

SCHOPENHAUER

julian young



Schopenhauer

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Julian Young

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**For
Mary Montgomery**

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Abbreviations

The World as Will and Representation, vols I and II — WR I, WR II

The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason – FR

On the Will in Nature – WN

On the Basis of Morality – BM

On the Freedom of the Will – FW

Parerga and Paralipomena – vols I and II — PP I, PP II

Manuscript Remains vols I–IV — MR 1–4

Chronology

- 1632** Spinoza born (dies 1677)
Locke born (dies 1704)
- 1685** Berkeley born (dies 1753)
- 1717** Hume born (dies 1776)
- 1724** Kant born (dies 1804)
- 1749** Goethe born (dies 1832)
- 1762** Fichte born (dies 1814)
- 1770** Hegel born (dies 1831)
- 1775** Schelling born (dies 1854)
- 1781** Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* appears.
- 1788** Arthur Schopenhauer is born.
- 1793** The Schopenhauer family move to Hamburg.
- 1797** Schopenhauer travels to Paris and Le Havre with his father.
Stays two years in Le Havre with family of business associate of his father.
- 1803–4** Grand tour of Holland, England, France, Switzerland, Austria.
- 1804** Apprenticed to merchant Kabrun in Danzig.
- 1805** Apprenticed to merchant Jenisch in Hamburg.
Apparent suicide of his father.
- 1806** Mother moves to Weimar. Goethe starts to visit her tea parties.
- 1807** Studies at grammar school in Gotha to obtain university entrance.

- 1809–11** University studies at Göttingen: natural science, Plato, Kant.
- 1811–13** University studies in Berlin. Attends lectures by Fichte, Schleiermacher, Wolf.
- 1813** Flees Berlin on account of war. Short stay in Weimar. Quarrels with mother, moves to nearby Rudolstadt where he writes his Ph. D. dissertation *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*. Conversation with Goethe in mother's house concerning theory of colours. Richard Wagner born (dies 1883).
- 1814** Schopenhauer's final break with mother. Leaves Weimar for Dresden.
- 1815** *On Seeing and Colours*. Draft of first version of *World as Will and Representation*.
- 1818** *World as Will and Representation* published (though with '1819' on title page). Leaves Dresden for Italy.
- 1820** Lectures in Berlin. Hardly anyone turns up.
- 1821** Falls in love with singer Caroline Médon. Beginning of the 'Marquet affair' (assault on seamstress and suit for damages).
- 1823–33** Lives in Italy, Munich, Frankfurt, Mannheim, Dresden, Bad Gastein and Berlin. Tries and fails to establish himself as a translator. Illness, depression.
- 1833** Settles in Frankfurt, where he remains until the end of his life.
- 1835** *On the Will in Nature*
- 1839** Competition essay 'On the Freedom of the Will' wins first prize.
- 1840** Competition essay 'On the Basis of Morality' not awarded the prize even though only entry. Rude remarks about Hegel upset Hegelian judges.
- 1844** Second edition of *World as Will and Representation* appears, amplified by a second volume. Nietzsche born (dies 1900)

- 1851** *Parerga and Paralipomena* appears.
- 1853** Beginning of Schopenhauer's fame.
- 1856** Sigmund Freud born (dies 1939).
- 1859** Third edition of *World as Will and Representation*. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection* appears.
- 1860** Schopenhauer dies.
- 1872** Nietzsche's first book *The Birth of Tragedy* appears.
- 1889** Nietzsche goes mad. Wittgenstein born (dies 1951).
Heidegger born (dies 1976).
- 1895** Max Horkheimer born (dies 1973).

Introduction

This is a book written primarily, though not exclusively, for those coming to Schopenhauer for the first time. It aims to introduce the reader to Schopenhauer's thought as a whole and, particularly in the final chapter, to convey a sense of its lasting importance.

By the generous standards of nineteenth-century German philosophy, Schopenhauer's is short and to the point. He only wrote one work of systematic philosophy, *The World as Will and Representation*. To master this is to master the totality of his philosophy. (Admittedly this involves mastering, in English translation, 1221 pages.)

In its final version, *The World as Will* consists of two volumes. The first, the substance of which appeared in 1818, is divided into four books. The second, added in 1844, comprises four 'Supplements' to each of the four books of volume I. Usually, though not universally, the supplements are, as Schopenhauer claims, expansions rather than corrections of the ideas of the corresponding book in volume I. My book closely follows the fourfold structure of Schopenhauer's great work, a work Thomas Mann described as a symphony in four movements.

