the reader ever deeper into the mystery of the world which coincides with the inner life of the human being. Important for the stylist is the shift from the use of *metaphor* to summarize the world as representation (the world as a hermetically closed off "castle" which one can only circle and view from the outside) to the use of the intuitively understood *symbol* for a nature which is in essence the very thing that it symbolizes. Thus, the violent clash of the elements in nature shares with the symbolically equivalent human passions the essence of the Will which lies at the root of either. Dante's *Inferno* likewise achieves its powerful effect by means of symbolic images that capture the essence of the evil passions they symbolize.

Another important literary structure involves his synthesis of sources. Since the truth of the Will is intuitively evident, previous philosophies and religious doctrines must have intuited this truth, albeit imperfectly. Accordingly, Schopenhauer cites the philosophies and beliefs which he regards as anticipating his system. Much has been made, both by him and his commentators, of his concordance with Eastern thought or mysticism. As interesting and worthy of consideration as these connections indeed are, there has never been any doubt that his engagement with Pietism and Christian mysticism predated the Eastern influence and coincided with his initial elaboration of his concept of the metaphysical Will. In an article in the *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* in 1992, I summarized and interpreted the

evidence for the influence of Jacob Böhme's mysticism of the Will on Schopenhauer. Elsewhere, I argued that Böhme's concept of the signatures of things (*signaturae rerum*) anticipated the philosopher's empathetic understanding of the phenomena of nature and human life. The intuitive character of Schopenhauer's thought links it to a German tradition of the self-asserting layperson who arrives at knowledge without logical deduction or academic dialectic. In a recent article in *Daphnis*, I placed Schopenhauer in this German anticlerical and antiacademic tradition. (The *Daphnis* article, "Valentin Weigel and German Anticlerical Tradition," and the 1992 *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* article are attached.)

In my publications, I have long been concerned with the relation of philosophical content to literary form. Most recently, I studied Marx's use of antithesis and analogy in his early *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843) as an expression of the influence of the Hegelian dialectic and its Young Hegelian corollary on the emergence of his notion of the proletariat as the revolutionary class par excellence. In the writings of the German mystics, literary-stylistic patterns adumbrate and intimate the figure of the hidden God. Schopenhauer himself was keenly aware that intellectual context dictates literary form in Kant's critical philosophy. The literary relationship of content to form applies also to philosophical writing.

What is needed is not some pessimistic, culturally conservative Schopenhauerian antipolitical tendency exemplified by Oswald Spengler or Michel Houellebecq. Schopenhauer can contribute to a broad theoretical grounding of human compassion and the preservation of the species and organisms of nature. We need him for the reconciliation of discordant or disassociated tendencies of thought and action, and for justifying self-limitation as their precondition or corollary. We need to recognize Schopenhauer as an important voice in a long tradition which encompasses Renaissance nature theory, German Protestant Spiritualistic dissent, Romantic nature lyricism, and the renunciation and pacifism of Tolstoy and Gandhi who in turn influenced the non-violent resistance of Martin Luther King.

However, we also need to recognize the limitations of compassion as a foundation for ethics: its focus on immediate experience and its resultant susceptibility to manipulation, arbitrariness, and subjectivity.

Perhaps it is worth adding a few words about the personal catalysts of my research goals. Four years ago, I was treated for cancer at the University of Chicago Medical Center, a hospital that serves both the wealthiest and most privileged patients and the poorer African-American patients who live in nearby South Chicago. I was struck by the unequal capacity of these groups for compassion: the poorer patients were conversant in every gesture of human solidarity, while often the wealthier white patients felt that cancer was something they did not “deserve” and sought to maintain their distance from other patients. During my recovery, I rekindled my youthful love of Russian literature and taught myself Russian in order to counteract the mental effects of chemotherapy. A year later, I began my retirement by traveling alone across the Russian Federation from Kaliningrad to Kamchatka. I was curious to understand whether the immense suffering of the Russian people had had an effect on their capacity for compassion. Though I came to no conclusion, I self-published my travel blog to share with friends. It is available online as documentation of my personal experience. (Andrew Weeks, *Night Train to Kaliningrad, Night Flight to Vladivostok. A Journal of Travel and Recovery*.) A self-published book is personal; but this non-scholarly artifact illustrates my engagement with Schopenhauer and the related phenomenon of compassion.

In the early months of the pandemic, I happened to see an older woman collapse on the street near my house. In reaction, I volunteered to visit and transport older, isolated, and indigent people to their medical appointments. I was as much motivated by cool intellectual curiosity about the response of distinct social and racial groups as by the desire to help others. My research has been impacted by these experiences. They have coincided with an eclipse of compassion in American political life and with the perversion of compassion through such conspiracy theories as the “Q” belief that innocent

children are being sacrificed by the rich and powerful (much as in the medieval libel of Jews murdering Christian children). If the conspiracy theorists in fact feel sympathy for those fictitious child victims, this would suggest that compassion may be an ambivalent foundation for ethics.

I would like to begin research and writing in Berlin after reexamining Schopenhauer's writings and surveying recent literature on Schopenhauer such as Sandra Shapshay's reevaluation of his ethics of compassion.* Her work is part of a recent trend of interest. The Free University has a tradition of the history of philosophy. I would want to consult Prof. Dina Emundts on the literature of German Idealism and Prof. Anne Eusterschulte on Renaissance philosophy, both relevant to Schopenhauer. I would contact the Lehrstuhl für Wissenschaftstheorie der Naturwissenschaften und Naturphilosophie at Humboldt University to seek out conversation partners with whom I could discuss Schopenhauer's understanding of the natural sciences; and I intend to discuss the nature and limitations of compassion with psychologists and social theorists. I expect those at the *Wissenschaftskolleg* to offer suggestions, criticism, and conversation.

Finally, Schopenhauer's style and concepts require context. The matter of compassion must be paired with the manifestations of suffering. How does suffering manifest itself to the populations of wealthy societies? Which factors intensify or limit compassion? To what extent does compassion encourage assistance and relief? Has suffering or compassion altered the character of cultures? Not only social theorists but artists, poets, and writers such as Jenny Erpenbeck (*Geben – Ging – Gegangen*) should be consulted for answers. Berlin, in its history and culture (Wim Wenders' film *Der Himmel über Berlin* or Inge Deutschkron's memoir *Ich trug den gelben Stern*), has been a theater and agent of immense suffering, as well as deep compassion. Berlin is a stimulating and resource-rich place for my research.

* Sandra Shapshay, *Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics: Hope, Compassion and Animal Welfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).