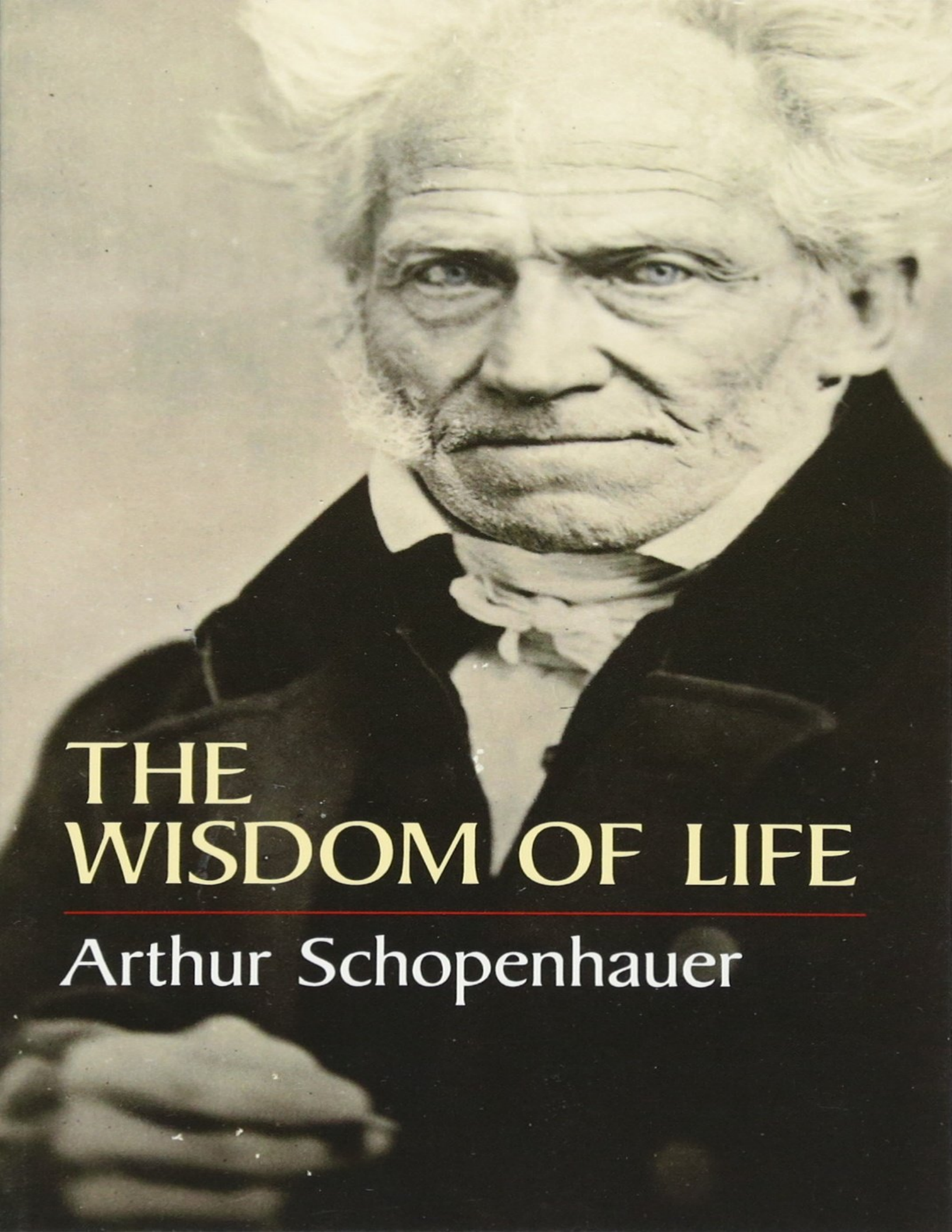

THE WISDOM OF LIFE

Arthur Schopenhauer

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ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

