

<https://TheVirtualLibrary.org>

Genius and Virtue

Arthur Schopenhauer

Translated by T. Bailey Saunders, M. A.

From book "Essays of A. Schopenhauer", A. L. Burt Company, New York, 1902

Genius and Virtue.

When I think, it is the spirit of the world which is striving to express its thought; it is nature which is trying to know and fathom itself. It is not the thoughts of some other mind, which I am endeavouring to trace; but it is I who transform that which exists into something which is known and thought, and would otherwise neither come into being nor continue in it.

In the realm of physics it was held for thousands of years to be a fact beyond question that water was a simple and consequently an original element. In the same way in the realm of metaphysics it was held for a still longer period that the ego was a simple and consequently an indestructible entity. I have shown, however, that it is composed of two heterogeneous parts, namely, the Will, which is metaphysical in its character, a thing in itself, and the knowing subject, which is physical and a mere phenomenon.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Take any large, massive, heavy building: this hard, ponderous body that fills so much space exists, I tell you, only in the soft pulp of the brain. There alone, in the human brain, has it any being. Unless you understand this, you can go no further.

Truly it is the world itself that is a miracle; the world of material bodies. I looked at two of them. Both were heavy, symmetrical, and beautiful. One was a jasper vase with golden rim and golden handles; the other was an organism, an animal, a man. When I had sufficiently admired their exterior, I asked my attendant genius to allow me to examine the inside of them; and I did so. In the vase I found nothing but the force of gravity and a certain obscure desire, which took the form of chemical affinity. But when I entered into the other — how shall I express my astonishment at what I saw? It is more incredible than all the fairy tales and fables that were ever conceived. Nevertheless, I shall try to describe it, even at the risk of finding no credence for my tale.

In this second thing, or rather in the upper end of it, called the head, which on its exterior side looks like anything else — a body in space, heavy, and so on — I found no less an object than the whole world itself, together with the whole of the space in which all of it exists, and the whole of the time in which all of it moves, and finally everything that fills both time and space in all its variegated and infinite character; nay, strangest sight of all, I found myself walking about in it! It was no picture that I saw; it was no peep-show, but reality itself. This it is that is really and truly to be found in a thing which is no bigger than a cabbage, and which, on occasion, an executioner might strike off at a blow, and suddenly smother that world in darkness and night. The world, I say, would vanish, did not heads grow like mushrooms, and were there not always plenty of them ready to snatch it up as it is sinking down into nothing, and keep it going like a ball. This world is an idea which they all have in common, and they express the community of their thought by the word “objectivity.”

In the face of this vision I felt as if I were Ardschuna when Krishna appeared to him in his

true majesty, with his hundred thousand arms and eyes and mouths.

When I see a wide landscape, and realise that it arises by the operation of the functions of my brain, that is to say, of time, space, and casuality, on certain spots which have gathered on my retina, I feel that I carry it within me. I have an extraordinarily clear consciousness of the identity of my own being with that of the external world.

Nothing provides so vivid an illustration of this identity as a dream. For in a dream other people appear to be totally distinct from us, and to possess the most perfect objectivity, and a nature which is quite different from ours, and which often puzzles, surprises, astonishes, or terrifies us; and yet it is all our own self. It is even so with the will, which sustains the whole of the external world and gives it life; it is the same will that is in ourselves, and it is there alone that we are immediately conscious of it. But it is the intellect, in ourselves and in others, which makes all these miracles possible; for it is the intellect which everywhere divides actual being into subject and object; it is a hall of phantasmagorical mystery, inexpressibly marvellous, incomparably magical.

The difference in degree of mental power which sets so wide a gulf between the genius and the ordinary mortal rests, it is true, upon nothing else than a more or less perfect development of the cerebral system. But it is this very difference which is so important, because the whole of the real world in which we live and move possesses an existence only in relation to this cerebral system. Accordingly, the difference between a genius and an ordinary man is a total diversity of world and existence. The difference between man and the lower animals may be similarly explained.

When Momus was said to ask for a window in the breast, it was an allegorical joke, and we cannot even imagine such a contrivance to be a possibility; but it would be quite possible to imagine that the skull and its integuments were transparent, and then, good heavens! what differences should we see in the size, the form, the quality, the movement of the brain! what degrees of value! A great mind would inspire as much respect at first sight as three stars on a man's breast, and what a miserable figure would be cut by many a one who wore them!

