

**THE LAST TEMPTATION OF NIETZSCHE:
TRACES OF AN ASCETIC IDEAL IN “SCHOPENHAUER AS EDUCATOR”**

For the genius yearns more profoundly for holiness because from his watchtower he sees farther and more clearly than any other human being, down into the depths of the reconciliation between knowledge and being, into the realm of peace and the negated will, over to the other shore of which the Hindus speak.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator”¹

I All Along the Watchtower

There are three dangers, Nietzsche tells us, that overshadowed Arthur Schopenhauer’s development throughout his gloomy and for the most part unappreciated philosophical career: (i) isolation; (ii) despair of truth; and (iii) moral or intellectual hardness.² In the passage above, we see the third form of this danger—a yearning that lured Schopenhauer to self-destruction, to a “realm of peace and the negated will,” expressed in the philosophies of Buddhism and Hinduism as “the longing of human beings to be *reborn* as saints and geniuses.”³ Nietzsche suggests that Schopenhauer felt this longing as a form of piety in search of metaphysical “saintliness,” and yet, in spite of everything, he still did not succumb to cold, self-proud hardening.

“Schopenhauer as Educator” advocates this piety as a type of strength, but it also exists as a species of nihilism that Nietzsche later came to renounce, in its baldest form, as an inactive will to nothingness far removed from his conception of himself in *Ecce Homo* as “warlike by nature” and an enemy of nihilistic value-systems.⁴ Hence, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” the third essay in his *Unfashionable Observations*, assumes a pivotal role in the development of Nietzsche’s own philosophy before he begins to cast off the metaphysical trappings that adorn his early work as mask, as surface, and appearance—even, perhaps, as something superficial.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator” in *Unfashionable Observations*, translated by Richard T. Gray and edited by Ernst Behler (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 191, ll. 14-19.

² *Ibid.*, 187-192.

³ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Why I Am So Wise” in *Ecce Homo*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1989).

Saying this, we should certainly not presume that these earlier writings lack *beauty* and insight; on the contrary, Nietzsche often suggests that it is precisely in the superficiality of a thing that we discover its hidden depth and profundity.⁵ And it is with such a mindset that we will approach his *Unfashionable Observations*. In this paper, therefore, we should note the way in which “Schopenhauer as Educator” marks to some extent a turn in Nietzsche’s thought and a clear development in his *own* history. To what degree, then, does this essay spell out the budding philosophy of its author, and not just a scholarly meditation on its subject matter?—this is the question at hand. The line between author and subject very often blurs in the figure of Nietzsche, or at least what we have left of him today in his work. Throughout his life, he too was weighed down with isolation, despair, and hardness. He implies this himself in his essay: that his first comprehension of Schopenhauer was as if “he had written expressly for me.”⁶ Such a feeling is by no means foolish, and the fact that Nietzsche overcame this Schopenhauerian perspective, even in the face of danger, is both a sign of his great capacity for self-analysis and his own strength.

II. Nietzsche as Metaphysician

My working thesis in this paper is that the isolation, despair, and hardness that Nietzsche locates in Schopenhauer are actually borne from what he later terms an ascetic ideal in the *Genealogy of Morality* (1887). Traces of this ideal and its metaphysical undertones are especially prevalent in the views of Nietzsche’s early period—roughly, from the *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) to the *Unfashionable Observations* (1873-1876)—and are often even beautified. During his middle and later periods, however, Nietzsche radically overturns these views to claim that all metaphysical thinking (and ultimately, any quest for objective truth) serves as an expression of the ascetic ideal in its most unadorned form, as a rejection of the value of human life. This ideal and its partner in crime, a self-negating impulse, are noticeably present in “Schopenhauer as Educator,” published in 1874, but since this piece holds a special place near the end of Nietzsche’s early period, we would do well to consider what he gave up in the essay, as well as what he would cling to in his subsequent works.

From the outset of “Schopenhauer as Educator,” in its first section, Nietzsche stresses that a human being may understand himself through a distinctly metaphysical outlook:

⁵ Cf. this lovely passage from the *Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), section 334: “In the end we are always rewarded for our good will, our patience, fairmindedness, and gentleness with what is strange; gradually, it sheds its veil and turns out to be a new and indescribable beauty. That is its thanks for our hospitality. Even those who love themselves will have learned it in this way; for there is no other way. Love, too, has to be learned.”

