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Psychological Observations

Arthur Schopenhauer

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Psychological Observations.

In the moment when a great affliction overtakes us, we are hurt to find that the world about us is unconcerned and goes its own way. As Goethe says in Tasso, how easily it leaves us helpless and alone, and continues its course like the sun and the moon and the other gods:

*... die Welt, wie sie so leicht,
Uns hilflos, einsam lässt, und ihren Weg,
Wie Sonn' und Mond und andre Götter geht.*

Nay more! it is something intolerable that even we ourselves have to go on with the mechanical round of our daily business, and that thousands of our own actions are and must be unaffected by the pain that throbs within us. And so, to restore the harmony between our outward doings and our inward feelings, we storm and shout, and tear our hair, and stamp with pain or rage.

Our temperament is so despotic that we are not satisfied unless we draw everything into our own life, and force all the world to sympathise with us. The only way of achieving this would be to win the love of others, so that the afflictions which oppress our own hearts might oppress theirs as well. Since that is attended with some difficulty, we often choose the shorter way, and blab out our burden of woe to people who do not care, and listen with curiosity, but without sympathy, and much oftener with satisfaction.

Speech and the communication of thought, which, in their mutual relations, are always attended by a slight impulse on the part of the will, are almost a physical necessity. Sometimes, however, the lower animals entertain me much more than the average man. For, in the first place, what can such a man say? It is only conceptions, that is, the driest of ideas, that can be communicated by means of words; and what sort of conceptions has the average man to communicate, if he does not merely tell a story or give a report, neither of which makes conversation? The greatest charm of conversation is the mimetic part of it — the character that is manifested, be it never so little. Take the best of men; how little he can say of what goes on within him, since it is only conceptions that are communicable; and yet a conversation with a clever man is one of the greatest of pleasures.

It is not only that ordinary men have little to say, but what intellect they have puts them in the way of concealing and distorting it; and it is the necessity of practising this concealment that gives them such a pitiable character; so that what they exhibit is not even the little that they have, but a mask and disguise. The lower animals, which have no reason, can conceal nothing; they are altogether naïve, and therefore very entertaining, if we have only an eye for the kind of communications which they make. They speak not with words, but with shape and structure, and manner of life, and the things they set about; they express themselves, to an intelligent observer, in a very pleasing and entertaining fashion. It is a varied life that is presented to him, and one that in its manifestation is very

different from his own; and yet essentially it is the same. He sees it in its simple form, when reflection is excluded; for with the lower animals life is lived wholly in and for the present moment: it is the present that the animal grasps; it has no care, or at least no conscious care, for the morrow, and no fear of death; and so it is wholly taken up with life and living.

The conversation among ordinary people, when it does not relate to any special matter of fact, but takes a more general character, mostly consists in hackneyed commonplaces, which they alternately repeat to each other with the utmost complacency.*

(Translator's Note. — This observation is in Schopenhauer's own English.*

Some men can despise any blessing as soon as they cease to possess it; others only when they have obtained it. The latter are the more unhappy, and the nobler, of the two.

When the aching heart grieves no more over any particular object, but is oppressed by life as a whole, it withdraws, as it were, into itself. There is here a retreat and gradual extinction of the will, whereby the body, which is the manifestation of the will, is slowly but surely undermined; and the individual experiences a steady dissolution of his bonds — a quiet presentiment of death. Hence the heart which aches has a secret joy of its own; and it is this, I fancy, which the English call “the joy of grief.”

The pain that extends to life as a whole, and loosens our hold on it, is the only pain that is really tragic. That which attaches to particular objects is a will that is broken, but not resigned; it exhibits the struggle and inner contradiction of the will and of life itself; and it is comic, be it never so violent. It is like the pain of the miser at the loss of his hoard. Even though pain of the tragic kind proceeds from a single definite object, it does not remain there; it takes the separate affliction only as a symbol of life as a whole, and transfers it thither.

Vexation is the attitude of the individual as intelligence towards the check imposed upon a strong manifestation of the individual as will. There are two ways of avoiding it: either by repressing the violence of the will — in other words, by virtue; or by keeping the intelligence from dwelling upon the check — in other words, by Stoicism.

To win the favour of a very beautiful woman by one's personality alone is perhaps a greater satisfaction to one's vanity than to anything else; for it is an assurance that one's personality is an equivalent for the person that is treasured and desired and defied above all others. Hence it is that despised love is so great a pang, especially when it is associated with well-founded jealousy.

With this joy and this pain, it is probable that vanity is more largely concerned than the senses, because it is only the things of the mind, and not mere sensuality, that produce such violent convulsions. The lower animals are familiar with lust, but not with the passionate pleasures and pains of love.

To be suddenly placed in a strange town or country where the manner of life, possibly even the language, is very different from our own, is, at the first moment, like stepping

into cold water. We are brought into sudden contact with a new temperature, and we feel a powerful and superior influence from without which affects us uncomfortably. We find ourselves in a strange element, where we cannot move with ease; and, over and above that, we have the feeling that while everything strikes us as strange, we ourselves strike others in the same way. But as soon as we are a little composed and reconciled to our surroundings, as soon as we have appropriated some of its temperature, we feel an extraordinary sense of satisfaction, as in bathing in cool water; we assimilate ourselves to the new element, and cease to have any necessary pre-occupation with our person. We devote our attention undisturbed to our environment, to which we now feel ourselves superior by being able to view it in an objective and disinterested fashion, instead of being oppressed by it, as before.

