



Arthur Schopenhauer
*Parega and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays**
(1851)

Chapter XXI
On Learning and the Learned

§ 244

When we see the many different institutions for teaching and learning and the vast throng of pupils and masters, we might imagine that the human race was very much bent on insight and truth; but here appearances are deceptive. The masters teach in order to earn money and aspire not to wisdom, but to the semblance and reputation thereof; the pupils learn not to acquire knowledge and insight, but to be able to talk and chat and to give themselves airs. Thus every thirty years a new generation appears in the world, a youngster who knows nothing about anything. It now wants to devour, summarily in all haste, the results of all human knowledge that has been accumulated in thousands of years, and then to be cleverer than all the past. For this purpose, the youngster goes off to the university and picks up books, indeed the newest and latest, as the companions of his time and age; only everything must be short and new, just as he himself is new! He then begins to judge and criticize for all he is worth. Here I have not taken into account at all the professional studies proper.

§ 245

Students and scholars of all kinds and of every age aim, as a rule, only at *information*, not *insight*. They make it a point of honour to have information about everything, every stone, plant, battle, or experiment and about all books, collectively and individually. It never occurs to them that information is merely *a means* to insight, but in itself is of little or no value. On the other hand, a philosophical mind is characterized by the way in which it thinks. With the impressive erudition of those great pundits, I sometimes say to myself: 'Ah, how little they must have had to think about, to have been able to read so much!' Even when it is reported of the elder Pliny that he was always reading or being read to, at table, when travelling, or in his bath, the question suggests itself to me whether the man was so lacking in ideas of his own that those of others had to be incessantly imparted to him, just as a *consommé* is given to a man suffering from consumption in order to keep him alive. Neither his undiscerning gullibility, nor his inexpressibly repulsive, almost unintelligible, paper-saving, notebook style is calculated to give me a high opinion of his ability to think for himself.

§ 246

Now just as a great deal of *reading and learning* is prejudicial to one's own *thinking*, so do much *writing and teaching* cause a man to lose the habit of being clear and *eo ipso* thorough in his *knowledge and understanding* because he is left with no time in which to acquire these. In his utterances he must then fill up with words and phrases the gaps in his clear knowledge. It is this, and not the dryness of the subject, that makes many books so infinitely tedious. For it is asserted that a good cook can produce something appetizing even from the sole of an old shoe; in the same way a good author can make the driest subject interesting and entertaining.

§ 247

By far the greatest number of scholars look upon their stock of knowledge as a means, not as an end; and so they will never achieve in it anything great because, to do this, it is necessary for the man who pursues a branch of knowledge to regard this as an end and to look upon everything else, even existence itself, as only a means. For everything that is not pursued for its own sake is only half-pursued; and in the case of every kind of work true excellence can be attained only by that which was produced for its own sake and not as a means to further ends. In the same way, new and great ideas and insight will be achieved only by those who have, as the immediate object of their studies, the attainment of their own knowledge and are quite unconcerned about that of others. But scholars, as a rule, study for the purpose of being able to teach and write; and so their heads resemble a stomach and intestines whence the food again passes away undigested. Their teaching and writing will, therefore, be of little use; for others cannot be nourished with undigested refuse and leavings, but only with the milk that has been secreted from the blood itself.

§ 248

The *wig* is indeed the well-chosen symbol of the pure scholar as such. It adorns the head with a copious quantity of false hair in the absence of one's own, just as erudition consists in furnishing the mind with a great mass of other people's ideas. These, of course, do not clothe the mind so well and naturally; nor are they so useful in all cases and suited to all purposes; nor have they such firm roots; nor, when they are used up, are they at once replaced by others from the same source, as are those which have sprung from one's own soil. Therefore in *Tristram Shandy* Sterne boldly asserts that 'an ounce of a man's own wit is worth a ton of other people's.'

Actually the most perfect erudition is related to genius as a herbarium to the plant world, that is always renewing itself and is eternally fresh, young, and changing. There is no greater contrast than that between the erudition of the commentator and the childlike naïveté of the ancient author.