Book I, together with its supplement – the topic of my [Chapter 2](#) – argues that the world of everyday experience is 'representation', merely; that it is only an 'appearance' or 'phenomenon' of reality, not reality itself. Book II – the topic of my [chapters 3](#) and [4](#) – pursues the interesting topic of what that reality is which underlies the everyday world. Schopenhauer's master-word is 'will'. The

metaphysical – meta-physical – essence of things is ‘will’. Unfortunately, this turns out to be a depressing discovery, since, like Buddhism, a religion that greatly impressed him, Schopenhauer sees will as inextricably tied to suffering. The third book – the topic of my [chapters 5](#) and [6](#) – discovers in art a partial escape from the world of suffering. And the final book – the topic of my [chapters 7](#) and [8](#) – discovers in love, but finally in mystical asceticism, a permanent escape from the will and hence from suffering.

Schopenhauer wrote a number of satellite works which deal with localised regions of the synoptic vision presented in *The World as Will*. *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (1813), his Ph.D. thesis, deals with the issues discussed in Book I, *On the Will in Nature* (1836) with those of Book II, while *On the Freedom of the Will* (1839) and *On the Basis of Morality* (1840) relate to the issues of Book IV. Schopenhauer’s final book *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851) is a collection of essays only some of which relate to his systematic concerns. (‘On Din and Noise’, for example, seeks to prove that all geniuses have been ultra-sensitive to noise pollution.) I have integrated my discussion of all of these works into the discussion of the main work at the appropriate places.

Wilfred Sellars, the teacher from whom I first gained an inkling of what philosophy really was, once said that to be able to criticise a philosophy you must first love it. This book attempts a judicious balance.

One

Life and Works

Theodor Adorno calls him 'peevish' and 'malicious',¹ Bertrand Russell 'shallow' and 'not very sincere'.² To Iris Murdoch, on the other hand, he is 'merry', 'sincere' and 'generous'.³ Who, in fact, was Arthur Schopenhauer?

HAMBURG

He was born in the port city of Danzig (now Gdansk) in 1788, but was brought up in Hamburg. In his parents he could have scarcely have been less fortunate. His father, though wealthy, cultured and cosmopolitan, was a depressive who, in 1805, jumped to his death from the attic of his house, leaving behind a traumatised son. His mother, Joanna, a writer of sentimental popular novels, combined frivolity and selfishness in a way that led one acquaintance to describe her as possessing neither heart nor soul.

Unsurprisingly, her marriage of convenience to a much older man was loveless. Though Arthur's arrival gave her the brief pleasure of, as she put it, 'playing with my new doll', she soon became bored, and resented the way his presence cramped her lifestyle. Adolescence did not improve relations between mother and son. More than usually alive to the pain and wickedness of life, Schopenhauer's no doubt inherited tendency to, as Johanna put it, 'brood on the misery of things' depressed her.

Schopenhauer was born, then, into a place without warmth or security. He records an occasion when, his parents having left the house, he experienced extreme anxiety that they would never

2 Schopenhauer

return. Anxiety remained with him all his life: 'I always', he remarks with characteristic honesty, have an anxious concern that causes me to look for dangers when none exists' (MR 4: 507).

Schopenhauer was often gruff and did not suffer fools gladly. But unlike Friedrich Nietzsche, whose philosophy is dominated by his love-hate relationship with Schopenhauer, he was by no means unsociable. Conversation was one of his greatest pleasures. Yet since anxiety, watchfulness, precludes the trust necessary to close relationships, it is unsurprising that his life contained no really deep friendships. In a famous parable, he offers an account of human sociability which naturally tells us a great deal about its author. One cold winter's day, Schopenhauer writes, a number of porcupines huddled together quite closely

in order through their mutual warmth to prevent themselves from being frozen. But they soon felt the effect of their quills on one another, which made them again move apart. Now when the need for warmth once more brought them together, the drawback of the quills was repeated so that they were tossed between two evils, until they discovered the proper distance from which they could best tolerate one another. Thus the need for society which springs from the emptiness and monotony of men's lives drives them together; but their many unpleasant and repulsive qualities and insufferable drawbacks once more drives them apart. The mean distance which they finally discover, and which enables them to endure being together, is politeness and good manners. Whoever does not keep to this is told in England to 'keep his distance'

[PP II: 651–2].

Schopenhauer clearly had a powerful sex drive – as we will see, he views sex as 'the invisible centre point of all action and conduct' (WR II: 513). But his sexual relations were consistently unsuccessful. The women he was disposed to love would not sleep with him, and the women who would sleep with him – whores and actresses – he did not love. The one exception is the actress-singer Caroline

Médon, with whom he had an on-off affair throughout the 1820s. Though he had a genuine and lasting affection for her – he remembered her in his will even though their contact had ceased many years before his death – his habit of distrust prevented him committing himself to the marriage he sometimes contemplated.

