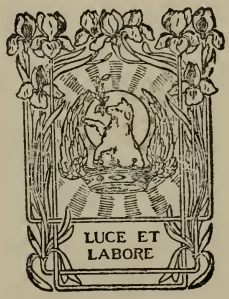
THE PHILOSOPHY OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

BY H. L. MENCKEN

I shall be told, I suppose, that my philosophy is comfortless — because I speak the truth; and people prefer to believe that everything the Lord made is good. If you are one such, go to the priests, and leave philosophers in peace!

Arthur Schopenhauer.

Third Edition



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salon and gave him of her good counsel and her excellent coffee.

Meanwhile there had occurred something that was destined to direct and color the whole stream of his life. This was his discovery of Arthur Schopenhauer. In the 60's, it would appear, the great pessimist was still scarcely more than a name in the German universities, which, for all their later heterodoxy, clung long to their ancient first causes. Nietzsche knew nothing of him, and in the seminaries of Leipsic not a soul maintained him. Of Kant and of Hegel there was talk unlimited, and of Lotze and Fichte there were riotous disputations that roared and raged about the class-room of Fechner, then the university professor of philosophy. But of Schopenhauer nothing was heard, and so, when Nietzsche, rambling through an old Leipsic bookshop, happened upon a second-hand copy of "*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*,"[1] a new world came floating into his view. This was in 1865.

"I took the book to my lodgings," he said years afterward, "and flung myself on a sofa and read and read and read. It seemed as if Schopenhauer were addressing me personally. I felt his enthusiasm and seemed to see him before me. Every line cried aloud for renunciation, denial, resignation!"

So much for the first flush of the ecstasy of discovery. That Nietzsche entirely agreed with everything in the book, even in his wildest transports of admiration, is rather doubtful. He was but 21 — the age of great passions and

[1] Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) published this book, his *magnum opus*, at Leipsic in 1819. It has been translated into English as "The World as Will and Idea" and has appeared in many editions.

great romance — and he was athirst for some writing that would solve the problems left unanswered by the accepted sages, but it is probable that when he shouted the Schopenhauer manifesto loudest he read into the text wild variations of his own. The premises of the pessimist gave credit and order to thoughts that had been rising up in his own mind; but the conclusions, if he subscribed to them at all, led him far afield. No doubt he was like one of those fantastic messiahs of new cults who search the scriptures for testimony — and find it. Late in life, when he was accused of inconsistency in first deifying Schopenhauer and then damning him, he made this defense, and despite the derisive sneers of his enemies, it seemed a fairly good one.

Schopenhauer's argument, to put it briefly, was that the will to exist — the primary instinct of life — was the eternal first cause of all human actions, motives and ideas. The old philosophers of Christendom had regarded intelligence as the superior of instinct. Some of them thought that an intelligent god ruled the universe and that nothing happened without his knowledge and desire. Others believed that man was a free agent, that whatever he did was the result of his own thought and choice, and that it was right, in consequence, to condemn him to hell for his sins and to exalt him to heaven for any goodness he might chance to show. Schopenhauer turned all this completely about. Intelligence, he said, was not the source of will, but its effect. When life first appeared upon earth, it had but one aim and object: that of perpetuating itself. This instinct, he said, was still at the bottom of every function of all living beings. Intelligence grew out of the

fact that mankind, in the course of ages, began to notice that certain manifestations of the will to live were followed by certain invariable results. This capacity of perceiving was followed by a capacity for remembering, which in turn produced a capacity for anticipating. An intelligent man, said Schopenhauer, was merely one who remembered so many facts (the result either of personal experience or of the transmitted experience of others) that he could separate them into groups and observe their relationship, one to the other, and hazard a close guess as to their future effects; *i. e.* could reason about them.