§ 249

Dilettanti, dilettanti! Those who pursue a branch of knowledge or art for the love and enjoyment thereof, *per il loro diletto*,¹ are disparagingly so called by those who take up such things for the sake of gain because *they* are attracted only by the money that is to be earned from them. This disparagement is due to their base conviction that no one will seriously tackle a thing unless he is spurred on by want, hunger, or some other keen desire. The public is of the same mind and thus of the same opinion; and from this result its general respect for 'professionals' and its distrust of dilettanti. But the truth is that the dilettante treats his subject as an end, whereas the professional as such treats his as a mere means. But a matter will be followed really seriously only by the man who is directly interested in it, is occupied with it out of pure love for it, and pursues it *con amore*. The greatest work has always come from such men, not from paid servants.

[¹ 'For their pleasure'.]

§ 250

Thus Goethe was also a dilettante in the theory of colours. Here I wish to

say a word or two about this.

Being stupid and being useless and worthless are permitted; *ineptire est juris gentium*.² On the other hand, to speak of stupidity and worthlessness is a crime, a shocking breach of good manners and decency. A wise precaution! I must, however, disregard this for once in order to speak plainly to my countrymen. For I must say that the fate of Goethe's colour theory is a glaring proof either of dishonesty or of a complete lack of judgement on the part of the German learned world. In all probability, both these precious characteristics have been working hand in hand. The great educated public looks for a life of pleasure and amusement and, therefore, lays aside that which is not a novel, a comedy, or a piece of poetry. If, by way of exception, it wants to read for instruction, it first waits for something positive in writing from those who know better that here some instruction is really to be found. It imagines that those who know better are the *professional men* and, therefore, confuses those who live *on* a thing with those who live *for* it, although the two are rarely the same. In *Le Neveu de Rameau* Diderot says that those who teach a certain branch of knowledge are not the men who seriously study and understand it, for the latter have no time left for teaching it. Those who teach it live merely *on* it, and for them it is 'an efficient cow providing them with butter'.³ When a nation's greatest intellect has made something the principal study of his life, as did Goethe the theory of colours, and it finds no favour, then it is the duty of governments that pay academies to order them to have the matter investigated by a commission. In France this is done in connection with matters of far less importance. Otherwise, what is the point of these academies which make such a great show and in whose halls many a block-head sits and assumes a pompous manner? New and important truths rarely come from them; and so they should at least be capable of judging important achievements and be compelled to speak *ex officio*. So far Herr Link, a member of the Berlin Academy, has furnished us with a sample of his academic power of judgement in his *Propyläen der Naturkunde*, vol. i, 1836. Convinced *a priori* that Hegel, his colleague at the university, is a great philosopher and that Goethe's colour theory is a piece of amateurish bungling, he brings the two together on page 47 of his book, and says: 'Hegel exhausts himself in the most excessive outbursts when the question turns on Newton, perhaps out of *condescension* for Goethe, a bad business merits a strong word.' This Herr Link, therefore, has the audacity to talk about a wretched charlatan's *condescension* to the nation's greatest intellect. As samples of his power of judgement and ludicrous presumption, I add the following passages from the same book which elucidate the foregoing: 'In profundity of thought Hegel surpasses all his predecessors; it can be said that their philosophy vanishes before his' (page 32). On page 44 he concludes his description of that pitiable Hegelian chair-buffoonery with these words: 'This is the sublime edifice on the deepest foundations of the loftiest metaphysical sagacity known to science. Expressions such as "the thinking of necessity is freedom"; "the mind creates for itself a world of morality where freedom again becomes necessity" fill the kindred spirit with reverence, and are rightly recognized. They ensure immortality to him who uttered them.' As this Herr Link is not only a member of the Berlin Academy, but also one of the notabilities, perhaps even one of the celebrities, of the German republic of learning, these expressions, especially as they have nowhere been censured, can also be regarded as a *specimen of German power of judgement and German justice and fairness*. Accordingly, it will not be difficult to see how it was possible, for more than thirty years, for my works to be considered as not even worth a passing glance.

