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Envisioning Suffering and Silence

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Schopenhauer is one of those great philosophers for whom it must be said that he never received the attention that he so rightfully deserved. From his contributions to Kant, to his understanding of Indian philosophy that showed Germany and Europe the path to the East; his contributions are enormous and varied. And yet, till now, despite the study that Schopenhauer's oeuvre generates; it falls quite short of that deserved by its writer's tall stature. Take for example, Schopenhauer's conspicuous absence from the curriculum of philosophy at both bachelor's and master's degree levels in so many leading universities of the world. Thus, in addition to a viable contribution to Schopenhauer studies; an international, scholarly work on Schopenhauer makes deeper the rightful suggestion that an appreciation of Western philosophy stands to be incomplete till one reads Arthur Schopenhauer.

Dr Barua has been engaged in a continued and meticulous discussion with Schopenhauer beginning with her thesis on the great thinker and following it up with the founding of the Indian division of the Schopenhauer S,ociety, conducting of seminars and symposia, and publications. Here latest book is a worthy contribution to the area, not least because of the international assemblage of scholars from Europe, India and the Far East. The topics range comprehensively over a wide strata of interests from Schopenhauer's engagement with Vedanta and Buddhism, to the emergence of Oriental Renaissance, to Nyaya-Vaishesika ontology and logic, to pessimism, Tagore, language, time and the relation between Religion and Philosophy itself. The approaches are likewise diverse, from purely historical, to critical to historico-critical. While more for the old acquaintances of Schopenhauer; it will be of help, and appeal to new readers alike.

Urs App's essay on Schopenhauer painstakingly traces the birth and development of his conversation with Indian philosophy. He also puts forth the interesting point that Schopenhauer's initial encounters happened through the Bhagavad Gita rather than the Upanisads. In this reading of the origin of Schopenhauer's ideas, it becomes clear that there were many mistakes in the way that Schopenhauer encountered the Gita; as also major lacunas in which contemporary thinkers—both contemporary to Schopenhauer and those our contemporary—seek to create analogies between Schopenhauer's philosophy and that of Vedanta.

In the same vein, one may discuss Stephen Cross's essay which places Schopenhauer in the context of the Oriental Renaissance that shook Europe, and especially Germany, towards the end of the eighteenth century. Cross understands two patterns in the unfolding of this "oriental Renaissance" and the ways in which it was understood to clarify a greater picture, both in a European and world-philosophical context. In both, the oriental knowledge (read Indian esoteric and philosophical knowledge) was found to be the primitive root, the originary power of human speculation and understanding. But in one, Christianity was integrated and found thoroughly capable of contributing to this greater ontological and epistemological picture; while in the other it was often found wanting. Schopenhauer, according to Cross, belongs to the second picture. So the contributors to the first pattern—Cross locates them in Novalis, Schelling and F, Schelgel—found the Indian originary philosophies as harmonious with Christianity, harmonious with the deeper esoteric truths that lay embedded in the Christian religious scripture and discourse. Schopenhauer, credited the good of Christianity with its agreement to this primal source; and wherever the difference, he judged Christianity in error. This point is interesting as it understands several patterns in this Oriental Renaissance and its enthusiastic reception of India's primitive knowledge systems. Studies such as this can serve a purpose both within and outside of Schopenhauer; in the sense that they invite us to think how and why these different religions need to be seen as unfolding a greater picture; one that spans both doctrinally and temporally; and whether one of these different systems can be given the status of the originally true, temporally prior and ontologico-soteriologically clearer system. I wish that Cross had undertaken this larger project; for while his essay is historically very rich; it is not as rich as a critical survey. The same problem persists with the much noted Schopenhauer scholar Urs App: his rewarding historical survey, if only as detailed in its critique of ideas would have been so much more rewarding. Interestingly, I would also like to mention Stephen Atzert's essay, which also raises several interesting points; —especially the Schopenhauer-Deussen and Schopenhauer-Grimm interface: sadly, where one expects the essay to come to full swing in its investigation, it ends. Atzert's essay is short to the extent of sounding abrupt. I believe that the editor should have asked Atzert to submit a longer version. Thus, these three essays are all interesting and rewarding in their own way; but each typically short of a full critical survey.