Going further, Schopenhauer pointed out that this will to exist, this instinct to preserve and protect life, this old Adam, was to blame for the unpleasant things of life as well as for the good things — that it produced avarice, hatred and murder just as well as industry, resourcefulness and courage — that it led men to seek means of killing one another as well as means of tilling the earth and procuring food and raiment. He showed, yet further, that its bad effects were a great deal more numerous than its good effects and so accounted for the fact — which many men before him had observed — that life, at best, held more of sorrow than of joy.[1]

The will-to-live, argued Schopenhauer, was responsible for all this. Pain, he believed, would always outweigh pleasure in this sad old world until men ceased to want to live — until no one desired food or drink or house or wife

[1] Schopenhauer (*"Nächträge zur Lehre vom Leiden der Welt"*) puts the argument thus: "Pleasure is never as pleasant as we expect it to be and pain is always more painful. The pain in the world always outweighs the pleasure. If you don't believe it, compare the respective feelings of two animals, one of which is eating the other."

or money. To put it more briefly, he held that true happiness would be impossible until mankind had killed will with will, which is to say, until the will-to-live was willed out of existence. Therefore the happiest man was the one who had come nearest this end — the man who had killed all the more obvious human desires, hopes and aspirations — the solitary ascetic — the monk in his cell — the soaring, starving poet — the cloud-enshrouded philosopher.

Nietzsche very soon diverged from this conclusion. He believed, with Schopenhauer, that human life, at best, was often an infliction and a torture, but in his very first book he showed that he admired, not the ascetic who tried to escape from the wear and tear of life altogether, but the proud, stiff-necked hero who held his balance in the face of both seductive pleasure and staggering pain; who cultivated within himself a sublime indifference, so that happiness and misery, to him, became mere words, and no catastrophe, human or superhuman, could affright or daunt him.[1]

It is obvious that there is a considerable difference between these ideas, for all their similarity in origin and for all Nietzsche's youthful worship of Schopenhauer. Nietzsche, in fact, was so enamoured by the honesty and originality of what may be called the data of Schopenhauer's philosophy that he took the philosophy itself rather on trust and did not begin to inquire into it closely or to

[1] Later on, in "*Menschliches allzu Menschliches*," II, Nietzsche argued that the ascetic was either a coward, who feared the temptations of pleasure and the agonies of pain, or an exhausted worlding who had become satiated with life.

compare it carefully with his own ideas until after he had committed himself in a most embarrassing fashion. The same phenomena is no curiosity in religion, science or politics.

Before a realization of these differences quite dawned upon Nietzsche he was busied with other affairs. In 1869, when he was barely 25, he was appointed, upon Ritschl's recommendation, to the chair of classical philology at the University of Basel, in Switzerland, an ancient stronghold of Lutheran theology. He had no degree, but the University of Leipsic promptly made him a doctor of philosophy, without thesis or examination, and on April 13th he left the old home at Naumburg to assume his duties. Thus passed that pious household. The grandmother had died long before — in 1856 — and one of the maiden aunts had preceded her to the grave by a year. The other, long ill, had followed in 1867. But Nietzsche's mother lived until 1897, though gradually estranged from him by his opinions, and his sister, as we know, survived him.

Nietzsche was officially professor of philology, but he also became teacher of Greek in the pedagogium attached to the University. He worked like a Trojan and mixed Schopenhauer and Hesiod in his class-room discourses upon the origin of Greek verbs and other such dull subjects. But it is not recorded that he made a very profound impression, except upon a relatively small circle. His learning was abyssmal, but he was far too impatient and unsympathetic to be a good teacher. His classes, in fact, were never large, except in the pedagogium. This, however, may have been partly due to the fact that in 1869, as in later years, there were comparatively few

exceptional individuals. To put it more simply, he believed that one man, Hannibal, was of vastly more importance to the world than all the other Carthaginians of his time taken together. Herein we have a reappearance of Dionysus and a foreshadowing of the *herrenmoral* and superman of later days.

Nietzsche's next essay was devoted to Schopenhauer and was printed in 1874. He called it "*Schopenhauer als Erzieher*" ("Schopenhauer as a Teacher") and in it he laid his burnt offering upon the altar of the great pessimist, who was destined to remain his hero, if no longer his god, until the end. Nietzsche was already beginning to read rebellious ideas of his own into "The World as Will and Idea," but in two things — the theory of will and the impulse toward truth — he and Schopenhauer were ever as one. He preached a holy war upon all those influences which had made the apostle of pessimism, in his life-time, an unheard outcast. He raged against the narrowness of university schools of philosophy and denounced all governmental interference in speculation — whether it were expressed crudely, by inquisitorial laws and the *Index*, or softly and insidiously, by the bribery of comfortable berths and public honors.

