ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

ON THINKING FOR YOURSELF

Before AI Does It for You



Schopenhauer and 18 Essays on Attention, Online Identity and Thinking in the Age of AI

Translated, with essays, by Julian Delphiki

thinking school

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Schopenhauer’s text is in the public domain. The translation, notes, essays and all other material in this edition are original.

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Reading means thinking with someone else's head instead of your own.

Schopenhauer, "On Thinking for Yourself," § 261

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Prologue

An essay from 1851 and a blinking text box.

There is a text box blinking on the screen, waiting. Underneath, a line in grey: "Ask anything." It is a generous invitation and a slightly unsettling one, because it makes no distinction between "What will the weather be like tomorrow?" and "What should I think about this?" The box answers both with the same courtesy, the same speed and the same tone of someone who has been waiting all their life for you to ask.

This book is for one thing: knowing, every time you open an artificial intelligence assistant, whether the machine is helping you think or thinking for you.

This book was born in that box, but it starts much earlier. In 1851 Arthur Schopenhauer published a chapter of fifteen numbered sections with a title that now sounds like a slogan on a coffee mug: "Selbstdenken," thinking for yourself. It is neither a treatise nor a manual. It is a reasoned complaint, cantankerous in places, against a habit he considered the disease of the learned men of his day: reading so much that no room is left for thinking. His thesis fits in one line of § 261: *reading means thinking with someone else's head instead of your own.*

Schopenhauer was complaining about books. We have something far more efficient than books for thinking with someone else's head: someone else's head that talks back, never tires, and drafts for us the opinion, the email, the LinkedIn summary and, if we ask politely enough, the three bul-

let points that sum up who we are. The question of this book is not whether that is good or bad, which is a question for panel shows, but which part of that work is worth never handing over. My provisional answer, which the essays try to earn, is short: judgment. Deciding what you think, and signing your name to it.

A TEST FOR TODAY

Before you open an AI assistant today to ask it something that matters, write in one line what you think the answer should be. Then ask, and compare. If you had no idea, the answer is the machine's, not yours, and it may be worth thinking it over before you use it. If you already knew, the machine has only helped you, which is what it is for. That difference, between receiving a thought and producing one, is what this whole book is about.

HOW THIS BOOK IS MADE

Before the text, a chapter of context explains who Schopenhauer was in 1851, whom he was writing against, and why this essay, published without a fee by an ignored philosopher, ended up making him famous. A short note explains the choices made in translating him.

Part One is a new translation, made directly from the German of the first edition, of chapter XXII of the second volume of *Parerga and Paralipomena*. The notes explain what a reader in 1851 knew and a reader today has no reason to know: what a wax seal was, what leading strings were, why an "immediate" prince owed nothing to anyone but the emperor.

Part Two is eighteen essays that answer Schopenhauer from here. They come in three movements. The first five are about who we are online: the profile, reputation, the opinions we wear like borrowed clothes, how hard it is to change them in public, and how much the tribe weighs when you want to think differently. The next five are about what we hand over: the sentences the machine finishes for us, the books we no longer read, the memory we leave in the cloud, the authority we invoke when we say "the AI said so," and the attention we give to products designed so that we nev-

er leave. The last eight are about what is left to us: the empty time in which thoughts arrive, silence, conversation, writing, school, learning a trade, the pleasure of thinking for its own sake, and the job worth keeping.

Each essay includes at least one serious objection to its own thesis, and a final chapter, "Counterpoints," gathers the best objections to Schopenhauer and to this book. That is not politeness. A book that argues for thinking for yourself and never lets the other side speak would be, to say the least, inconsistent.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

It is not a book against artificial intelligence, which does very well many things we used to do badly and slowly. Nor is it a self-help book with a seven-step method for reclaiming your attention; Schopenhauer would have laughed at it, and rightly. It is a book about a moving border, the one that separates help from substitution, and about the value of knowing, at any given moment, which side of it you are on.

A note on sources. The essays cite studies, books and public conversations. Quotations from classic authors are my own translations from the originals; the ideas of contemporary authors are summarized in my words and credited to them. At the end of the book, under "Sources and References," every reference is listed by essay, so that nobody has to take my word for anything. That would be a strange way to end a book like this one.

Context: Schopenhauer in 1851

A philosopher ignored for thirty years publishes, without a fee, the book that will make him famous.

In 1851 Arthur Schopenhauer was sixty-three. He lived in Frankfurt with a poodle, played the flute every day before lunch, and had spent more than three decades convinced he had solved the riddle of the world without almost anyone noticing. That year he published in Berlin two volumes of loose essays under a Greek title that did nothing to help sales: *Parerga und Paralipomena*, something like "side works and things left over." The chapter translated in this book is in the second volume. To understand it, it helps to know who wrote it, against whom, and when.

A reluctant merchant

Schopenhauer was born in Danzig in 1788, the son of a wealthy merchant, Heinrich Floris Schopenhauer, who wanted to make him a merchant too. Young Arthur served his commercial apprenticeship unwillingly, his head in books. In 1805 his father died after falling from a window of the family warehouse in Hamburg, in circumstances the family never fully explained and that many biographers read as suicide. His mother, Johanna Schopenhauer, moved to Weimar, opened a literary salon that Goethe attended, and became a successful novelist, far more widely read in her lifetime than

her son. Mother and son got on badly, and the relationship ended in a break.