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator” in *Unfashionable Observations*, p. 180.

Let the young soul look back on its life with the question: What have you up to now truly loved, what attracted your soul, what dominated it while simultaneously making it happy? Place this series of revered objects before you, and perhaps their nature and their sequence will reveal to you a law, the fundamental law of your authentic self. Compare these objects, observe how one completes, expands, surpasses, transfigures the others, how they form a stepladder on which until now you have climbed up to yourself; for your true being does not lie deeply hidden within you, but rather immeasurably high above you, or at least above what you commonly take to be your ego.⁷

Nietzsche's query here might be seen as an initial formulation of a question he develops more fully in his later works as a principle of the eternal recurrence—for there too our answer will reveal a law of our "authentic self." The question is framed differently, but its origins can clearly be found here in an analysis of the value of human life. Nonetheless, in the passage above an earthly existence is to some extent *devalued*. Nietzsche states that our human 'being' does not lie within any realm of human becoming, but *beyond* us: out of reach in an inchoate realm of truth. This truth is imagined as a pseudo-Hegelian sublimation of the natural world—as a world of culture, but one in which our will longs for self-negation, for peace and quiet—where knowledge and being are reconciled.⁸

Along these lines, Nietzsche seeks in this essay to erect an ideal: a liberated human being. But a liberation from what? In part, he hopes for a liberation from modernity—from an egoistic, desacralized, and uprooted culture where religion is no longer able to keep barbaric forces at bay. For the "floodwaters of religion are receding," he claims, "and leaving behind swamps; nations are once again drawing away from each other in the most hostile manner and long to massacre each other. . . . Never has the world been more worldly, never has it been poorer in love and goodness."⁹ Whereas in the Middle Ages adverse forces were held in check by the church, modern society has (especially since the Reformation) taken an atheistic turn by developing a secular state. In our present day and age, Nietzsche asserts, the state itself wishes to be idolised; but this is also an "age of atomic chaos," an age of self-centredness where "almost everything on earth is determined only by the crudest and most evil forces, by the egoism of the money makers and by military despots."¹⁰ In the face of such unruliness, the importance of creating a new ideal has become paramount. Nietzsche thus seeks to develop a 'true' culture and a revitalised sense of the human

⁷ Ibid., 174.

⁸ It is perhaps against just this sort of 'peacefulness' that we should compare Nietzsche's warlike posture in his later works.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator" in *Unfashionable Observations*, p. 198.

¹⁰ Ibid., 200.

being as saint. The “liberation” he promotes is an *education* under the tutelage of Schopenhauer. As well as a release from modernity, however, this involves a release from nature; such liberation, Nietzsche claims, “is perfection of nature when it prevents nature’s cruel and merciless onslaughts and turns them to good, when it drapes a veil over the expressions of nature’s stepmotherly disposition and sad lack of understanding.”¹¹ But this perspective bluntly *presupposes* nature’s hidden deficiencies: its cruelty, its malice, and the ugliness of our earthliness that must be veiled.

These are just a few instances of Nietzsche’s disparagement of nature and the metaphysical stance he takes in “Schopenhauer as Educator.” Nevertheless, one of the most perceptive observations he makes in this essay is that such a stance is *dangerous*. At this point, we see that there are two “inimical forces” that he himself suffers from over the course of his early period. On the one hand, Nietzsche’s derision of nature and the longing he expresses for a negated will call for a dissolution of the ego; on the other hand, there are moments even here in his early works when Nietzsche conveys a need to live a “genuine, red-blooded, healthy life” in triumph:

This is the reason why especially the modern philosophers are among the most powerful promoters of life, of the will to life, and why they long not only for release from their own, exhausted age, but for a culture, for a transfigured *physis*. But this longing is also their *danger*: within them the reformer of life and the philosopher—that is, the judge of life—are in conflict. Regardless of which one is victorious, it is a victory that will involve a defeat.¹²

Schopenhauer found a way to avoid this danger, we learn, by at first recognising his struggle against modern culture, and against nature, as a struggle against *himself*. When he subsequently grasped this resentment as only directed against a part of himself, however, and not his true self, Schopenhauer was able to distinguish the genius within him: “The secret of his being had now been revealed to him, the intention of his stepmotherly age to conceal this genius from him was thwarted, the realm of transfigured *physis* was discovered.”¹³ But this solution is something of an evasion—a *dissolution* yet again in which Nietzsche’s metaphysical vocabulary poses a problem. For what “true

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹² *Ibid.*, 194.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 195. Nietzsche’s line of reasoning here seems to serve as the first hint of what he later terms the “internalizing of man,” through *ressentiment*, in his analysis of bad conscience. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), II: 16. In his later period, then, it looks as if Nietzsche portrays this genius, spawned from resentment and in a “transfigured *physis*,” as the soul: another manifestation of the ascetic ideal.

self” does he seek to cultivate once nature has been banished? The answer, as his argument suggests, is no self at all: a non-self.