[² 'To be foolish and silly is the right of mankind.' (Cf. § 106 at end.)]

[³ From Schiller's epigram *Wissenschaft*.]

§ 251

But the German savant is also too poor to be honourable and straightforward. His method and course of action are, therefore, to twist and turn, to be accommodating and renounce his convictions, to teach and write what he does not believe, to fawn and flatter, to take sides and form cliques, to show deference to ministers, bigwigs, colleagues, students, publishers, reviewers, in short, to respect anything but truth and the merit of others. In this way, he often becomes a considerate bungler; and in consequence dishonesty has so gained the upper hand in German literature in general and in philosophy in particular that it is to be hoped a point will be reached where it will become ineffective and incapable of still deceiving anyone.

§ 252

Moreover, it is the same in the republic of learning as in other republics; the plain unassuming man is liked who quietly goes his own way and does not try to be cleverer than others. People unite against the eccentric mind who is a menace; and what a majority they have on their side!

In the republic of learning, things on the whole are much the same as in the republic of Mexico, where everyone is bent only on *his own* advantage and seeks prestige and power *for himself*, being quite unconcerned about all the rest who may be ruined over it. Likewise in the republic of learning, everyone wants to put *himself* forward in order to gain prestige and a reputation. The only thing wherein all agree is not to let a man with a really eminent mind come to the top, should he show himself; for he becomes a menace to them all simultaneously. From this it is easy to see how it fares with all branches of knowledge.

§ 253

Between professors and independent scholars there has existed from time immemorial a certain antagonism which could be illustrated perhaps through that between dogs and wolves.

Through their position, professors have great advantages for obtaining information about their contemporaries. Independent scholars, on the other hand, have through their position great advantages for obtaining information about posterity because, for this purpose, among other and much rarer things a certain amount of leisure and independence are needed.

As it takes a long time for mankind to discover to whom it should give its attention, the two can work side by side.

On the whole, the stall-feeding of professorships is the most suitable for those who ruminate and go over the same thing again and again. On the other hand, those who find their own fodder at the hands of nature are much better off in the open.

§ 254

Of human knowledge in general and in every branch thereof, by far the greatest part exists always only on paper, in books, this paper-memory of mankind. Only a small part of it is at any given moment actually living in the minds of some. This springs in particular from the shortness and uncertainty of life and also from men's indolence and love of pleasure. Every generation rapidly hurries past and obtains of human knowledge just what it needs; and then it soon disappears. Most men of learning are very superficial. A new generation full of hope then follows; it knows nothing of anything but has to learn everything from the beginning. Again, it takes just as much as it can

grasp or use on its short journey and then it too departs. How bad it would be, therefore, for human knowledge if there were no writing and printing! And so libraries alone are the sure and permanent memory of the human race, all of whose individual members have only a very limited and imperfect memory. Hence most scholars are as unwilling to have their knowledge examined as are merchants to have their accounts scrutinized.

Human knowledge is immense in all directions, and, of that which would generally be worth knowing, no individual can know even a thousandth part.

