The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer: the Wisdom of Life

Arthur Schopenhauer

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THE ESSAYS

OF

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

TRANSLATED BY

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THE WISDOM OF LIFE.

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INTRODUCTION.

In these pages I shall speak of _The Wisdom of Life_ in the common meaning of the term, as the art, namely, of ordering our lives so as to obtain the greatest possible amount of pleasure and success; an art the theory of which may be called _Eudaemonology_, for it teaches us how to lead a happy existence. Such an existence might perhaps be defined as one which, looked at from a purely objective point of view, or, rather, after cool and mature reflection--for the question necessarily involves subjective considerations,--would be decidedly preferable to non-existence; implying that we should cling to it for its own sake, and not merely from the fear of death; and further, that we should never like it to come to an end.

Now whether human life corresponds, or could possibly correspond, to this conception of existence, is a question to which, as is well-known, my philosophical system returns a negative answer. On the eudaemonistic hypothesis, however, the question must be answered in the affirmative; and I have shown, in the second volume of my chief work (ch. 49), that this hypothesis is based upon a fundamental mistake. Accordingly, in elaborating the scheme of a happy existence, I have had to make a complete surrender of the higher metaphysical and ethical standpoint to which my own theories lead; and everything I shall say here will to some extent rest upon a compromise; in so far, that is, as I take the common standpoint of every day, and embrace the error which is at the bottom of it. My remarks, therefore, will possess only a qualified value, for the very word _eudaemonology_ is a euphemism. Further, I make no claims to completeness; partly because the subject is inexhaustible, and partly

because I should otherwise have to say over again what has been already said by others.

The only book composed, as far as I remember, with a like purpose to that which animates this collection of aphorisms, is Cardan's _De utilitate ex adversis capienda_, which is well worth reading, and may be used to supplement the present work. Aristotle, it is true, has a few words on eudaemonology in the fifth chapter of the first book of his _Rhetoric_; but what he says does not come to very much. As compilation is not my business, I have made no use of these predecessors; more especially because in the process of compiling, individuality of view is lost, and individuality of view is the kernel of works of this kind. In general, indeed, the wise in all ages have always said the same thing, and the fools, who at all times form the immense majority, have in their way too acted alike, and done just the opposite; and so it will continue. For, as Voltaire says, _we shall leave this world as foolish and as wicked as we found it on our arrival_.

THE WISDOM OF LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

DIVISION OF THE SUBJECT.

Aristotle[1] divides the blessings of life into three classes--those which come to us from without, those of the soul, and those of the body. Keeping nothing of this division but the number, I observe that

the fundamental differences in human lot may be reduced to three distinct classes:

[Footnote 1: _Eth. Nichom_., I. 8.]

(1) What a man is: that is to say, personality, in the widest sense of the word; under which are included health, strength, beauty, temperament, moral character, intelligence, and education.

(2) What a man has: that is, property and possessions of every kind.

(3) How a man stands in the estimation of others: by which is to be understood, as everybody knows, what a man is in the eyes of his fellowmen, or, more strictly, the light in which they regard him. This is shown by their opinion of him; and their opinion is in its turn manifested by the honor in which he is held, and by his rank and reputation.

The differences which come under the first head are those which Nature herself has set between man and man; and from this fact alone we may at once infer that they influence the happiness or unhappiness of mankind in a much more vital and radical way than those contained under the two following heads, which are merely the effect of human arrangements. Compared with _genuine personal advantages_, such as a great mind or a great heart, all the privileges of rank or birth, even of royal birth, are but as kings on the stage, to kings in real life. The same thing was said long ago by Metrodorus, the earliest disciple of Epicurus, who wrote as the title of one of his chapters, _The happiness we receive from ourselves is greater than that which we obtain from our surroundings_[1] And it is an obvious fact, which cannot be called in question, that the principal element in a man's well-being,--indeed, in the whole tenor of his existence,--is

what he is made of, his inner constitution. For this is the immediate source of that inward satisfaction or dissatisfaction resulting from the sum total of his sensations, desires and thoughts; whilst his surroundings, on the other hand, exert only a mediate or indirect influence upon him. This is why the same external events or circumstances affect no two people alike; even with perfectly similar surroundings every one lives in a world of his own. For a man has immediate apprehension only of his own ideas, feelings and volitions; the outer world can influence him only in so far as it brings these to life. The world in which a man lives shapes itself chiefly by the way in which he looks at it, and so it proves different to different men; to one it is barren, dull, and superficial; to another rich, interesting, and full of meaning. On hearing of the interesting events which have happened in the course of a man's experience, many people will wish that similar things had happened in their lives too, completely forgetting that they should be envious rather of the mental aptitude which lent those events the significance they possess when he describes them; to a man of genius they were interesting adventures; but to the dull perceptions of an ordinary individual they would have been stale, everyday occurrences. This is in the highest degree the case with many of Goethe's and Byron's poems, which are obviously founded upon actual facts; where it is open to a foolish reader to envy the poet because so many delightful things happened to him, instead of envying that mighty power of phantasy which was capable of turning a fairly common experience into something so great and beautiful.