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Translator's Preface

SCHOPENHAUER is one of the few philosophers who can be generally understood without a commentary. All his theories claim to be drawn direct from the facts, to be suggested by observation, and to interpret the world as it is; and whatever view he takes, he is constant in his appeal to the experience of common life. This characteristic endows his style with a freshness and vigour which would be difficult to match in the philosophical writing of any country, and impossible in that of Germany. If it were asked whether there were any circumstances, apart from heredity, to which he owed his mental habit, the answer might be found in the abnormal character of his early education, his acquaintance with the world rather than with books, the extensive travels of his boyhood, his ardent pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and without regard to the emoluments and endowments of learning. He was trained in realities even more than in ideas; and hence he is original, forcible, clear, an enemy of all philosophic indefiniteness and obscurity; so that it may well be said of him, in the words of a writer in the "Revue Contemporaine," ce n'est pas un philosophe comme les autres, c'est un philosophe qui a vu le monde.

It is not my purpose, nor would it be possible within the limits of a prefatory note, to attempt an account of Schopenhauer's philosophy, to indicate its sources, or to suggest or rebut the objections which may be taken to it. M. Ribot, in his excellent little book,[1] has done all that is necessary in this direction. But the essays here presented need a word of explanation. It should be observed, and Schopenhauer himself is at pains to point out, that his system is like a citadel with a hundred gates: at whatever point you take

it up, wherever you make your entrance, you are on the road to the centre. In this respect his writings resemble a series of essays composed in support of a single thesis; a circumstance which led him to insist, more emphatically even than most philosophers, that for a proper understanding of his system it was necessary to read every line he had written. Perhaps it would be more correct to describe Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung as his main thesis, and his other treatises as merely corollary to it. The essays in these volumes form part of the corollary; they are taken from a collection published towards the close of Schopenhauer's life, and by him entitled Parerga una Paralipomena, as being in the nature of surplusage and illustrative of his main position. They are by far the most popular of his works, and since their first publication in 1851 they have done much to build up his fame. Written so as to be intelligible enough in themselves, the tendency of many of them is towards the fundamental idea on which his system is based. It may therefore be convenient to summarise that idea in a couple of sentences; more especially as Schopenhauer sometimes writes as if his advice had been followed and his readers were acquainted with the whole of his work.

All philosophy is in some sense the endeavour to find a unifying principle, to discover the most general conception underlying the whole field of nature and of knowledge. By one of those bold generalisations which occasionally mark a real advance in science Schopenhauer conceived this unifying principle, this underlying unity, to consist in something analogous to that will which self-consciousness reveals to us. Will is, according to him, the fundamental reality of the world, the thing-in-itself; and its objectivation is what is presented in phenomena. The struggle of the will to realise itself evolves the organism, which in its turn evolves intelligence as the servant of the will. And in practical life the antagonism between the will and the intellect arises from the fact that the former is the metaphysical substance, the latter something accidental and secondary. And further, will is desire, that is to say, need of something; hence need and pain are what is positive in

the world, and the only possible happiness is a negation, a renunciation of the will to live.

It is instructive to note, as M. Ribot points out, that in finding the origin of all things, not in intelligence, as some of his predecessors in philosophy had done, but in will, or the force of nature, from which all phenomena have developed, Schopenhauer was anticipating something of the scientific spirit of the nineteenth century. To this it may be added that in combating the method of Fichte and Hegel, who spun a system out of abstract ideas, and in discarding it for one based on observation and experience, Schopenhauer can be said to have brought down philosophy from heaven to earth.

In Schopenhauer's view the various forms of Religion are no less a product of human ingenuity than Art or Science. He holds, in effect, that all religions take their rise in the desire to explain the world; and that, in regard to truth and error, they differ, in the main, not by preaching monotheism, polytheism or pantheism, but in so far as they recognise pessimism or optimism as the true description of life. Hence any religion which looked upon the world as being radically evil appealed to him as containing an indestructible element of truth. I have endeavoured to present his view of two of the great religions of the world in the extract which comes in the third volume, and to which I have given the title of The Christian System. The tenor of it is to show that, however little he may have been in sympathy with the supernatural element, he owed much to the moral doctrines of Christianity and of Buddhism, between which he traced great resemblance.