"Experience teaches us," he said, "that nothing stands so much in the way of developing great philosophers as the custom of supporting bad ones in state universities. . . . It is the popular theory that the posts given to the latter make them 'free' to do original work; as a matter of fact, the effect is quite the contrary. . . . No state would ever dare to patronize such men as Plato and Schopenhauer. And why? Because the state is always

afraid of them. . . . It seems to me that there is need for a higher tribunal outside the universities to critically examine the doctrines they teach. As soon as philosophers are willing to resign their salaries, they will constitute such a tribunal. Without pay and without honors, it will be able to free itself from the prejudices of the age. Like Schopenhauer, it will be the judge of the so-called culture around it." [1]

Years later Nietzsche denied that, in this essay, he committed himself irretrievably to the whole philosophy of Schopenhauer and a fair reading bears him out. He was not defending Schopenhauer's doctrine of renunciation, but merely asking that he be given a hearing. He was pleading the case of foes as well as of friends: all he asked was that the forum be opened to every man who had something new to say.

Nietzsche regarded Schopenhauer as a king among philosophers because he shook himself entirely free of the dominant thought of his time. In an age marked, beyond everything, by humanity's rising reliance upon human reason, he sought to show that reason was a puny offshoot of an irresistible natural law — the law of self-preservation. Nietzsche admired the man's courage and agreed with him in his insistence that this law was at the bottom of all sentient activity, but he was never a subscriber to Schopenhauer's surrender and despair. From the very start, indeed, he was a prophet of defiance, and herein his divergence from Schopenhauer was infinite. As his knowledge broadened and his scope widened, he expanded and developed his philosophy, and often he found it

[1] "*Schopenhauer als Erzieher*," § 8.

I

DIONYSUS VERSUS APOLLO

In one of the preceding chapters Nietzsche's theory of Greek tragedy was given in outline and its dependence upon the data of Schopenhauer's philosophy was indicated. It is now in order to examine this theory a bit more closely and to trace cut its origin and development with greater dwelling upon detail. In itself it is of interest only as a step forward in the art of literary criticism, but in its influence upon Nietzsche's ultimate inquiries it has colored, to a measurable extent, the whole stream of modern thought.

Schopenhauer laid down, as his cardinal principle, it will be recalled, the idea that, in all the complex whirlpool of phenomena we call human life, the mere will to survive is at the bottom of everything, and that intelligence, despite its seeming kingship in civilization, is nothing more, after all, than a secondary manifestation of this primary will. In certain purely artificial situations, it may seem to us that reason stands alone (as when, for example, we essay to solve an abstract problem in mathematics), but in everything growing out of our relations as human beings, one to the other, the old instinct of race-and-self-preservation is plainly discernible. All of our

acts, when they are not based obviously and directly upon our yearning to eat and take our ease and beget our kind, are founded upon our desire to appear superior, in some way or other, to our fellow men about us, and this desire for superiority, reduced to its lowest terms, is merely a desire to face the struggle for existence — to eat and beget — under more favorable conditions than those the world accords the average man. "Happiness is the feeling that power increases — that resistance is being overcome."[1]

Nietzsche went to Basel firmly convinced that these fundamental ideas of Schopenhauer were profoundly true, though he soon essayed to make an amendment to them. This amendment consisted in changing Schopenhauer's "will to live" into "will to power." That which does not live, he argued, cannot exercise a will to live, and when a thing is already in existence, how can it strive after existence? Nietzsche voiced the argument many times, but its vacuity is apparent upon brief inspection. He started out, in fact, with an incredibly clumsy misinterpretation of Schopenhauer's phrase. The philosopher of pessimism, when he said "will to live" obviously meant, not will to begin living, but will to continue living. Now, this will to continue living, if we are to accept words at their usual meaning, is plainly identical, in every respect, with Nietzsche's will to power. Therefore, Nietzsche's amendment was nothing more than the coinage of a new phrase to express an old idea. The unity of the two philosophers and the identity of the two phrases are proved a thousand times by Nietzsche's own discourses. Like

[1] "*Der Antichrist*," § 2.

