Thoughts Out of Season

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Of Mutual Interest
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Plato (427 – 348 BC)
Kant (1724 – 1804)
Schopenhauer (1788 –1860)
& Modern Man (? – ?)

IMMANUEL KANT, the critic of pure knowledge, rescued philosophy from the speculation into which it had retreated and brought it back into the realm of the human intellect; made this his field and delimited the reason. At Königsberg in Prussia, in the second half of the eighteenth century, he was teaching something very like the premises laid down two thousand years before by the Athenian thinker. Our whole experience of the world, he declared, is subject to three laws and conditions, the inviolable forms in which all our knowledge is effectuated. These are time, space and causality. But they are not definitions of the world as it may be in and of itself, of *das Ding an sich,* independently of our apperception of it; rather they belong only to its appearance, in that they are nothing but the forms of our knowledge. All variation, all becoming and passing away, is only possible through these three. Thus they depend only on appearance and we can know nothing through them of the "thing in itself," to which they are no way applicable. This fact applies even to our own ego: we apprehend it only as a manifestation, not as anything that it may be in itself. In other words, time, space, and causality are mechanisms of the intellect, and we call immanent the conception of things which is vouchsafed to us in their image and conditioned by them; while that is transcendent which we might gain by applying reason upon itself, by critique of the reason, and by dint of seeing through these three devices as the mere forms of knowledge.

This is Kant's fundamental concept; and as we can see, it is closely related to Plato's Both explain the visible world as phenomenal, in other words as idle-seeming, which gains significance and some measure of reality only by virtue of that which shines through it. For both Plato and Kant

Immanuel Kant

the true reality lies above, behind, in short "beyond" the phenomenon. Whether it is called "idea" or "*das Ding an sich*" is relatively unimportant.

Both of these concepts penetrated deeply into Schopenhauer's thought. He early elected the exhaustive study of Plato and Kant (Göttingen, 1909-11) and placed above all others these two philosophers so widely separated in time and space. The almost identical results they arrived at seemed best calculated to support and justify, to help construct an image of the world which he bore within himself. No wonder, then that he called them the two greatest Occidental philosophers. He took from them what he could use and it gratified the craving for the traditional that he could so well use it; although owing to his entirely different constitution – so much more "modern," storm-tossed, and suffering – he made out of it something else altogether.

What he took was the "idea" and the "*Ding an sich.*" But with the latter he did something very bold, even scarcely permissible, though at the same time with deeply felt, almost compulsive conviction: he defined the *Ding an sich,* he called by name, he asserted – though from Kant himself you would never have known – that he knew what it was. It was the will. The will was the ultimate irreducible, primeval principle of being, the source of all phenomena, the begetter present and active in every single one of them, the impelling force producing the whole visible world and all life – for it was the will to live. It was this through and through; so that whoever said "will" was speaking of the will to live, and if you used the longer term, you were guilty of a pleonasm. The will always willed one thing: life. And why? Because it found it priceless? Because it afforded the experience of any objective knowledge of life? Ah, no. All knowledge alike was foreign to the will; it was something independent of knowledge, it was entirely original and absolute, a blind urge, a fundamentally uncaused, utterly unmotivated force; so far from depending on any evaluation of life, the converse was the case, and all judgements were dependent upon the strength of the will to live.[1]

THE WORLD OF GERMAN philosophy seems queer to us when we come to it from the French Revolution. The abstractions of the French – whether Liberty, Fraternity and Equality of the Harmonies and Passionate Attractions of Fourier – are social principles which are intended to evoke visions of social and political improvement; but the abstractions of the Germans, by comparison, are like foggy and amorphous myths, which hang in the gray heavens above the flat land of Königsberg and Berlin, only descending into reality in the role of intervening gods. Marx and Engels were to come to the conclusion that the failure of the German philosophers to supply principles of man as a social being had been due to their actual helplessness under an obsolete feudal regime: as, for example, the "self-determination" of Kant had been the intellectual reflection of the effect of the French Revolution on the minds of the German bourgeoisie, which had the impulse but not yet the power to free itself from the old institutions – so that this "will" remained a "will-in-and-for-itself . . . a purely ideological determination and moral postulate," with no influence on actual society.[2]

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[1] Thomas Mann trans. by H.T. Lowe-Porter. *Essays of Three Decades.* (New York: Alfred A Knopf. 1948) 378 & 379.
[2] Edmund Wilson. *To The Finland Station, A Study in the Writing and Acting of History*. (New York: Doubleday, 1940) 120.