Of Schopenhauer, as of many another writer, it may be said that he has been misunderstood and depreciated just in the degree in which he is thought to be new; and that, in treating of the Conduct of Life, he is, in reality, valuable only in so far as he brings old truths to remembrance. His name used to arouse, and in certain quarters still arouses, a vague sense of alarm; as though he had come to subvert all the rules of right thinking and

all the principles of good conduct, rather than to proclaim once again and give a new meaning to truths with which the world has long been familiar. Of his philosophy in its more technical aspects, as matter upon which enough, perhaps, has been written, no account need be taken here, except as it affects the form in which he embodies these truths or supplies the fresh light in which he sees them. For whatever claims to originality his metaphysical theory may possess, the chief interest to be found in his views of life is an affair of form rather than of substance; and he stands in a sphere of his own, not because he sets new problems or opens up undiscovered truths, but in the manner in which he approaches what has been already revealed.

He is not on that account less important; for the great mass of men at all times requires to have old truths imparted as if they were new—formulated, as it were, directly for them as individuals, and of special application to their own circumstances in life. A discussion of human happiness and the way to obtain it is never either unnecessary or uncalled for, if one looks to the extent to which the lives of most men fall short of even a poor ideal, or, again, to the difficulty of reaching any definite and secure conclusion. For to such a momentous inquiry as this, the vast majority of mankind gives nothing more than a nominal consideration, accepting the current belief whatever it may be, on authority, and taking as little thought of the grounds on which it rests as a man walking takes of the motion of the earth. But for those who are not indifferent—for those whose desire to fathom the mystery of existence gives them the right to be called thinking beings—it is just here, in regard to the conclusion to be reached, that a difficulty arises, a difficulty affecting the conduct of life: for while the great facts of existence are alike for all, they are variously appreciated, and conclusions differ, chiefly from innate diversity of temperament in those who draw them. It is innate temperament, acting on a view of the facts necessarily incomplete, that has inspired so many different teachers. The tendencies of a man's own mind—the Idols of the Cave before which he bows—interpret the facts in accordance with his own nature: he elaborates a system containing, perhaps, a grain of

truth, to which the whole of life is then made to conform; the facts purporting to be the foundation of the theory, and the theory in its turn giving its own colour to the facts.

Nor is this error, the manipulation of facts to suit a theory, avoided in the views of life which are presented by Schopenhauer. It is true that he aimed especially at freeing himself from the trammels of previous systems; but he was caught in those of his own. His natural desire was to resist the common appeal to anything extramundane, anything outside or beyond life, as the basis of either hope or fear. He tried to look at life as it is; but the metaphysical theory on which his whole philosophy rests made it necessary for him, as he thought, to regard it as an unmixed evil. He calls our present existence an infinitesimal moment between two eternities, the past and the future, a moment, like the life of Plato's "Dwellers in the Cave," filled with the pursuit of shadows; where everything is relative, phenomenal, illusory, and man is bound in the servitude of ignorance, struggle and need, in the endless round of effort and failure. If you confine yourself, says Schopenhauer, only to some of its small details, life may indeed appear to be a comedy, because of the one or two bright spots of happy circumstance to be found in it here and there; but when you reach a higher point of view and a broader outlook, these soon become invisible, and Life, seen from the distance which brings out the true proportion of all its parts, is revealed as a tragedy—a long record of struggle and pain, with the death of the hero as the final certainty. How then, he asks, can a man make the best of his brief hour under the hard conditions of his destiny? What is the true Wisdom of Life?

Schopenhauer has no pre-conceived divine plan to vindicate; no religious or moral enthusiasm to give a roseate hue to some far-off event, obliging us in the end to think that all things work together for good. Let poets and theologians give play to imagination! he, at any rate, will profess no knowledge of anything beyond our ken. If our existence does not entirely fail of its aim, it must, he says, be suffering; for this is what meets us everywhere

in the world, and it is absurd to look upon it as the result of chance. Still, in the face of all this suffering, and in spite of the fact that the uncertainty of life destroys its value as an end in itself, every man's natural desire is to preserve his existence; so that life is a blind, unreasoning force, hurrying us we know not whither. From his high metaphysical standpoint, Schopenhauer is ready to admit that there are many things in life which give a short satisfaction and blind us for the moment to the realities of existence,—pleasures as they may be called, in so far as they are a mode of relief; but that pleasure is not positive in its nature nor anything more than the negation of suffering, is proved by the fact that, if pleasures come in abundance, pain soon returns in the form of satiety; so that the sense of illusion is all that has been gained. Hence, the most a man can achieve in the way of welfare is a measure of relief from this suffering; and if people were prudent, it is at this they would aim, instead of trying to secure a happiness which always flies from them.