If we now balance this claim against a major concern raised in the first section of “Schopenhauer as Educator,” that the young soul in modern culture runs the risk of ‘pawning’ and ‘losing’ its self, we begin to see the real *tension* embedded in Nietzsche throughout his early period. Section 3 of this essay ends with two questions that prefigure once more his conception of the eternal recurrence—“Do *you* affirm this existence from the bottom of your heart? Are you willing to be its advocate, its savior?”—but it is Nietzsche himself who must overcome the “dangers” of a Schopenhauerian perspective before truly administering a Yes-saying philosophy.

III. Nietzsche as Physician

The germ of this life-affirming philosophy remains latent in Nietzsche’s early works, although it often comes to light through some unveiling as we have seen. Thus, in the “Utility and Liability of History,” the second piece in his *Unfashionable Observations*, he ardently proclaims life as “that dark, driving, insatiable power that lusts after itself.”¹⁴ By this, we should not imagine Nietzsche’s philosophy as one that sponsors supremacist values and forms of tyranny—at least not in the social realm. His objective is to expound an ethical theory rather than a political one; philosophers are to create an archetype of the true human being as an educator, and the point of culture in this sense is to foster lives of *true value*. “For where are the doctors of modern humanity,” he asks, “people who themselves stand so solidly and robustly on their feet that they could lend support to others and lead them by the hand?”¹⁵ With this question we see Nietzsche in a role he assumes throughout his works as a ‘physician’ of culture with moral concerns. In this vein, his *Unfashionable Observations* are devoted to a critique of modernity—particularly, to the way in which science, reason, and pure knowledge have been ranked above art and religion. His task is to expose the truth of “pure knowledge” as a lie, as *untruth*,¹⁶ to form new conceptions of philosophy, art, religion—and hence, to reevaluate our sense of life.

These concerns in “Schopenhauer as Educator” point to Nietzsche’s overarching query in section 4 that comes to dominate the rest of his essay:

¹⁴ Ibid., 106.

¹⁵ Ibid., 179.

¹⁶ Ibid., 184.

Given the dangers threatening our age, who, then, will pledge his services as sentinel and champion of *humanity*, to watch over the inalienable, sacred treasures amassed by such diverse generations? Who will erect the *image of the human being* at a time when all others sense in themselves only the selfish worm and a bovine fear, and have for this reason fallen from that image into bestiality or even into robotic automatism?¹⁷

This is an issue Nietzsche lingers on throughout his works, right up until his later period in his conception of the *Übermensch*. In the passage above, the dangers which threaten our age are the same “constitutional dangers” that Nietzsche describes as threatening Schopenhauer: isolation, despair, and moral hardness.¹⁸ Only ‘true’ culture, he maintains, can elevate our human nature to a more ‘spiritual’ plane and rescue us from these perils. Accordingly, Nietzsche depicts three expressions of a human being who has the strength to transfigure nature: Rousseau’s human being, given to violence; Goethe’s human being, given to contemplation; and Schopenhauer’s human being, the type Nietzsche finally endorses, given to action:

*The Schopenhauerian human being voluntarily takes upon himself the suffering inherent in truthfulness, and this suffering serves to extinguish his individual will and to prepare the way for that complete revolution and reversal in his being whose achievement is the true meaning of life.*¹⁹

This strength borne from transfiguration, however, is surely a curious form of action, in that the philosophy that Nietzsche invokes here requires a negation of the will and a rebellion in our being that can only lead to *inaction*.