* * *

Parents, as Philip Larkin famously observed (in somewhat racier language), screw you up. And Schopenhauer's philosophy with, at its heart, we will see, the assertion that life is a painful 'error' from which we need to be 'saved', may well seem the product of a distressed childhood. In fact, I think, there is little doubt that it is. Had he been the offspring of different parents he would have written a different philosophy – or, more probably, no philosophy at all. The actual homelessness of his childhood is reflected in the metaphysical homelessness (and homesickness) of his philosophy.

This being said, it is important also to emphasise that the facts of Schopenhauer's life, of themselves, do nothing to bring into doubt the truth of his philosophy. For, as we shall see, he presents an array of insightful and substantial arguments for his pessimistic account of the human condition and it is upon these that his philosophy stands or falls. The facts of his life bear on the origin of his ideas but not on their validity.

GÖTTINGEN

Let us fast-forward; past Schopenhauer's early schooldays, past his two-year stay in France in 1797–9, past his grand tour of Europe in 1803–4 and past his unhappy commercial apprenticeships of 1804–7 undertaken out of respect for his father's wishes. Let us fast-forward to his final escape from the world of commerce and to his arrival at the University of Göttingen in 1809.

Schopenhauer spent his first year at Göttingen studying natural science. This, however, was by no means incompatible with his philosophical inclinations since, as we will see in [chapter 3](#), he

regards science as 'the corrected statement of the problem of metaphysics' (WR II: 178). In Schopenhauer's view, only a substantial grounding in science allows one even to *begin* as a philosopher.

Schopenhauer remained fascinated by natural science, and kept abreast of new developments all his life. Unlike most members of the Romantic movement with whom he otherwise has many affinities, he is not at all hostile to science – providing, as we shall see, it recognises that, at the most fundamental level, it can only complete itself by becoming philosophy. There is, as Nietzsche remarks, much science in Schopenhauer.

In his second and final year at Göttingen, Schopenhauer turned to philosophy proper. The philosophers he admired above all others were Plato and Kant. The quality of his relationship to the one, however, was very different from that of his relationship to the other.

* * *

Schopenhauer admired Kant as a supreme theoretician. (As a surveyor of the human heart, on the other hand, he regards him as fatally crippled by a lack of contact with the 'real' world, by a life spent in lecture theatres.) The *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) is a source of so many fundamental and 'incontestable' theoretical truths as to make Kant's name indisputably 'immortal' (WR I: 437).

'Kant's greatest merit', Schopenhauer writes, 'is the distinction of the phenomenon from the thing in itself, based on the proof that between things and us there always stands the intellect' (WR I: 417). Kant's central achievement, in other words, was to show that rather than being a blank sheet on which reality simply stamps its character, the knowing mind is *active*, actively engaged in constructing intelligibility out of unintelligibility, consciousness out of sensations. From this it follows, Schopenhauer takes Kant to have shown, that the world of everyday experience, indeed the whole space-time world of 'nature', is 'appearance' or 'phenomenon', merely, utterly distinct from reality as such, from the 'thing in itself'.

What, then, Schopenhauer took from Kant is the conviction that the natural world is, in philosophers' jargon, 'ideal' rather than 'real'. ('Ideal' is confusing. Think of it in connection with 'idea' rather than 'perfection'.) To read and understand Kant's proofs of idealism, he says, produces a change so fundamental as to amount to an 'intellectual rebirth', an overcoming of that 'inborn realism which arises from the original disposition of the intellect' (WR I: xxiii). As we will see in the next chapter, Schopenhauer regards the human mind as an evolutionary product of the struggle for survival. From this point of view, 'realism' has to be built into the intellect. Creatures with a disposition to sit around doubting the reality of the tiger bearing down on them are likely to come to a tragic end before reproducing their kind.

If the space-time world is ideal, a mere construction of our minds, what is reality – *real* reality – like? Kant's frustrating answer (frustrating at least to his immediate successors) is that this question can never be answered. To know reality as it is 'in itself' we would have to possess what he calls 'intellectual intuition'. We would have to be capable of a direct encounter with the 'thing in itself', an encounter which bypassed the world-fabricating, 'story'-telling, activity of the mind. But as *human* beings, says Kant, intellectual intuition is something of which we are incapable. Only God has intellectual intuition – or would have if he existed. (Whether God exists is, for Kant, precisely one of those questions about ultimate reality we can never answer.)

