

Robert L. Wicks

Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Representation: A Reader's Guide.

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Within recent times there seems to be something of a renewed interest in metaphysics. This is not to say that metaphysics now takes on the same unabashed form as it once did. As thinkers, the metaphysicians of today are far less bold than they once were. Nonetheless, following some three centuries of critique, akin to a parlay upon the field of battle, the critics of speculative thinking in some sense seem to have set aside their arms and become... less *certain*, I suppose, would be the best expression. Whatever the reason may be for this, the fact of the matter is that today, philosophers seem to be more interested or at least more willing to lend an ear to speculative philosophy.

Robert Wicks's text on *Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Representation* thus arrives at an apposite time, historically speaking, and in fact serves a quite explicit purpose. As the subtitle, *A Reader's Guide* implies, and in the words of the author himself within the dedication of the text, the primary purpose of the text is to keep "Schopenhauer philosophically alive and influential" (viii). I think there are a number of reasons why Wicks's book is so successful in achieving this objective, or at least carries the promise of doing so, when put to proper use.

In the first place, reading Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (WWR) is hardly a walk in the park. This is not to say that Schopenhauer would be an abstruse writer, as one might say of Husserl; nor do we encounter the kind of heady abstract plodding which makes Hegel (certainly) and Kant (perhaps) tough going. To the contrary, Schopenhauer is a grounded thinker and with regards to style, known as one of the greats of German prose. In many ways, WWR reads like a novel. Yet the text is not fiction but philosophy, nor can it be read in the casual way in which one might approach the novel. Schopenhauer's thought is rich, and there is depth to his insights found among very few thinkers within the history of philosophy. A meal of such thought takes time to digest and the wealth of ideas expressed requires steady patience, even as the written style lends itself to smooth and even reading. As with Plato, so also in reading Schopenhauer one must often pause to reflect, as though standing before a work of art.

But when I say that Schopenhauer's work is no walk in the park, I refer as much to the sheer length of the work as to its depth. For example, the standard Payne translation of Schopenhauer's WWR contains very few comments, yet it runs to well over 500 pages. Normally, I would not count this as a problem. Aren't we all by now accustomed to the philosophically longwinded? Nonetheless, the unfortunate truth is that today, Schopenhauer is considered by many to be a somewhat minor philosopher, at least in comparison to the giants of his era. The result is that his brilliant prose is hardly read, though admittedly, I have yet to meet a professional philosopher who has not expressed a *desire* to read Schopenhauer – some day.

The second point follows from the first. Most of the secondary literature on Schopenhauer, as is natural among scholars, is either far too specialized or overly biographical. The latter contains some (but perhaps not enough) reflection upon his thought, but there is to my mind no specific account which surveys the whole of Schopenhauer's WWR in quite the way Wicks's text does. Indeed, this is precisely where Wicks's text stands out as a very useful exception and addition to the literature. In the first place, the work is relatively brief, coming in at around 150 pages. My reason for stating this has to do with the use to which the text ought to be put, at least in my opinion, and in this context brevity has its value. In the second place, Wicks is an evidently fine-tuned scholar with respect to knowledge of Schopenhauer himself. He draws not only from the WWR in his discussion but likewise from Schopenhauer's earlier doctoral dissertation, his later essays and collections, and finally his posthumous notes. In the third place, Wicks's text offers a book-by-book, section-by-section summary and analysis of the WWR. It is then in this last sense that the text becomes most invaluable: in his summaries, Wicks very much succeeds in distilling the primary contents of Schopenhauer's thought with ease and clarity.

In the first instance, the summary begins precisely as it should, that is, with an initial account of Schopenhauer's earlier doctoral work and a discussion of the appendix to the WWR, the famous *Critique of Kantian Philosophy*. Indeed, in the case of other philosophers, we might perhaps get along reading their later work without having read their earlier writings, but with Schopenhauer this is far from the case. There is a reverse geometry to Schopenhauer's thought, a procession from the complex to the simple that presumes knowledge of both sides of the procession. His thought is itself akin to a story that has a beginning, middle, and end. So in this sense, Wicks's text is quite useful, as he does an outstanding job of summarizing the primary points, clearly and concisely, by way of introduction to the WWR itself.

Wicks's text is structured as follows. Divided into four chapters, the first chapter ("Context") deals with a number of biographical issues coupled with remarks concerning the place of Schopenhauer in the history of philosophy. The second chapter ("Overview of Themes") highlights the main thematic elements at bottom to the work itself. The third chapter ("Reading the Text"), which takes the lion's share of the work, is divided into five parts (each a short chapter in its own right) within which Wicks first initiates a discussion of the above-mentioned introductory material and then proceeds systematically to summarize and analyze each section of the four books of WWR itself. Overall I found Wicks's elucidations compelling and an excellent review of the material. The final and fourth chapter ("Reception and Influence") discusses Schopenhauer in the context of his philosophical, literary, and artistic influence. This includes his impact on Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche, naturally, but Wicks also reflects upon lesser-known readers such as Leo Tolstoy and Thomas Mann and some further speculation upon possible influence with respect to Sigmund Freud, Herman Melville, and others.

With the above considerations in mind, Wicks's text should benefit the following audiences. First, scholars working within related fields, e.g., German Idealism, Continental Philosophy, Kantianism, Existentialism, etc., who already have enough reading on their plate (as we all do) but who would be well-served with deeper familiarity with Schopenhauer will find Wicks's text quite useful, as the whole text can be read fruitfully in a few days and the treatment

serves as a handy reference tool in the event that more specific reading of Schopenhauer's WWR is desired. Second, the text would likewise fit perfectly within the scope of a course on any of the above-mentioned themes as well as a course on modern or 19th-century European philosophy, as indeed Schopenhauer's influence is present throughout. There is often far too much to cover to allow for multiple primary sources, so the text fits quite well in this context. Third, in a graduate class on Kant or Nietzsche, etc., the text would be quite suitable as a reference tool to fill in the gap between the big names of the era. Finally, among those who have always desired to read Schopenhauer but never seem to find the time, Wicks is perhaps a choice substitute.

My only criticism of the text is perhaps unfair to the purpose of the work, but worth noting anyhow. The joy of reading Schopenhauer involves not only one's engagement with the genius of a great thinker, but there is the equally important matter of Schopenhauer's style – the great lucidity of his writing, the wit and humor which makes reading him so enjoyable. Wicks's text necessarily pales in comparison and so may give the reader who has never read Schopenhauer the impression that the work constitutes nothing more than a dry and somewhat simplified version of Kantianism (as indeed Schopenhauer is often painted in the history books). Given the aim of Wicks's text, I do not think this can be avoided. Then again, if such a thing should happen, it would pose a question as to whether the book's objective had really been attained. The danger, so to say, is that after reading Wicks's text, the reader will fail to reach for Schopenhauer, thinking that she or he already knows all there is to know. Indeed, the spirit of a thinker lives on in his or her writing, and thus to truly know the thinker, we must engage them, as it were, face to face. This slight criticism aside, I enjoyed reading Wicks's text overall and heartily recommend it.

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