

David E. Cartwright

Schopenhauer: A Biography.

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David Cartwright's *Schopenhauer: A Biography* sheds new light on the relationship between the thought and life of Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer is a philosopher whose popularity attests to the need for philosophy to be related to individual human existence and experience—that feelings and existential qualms must be integrated into what Schopenhauer otherwise considered empty verbiage. The necessity to disclose how Schopenhauer came to realize his philosophy, what inspired his fundamental idea of will, and the chronology of these events makes David Cartwright's systematic, concise, and comprehensive biography a necessary edition to an understanding of Schopenhauer's philosophy.

The first biography on Arthur Schopenhauer was written by Schopenhauer's close friend Wilhelm v. Gwinner. It was published in 1862, two years after Schopenhauer's death, and it tells an intimately informed story of his life. There are countless quotations taken from Schopenhauer's published works and other notes to inform us of his academic development. Gwinner's biography possesses a wealth of detail and reflection on Schopenhauer's life, but if anything it lacks order and any poignant clarification of the link between Schopenhauer's ideas and the course of his life. Arthur Hübscher wrote two biographical works on Schopenhauer. The first, written in 1938, entitled "Arthur Schopenhauer: a depiction of his life" (*Arthur Schopenhauer: Ein Lebensbild*), is a fascinating biographical tale in which Schopenhauer truly comes to life. It becomes extremely clear that Schopenhauer's character was influenced, particularly in its more negative view of life, by his predecessors, his experiences, and the ruminations on those experiences. The family background, his friendships and relationships are described lucidly. Hübscher's second biography *Denker gegen den Strom* (1973) certainly lays the framework for all further excursions into the link between Schopenhauer's life and thought. The breadth and depth of content is quite remarkable, yet it is to be characterized more as an explanation of Schopenhauer's thought, related back to different stages in his life, than a truly biographical, succinct outline of Schopenhauer's life. The more recent descriptive biography written by Rüdiger Safranski (available in English from Harvard UP as *Schopenhauer and the Wild years of Philosophy*) adds a cultural and more circumstantially related account of Schopenhauer's life, his ideas, the controversies surrounding those ideas, his views of others, and his relationships on both an academic and personal level. Finally, mention must be made of Patrick Bridgwater's extremely well researched contribution to this string of biographies in *Arthur Schopenhauer's English Schooling* (1988), which is focused on Schopenhauer's cultural, intellectual and personal relationship to England, consisting of a 12-week stay at a school in Wimbledon aged 15. We realize that these experiences left a lasting impression on Schopenhauer and indeed his devotion to Anglophone culture is apparent in his reverence of Empiricism and its importance to his work.

Cartwright's book includes a chronology of Schopenhauer's life and a valuable index on featured authors and terms. The detail and imagination with which David Cartwright depicts the

scenes of the life of Schopenhauer and his family would have us believe he had actually been there, living and observing their fate as a silent, shadowing guest. We live out these vivid depictions concerning, initially, the actions and adventures of Arthur, his mother Johanna, and his sister Adele. But it is the comprehensive nature of this biographical study, the structured detail of Arthur Schopenhauer's life and thought which brings the book to life. The astute remarks on Schopenhauer's personal and theoretical development based on facts, and the evident interrelation of what was happening in Schopenhauer's mind and that which surrounds him, truly grips the reader. Schopenhauer, as we come to know him, was a philosopher who learned from experience, who developed his ideas on the basis of life itself and then abstracted from those experiences to develop the general notion of a philosophy tied to ethics, metaphysics, and the beauty and strife of existence. Clearly a highly intelligent youth—and no less highly sensitive—Schopenhauer is led to the arts, is led into the maze of his own mind by entertaining concrete notions on the body, unhappiness, boredom, will, color, and many other themes. It is this aspect of David Cartwright's biography, the chronology of Schopenhauer's holistic development, which makes it a methodical, intellectual and factual handbook for writers of the genre as a whole. The biography opens doors to those who wish to see how a talented and fascinating individual develops over the course of a lifetime, along with the joys, pains and sufferings all of us might experience. Importantly, Cartwright's biography is equally as relevant to experts on Schopenhauer, who will not only gain insight into the succinct progression of Schopenhauer's ideas but also discover well-placed, contextual quotations from Schopenhauer's books, notes and handwritten annotations, as well as references to other authors Schopenhauer read, and read well. This allows the reader to piece together, in a manner not available through a reading of his main works, a sense of what it was that drove Arthur Schopenhauer to the principal and recurring themes of his philosophy. Furthermore, the research in this biography clearly draws on Hübscher's expertise and expands on it, as is evidenced by the smooth succession and unbroken running of the chronology of the story of Schopenhauer's life and philosophy.