Accordingly, all branches of knowledge have become so extended and enlarged that, whoever wants to 'do something', needs to pursue only one special branch and to disregard all else. Then he will, of course, be in his own subject superior to the vulgar masses, but will belong to them in everything else. If we add to this a neglect of the ancient languages which is daily becoming more frequent whereby general education in the humanities is disappearing, for a smattering of them is useless, we shall then see scholars who are really dunces and blockheads outside their special branch of knowledge. In general such an exclusive specialist is analogous to a workman in a factory whose whole life is spent in making nothing but a particular screw, hook, or handle, for a definite instrument or machine, in which he certainly reaches an incredible dexterity. The specialist scholar can also be compared to a man who lives in his own house but never leaves it. In it he knows everything exactly, every little step, corner, and beam, just as in Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame* Quasimodo knows all about the cathedral. Outside the house, everything is to him strange and unknown. True education for humanity, on the other hand, positively requires versatility and a wide view and therefore certainly some degree of all-round knowledge for a scholar in the higher sense. But whoever wants to be a philosopher as well, must gather into his mind the remotest ends of human knowledge; for where else could they ever come together? Minds of the first rank will never be specialist scholars. To them as such the whole of existence is given as their problem and on this subject each of them will provide mankind with new information in some form and in some way. For only that man can merit the name of genius who takes as the theme of his achievements the totality of things, their essential and universal aspect, not he who spends his whole life attempting to explain some special relation of things to one another.

§ 255

The abolition of Latin as the universal language of scholars and the introduction of the petty provincialism of national literatures have been a positive misfortune for the stock of human knowledge in Europe. Because there was a learned public at all in Europe only through the Latin language, all books that appeared first made a direct appeal to everyone. Now the number of minds in the whole of Europe who are capable of really thinking and judging is in any case so small that, if their forum is further broken up and torn apart by language boundaries, their beneficial effect will be immensely weakened. The interpretations that are fabricated by literary hacks, in accordance with the arbitrary selection of publishers, are a poor substitute for a universal language of scholars. *That is why*, after a brief period of splendour, Kant's philosophy became stuck in the quagmire of German critical faculty, whereas over it the will-o'-the-wisps of Fichte's, Schelling's, and finally even Hegel's sham erudition enjoyed their flickering life. *That is why* Goethe's colour theory met with no justice. *That is why* I have been passed by and ignored. *That is why* the English nation, so intellectual and discerning, is still degraded by the most scandalous bigotry and priestly tutelage. *That is why* France's glorious physics and zoology lack the support and control of an adequate and worthy system of

metaphysics. Even more instances could be mentioned. Very soon, however, this great disadvantage will be followed by a second and even greater, namely that the study of the ancient languages will cease altogether. The neglect of them is already gaining the upper hand in France and even in Germany. In the eighteen-thirties the *Corpus juris* was translated into German; and this was an unmistakable sign of the appearance of ignorance in the foundation of all scholarship, the Latin language, and thus of the advent of barbarism. Things have now gone to such lengths that Greek and even Latin authors are edited with *German* notes; this is positively disgraceful and scandalous. The real reason for this (however much the gentlemen may give themselves airs) is that editors are no longer able to write Latin, and in their hands dear young people like to follow the path of indolence, ignorance, and barbarism. I had hoped to see this kind of thing duly and severely censured in the literary journals; but imagine my astonishment when I saw that it got away without any censure at all, as if it were quite in order! This means that the reviewers are just ignorant clients or else sponsors of the editors or of the publisher. The most considerate turpitude is thoroughly at home in every kind of German literature.

I have still to censure, as specially vulgar, a thing that is daily making its appearance with greater audacity. I refer to the fact that in scientific works and really learned periodicals that come even from academies, passages from Greek and (*proh pudor*)⁴ Latin authors are quoted in a German translation. Good heavens! Are you writing for cobblers and tailors? I believe you are! simply in order to have a '*very good sale*'. Then permit me most humbly to observe that you are in every sense of the word common fellows. Be more honourable and have less money in your pockets, and let the illiterate man feel his inferiority instead of your bowing and scraping to his money-box! German translations are precisely the same substitute for Greek and Latin authors as is chicory for coffee; moreover, we dare not place any reliance whatever on their accuracy.

[⁴ 'What a scandal!']