When we are on a journey, and all kinds of remarkable objects press themselves on our attention, the intellectual food which we receive is often so large in amount that we have no time for digestion; and we regret that the impressions which succeed one another so quickly leave no permanent trace. But at bottom it is the same with travelling as with reading. How often do we complain that we cannot remember one thousandth part of what we read! In both cases, however, we may console ourselves with the reflection that the things we see and read make an impression on the mind before they are forgotten, and so contribute to its formation and nurture; while that which we only remember does no more than stuff it and puff it out, filling up its hollows with matter that will always be strange to it, and leaving it in itself a blank.

It is the very many and varied forms in which human life is presented to us on our travels that make them entertaining. But we never see more than its outside, such as is everywhere open to public view and accessible to strangers. On the other hand, human life on its inside, the heart and centre, where it lives and moves and shows its character, and in particular that part of the inner side which could be seen at home amongst our relatives, is not seen; we have exchanged it for the outer side. This is why on our travels we see the world like a painted landscape, with a very wide horizon, but no foreground; and why, in time, we get tired of it.

One man is more concerned with the impression which he makes upon the rest of mankind; another, with the impression which the rest of mankind makes upon him. The disposition of the one is subjective; of the other, objective; the one is, in the whole of his existence, more in the nature of an idea which is merely presented; the other, more of the being who presents it.

A woman (with certain exceptions which need not be mentioned) will not take the first step with a man; for in spite of all the beauty she may have, she risks a refusal. A man may be ill in mind or body, or busy, or gloomy, and so not care for advances; and a refusal would be a blow to her vanity. But as soon as he takes the first step, and helps her over this danger, he stands on a footing of equality with her, and will generally find her quite tractable.

The praise with which many men speak of their wives is really given to their own judgment in selecting them. This arises, perhaps, from a feeling of the truth of the saying, that a man shows what he is by the way in which he dies, and by the choice of his wife.

If education or warning were of any avail, how could Seneca's pupil be a Nero?

The Pythagorean* principle that like is known only by like is in many respects a true one. It explains how it is that every man understands his fellow only in so far as he resembles him, or, at least, is of a similar character. What one man is quite sure of perceiving in another is that which is common to all, namely, the vulgar, petty or mean elements of our nature; here every man has a perfect understanding of his fellows; but the advantage which one man has over another does not exist for the other, who, be the talents in question as extraordinary as they may, will never see anything beyond what he possesses himself, for the very good reason that this is all he wants to see. If there is anything on which he is in doubt, it will give him a vague sense of fear, mixed with pique; because it passes his comprehension, and therefore is uncongenial to him.

(* See Porphyry, *de Vita Pythagorae*.

This is why it is mind alone that understands mind; why works of genius are wholly understood and valued only by a man of genius, and why it must necessarily be a long time before they indirectly attract attention at the hands of the crowd, for whom they will never, in any true sense, exist. This, too, is why one man will look another in the face, with the impudent assurance that he will never see anything but a miserable resemblance of himself; and this is just what he will see, as he cannot grasp anything beyond it. Hence the bold way in which one man will contradict another. Finally, it is for the same reason that great superiority of mind isolates a man, and that those of high gifts keep themselves aloof from the vulgar (and that means every one); for if they mingle with the crowd, they can communicate only such parts of them as they share with the crowd, and so make themselves common. Nay, even though they possess some well-founded and authoritative reputation amongst the crowd, they are not long in losing it, together with any personal weight it may give them, since all are blind to the qualities on which it is based, but have their eyes open to anything that is vulgar and common to themselves. They soon discover the truth of the Arabian proverb: Joke with a slave, and he'll show you his heels.

It also follows that a man of high gifts, in his intercourse with others, must always reflect that the best part of him is out of sight in the clouds; so that if he desires to know accurately how much he can be to any one else, he has only to consider how much the man in question is to him. This, as a rule, is precious little; and therefore he is as uncongenial to the other, as the other to him.

Goethe says somewhere that man is not without a vein of veneration. To satisfy this impulse to venerate, even in those who have no sense for what is really worthy, substitutes are provided in the shape of princes and princely families, nobles, titles, orders, and money-bags.

Vague longing and boredom are close akin.

When a man is dead, we envy him no more; and we only half envy him when he is old.

Misanthropy and love of solitude are convertible ideas.

In chess, the object of the game, namely, to checkmate one's opponent, is of arbitrary adoption; of the possible means of attaining it, there is a great number; and according as we make a prudent use of them, we arrive at our goal. We enter on the game of our own choice.

Nor is it otherwise with human life, only that here the entrance is not of our choosing, but is forced on us; and the object, which is to live and exist, seems, indeed, at times as though it were of arbitrary adoption, and that we could, if necessary, relinquish it. Nevertheless it is, in the strict sense of the word, a natural object; that is to say, we cannot relinquish it without giving up existence itself. If we regard our existence as the work of some arbitrary power outside us, we must, indeed, admire the cunning by which that creative mind has succeeded in making us place so much value on an object which is only momentary and must of necessity be laid aside very soon, and which we see, moreover, on reflection, to be altogether vanity — in making, I say, this object so dear to us that we eagerly exert all our strength in working at it; although we knew that as soon as the game is over, the object will exist for us no longer, and that, on the whole, we cannot say what it is that makes it so attractive. Nay, it seems to be an object as arbitrarily adopted as that of checkmating our opponent's king; and, nevertheless, we are always intent on the means of attaining it, and think and brood over nothing else. It is clear that the reason of it is that our intellect is only capable of looking outside, and has no power at all of looking within; and, since this is so, we have come to the conclusion that we must make the best of it.