Men of genius and intellect, and all those whose mental and theoretical qualities are far more developed than their moral and practical qualities — men, in a word, who have more mind than character — are often not only awkward and ridiculous in matters of daily life, as has been observed by Plato in the seventh book of the Republic, and portrayed by Goethe in his Tasso; but they are often, from a moral point of view, weak and contemptible creatures as well; nay, they might almost be called bad men. Of this Rousseau has given us genuine examples. Nevertheless, that better consciousness which is the source of all virtue is often stronger in them than in many of those whose actions are nobler than their thoughts; nay, it may be said that those who think nobly have a better acquaintance with virtue, while the others make a better practice of it. Full of zeal for the good and for the beautiful, they would fain fly up to heaven in a straight line; but the grosser elements of this earth oppose their flight, and they sink back again. They are like born artists, who have no knowledge of technique, or find that the marble is too hard for their fingers. Many a man who has much less enthusiasm for the good, and a far shallower acquaintance with its depths, makes a better thing of it in practice; he looks down upon the noble thinkers with contempt, and he has a right to do it; nevertheless, he does not

understand them, and they despise him in their turn, and not unjustly. They are to blame; for every living man has, by the fact of his living, signed the conditions of life; but they are still more to be pitied. They achieve their redemption, not on the way of virtue, but on a path of their own; and they are saved, not by works, but by faith.

Men of no genius whatever cannot bear solitude: they take no pleasure in the contemplation of nature and the world. This arises from the fact that they never lose sight of their own will, and therefore they see nothing of the objects of the world but the bearing of such objects upon their will and person. With objects which have no such bearing there sounds within them a constant note: It is nothing to me, which is the fundamental base in all their music. Thus all things seem to them to wear a bleak, gloomy, strange, hostile aspect. It is only for their will that they seem to have any perceptive faculties at all; and it is, in fact, only a moral and not a theoretical tendency, only a moral and not an intellectual value, that their life possesses. The lower animals bend their heads to the ground, because all that they want to see is what touches their welfare, and they can never come to contemplate things from a really objective point of view. It is very seldom that unintellectual men make a true use of their erect position, and then it is only when they are moved by some intellectual influence outside them.

The man of intellect or genius, on the other hand, has more of the character of the eternal subject that knows, than of the finite subject that wills; his knowledge is not quite engrossed and captivated by his will, but passes beyond it; he is the son, not of the bondswoman, but of the free. It is not only a moral but also a theoretical tendency that is evinced in his life; nay, it might perhaps be said that to a certain extent he is beyond morality. Of great villainy he is totally incapable; and his conscience is less oppressed by ordinary sin than the conscience of the ordinary man, because life, as it were, is a game, and he sees through it.

The relation between genius and virtue is determined by the following considerations. Vice is an impulse of the will so violent in its demands that it affirms its own life by denying the life of others. The only kind of knowledge that is useful to the will is the knowledge that a given effect is produced by a certain cause. Genius itself is a kind of knowledge, namely, of ideas; and it is a knowledge which is unconcerned with any principle of causation. The man who is devoted to knowledge of this character is not employed in the business of the will. Nay, every man who is devoted to the purely objective contemplation of the world (and it is this that is meant by the knowledge of ideas) completely loses sight of his will and its objects, and pays no further regard to the interests of his own person, but becomes a pure intelligence free of any admixture of will.

Where, then, devotion to the intellect predominates over concern for the will and its objects, it shows that the man's will is not the principal element in his being, but that in proportion to his intelligence it is weak. Violent desire, which is the root of all vice, never allows a man to arrive at the pure and disinterested contemplation of the world, free from any relation to the will, such as constitutes the quality of genius; but here the intelligence remains the constant slave of the will.

Since genius consists in the perception of ideas, and men of genius contemplate their object, it may be said that it is only the eye which is any real evidence of genius. For the contemplative gaze has something steady and vivid about it; and with the eye of genius it

is often the case, as with Goethe, that the white membrane over the pupil is visible. With violent, passionate men the same thing may also happen, but it arises from a different cause, and may be easily distinguished by the fact that the eyes roll. Men of no genius at all have no interest in the idea expressed by an object, but only in the relations in which that object stands to others, and finally to their own person. Thus it is that they never indulge in contemplation, or are soon done with it, and rarely fix their eyes long upon any object; and so their eyes do not wear the mark of genius which I have described. Nay, the regular Philistine does the direct opposite of contemplating — he spies. If he looks at anything it is to pry into it; as may be specially observed when he screws up his eyes, which he frequently does, in order to see the clearer. Certainly, no real man of genius ever does this, at least habitually, even though he is short-sighted.

What I have said will sufficiently illustrate the conflict between genius and vice. It may be, however, nay, it is often the case, that genius is attended by a strong will; and as little as men of genius were ever consummate rascals, were they ever perhaps perfect saints either.

Let me explain. Virtue is not exactly a positive weakness of the will; it is, rather, an intentional restraint imposed upon its violence through a knowledge of it in its inmost being as manifested in the world. This knowledge of the world, the inmost being of which is communicable only in ideas, is common both to the genius and to the saint. The distinction between the two is that the genius reveals his knowledge by rendering it in some form of his own choice, and the product is Art. For this the saint, as such, possesses no direct faculty; he makes an immediate application of his knowledge to his own will, which is thus led into a denial of the world. With the saint knowledge is only a means to an end, whereas the genius remains at the stage of knowledge, and has his pleasure in it, and reveals it by rendering what he knows in his art.