It is a trite saying that happiness is a delusion, a chimæra, the fata morgana of the heart; but here is a writer who will bring our whole conduct into line with it, as a matter of practice; making pain the positive groundwork of life, and a desire to escape it the spur of all effort. While most of those who treat of the conduct of life come at last to the conclusion, more or less vaguely expressed, that religion and morality form a positive source of true happiness, Schopenhauer does not professedly take this view; though it is quite true that the practical outcome of his remarks tends, as will be seen, to support it. His method is different: he does not direct the imagination to anything outside this present life as making it worth while to live at all; his object is to state the facts of existence as they immediately appear, and to draw conclusions as to what a wise man will do in the face of them.

In the practical outcome of Schopenhauer's ethics—the end and aim of those maxims of conduct which he recommends, there is nothing that is not

substantially akin to theories of life which, in different forms, the greater part of mankind is presumed to hold in reverence. It is the premises rather than the conclusion of his argument which interest us as something new. The whole world, he says, with all its phenomena of change, growth and development, is ultimately the manifestation of Will—Wille und Vorstellung—a blind force conscious of itself only when it reaches the stage of intellect. And life is a constant self-assertion of this will, a long desire which is never fulfilled. Disillusion inevitably follows upon attainment, because the will, the thing-in-itself—in philosophical language, the noumenon—always remains as the permanent element; and with this persistent exercise of its claim, it can never be satisfied. So life is essentially suffering; and the only remedy for it is the freedom of the intellect from the servitude imposed by its master, the will.

The happiness a man can attain, is thus, in Schopenhauer's view, negative only; but how is it to be acquired? Some temporary relief, he says, may be obtained through the medium of Art; for in the apprehension of Art we are raised out of our bondage, contemplating objects of thought as they are in themselves, apart from their relations to our own ephemeral existence, and free from any taint of the will. This contemplation of pure thought is destroyed when Art is degraded from its lofty sphere, and made an instrument in the bondage of the will. How few of those who feel that the pleasure of Art transcends all others could give such a striking explanation of their feeling!

But the highest ethical duty, and consequently the supreme endeavour after happiness, is to withdraw from the struggle of life, and so obtain release from the misery which that struggle imposes upon all, even upon those who are for the moment successful. For as will is the inmost kernel of everything, so it is identical under all its manifestations; and through the mirror of the world a man may arrive at the knowledge of himself. The recognition of the identity of our own nature with that of others is the beginning and

foundation of all true morality. For when a man clearly perceives this solidarity of the will, there is aroused in him a feeling of sympathy which is the main-spring of ethical conduct. This feeling of sympathy must, in any true moral system, prevent our obtaining success at the price of others' loss. Justice, in this theory, comes to be a noble, enlightened self-interest; it will forbid our doing wrong to our fellow-man, because, in injuring him, we are injuring ourselves—our own nature, which is identical with his. On the other hand, the recognition of this identity of the will must lead to commiseration —a feeling of sympathy with our fellow-sufferers—to acts of kindness and benevolence, to the manifestation of what Kant, in the Metaphysic of Ethics, calls the only absolute good, the good will. In Schopenhauer's phraseology, the human will, in other words, ἔρως, the love of life, is in itself the root of all evil, and goodness lies in renouncing it. Theoretically, his ethical doctrine is the extreme of socialism, in a large sense; a recognition of the inner identity and equal claims, of all men with ourselves; a recognition issuing in ἀγάπη, universal benevolence, and a stifling of particular desires.