The “true meaning of life” in this sense is a denial of life—squarely at odds with the Yes-saying philosophy that Nietzsche wants and, to be sure, *needs* to develop. The ideal of suffering for truth that he praises in this early period leads him to encourage self-denial: our realm of becoming is a “deceitful puppet play,” he asserts, since the ground of human experience lies only in immutable being. As a result, the “strength” of a Schopenhauerian individual is to be found in “his self-oblivion, and when he thinks of himself, he measures the distance between himself and his lofty goal, and it seems to him as though he has nothing but an unsightly cinder heap behind him and beneath

¹⁷ Ibid., 200.

¹⁸ Ibid., 192.

¹⁹ Ibid., 203.

him.”²⁰ This is anathema to the work of Nietzsche’s middle and later periods. The lofty goal he depicts is analogous, if not equivalent, to the ascetic ideal he takes issue with explicitly in the *Genealogy*; for even though the ideal here is a model human being, the fact remains that Nietzsche imagines this ‘being’ in metaphysical terms and actually hopes “to describe how we can derive a new set of duties from this ideal.”²¹ The fundamental purpose of culture in this sense, he affirms, is “to foster the production of philosophers, artists, and saints within us and around us, and thereby to work toward the perfection of nature.”²²

Consequently, where the philosopher and the artist of Nietzsche’s early period fulfill a metaphysical need in nature, the saint transcends his animality through a melting away of the ego. All achieve a redemption from nature: “with their appearance and by means of their appearance, nature, which never leaps, takes its only leap; and it is a leap of joy, for it feels that for the first time it has arrived at that place where it realizes that it must unlearn its goals and that it staked too much on the game of living and becoming.”²³ This “self-recognition,” not in terms of Hegel’s state but as ‘true’ culture, is imagined as the gentle weariness of nature in its twilight hours. Along the lines of Schopenhauer, this is the only image of beauty that Nietzsche can arrive at in his early works, which is hardly in keeping with Stendhal’s view, taken up in the *Genealogy*, that beauty is a promise of happiness.²⁴ As a matter of fact, happiness is entirely lacking in the Schopenhauerian individual; in its place, Nietzsche quotes Schopenhauer himself to state that the greatest life that any human being can live is a *heroic* one:

This sort of life is led by the person who, in whatever manner and for whatever reason, struggles against overwhelming odds for something that in some way will benefit all, who in the end is victorious, and who receives for this little or no reward. . . . His memory remains and is celebrated like that of a hero; his will, mortified throughout his entire life by toil and trouble, lack of success, and the ingratitude of the world, is extinguished in Nirvana.²⁵

Once again, though, this heroism presupposes that the will needs to be degraded, that nature needs redeeming, and that life is not worth living but full of constant suffering. Nature’s “leap” with the philosopher-artist-saint provides

²⁰ Ibid., 207.

²¹ Ibid., 207.

²² Ibid., 213.

²³ Ibid., 211.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 73.

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator” in *Unfashionable Observations*, p. 204.

us with a revitalised sense of the human being, an ideal that Nietzsche promotes throughout his philosophical works, but this Schopenhauerian outlook in particular has a tendency to slip into an ascetic mantle, with the saint who negates his will in Nirvana as an ascetic priest. Before he prescribes his own ideal, therefore, Nietzsche must throw off this ascetic mask in “Schopenhauer as Educator”—to *affirm* on the one hand how human culture should strive without end toward producing strong individuals,²⁶ but *cast away* on the other hand his belief that the meaning of culture is supernatural.²⁷

IV. Towards a Revaluation

I have in this essay put forward the view that Nietzsche’s early works spell out a great tension in him that he overcomes—as a self-overcoming of sorts—by his later period, and that the source of this inner conflict is his clear preoccupation with an ascetic ideal. Such tension is especially present in “Schopenhauer as Educator” where we see Nietzsche as both metaphysician and physician attempt to cultivate individuals of strong character; the implicit aim here is to make life meaningful, yet this is paradoxically lost as he urges a life of self-denial.