[Footnote 1: Cf. Clemens Alex. Strom. II., 21.]

In the same way, a person of melancholy temperament will make a

scene in a tragedy out of what appears to the sanguine man only in the light of an interesting conflict, and to a phlegmatic soul as something without any meaning;--all of which rests upon the fact that every event, in order to be realized and appreciated, requires the co-operation of two factors, namely, a subject and an object, although these are as closely and necessarily connected as oxygen and hydrogen in water. When therefore the objective or external factor in an experience is actually the same, but the subjective or personal appreciation of it varies, the event is just as much a different one in the eyes of different persons as if the objective factors had not been alike; for to a blunt intelligence the fairest and best object in the world presents only a poor reality, and is therefore only poorly appreciated,--like a fine landscape in dull weather, or in the reflection of a bad _camera obscura_. In plain language, every man is pent up within the limits of his own consciousness, and cannot directly get beyond those limits any more than he can get beyond his own skin; so external aid is not of much use to him. On the stage, one man is a prince, another a minister, a third a servant or a soldier or a general, and so on,--mere external differences: the inner reality, the kernel of all these appearances is the same--a poor player, with all the anxieties of his lot. In life it is just the same. Differences of rank and wealth give every man his part to play, but this by no means implies a difference of inward happiness and pleasure; here, too, there is the same being in all--a poor mortal, with his hardships and troubles. Though these may, indeed, in every case proceed from dissimilar causes, they are in their essential nature much the same in all their forms, with degrees of intensity which vary, no doubt, but in no wise correspond to the part a man has to play, to the presence or absence of

position and wealth. Since everything which exists or happens for a man exists only in his consciousness and happens for it alone, the most essential thing for a man is the constitution of this consciousness, which is in most cases far more important than the circumstances which go to form its contents. All the pride and pleasure of the world, mirrored in the dull consciousness of a fool, are poor indeed compared with the imagination of Cervantes writing his _Don Quixote_ in a miserable prison. The objective half of life and reality is in the hand of fate, and accordingly takes various forms in different cases: the subjective half is ourself, and in essentials is always remains the same.

Hence the life of every man is stamped with the same character throughout, however much his external circumstances may alter; it is like a series of variations on a single theme. No one can get beyond his own individuality. An animal, under whatever circumstances it is placed, remains within the narrow limits to which nature has irrevocably consigned it; so that our endeavors to make a pet happy must always keep within the compass of its nature, and be restricted to what it can feel. So it is with man; the measure of the happiness he can attain is determined beforehand by his individuality. More especially is this the case with the mental powers, which fix once for all his capacity for the higher kinds of pleasure. If these powers are small, no efforts from without, nothing that his fellowmen or that fortune can do for him, will suffice to raise him above the ordinary degree of human happiness and pleasure, half animal though it be; his only resources are his sensual appetite,--a cozy and cheerful family life at the most,--low company and vulgar pastime; even education, on the whole, can avail little, if anything, for the enlargement of his

horizon. For the highest, most varied and lasting pleasures are those of the mind, however much our youth may deceive us on this point; and the pleasures of the mind turn chiefly on the powers of the mind. It is clear, then, that our happiness depends in a great degree upon what we _are_, upon our individuality, whilst lot or destiny is generally taken to mean only what we _have_, or our _reputation_. Our lot, in this sense, may improve; but we do not ask much of it if we are inwardly rich: on the other hand, a fool remains a fool, a dull blockhead, to his last hour, even though he were surrounded by houris in paradise. This is why Goethe, in the _West-östliclien Divan_, says that every man, whether he occupies a low position in life, or emerges as its victor, testifies to personality as the greatest factor in happiness:--

_Volk und Knecht und Uberwinder
Sie gestehen, zu jeder Zeit,
Höchtes Glück der Erdenkinder
Sei nur die Persönlichkeit_.

Everything confirms the fact that the subjective element in life is incomparably more important for our happiness and pleasure than the objective, from such sayings as _Hunger is the best sauce_, and _Youth and Age cannot live together_, up to the life of the Genius and the Saint. Health outweighs all other blessings so much that one may really say that a healthy beggar is happier than an ailing king. A quiet and cheerful temperament, happy in the enjoyment of a perfectly sound physique, an intellect clear, lively, penetrating and seeing things as they are, a moderate and gentle will, and therefore a good conscience--these are privileges which no rank or wealth can make up for or replace. For what a man is in himself, what

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