It may come as a surprise to those who affect to hold Schopenhauer in abhorrence, without, perhaps, really knowing the nature of his views, that, in this theory of the essential evil of the human will—ἔρως, the common selfish idea of life—he is reflecting and indeed probably borrowing what he describes as the fundamental tenet of Christian theology, that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain,[2] standing in need of redemption. Though Schopenhauer was no friend to Christian theology in its ordinary tendencies, he was very much in sympathy with some of the doctrines which have been connected with it. In his opinion the foremost truth which Christianity proclaimed to the world lay in its recognition of pessimism, its view that the world was essentially corrupt, and that the devil was its prince or ruler.[3] It would be out of place here to inquire into the exact meaning of this statement, or to determine the precise form of compensation provided for the ills of life under any scheme of doctrine which passes for Christian;

and even if it were in place, the task would be an extremely difficult one; for probably no system of belief has ever undergone, at various periods, more radical changes than Christianity. But whatever prospect of happiness it may have held out, at an early date of its history, it soon came to teach that the necessary preparation for happiness, as a positive spiritual state, is renunciation, resignation, a looking away from external life to the inner life of the soul—a kingdom not of this world. So far, at least, as concerns its view of the world itself, and the main lesson and duty which life teaches, there is nothing in the theory of pessimism which does not accord with that religion which is looked up to as the guide of life over a great part of the civilised world.

What Schopenhauer does is to attempt a metaphysical explanation of the evil of life, without any reference to anything outside it. Philosophy, he urges, should be cosmology, not theology; an explanation of the world, not a scheme of divine knowledge; it should leave the gods alone—to use an ancient phrase—and claim to be left alone in return. Schopenhauer was not concerned, as the apostles and fathers of the Church were concerned, to formulate a scheme by which the ills of this life should be remedied in another—an appeal to the poor and oppressed, conveyed often in a material form, as, for instance, in the story of Dives and Lazarus. In his theory of life as the self-assertion of will, he endeavours to account for the sin, misery and iniquity of the world, and to point to the way of escape by the denial of the will to live.

Though Schopenhauer's views of life have this much in common with certain aspects of Christian doctrine, they are in decided antagonism with another theory which, though, comparatively speaking, the birth of yesterday, has already been dignified by the name of a religion, and has, no doubt, a certain number of followers. It is the theory which looks upon the life of mankind as a continual progress towards a state of perfection, and humanity in its nobler tendencies as itself worthy of worship. To those who

embrace this theory, it will seem that because Schopenhauer does not hesitate to declare the evil in the life of mankind to be far in excess of the good, and as long as the human will remains what it is, any radical change for the better to be impossible, he is therefore outside the pale of civilisation, an alien from the commonwealth of ordered knowledge and progress. But it has yet to be seen how the religion of humanity will fare, either as a theory of conduct or as a guide of life.

If there is any one doctrine more than another which has distinguished Christianity wherever it has been a living force among its adherents, it is the doctrine of renunciation; the same doctrine which, in a different shape and with other surroundings, forms the spirit of Buddhism. With those great religions of the world which mankind has hitherto professed to revere as the most ennobling of all influences, Schopenhauer's theories, not perhaps in their details, but in the principle which informs them, are, as we have seen, in close alliance. According to him, too, renunciation, in the same sense, is the truest wisdom of life, from the higher ethical standpoint. His heroes are the Christian ascetics of the Middle Age, and the followers of Buddha who turn away from the Sansara to the Nirvana. But our modern habits of thought are different. We look askance at the doctrines, and we have no great enthusiasm for the heroes. The system which is in vogue amongst us just now objects to the identification of nature with evil, and, in fact, abandons ethical dualism altogether. And if nature is not evil, where, it will be asked, is the necessity or the benefit of renunciation—a question which may even come to be generally raised, in a not very distant future, on behalf of some new conception of Christianity. And from another point of view, let it be most fully and frankly admitted that renunciation is incompatible with ordinary practice, with the rules of life as we are compelled to formulate them; and that, to the vast majority, the doctrine seems little but a mockery, a hopelessly unworkable plan, inapplicable to the conditions under which men have to exist.