And so if it comes to this, then goodbye to humanity, noble taste, and lofty sentiment! Barbarism will come again in spite of railways, telegraphs, and balloons. Finally, we shall suffer in this way the loss of yet another advantage that was enjoyed by all our ancestors. Thus Latin discloses to us not only Roman antiquity, but also directly the whole of the Middle Ages in all European countries and modern times down to the middle of the eighteenth century. Thus, for example, Scotus Erigena of the ninth century, John of Salisbury of the twelfth, Raymond Lull of the thirteenth, and hundreds of others speak to us directly in the language that was peculiar and natural to them whenever they thought about scientific and learned matters. Therefore even now they come quite near to me; I am in direct contact with them and really make their acquaintance. How would it have been, had each of them written in the language that was peculiar to his times and country? I should not be able to understand even a half of what they wrote and a real intellectual contact with them would be impossible. I should see them as shadows on a distant horizon, or even through the telescope of a translation. To prevent this, Bacon, as he himself expressly states, afterwards translated his *Essays* into Latin under the title *Sermones fideles* in which, however, he was assisted by Hobbes. (See *Thomae Hobbesii vita*, Charleville, 1681, p. 22.)

Incidentally, it should be mentioned here that, if patriotism tries to assert itself in the realm of knowledge, it is objectionable and should be expelled. For what can be more impertinent than for a man to want to weigh in the balance his preference for the nation to which his precious self happens to belong and to do so in the sphere of what is purely and universally human where only

truth, clearness, and beauty should be admitted and now, from such considerations, to wish either to do violence to truth, or to be unjust to the great minds of foreign countries in order to praise and extol the smaller minds of his own ? But we daily come across instances of this vulgar feeling in the authors of all the nations of Europe. Such a sentiment has, therefore, been ridiculed by Yriarte in the thirty-third of his most delightful literary fables.

§ 256

To improve the *quality* of students at the expense of their already excessive *quantity*, it should be laid down by law that (1) no one be allowed to go to the university before his twentieth year. He would first have to pass there an *examen rigorosum* in the two ancient languages before being given a certificate of matriculation. Through this, however, he would have to be released from military service and would thus have his first *doctarum praemia frontium*. A student has far too much to learn that he could thoughtlessly throw away a whole year or more on the profession of arms which is so different from his own vocation; not to mention that his military training undermines the respect that every illiterate person, whoever he may be, owes the scholar from first to last. In fact, it is just the same barbarism that Raupach has described in the comedy *Vor hundert Fahren* in the 'Old Dessauer's' cunning brutality to a candidate. This very natural exemption of the learned professions from military service will not result in a reduction in the size of armies. On the contrary, it will reduce the number of bad doctors, inferior lawyers and judges, and all kinds of ignorant pedagogues and charlatans the more certainly, since every circumstance of a soldier's life has a demoralizing effect on the future scholar. (2) It should also be laid down by law that everyone in his first year at the university must attend lectures devoted entirely to philosophy; he should certainly not be admitted to those of the three principal faculties before his second year; but to these the students of theology would have to devote two years, those of law three, and those of medicine four. On the other hand, instruction at the gymnasia or high schools could be limited to the ancient languages, history, mathematics, and literary style, and could be the more thorough, especially in the first. But since an aptitude for mathematics is quite special and peculiar and does not by any means run parallel to the other mental faculties, and in fact has nothing in common with them,⁵ there should be an entirely separate class of students for instruction in this subject. In this way, the pupil in the sixth form for all the other subjects could be in the fourth for mathematics and also vice versa without detriment to his honour. Only thus can everyone learn something about it in accordance with his ability in that particular direction.

⁵ In this connection see Sir William Hamilton's fine essay in the form of a review of a book by Whewell in the *Edinburgh Review* of January 1836; also later edited in his name with a few other essays; also in German under the title *Über den Werth und Unwerth der Mathematik*, 1836.]

The professors, of course, will not countenance the above proposals, for they are concerned more with the quantity than the quality of the students. Nor will they support the following proposal. Graduations should take place absolutely gratuitously so that the doctor's degree which has been discredited by the professors' greed for gain might be restored to honour. In return for this, the subsequent state examinations for doctors could be abolished.

* Scanned from Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, Volume Two, Translated from the German by E. F. J. Payne, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

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