In the hierarchy of physical organisation, strength of will is attended by a corresponding growth in the intelligent faculties. A high degree of knowledge, such as exists in the genius, presupposes a powerful will, though, at the same time, a will that is subordinate to the intellect. In other words, both the intellect and the will are strong, but the intellect is the stronger of the two. Unless, as happens in the case of the saint, the intellect is at once applied to the will, or, as in the case of the artist, it finds its pleasures in a reproduction of itself, the will remains untamed. Any strength that it may lose is due to the predominance of pure objective intelligence which is concerned with the contemplation of ideas, and is not, as in the case of the common or the bad man, wholly occupied with the objects of the will. In the interval, when the genius is no longer engaged in the contemplation of ideas, and his intelligence is again applied to the will and its objects, the will is re-awakened in all its strength. Thus it is that men of genius often have very violent desires, and are addicted to sensual pleasure and to anger. Great crimes, however, they do not commit; because, when the opportunity of them offers, they recognise their idea, and see it very vividly and clearly. Their intelligence is thus directed to the idea, and so gains the predominance over the will, and turns its course, as with the saint; and the crime is uncommitted.

The genius, then, always participates to some degree in the characteristics of the saint, as he is a man of the same qualification; and, contrarily, the saint always participates to some

degree in the characteristics of the genius.

The good-natured character, which is common, is to be distinguished from the saintly by the fact that it consists in a weakness of will, with a somewhat less marked weakness of intellect. A lower degree of the knowledge of the world as revealed in ideas here suffices to check and control a will that is weak in itself. Genius and sanctity are far removed from good-nature, which is essentially weak in all its manifestations.

Apart from all that I have said, so much at least is clear. What appears under the forms of time, space, and casuality, and vanishes again, and in reality is nothing, and reveals its nothingness by death — this vicious and fatal appearance is the will. But what does not appear, and is no phenomenon, but rather the noumenon; what makes appearance possible; what is not subject to the principle of causation, and therefore has no vain or vanishing existence, but abides for ever unchanged in the midst of a world full of suffering, like a ray of light in a storm — free, therefore, from all pain and fatality — this, I say, is the intelligence. The man who is more intelligence than will, is thereby delivered, in respect of the greatest part of him, from nothingness and death; and such a man is in his nature a genius.

By the very fact that he lives and works, the man who is endowed with genius makes an entire sacrifice of himself in the interests of everyone. Accordingly, he is free from the obligation to make a particular sacrifice for individuals; and thus he can refuse many demands which others are rightly required to meet. He suffers and achieves more than all the others.

The spring which moves the genius to elaborate his works is not fame, for that is too uncertain a quality, and when it is seen at close quarters, of little worth. No amount of fame will make up for the labour of attaining it:

Nulla est fama tuum par oequiparare laborem.

Nor is it the delight that a man has in his work; for that too is outweighed by the effort which he has to make. It is, rather, an instinct *sui generis*; in virtue of which the genius is driven to express what he sees and feels in some permanent shape, without being conscious of any further motive.

It is manifest that in so far as it leads an individual to sacrifice himself for his species, and to live more in the species than in himself, this impulse is possessed of a certain resemblance with such modifications of the sexual impulse as are peculiar to man. The modifications to which I refer are those that confine this impulse to certain individuals of the other sex, whereby the interests of the species are attained. The individuals who are actively affected by this impulse may be said to sacrifice themselves for the species, by their passion for each other, and the disadvantageous conditions thereby imposed upon them — in a word, by the institution of marriage. They may be said to be serving the interests of the species rather than the interests of the individual.

The instinct of the genius does, in a higher fashion, for the idea, what passionate love does for the will. In both cases there are peculiar pleasures and peculiar pains reserved for the individuals who in this way serve the interests of the species; and they live in a state of enhanced power.

The genius who decides once for all to live for the interests of the species in the way which he chooses is neither fitted nor called upon to do it in the other. It is a curious fact that the perpetuation of a man's name is effected in both ways.

In music the finest compositions are the most difficult to understand. They are only for the trained intelligence. They consist of long movements, where it is only after a labyrinthine maze that the fundamental note is recovered. It is just so with genius; it is only after a course of struggle, and doubt, and error, and much reflection and vacillation, that great minds attain their equilibrium. It is the longest pendulum that makes the greatest swing. Little minds soon come to terms with themselves and the world, and then fossilise; but the others flourish, and are always alive and in motion.