In spite of the fact that he is theoretically in sympathy with truths which lie at the foundation of certain widely revered systems, the world has not yet accepted Schopenhauer for what he proclaimed himself to be, a great teacher; and probably for the reason that hope is not an element in his wisdom of life, and that he attenuates love into something that is not a real, living force—a shadowy recognition of the identity of the will. For men are disinclined to welcome a theory which neither flatters their present position nor holds out any prospect of better things to come. Optimism—the belief that in the end everything will be for the best—is the natural creed of mankind; and a writer who of set purpose seeks to undermine it by an appeal to facts is regarded as one who tries to rob humanity of its rights. How seldom an appeal to the facts within our reach is really made! Whether the evil of life actually outweighs the good; or, if we should look for better things, what is the possibility or the nature of a Future Life, either for ourselves as individuals, or as part of some great whole, or, again, as contributing to a coming state of perfection?—such inquiries claim an amount of attention which the mass of men everywhere is unwilling to give. But, in any case, whether it is a vague assent to current beliefs, or a blind reliance on a baseless certainty, or an impartial attempt to put away what is false,—hope remains as the deepest foundation of every faith in a happy future.

But it should be observed that this looking to the future as a complement for the present is dictated mainly by the desire to remedy existing ills; and that the great hold which religion has on mankind, as an incentive to present happiness, is the promise it makes of coming perfection. Hope for the future is a tacit admission of evil in the present; for if a man is completely happy in this life, and looks upon happiness as the prevailing order, he will not think over much of another. So a discussion of the nature of happiness is not thought complete if it takes account only of our present life, and unless it connects what we are now and what we do here with what we may be hereafter. Schopenhauer's theory does not profess to do this: it promises no positive good to the individual, at most, only relief; he breaks the idol of the

world, and sets up nothing in its place; and like many another iconoclast, he has long been condemned by those whose temples he has desecrated. If there are optimistic theories of life, it is not life itself, he would argue, which gives colour to them; it is rather the reflection of some great final cause which humanity has created as the last hope of its redemption:—

> Heaven but the vision of fulfilled desire,
> And hell the shadow from a soul on fire,
> Cast on the darkness into which ourselves,
> So late emerged from, shall so soon expire.[4]

Still, hope, it may be said, is not knowledge, nor a real answer to any question; at most, a makeshift, a moral support for intellectual weakness. The truth is that, as theories, both optimism and pessimism are failures, because they are extreme views where only a very partial judgment is possible. And in view of the great uncertainty of all answers, most of those who do not accept a stereotyped system leave the question alone, as being either of little interest, or of no bearing on the welfare of their lives, which are commonly satisfied with low aims; tacitly ridiculing those who demand an answer as the most pressing affair of existence. But the fact that the final problems of the world are still open, makes in favour of an honest attempt to think them out, in spite of all previous failure or still existing difficulty; and however old these problems may be, the endeavour to solve them is one which it is always worth while to encourage afresh. For the individual advantages which attend an effort to find the true path accrue quite apart from any success in reaching the goal; and even though the height we strive to climb be inaccessible, we can still see and understand more than those who never leave the plain. The sphere, it is true, is enormous. It is the world

and life and destiny as a whole; and our mental vision is so ill-adapted to a range of this extent that to aim at forming a complete scheme is to attempt the impossible. It must be recognised that the data are insufficient for large views, and that we ought not to go beyond the facts we have, the facts of ordinary life, interpreted by the common experience of every day. These form our only material. The views we take must of necessity be fragmentary; they can be little but aperçus, rough guesses at the undiscovered, or else of the same nature as all our possessions in the way of knowledge—small tracts of solid land reclaimed from the mysterious ocean of the unknown.