Schopenhauer he believed that all human ideas were the direct products of the unconscious and unceasing effort of all living creatures to remain alive. Like Schopenhauer he believed that abstract ideas, in man, arose out of concrete ideas, and that the latter arose out of experience, which, in turn, was nothing more or less than an ordered remembrance of the results following an endless series of endeavors to meet the conditions of existence and so survive. Like Schopenhauer, he believed that the criminal laws, the poetry, the cookery and the religion of a race were alike expressions of this unconscious groping for the line of least resistance.

As a philologist, Nietzsche's interest, very naturally, was fixed upon the literature of Greece and Rome, and so it was but natural that his first tests of Schopenhauer's doctrines should be made in that field. Some time before this, he had asked himself (as many another man had asked before him) why it was that the ancient Greeks, who were an efficient and vigorous people, living in a green and sunny land, should so delight in gloomy tragedies. One would fancy that a Greek, when he set out to spend a pleasant afternoon, would seek entertainment that was frivolous and gay. But instead, he often preferred to see one of the plays of Thespis, Æschylus, Phrynichus or Pratinus, in which the heroes fought hopeless battles with fate and died miserably, in wretchedness and despair. Nietzsche concluded that the Greeks had this liking for tragedy because it seemed to them to set forth, truthfully and understandably, the conditions of life as they found it: that it appeared to them as a reasonable and accurate picture of human existence. The gods or-

IV

THE SUPERMAN

No doubt the reader who has followed the argument in the preceding chapters will have happened, before now, upon the thought that Nietzsche's chain of reasoning, so far, still has a gap in it. We have seen how he started by investigating Greek art in the light of the Schopenhauerean philosophy, how this led him to look into morality, how he revealed the origin of morality in transitory manifestations of the will to power, and how he came to the conclusion that it was best for a man to reject all ready-made moral ideas and to so order his life that his every action would be undertaken with some notion of making it subserve his own welfare or that of his children or children's children. But a gap remains and it may be expressed in the question: How is a man to define and determine his own welfare and that of the race after him?

Here, indeed, our dionysian immoralist is confronted by a very serious problem, and Nietzsche himself well understood its seriousness. Unless we have in mind some definite ideal of happiness and some definite goal of progress we had better sing the doxology and dismiss our congregation. Christianity has such an ideal and such a goal. The one is a Christ-like life on earth and the other

IX

WOMEN AND MARRIAGE

NIETZSCHE'S faithful sister, with almost comical and essentially feminine disgust, bewails the fact that, as a very young man, the philosopher became acquainted with the baleful truths set forth in Schopenhauer's immortal essay "On Women." That this daring work greatly influenced him is true, and that he subscribed to its chief arguments all the rest of his days is also true, but it is far from true to say that his view of the fair sex was borrowed bodily from Schopenhauer or that he would have written otherwise than as he did if Schopenhauer had never lived. Nietzsche's conclusions regarding women were the inevitable result, indeed, of his own philosophical system. It is impossible to conceive a man who held his opinions of morality and society laying down any other doctrines of femininity and matrimony than those he scattered through his books.

Nietzsche believed that there was a radical difference between the mind of man and the mind of woman and that the two sexes reacted in diametrically different ways to those stimuli which make up what might be called the clinical picture of human society. It is the function of man, he said, to wield a sword in humanity's battle with everything that makes life on earth painful or precarious.