The essence of genius is a measure of intellectual power far beyond that which is required to serve the individual's will. But it is a measure of a merely relative character, and it may be reached by lowering the degree of the will, as well as by raising that of the intellect. There are men whose intellect predominates over their will, and are yet not possessed of genius in any proper sense. Their intellectual powers do, indeed, exceed the ordinary, though not to any great extent, but their will is weak. They have no violent desires; and therefore they are more concerned with mere knowledge than with the satisfaction of any aims. Such men possess talent; they are intelligent, and at the same time very contented and cheerful.

A clear, cheerful and reasonable mind, such as brings a man happiness, is dependent on the relation established between his intellect and his will — a relation in which the intellect is predominant. But genius and a great mind depend on the relation between a man's intellect and that of other people — a relation in which his intellect must exceed theirs, and at the same time his will may also be proportionately stronger. That is the reason why genius and happiness need not necessarily exist together.

When the individual is distraught by cares or pleasantries, or tortured by the violence of his wishes and desires, the genius in him is enchained and cannot move. It is only when care and desire are silent that the air is free enough for genius to live in it. It is then that the bonds of matter are cast aside, and the pure spirit — the pure, knowing subject — remains. Hence, if a man has any genius, let him guard himself from pain, keep care at a distance, and limit his desires; but those of them which he cannot suppress let him satisfy to the full. This is the only way in which he will make the best use of his rare existence, to his own pleasure and the world's profit.

To fight with need and care or desires, the satisfaction of which is refused and forbidden, is good enough work for those who, were they free of would have to fight with boredom, and so take to bad practices; but not for the man whose time, if well used, will bear fruit for centuries to come. As Diderot says, he is not merely a moral being.

Mechanical laws do not apply in the sphere of chemistry, nor do chemical laws in the sphere in which organic life is kindled. In the same way, the rules which avail for ordinary men will not do for the exceptions, nor will their pleasures either.

It is a persistent, uninterrupted activity that constitutes the superior mind. The object to which this activity is directed is a matter of subordinate importance; it has no essential bearing on the superiority in question, but only on the individual who possesses it. All that

education can do is to determine the direction which this activity shall take; and that is the reason why a man's nature is so much more important than his education. For education is to natural faculty what a wax nose is to a real one; or what the moon and the planets are to the sun. In virtue of his education a man says, not what he thinks himself, but what others have thought and he has learned as a matter of training; and what he does is not what he wants, but what he has been accustomed to do.

The lower animals perform many intelligent functions much better than man; for instance, the finding of their way back to the place from which they came, the recognition of individuals, and so on. In the same way, there are many occasions in real life to which the genius is incomparably less equal and fitted than the ordinary man. Nay more: just as animals never commit a folly in the strict sense of the word, so the average man is not exposed to folly in the same degree as the genius.

The average man is wholly relegated to the sphere of being; the genius, on the other hand, lives and moves chiefly in the sphere of knowledge. This gives rise to a twofold distinction. In the first place, a man can be one thing only, but he may know countless things, and thereby, to some extent, identify himself with them, by participating in what Spinoza calls their *esse objectivum*. In the second place, the world, as I have elsewhere observed, is fine enough in appearance, but in reality dreadful; for torment is the condition of all life.

It follows from the first of these distinctions that the life of the average man is essentially one of the greatest boredom; and thus we see the rich warring against boredom with as much effort and as little respite as fall to the poor in their struggle with need and adversity. And from the second of them it follows that the life of the average man is overspread with a dull, turbid, uniform gravity; whilst the brow of genius glows with mirth of a unique character, which, although he has sorrows of his own more poignant than those of the average man, nevertheless breaks out afresh, like the sun through clouds. It is when the genius is overtaken by an affliction which affects others as well as himself, that this quality in him is most in evidence; for then he is seen to be like man, who alone can laugh, in comparison with the beast of the field, which lives out its life grave and dull.

It is the curse of the genius that in the same measure in which others think him great and worthy of admiration, he thinks them small and miserable creatures. His whole life long he has to suppress this opinion; and, as a rule, they suppress theirs as well. Meanwhile, he is condemned to live in a bleak world, where he meets no equal, as it were an island where there are no inhabitants but monkeys and parrots. Moreover, he is always troubled by the illusion that from a distance a monkey looks like a man.

Vulgar people take a huge delight in the faults and follies of great men; and great men are equally annoyed at being thus reminded of their kinship with them.

The real dignity of a man of genius or great intellect, the trait which raises him over others and makes him worthy of respect, is at bottom the fact, that the only unsullied and innocent part of human nature, namely, the intellect, has the upper hand in him? and prevails; whereas, in the other there is nothing but sinful will, and just as much intellect as is requisite for guiding his steps — rarely any more, very often somewhat less — and of what use is it?

It seems to me that genius might have its root in a certain perfection and vividness of the memory as it stretches back over the events of past life. For it is only by dint of memory, which makes our life in the strict sense a complete whole, that we attain a more profound and comprehensive understanding of it.