An intriguing point about Schopenhauer is one complex philosopher trying to come to terms with a primitive and extraordinarily complex philosophical, religious and mystic tradition. This requires in the first place a more than thorough understanding of Indian philosophy; and fact of having had somehow lived it. Otherwise, problems are bound to arise either in Schopenhauer or a scholar trying to negotiate Schopenhauer and Vedanta-Buddhist doctrine(s) or both. A case in point is Douglas Berger's essay. Berger is indeed a committed Schopenhauer scholar and has written a long and judicious essay for the volume; which is bound to benefit Schopenhauer enthusiasts and scholars. But consider Berger's point on the mahavakya, "Tat Tvam Asi." This is one of the most fundamental aspects of Hindu—and definitely Advaita—experience, which realizes the individual Atman, as ultimately the Brahman. Berger is right in understanding the postulation as ontological. It is where he criticizes Schopenhauer as making tat tvam asi as an ethical proposition; that the problem arises. Indeed, Schopenhauer suffered from major errors in his understanding and appropriation of the Hindu tradition; and definitely the mahavakya is meant to be an ontological truth. However, is it not ethical? It is simultaneously ethical; though definitely the ontological nevertheless precedes the ethical aim and content. For when one realizes that his individual self (tvam) is essentially the that which is Brahman (tat); he of necessity also realizes that so is every other self; whether that of a dacoit, outcast, ignoramus, learned or animal, whether man or woman; whether sentient or vegetable. This leads to a dismissal of the idea of superiority and the sense of respecting the other, the other who/which is essentially the Brahman as much as one is itself the transcendental, Absolute other of oneself. Thus, Vedantic scriptures in Sanskrit or Sanskrit-Hindi often carry photographs of a visionary seeing Brahman in the hearts of all beings, beings who are stationed many wise and many where in the spatio-temporal expense. Hindus who "live" these scriptures try to live this sense of being and ethics. Thus, Vivenkananda or Tilak's acceptance of Schopenhauer's "tat tvam asi ethic," is not colonial mindedness—which may or may not have been present otherwise—but an obvious fact that they lived with. I again affirm that the mahavakya is ontological: to call it ethical as such or per se, is an error, yet its ethical implications are obvious, and entailed by the very illumination of Being/being offered by it. This despite the fact that Schopenhauer may not have been conversant with any of these intricacies. And this because of the fact that Schopenhauer's ethics foreground empathy with the Other.

On the whole, however, I would recommend Berger's essay as it gives a lot to think about in terms of how one must understand a thinker's understanding of a tradition and its use of it; and how this hermeneutic process is too complex to be determined by even the modes of accuracy and historical clarity. That is, that despite Schopenhauer's grave misgivings and misshaping, he is both to be understood as influenced by Indian tradition, to have contributed to an emerging and even emerged European-Indian interface: undeniably, this enigmatic Schopenhauer-Indian philosophy complex generated a lot of verve and vitality.

Moving in the same direction, one may comment on two essays on Schopenhauer's relation to Vedanta: R C Pradhan's essay on the metaphysics of human existence and time, and Indu Sarin's essay on the metaphysics of will in Arthur Schopenhauer in relation to Maya/avidya in Vedanta. One very positive aspect of these essays is the detailed notes that they give, especially Sarin's essay, on some aspects of Vedanta, not that easily accessible to readers belonging properly only to the Western tradition. Reservations of such scholars in reaching out to Schopenhauer may in some sense be assuaged by the crucial backgrounds on Vedanta and Buddhism offered by many scholars in this volume. Thus, it is indeed helpful—to limit focus on Sarin's essay for the moment—that such readers can become acquainted with key Hindu concepts as different states (jagrat/svapna/susupti/turiya) or various sheaths or the sense of maya as positive wrong knowledge, and covering. It is only imperative to ask such fundamental questions as the nature of ananlogy operating between Schopenhauerean will and its closest correlate in Vedanta. The problem is that given the enigmatic nature of Schopenhauer's own interactions and his range of operation from Greek esoterics to Kant to Indian philosophy, such analogies are necessarily open ended and resistant to delimitation. Thus I fail to see the point of how Schopenahuer's metaphysics can be explicitly understood through Sankara's non dualism and how the latter's non dualism can be approached better by following Schopenhauer. This is not at all to suggest that the two systems are mutually exclusive, for that would be at least historically and autobiographically inaccurate, given Schopenhauer's own eulogies on the Upanisads, which with Brahma Sutras and Srimadbhagavad Gita, were the agamas of Sankara. But there are nevertheless problems, and rather obvious ones too. In the first place, are the problems of Schopenhauer's appropriation of Sankara; and then the fact that the latter's system cannot be encompassed within Schopenhauer's confines owing to the difference operative in the two. There are gaps between the two thinkers which refuse to enter into any explicit-implicitness. I believe that the end of Sarin's essay is sketchy; the better alternative is R C Pradhan's use of family relationships between Schopenhauer and the various tenets of Vedanta. A certain quasi-Wittgensteinean use is actually helpful.