His father's inheritance let Schopenhauer do something very few philosophers of his time could afford: depend on no one. He studied at Göttingen and Berlin, took his doctorate at Jena in 1813 with a thesis on the principle of sufficient reason and, in December 1818, published with the house of Brockhaus the work to which he would devote the rest of his life, *The World as Will and Representation*. He was thirty. He was convinced he had written a definitive book.

It barely sold. Years later, the publisher told him that much of the print run had ended up as waste paper.

HEGEL'S HOUR

In 1820 Schopenhauer obtained the right to lecture at the University of Berlin and made a mistake that portrays his character better than any anecdote: he scheduled his course at the same hour as the lectures of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the great star of German philosophy. Hegel filled the hall. A handful of students came to Schopenhauer, and the course did not survive its first semester.

From then on Hegel became his obsession. In later works he calls him a charlatan, accuses him of deliberately obscure gibberish and of corrupting a whole generation of readers. When "On Thinking for Yourself" describes the book philosopher, who compares, weighs and criticizes what others said without ever looking at the thing itself, or the scholars who "amount to so little," it is not hard to guess whom he had in mind. The essay is, among other things, the revenge of a man who watched a full lecture hall applaud someone else.

It is worth remembering as you read. Schopenhauer was not a neutral observer of academic life. He was a rejected man who was right about many things and resentful enough to exaggerate nearly all of them.

FRANKFURT

In 1831 a cholera epidemic reached Berlin. Schopenhauer fled; Hegel stayed and died that November, probably of the disease. After some hesitation Schopenhauer settled in 1833 in Frankfurt am Main, where he lived until his death in 1860. His life ran like clockwork: writing in the morning, the flute, lunch at the same inn, a walk with his dog, the English papers in a reading room, the theater or a concert in the evening. Over the years he kept several poodles, and gave them all similar names; the best known was called Atma, the Sanskrit word for the soul.

He was a voracious reader, which adds an irony to the essay you are holding. He read Plato and Kant, the French moralists, the German mystics, Spanish literature (he translated Gracián's *Oráculo manual* into German), and the first European translations of the sacred texts of India, which shaped his philosophy more than almost anything else. When he writes that reading is thinking with someone else's head, it is not someone who despises books speaking, but someone who knew very well what books can do to a head, for good and for ill.

In 1844 he published a second, enlarged edition of his main work, with a second volume of supplements. It did not sell either.

A BOOK WITHOUT A FEE

Parerga and Paralipomena was made from the leftovers. Schopenhauer gathered in it what had not fit into his system: essays on the practical wisdom of life, on ghosts, on religion, on noise, on women, on reading, on style. He looked for a publisher for some time. Brockhaus, which had lost money on him, would not take the risk. A Berlin publisher, A. W. Hayn, finally accepted it without paying a fee; the print run was 750 copies, and the author's whole reward was ten of them, free.

The second volume contains a series of chapters on intellectual work that are best read together. Chapter XXII is "On Thinking for Yourself." It is followed by "On Authorship and Style" and "On Reading and Books." Further on comes the chapter on noise, to which the end of our

text alludes. Together they make something like a manual of mental hygiene for people who live among paper, written by someone who had spent thirty years looking down on those who made a living from it.

FAME, AT LAST

What happened next has a touch of poetic justice. In April 1853 London's *Westminster Review* published an anonymous article by the translator John Oxenford, titled "Iconoclasm in German Philosophy," which introduced Schopenhauer to English readers as an original thinker unjustly ignored. The article was translated in the German press, and suddenly the old man of Frankfurt was in fashion. The *Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life* in the first volume of *Parerga*, written in a far more accessible tone than his main work, became drawing-room reading. Visitors, admirers and portrait painters arrived. Richard Wagner sent him the libretto of *The Ring of the Nibelung* with a dedication. Schopenhauer, who had despised other people's opinion for decades, enjoyed every minute of his late celebrity.

It is one of the most instructive ironies in the history of ideas. The man who wrote in § 270 that only what one has thought *for oneself* has value, and that those who think for others are sophists, became famous through his book most written for others. It is better read not as a contradiction but as a warning: not even the person who draws the distinction most clearly is safe from it.

READING IN 1851

One last piece of context makes the essay sound less remote than it seems. Germany in the middle of the nineteenth century was living through its own information explosion. Mechanized printing had cheapened print; lending libraries rented out novels by the day; newspapers and magazines multiplied, especially after the upheavals of 1848; universities produced scholars who produced books commenting on other books. Schopenhauer writes in the middle of what a reader today would recognize as overload:

more text than anyone could read, most of it written, in his view, to be read quickly and forgotten.

His answer was not to read less on principle, but to distinguish. There is reading that feeds your own thinking and reading that replaces it. There are writers who have seen the thing with their own eyes and writers who only repeat what they read. There are ideas you have earned and ideas you have merely inherited. The vocabulary is from 1851, but the distinction works unchanged for an age in which text is written not only by scholars but by machines, at a speed that would have left Schopenhauer speechless, which hardly ever happened to him.

ABOUT THIS TRANSLATION

The text that follows has been translated from the first edition of 1851. Schopenhauer was a careful stylist who wrote long but clear sentences, with very concrete images: the seal and the wax, the cast-off clothes, the wax nose, the immediate monarch. The translation tries to keep that concreteness and the tone, rough at times, ironic at others, without modernizing it. The footnotes explain what a reader today might not know. The opinions are his, including the unfair ones. The reader is invited to do with them what Schopenhauer himself recommended: not to accept them because he said so.

PART ONE

The Text

Newly translated from the German of 1851, with footnotes only where the reader needs them.