I

NIETZSCHE'S ORIGINS

THE construction of philosophical family trees for Nietzsche has ever been one of the favorite pastimes of his critics and interpreters. Thus Dr. Oscar Levy, editor of the English translation of his works, makes him the heir of Goethe and Stendhal, and the culminating figure of the "Second Renaissance" launched by the latter, who was "the first man to cry halt to the Kantian philosophy which had flooded all Europe.[1] Dr. M. A. Mügge agrees with this genealogy so far as it goes, but points out that Nietzsche was also the intellectual descendant of certain pre-Socratic Greeks, particularly Heracleitus, and of Spinoza and Stirner.[2] Alfred Fouillée, the Frenchman, is another who gives him Greek blood, but in seeking his later forebears Fouillée passes over the four named by Levy and Mügge and puts Hobbes, Schopenhauer, Darwin, Rousseau and Diderot in place of them.[3] Again, Thomas Common says that "perhaps Nietzsche is most indebted to Chamfort and Schopenhauer," but also allows a considerable influence to Hobbes, and endeavors to show how Nietzsche car-

[1] "The Revival of Aristocracy," London, 1906, pp. 14–59.

[2] "Friedrich Nietzsche: His Life and Work," New York, 1909, pp. 315–320.

[3] "*Nietzsche et l'Immoralisme*," Paris, 1902, p. 294.

ried on, consciously and unconsciously, certain ideas originating with Darwin and developed by Huxley, Spencer and the other evolutionists.[1] Dr. Alexander Tille has written a whole volume upon this latter relationship.[2] Finally, Paul Elmer More, the American, taking the cue from Fouillée, finds the germs of many of Nietzsche's doctrines in Hobbes, and then proceeds to a somewhat elaborate discussion of the mutations of ethical theory during the past two centuries, showing how Hume superimposed the idea of sympathy as a motive upon Hobbes' idea of self-interest, and how this sympathy theory prevailed over that of self-interest, and degenerated into sentimentalism, and so opened the way for Socialism and other such delusions, and how Nietzsche instituted a sort of Hobbesian revival.[3] Many more speculations of that sort, some of them very ingenious and some merely ingenuous, might be rehearsed. By one critic or another Nietzsche has been accused of more or less frank borrowings from Xenophanes, Democritus, Pythagoras, Callicles, Parmenides, Arcelaus, Empedocles, Pyrrho, Hegesippus, the Eleatic Zeno, Machiavelli, Comte, Montaigne, Mandeville, La Bruyère, Fontenelle, Voltaire, Kant, La Rochefoucauld, Helvétius, Adam Smith, Malthus, Butler, Blake, Proudhon, Paul Rée, Flaubert, Taine, Gobineau, Renan, and even from Karl Marx! — a long catalogue of meaningless names, an exhaustive roster of pathfinders and pro-

[1] "Nietzsche as Critic, Philosopher, Poet and Prophet," London, 1901, pp. xi–xxiii.

[2] "*Von Darwin bis Nietzsche*," Leipsic, 1895.

[3] "Nietzsche," Boston, 1912, pp. 18–45.

testants. A Frenchman, Jules de Gaultier, has devoted a whole book to the fascinating subject.[1]

But if we turn from this laborious and often irrelevant search for common ideas and parallel passages to the actual facts of Nietzsche's intellectual development, we shall find, perhaps, that his ancestry ran in two streams, the one coming down from the Greeks whom he studied as school-boy and undergraduate, and the other having its source in Schopenhauer, the great discovery of his early manhood and the most powerful single influence of his life. No need to argue the essentially Greek color of Nietzsche's apprentice thinking. It was, indeed, his interest in Greek literature and life that made him a philologist by profession, and the same interest that converted him from a philologist into a philosopher. The foundation of his system was laid when he arrived at his conception of the conflict between the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus, and all that followed belonged naturally to the working out of that idea. But what he got from the Greeks of his early adoration was more than a single idea and more than the body of miscellaneous ideas listed by the commentators: it was the Greek outlook, the Greek spirit, the Greek attitude toward God and man. In brief, he ceased to be a German pastor's son, brought up in the fear of the Lord, and became a citizen of those gorgeous and enchanted isles, much as Shelley had before him. The sentimentality of Christianity dropped from him like an old garment; he stood forth, as it were, bare and unashamed, a pagan in the springtime of the world, a *ja-*

[1] "*De Kant à Nietzsche*," Paris, 1900.

sager. More than the reading of books, of course, was needed to work that transformation — the blood that leaped had to be blood capable of leaping — but it was out of books that the stimulus came, and the feeling of surety, and the beginnings of a workable philosophy of life. It is not a German that speaks in "The Antichrist," nor even the Polish noble that Nietzsche liked to think himself, but a Greek of the brave days before Socrates, a spokesman of Hellenic innocence and youth.