The last paper in the section on Schopenhauer and Vedanta is the paper by Arati Barua, which focuses on the Will-intellect relationship, especially the patterns as found by Wayne Sheeks; the irresoluble paradoxes occurring therein, and the solution offered in Sankara Vedanta. The paper reads interestingly; but again, I wish that Arati Barua had spent more time on Sankara in her essay, because that part begins and ends too quickly. Though I agree with the fact that Sankara's system provides a solution to the impasse to which Schopenhauer is led to, by way of Brahman that is the ultimate Reality; it is not clear as to what correlate to Will is sought from the Vedanta ontology.

Another very interesting essay on Vedanta, Tagore and Schopenhauer vis-à-vis Will is by Sitansu Ray (though found in the book in a different, and separate section). Ray makes several valid points of comparison between Tagore and Schopenhauer, including the former's optimism and latter's pessimism, the closeness of Tagore to Vedanta, both from a socio-cultural background and the knowledge of Sanskrit. It is also notable that Ray claims that it is us (or rather Ray!) who find a parallel between authors who not only were more than a generation apart, but also separated by the absence of any documented evidence of Tagore having read Schopenhauer. There is sustained discussion on the parallel between Schopenhauer's Will and Tagore's Ichcha; both where they converge and where they diverge from each other. The points are interesting and well taken; except that some pointers are needed. Ichcha does translate as Will; and Tagore does quote Ichcha —Ray gives several instances—in its several gradations and manifestations in creation—but ichcha also stands to mean desire. The Will of Schopenhauer has affinities with Maya/avidya, which ichcha as desire or ichcha as the higher Will of man does not have. At least; ichcha in Tagore is closer to Avidya as the Puranic cosmic generative mother Goddess; rather than the positive-negative superimposition-illusion dyad of Sankara.

We now come to the Buddhist sections of the book; here too persist the problems that I outlined in the section on Vedanta. In Buddhism, like Vedanta, we may find several misinterpretations that arise due to a lack of sufficient conversation with the original texts, more compounded when we move into the realm of the tantra that takes and deviates from the mainstream Hindu-Buddhist principles. Tantra is actually about a certain realm or realms of experience, of a consciousness understanding itself, rather than a theoretic expanse. Thus it again requires a certain faith, and a certain sense of having lived the tantric-Vedantin-Buddhist experience. Therefore, wherever this engagement is missing, problems necessarily ensue. In Michael Gerhard's essay, I much appreciate his scrutiny of the so called esoteric and exoteric divisions that, as he himself so well points out, were supplied later to Buddhism. Also interesting is Buddhism's enigmatic relation to Vedanta. (Though this enigma is far deeper; and there is the fact that the founder of Advaita Vedanta, Gaudapada is called a crypto-Buddhist, and alternatively Nagarjuna as crypto-Vedantin. This discussion cannot however be encompassed in a review.) There is also a painstaking reading of Schopenhauer in all this tangle of beliefs, doctrines and practices. But the last section on tantra is hazy and to any reader versed with the tantric tradition, lacking in astute detail without which it is futile to bring the discussion in the first place. For example, without an understanding of the cakras or energy states, the whole tradition of tantric sexuality and its relation to elements like semen and menstrual blood/cycle; the gunas and the guna-characters who practice tantra, and so on; it is only an incomplete and hazy discussion. Thus, for all his detail, Gerhard is unclear in the precise analogies which he seeks to make between Schopenhauer, tantra, and more specifically, the tantric understanding of sexuality, death and becoming. Gerhard says that he is making a superficial discussion; it is not superficial, but incomplete and makes the ending rather problematic.