But if we do not admit Schopenhauer to be a great teacher, because he is out of sympathy with the highest aspirations of mankind, and too ready to dogmatise from partial views, he is a very suggestive writer, and eminently readable. His style is brilliant, animated, forcible, pungent; although it is also discursive, irresponsible, and with a tendency to superficial generalisation. He brings in the most unexpected topics without any very sure sense of their relative place; everything, in fact, seems to be fair game, when he has taken up his pen. His irony is noteworthy; for it extends beyond mere isolated sentences, and sometimes applies to whole passages, which must be read cum grano salis. And if he has grave faults as well as excellences of literary treatment, he is at least always witty and amusing, and that, too, in dealing with subjects—as here, for instance, with the Conduct of Life—on which many others have been at once severe and dull. It is easy to complain that though he is witty and amusing, he is often at the same time bitter and ill-natured. This is in some measure the unpleasant side of his uncompromising devotion to truth, his resolute eagerness to dispel illusion at any cost—those defects of his qualities which were intensified by a solitary and, until his last years, unappreciated life. He was naturally more disposed to coerce than to flatter the world into accepting his views; he was above all things un esprit fort, and at times brutal in the use of his strength. If it should be urged that, however great his literary qualities, he is not worth reading because he takes a narrow view of life and is blind to some of its

greatest blessings, it will be well to remember the profound truth of that line which a friend inscribed on his earliest biography: Si non errasset fecerat ille minus,[5] a truth which is seldom without application, whatever be the form of human effort. Schopenhauer cannot be neglected because he takes an unpleasant view of existence, for it is a view which must present itself, at some time, to every thoughtful person. To be outraged by Schopenhauer means to be ignorant of many of the facts of life.

In the volumes containing his Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit, Schopenhauer abandons the high metaphysical standpoint, and discusses, with the same zest and appreciation as in fact marked his enjoyment of them, some of the pleasures which a wise man will seek to obtain,—health, moderate possessions, intellectual riches. And when, as in this little work, he comes to speak of the wisdom of life as the practical art of living, the pessimist view of human destiny is obtruded as little as possible. His remarks profess to be the result of a compromise—an attempt to judge life by the common standards. He is content to call these witty and instructive pages a series of aphorisms; thereby indicating that he makes no claim to expound a complete theory of conduct. It will doubtless occur to any intelligent reader that his observations are but fragmentary thoughts on various phases of life; and, in reality, mere *aphorisms*—in the old, Greek sense of the word—pithy distinctions, definitions of facts, a marking-off, as it were, of the true from the false in some of our ordinary notions of life and prosperity. Here there is little that is not in complete harmony with precepts to which the world has long been accustomed; and in this respect, also, Schopenhauer offers a suggestive comparison rather than a contrast with most writers on happiness.

The philosopher in his study is conscious that the world is never likely to embrace his higher metaphysical or ethical standpoint, and annihilate the will to live; nor did Schopenhauer himself do so except so far as, in common

with most serious students of life, he avoided the ordinary aims of mankind. The theory which recommended universal benevolence as the highest ethical duty, came, in personal practice, to mean a formal standing-aloof—the ne plus ultra of individualism. Wisdom, as the ordinary art of living, he took to be a compromise. We are here not by any choice of our own; and while we strive to make the best of it, we must not let ourselves be deceived. If we want to be happy, he says, it will not do to cherish illusions. Schopenhauer would have found nothing admirable in the conclusion at which the late M. Edmond Scherer, for instance, arrived. L'art de vivre, he wrote in his preface to Amiel's Journal, c'est de se faire une raison, de souscrire au compromis, de se prêter aux fictions. Schopenhauer conceives his mission to be, rather, to dispel illusion, to tear the mask from life;—a violent operation, not always productive of good. Some illusion, he urges, may profitably be dispelled by recognising that no amount of external aid will make up for inward deficiency; and that if a man has not got the elements of happiness in himself, all the pride, pleasure, beauty and interest of the world will not give it to him. Success in life, as gauged by the ordinary material standard, means to place faith wholly in externals as the source of happiness, to assert and emphasize the common will to live, in a word, to be vulgar. He protests against this search for happiness—something subjective—in the world of our surroundings, or anywhere but in a man's own self; a protest the sincerity of which might well be imitated by some professed advocates of spiritual claims.

It would be interesting to place his utterances on this point side by side with those of a distinguished interpreter of nature in this country, who has recently attracted thousands of readers by describing The Pleasures of Life; in other words, the blessings which the world holds out to all who can enjoy them—health, books, friends, travel, education, art. On the common ground of their regard for these pleasures there is no disagreement between the optimist and the pessimist. But a characteristic difference of view may be found in the application of a rule of life which Schopenhauer seems never to