No doubt it was the unmistakably Greek note in Schopenhauer — the delivery of instinct, so long condemned to the ethical dungeons — that engendered Nietzsche's first wild enthusiasm for the Frankfort sage. The atmosphere of Leipsic in 1865 was heavy with moral vapors, and the daring dissent of Schopenhauer must have seemed to blow through it like a sharp wind from the sea. And Nietzsche, being young and passionate, was carried away by the ecstasy of discovery, and so accepted the whole Schopenhauerean philosophy without examining it too critically — the bitter with the sweet, its pessimism no less than its rebellion. He, too, had to go through the green-sickness of youth, particularly of German youth. The Greek was yet but half way from Naumburg to Attica, and he now stopped a moment to look backward. "Every line," he tells us somewhere, "cried out renunciation, denial, resignation. . . . Evidences of this sudden change are still to be found in the restless melancholy of the leaves of my diary at that period, with all their useless self-reproach and their desperate gazing upward for recovery and for the transformation of the whole spirit of mankind. By

drawing all my qualities and my aspirations before the forum of gloomy self-contempt I became bitter, unjust and unbridled in my hatred of myself. I even practised bodily penance. For instance, I forced myself for a fortnight at a stretch to go to bed at two o'clock in the morning and to rise punctually at six." But not for long. The fortnight of self-accusing and hair-shirts was soon over. The green-sickness vanished.[1] The Greek emerged anew, more Hellenic than ever. And so, almost from the start, Nietzsche rejected quite as much of Schopenhauer as he accepted. The Schopenhauerean premise entered into his system — the will to live was destined to become the father, in a few years, of the will to power — but the Schopenhauerean conclusion held him no longer than it took him to inspect it calmly. Thus he gained doubly — first, by the acquisition of a definite theory of human conduct, one giving clarity to his own vague feelings, and secondly, by the reaction against an abject theory of human destiny, the very antithesis of that which rose within him.

And yet, for all his dissent, for all his instinctive revolt against the resignationism which overwhelmed him for an hour, Nietzsche nevertheless carried away with him, and kept throughout his life, some touch of Schopenhauer's distrust of the search for happiness. Nine years after his great discovery we find him quoting and approving his teacher's words: "A happy life is impossible; the highest thing that man can aspire to is a

[1] Nietzsche himself, in after years, viewed this attack humorously, and was wont to say that it was caused, not by Schopenhauer alone, but also (and chiefly) by the bad cooking of Leipsic. See "*Ecce Homo*," II, i.

heroic life." And still later we find him thundering against "the green-grazing happiness of the herd." What is more, he gave his assent later on, though always more by fascination than by conviction, to the doctrine of eternal recurrence, the most hopeless idea, perhaps, ever formulated by man. But in all this a certain distinction is to be noted: Schopenhauer, despairing of the happy life, renounced even the heroic life, but Nietzsche never did anything of the sort. On the contrary, his whole philosophy is a protest against that very despair. The heroic life may not bring happiness, and it may even fail to bring good, but at all events it will shine gloriously in the light of its own heroism. In brief, high endeavor is an end in itself — nay, the noblest of all ends. The higher man does not work for a wage, not even for the wage of bliss: his reward is in the struggle, the danger, the aspiration. As for the happiness born of peace and love, of prosperity and tranquillity, that is for "shopkeepers, women, Englishmen and cows." The man who seeks it thereby confesses his incapacity for the loftier joys and hazards of the free spirit, and the man who wails because he cannot find it thereby confesses his unfitness to live in the world. "My formula for greatness," said Nietzsche toward the end of his life, "is *amor fati* . . . not only to bear up under necessity, but to *love* it." Thus, borrowing Schopenhauer's pessimism, he turned it, in the end, into a defiant and irreconcilable optimism — not the slave optimism of hope, with its vain courting of gods, but the master optimism of courage.

So much for the larger of the direct influences upon