At this point, we should note Nietzsche’s own words, that such paradoxes are “assertions that do not inspire confidence because the author himself made them without genuine confidence, because he used them to make himself appear brilliant, to seduce, and generally to create appearances.”²⁸ Here we are told that Schopenhauer was never one to create appearances, but Nietzsche himself it seems was surely such a philosopher. In *Ecce Homo*, he describes “Schopenhauer as Educator” as an essay in which “my innermost history, my *becoming*, is inscribed. Above all, my promise!” His attachment to the ascetic ideal in this piece serves as a seduction, but his budding awareness of the *value* of human life in spite of every danger and all sorts of hardship serves as his promise. He continues:

What I am today, where I am today—at a height where I speak no longer with words but with lightning bolts—ah, how remote from this I still was at that time!—But I beheld the land—I did not deceive myself for a moment about the way,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 231.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

the sea, the danger—and success. The great calm in promising, this happy gaze into a future that is not to remain a mere promise!²⁹

Finally, Nietzsche admits that it is not Schopenhauer who is the educator in this piece but he himself. In his later period, therefore, he fulfills the promise embedded in the tension of his early writings. We perceive this tension already in “Schopenhauer as Educator” as Nietzsche wonders at the start of section 5 how he might associate with a self-denying ideal, and that perhaps this ideal is “nothing but an enrapturing, indeed intoxicating, vision that grants us individual moments only to let us down all the more immediately afterward and deliver us over to an even deeper sense of disheartenment.” This is exactly the conclusion Nietzsche reaches about Schopenhauer in the *Genealogy*:

The issue for me was the *value* of morality—and over this I had to struggle almost solely with my great teacher Schopenhauer, to whom that book, the passion and the secret contradiction of that book, is directed In particular the issue was the value of the unegoistic, of the instincts of compassion, self-denial, self-sacrifice, precisely the instincts that Schopenhauer had gilded, deified, and made otherworldly until finally they alone were left for him as the “values in themselves,” on the basis of which he *said* “no” to life, also to himself. . . . Precisely here I saw the *great* danger to humanity, its most sublime lure and temptation—and into what? into nothingness?—precisely here I saw the beginning of the end, the standstill, the backward-glancing tiredness, the will turning *against* life, the last sickness gently and melancholically announcing itself: I understood the ever more widely spreading morality of compassion—which seized even the philosophers and made them sick—as the most uncanny symptom of our now uncanny European culture, as its detour to a new Buddhism? to a Buddhism for Europeans? to—*nihilism*?³⁰

Later Nietzsche wants to see morality as growing out of human life with its origins in nature, not as transcending nature; along these lines, our world of becoming serves as a *platform* for culture on which the strong individual sees him or herself simply in terms of becoming without any reliance on supernatural ‘being.’ This is a naturalistic reading of human existence in which nature is not disparaged in any way but does also not serve as our sole basis.³¹

The ambiguous reference Nietzsche makes above to “that book” most probably alludes to *Human, All Too Human*,

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Untimely Ones” in *Ecce Homo*, Sec. 3.

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 4.

³¹ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1989), section 230: “. . . the basic text of *homo natura* must again be recognized.”

written after his *Unfashionable Observations*, where he finally begins to recognise Schopenhauer's No-saying philosophy as nihilistic—as a philosophy of destruction.

In his early period, however, this philosophy is a temptation Nietzsche yields to by endorsing the saintliness of a Schopenhauerian individual, effectively declaring that life is not worth living and that the ascetic life is the best life. The “leap” that nature makes here is not towards culture but towards ‘anti-nature’ since Nietzsche clearly adopts an ascetic ideal that *negates* the will—that negates the self and nature, and fundamentally rejects the value of human existence. Until he gives up this view that the meaning of human life is metaphysical, “something that is explicable only by the laws of another, higher life, one that is in the most profound sense affirmative,”³² he cannot quite accomplish the revaluation he so desires. For there is no real *affirmation* here. The watchwords of the Schopenhauerian human being only lead to self-denial, and this is a fact Nietzsche must contend with, even as he identifies these three dangers in section 3 of his essay—dangers that were, in truth, all too human to himself.

When he claims, then, that his educator “was an absolutely solitary person” without a single like-minded friend to console him, Nietzsche describes his own life. And when he stresses that “it is precisely such solitary people who require love, need companions in whose presence they can be as open and straightforward as they are when they are alone, companions in whose presence the strain of silence and dissemblance can cease,” he poignantly relates the lonesomeness he himself suffered from. The education he obtains to conquer such danger is his *self-education* on the way to cultivating a truly naturalistic and self-affirming outlook on life. To combat hardness, Nietzsche learned to love and found cheerfulness; to combat despair, he found his own strain of hope; to combat isolation, he found solace and companionship in his writings. After so many afflictions, the definitive test of our human spirit is our will to carry on. The most compelling example of this principle is Nietzsche's own life, inscribed in his work.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator” in *Unfashionable Observations*, p. 204.