Thomas Regehly's essay on Schopenhauer, Buddha and Kamadamana, is an interesting one, and brings in Thomas Mann and Goethe in the complex web of influences springing around Schopenhauer. It is a readable discussion on Schopenhauer's idea of sainthood; as also the willingness to die, but the discussion seems more on Mann than on Schopenhauer.

Among the essays that bring together Schopenhauer's response to Vedantic and Buddhist philosophy rather well, is R Raj Singh's essay on suffering and Nirvana in Schopenhauer, the "trans-cultural philosopher." Raj Singh makes many valid points, including the need to appreciate both Schopenhauer's own limits as also the fact that many of his writings are not written under Vedantin-Buddhist influence. Moreover, as Raj Singh notes, some western critics (and we may add, many Indian ones too) are not well conversant with Indian thought and often make semi-erratic, incomplete and passing remarks on the subject; a point I have stressed often in this review. I found Singh's comments on the ideas of suffering, renunciation and release well made and to the point. Yasuo Kamata's essay on Schopenhauer in terms of pessimistic society and pessimistic religion is interesting in many ways; most of all in his correct insistence on the problems of ego-centeredness and individualism in Western society and this egoism-individualism giving birth to a relentless will to power. These points are now being consistently made within the Western tradition itself, in thinkers like Alisdair MacIntyre and in schools like deep ecology. Indeed, Schopenhauer's denial of the will to live is a correct diagnosis of suffering and a "rational" tirade against the excesses of rationalism itself. Kamata is also right in his resistance to the labels of pessimism as understood by the West, especially a society that loves only too much its autonomy, ego and individualism. I read his essay rather enthusiastically for a sustained debate on pessimistic society vs. pessimistic religion—it was touched upon but not dealt in that much detail.

A very different essay is that by Eberhard Guhe, on the causality principle of Nyaya-Vaishesika and its bearing on Schopenhauer. There is a background introduction to Nyaya-Vaishesika ontology and logic, their understanding of cause-effect; and how it may be seen to compare with Schopenhauer.

I found Matthias Kossler's essay on Philosophy and Religion appealing and engaging reading. Beginning from a brief historical note on the emphasis of difference between philosophy and religion; Kossler seeks to investigate Schopenhauer's rigorous insistence on this difference; and shows how Schopenhauer's binary contradicts the philosopher's own observations. The discussion is continued by noting Schopenhauer's contrast between religion and mysticism on one hand and philosophy and mysticism on the other; with a ending note on the question of "nothing," and its value for philosophy. This essay is also interesting in that it puts a warning to those all too hasty to make conclusions that Schopenhauer's Will leads to Brahman, or that he is a rigorous opponent of religion in favour of philosophy. For while Kossler retains the Schopenhauerean difference between religion and philosophy, he does so only by first rationally undercutting some of Schopenhauer's own pronouncements on the difference, and showing Schopenhauer's own inconsistencies.

D P Chattopadhyaya's essay on "Knowledge, Freedom and Language," is very well written, interesting and able to fuse various thinkers, concepts and concerns harmoniously and with ease. There is an excellent discussion on the difference between science-discourse-language on one hand and the aspects of life such a nirvana which precede them in the sense of transcending or, if some prefer, eluding language and conceptual communicability itself. In this sense, D P Chattopadhyaya discusses the notion of silence; the silence of the saint-mendicant and not the skeptical silence. There is also a very interesting discussion on death and the prognosis of the fear of death. Here is one essay that strides with a certain ease through Western and Eastern traditions, of which needless to say, Prof Chattopadhyaya is too well acquainted. I may add that even in terms of nirvana, we do try to conceptualize it (precisely the difference between religion and theology) and talk about it (precisely the various agamas and scriptures) but the point is that it remains beyond these as the other. So the same Puranas that talk of Isvara and Brahman, also say that these scriptures depart from His Presence, unable to be ultimately intimate with It; and thus only uttering neti neti(not this, not this). In a lighter context, we may also notice Heidegger—(and mentioned in the essay in the last paragraphs)—who speaks against the scientific, convention-ridden nature of language—this convention-language is dependent, nay, parasitical, on the true nature of language, which is the discourse of Being, the "house of Being." It is in this pre-scientific sense; as Chattopadhyaya quotes, "science in concepts," that we must locate Schopenhauer, and his idea of death, of time, of the body.

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