To begin, we read that Schopenhauer's family had a profound influence on his spirit and life-choices. We discover that his father, like Arthur, was of a melancholic disposition (47), highly ambitious, successful and very strict. Arthur's mother, on the other hand, was an artistic and intelligent woman, who, following the death of Schopenhauer's father, became a writer and intellectual socialite of the times. She was even to find some success as a writer and relays to her son that he has inherited her feelings for aesthetics (50). However, her criticisms of Schopenhauer's brooding and negatively disposed character grow with time. Moreover, her sometimes direct and domineering character, along with the death of his father, deeply influence Schopenhauer's sense of tragedy (88). This rupture between mother and son becomes increasingly evident over the passage of time, which finally escalates when Schopenhauer's mother, having fled from Arthur's volatile character with his sister Adele, leaves a devastating letter behind. At this point, when in 1813 Schopenhauer was only 25, she writes: "The door that you slammed so loudly yesterday, after you had conducted yourself extremely improperly toward your mother, closed forever between you and me. I am tired of enduring your behavior any longer." (238)

Besides the apparently substantial influence his family played on Schopenhauer, Cartwright's biography expresses in no uncertain terms that Schopenhauer's philosophy very much derives from experience of life as a whole. Schopenhauer's understanding of philosophy

is based on the concrete vicissitudes of life and Cartwright points out that like Pestalozzi, Schopenhauer would always insist that the direct experience of a thing itself is prior to any abstract, conceptual knowledge. He would claim that “the fund and substance of all our knowledge lies in the comprehension of the world through intuition” (82–83). Moreover, it is this relationship between the concrete individual and the notion of artistic oneness as a removed, all-encompassing entity that becomes the main theme of Schopenhauer’s dualistic world image, both aspects of which appear to be intertwined with the non-rational basis of cognition. Cartwright eloquently depicts how Schopenhauer’s experiences of art already express the quintessence of his systematic philosophy, how art is a binding essence of unity and how music expresses the human soul. Schopenhauer’s early fanatic and informed approach to the arts is a strong influence in this process. Cartwright states with a view to Schopenhauer’s readings: “These Early Romantics promoted the cultivation of one’s feelings and imagination as the means of knowledge, fostered an idiosyncratic form of individuality, self-consciously employed mythology, loved fairy tales and the Orient, glorified art—especially music—and sought to transcend all finiteness, limitation, and dualism through identification with some greater whole.” (110) Hence, Cartwright points out that in 1806 at the age of 18 “music comes to the rescue” for Schopenhauer. It is the only element that truly saves him from what might otherwise be a mundane existence, quoting Schopenhauer’s comment from the same year: “And still a compassionate angel has pleaded on our behalf for the heavenly flower, and it rises tall in full magnificence, rooted in the soil of wretchedness. – The pulsations of divine music have not ceased beating through the centuries of barbarism.”(111)

In 1811, after years of brooding and dissatisfaction, having left the merchant apprenticeship his father had wished for far behind, Schopenhauer finally changes his present course of study from medicine to philosophy (149–150). It may have been this initial period of study that influenced his theory on the materialization of will. This change prompted him to move from Göttingen to Berlin, where Fichte had begun teaching. In fact, it was initially Fichte, as Cartwright points out, that drove Schopenhauer to Berlin (155). Yet Fichte would not represent a positive figure in Schopenhauer’s later philosophy. He becomes one of the aloof philosophers of German Idealism who according to Schopenhauer did not understand and take cognizance of reality, but instead created a world of theoretical phantasm. We learn instead that Goethe was held in as much reverence as Schopenhauer’s idol Kant (244–246). Goethe appears to have been an extremely important influence on Schopenhauer and to have guided his thinking on a variety of important subjects. They met several times when the young Schopenhauer was only 26 and continued to exchange detailed letters on various subjects over the years to follow.

The fact that Schopenhauer’s philosophy is itself personal in its appeal, in the style of his writing, and based on the principle of direct intuition and experience itself surely indicates in no uncertain terms that a biography of Arthur Schopenhauer is as much a tool to unlocking his philosophy as his main body of philosophy itself might be. It is on account of the accessibility of his writings that Schopenhauer has become one of the most widely read philosophers in the world, but more importantly it is on account of the themes of his philosophy as a whole that Schopenhauer’s work has in recent years made its mark on the academic public. Apparent contradictions in his writings, which have gradually been resolved, the lucidity of his style, the relationship of will to body, his aesthetic theory, his love of nature and many more modern,

philosophical paradigms have shaped the way for a philosopher who, as David Cartwright points out, is finally coming into his own in the 21st century.

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