Schopenhauer says that Kant's writings are illuminated by a 'brilliant dryness' (WR I: 428). But his own spirit was far from dry. It was flooded by a passionate yearning that there be 'something more'; something more than this mundane world which, already as a teenager, he perceived to be a place of pain, horror and boredom. This metaphysical homesickness, this yearning for, as Nietzsche would later call it, a 'true world' above and beyond this one, is what constitutes his spiritual affinity with Plato. Whereas he relates to

6 Schopenhauer

Kant as a theoretician, he relates to Plato as an existential philosopher.

* * *

Like Schopenhauer, Plato (about 428–347 BC) found the everyday world an unpleasant place in which to find oneself, and like Kant he found it to be less than fully real. In the *Republic* he propounds the famous simile of the cave. Our everyday conception of reality, he suggests, is like that of prisoners in a cave chained in such a way that they can only look at the play of shadows on the wall in front of them, the shadows being cast by objects behind their backs illuminated by a fire. Taking the ‘virtual’ objects on the screen in front of them to be reality itself (like the inhabitants of *The Matrix*) they do not even guess the existence of the objects and the fire behind their backs. And of the truly real world beyond the cave and of the sun which illuminates it, they have no inkling at all.

Truly real objects are, for Plato, what he calls the ‘Forms’ or ‘Ideas’. These are the perfect originals of which the shadow-casting objects of the cave are, even at their best, imperfect copies. So the form of the mountain, for example, is a perfect, perfectly beautiful, mountain. The ‘sun’ which illuminates the world of the Forms corresponds to ‘the good’. Plato is convinced that the world of the Forms is ordered and illuminated by a divine benevolence.

Unlike Kant, Plato held that access to the ‘true world’ was possible – not for the multitude of ordinary ‘prisoners’ of the shadow world, but for the enlightened few, the lovers of the Forms, the authentic ‘philosophers’. In the *Phaedrus*, a work influenced, as Schopenhauer was to be a couple of millennia later, by Eastern thinking, he suggests that while ordinary people are condemned to perpetual reincarnation, the enlightened one can escape the cycle of rebirth and achieve permanent dwelling in a world beyond change and pain.

All this produced a powerful resonance in Schopenhauer. Already as a teenager (like Nietzsche) he loved mountain tops, especially at

dawn. Climbing the Chapeau near Chamonix when he was sixteen, he records in his diary the ‘indescribably wonderful imprint’ of ‘the enormity of nature’, a nature that is ‘no longer ordinary nature but has stepped out of its bounds [so that] one feels closer to it’ (*Reisetagebücher aus den Jahren 1803 bis 1804*, p. 186). Already as a teenager, that is, Schopenhauer sought and sometimes achieved ecstasy: Latin: *ex-stasis*, standing out of, transcendence, transcendence of ordinary consciousness, absorption into a higher plane of reality. By 1813 Platonic transcendence has begun to dominate his philosophical notebook as the notion of a ‘better consciousness’:

personality and causality exist in this temporal, sensory,
comprehensible world. But the better consciousness within me lifts
me up into a world where neither personality, nor subject not
object, exist any more

[MR 1: 44].

It is very important to see that the idea of Platonic ecstasy, of a ‘better consciousness’ that transports us to a ‘true world’, belonged to Schopenhauer’s philosophical thinking from the very beginning. As we will see in [chapter 8](#), his mature philosophy ends with an affirmation of the possibility of ‘salvation’, hinted at by art but achieved only through the will-‘denial’ of the mystical ascetic. Many interpreters follow Bertrand Russell in viewing Schopenhauer’s ‘salvation’ as a last-minute failure of nerve; an ‘insincere’ twist stuck on to the end of a work whose true conclusion is bleak despair. In fact, however, the idea of ecstatic access to a Platonic domain belonged to the heart of Schopenhauer’s thinking from the very beginning. This is why Iris Murdoch (one of Schopenhauer’s greatest admirers and best readers) is right in saying that, though he totally rejects traditional Christian theology, Schopenhauer’s fundamental concerns are, in a broad sense of the term, ‘religious’, and that ‘his religious passion is sincere’ (op. cit: 72, 62). Like all of us who are troubled by evil, pain and death, Schopenhauer was always intensely focused on the ‘something more’.

BERLIN

In 1811 Schopenhauer moved from Göttingen to Berlin in order to attend the lectures of Johann Fichte, then at the height of his fame. Like all of Kant's immediate successors, the so-called 'German idealists', such as Jacobi, Schelling and Hegel, Fichte refused to accept the unknowability of the thing in itself. Not only did he claim to have the 'intellectual intuition' necessary to know it, he claimed to be able to capture it in concepts, to describe it in the sober medium of philosophical prose. (What Fichte's contemplation of 'the Absolute'⁴ delivered were three fundamental principles: 'The ego posits itself', 'The ego posits the non-ego' and 'The ego posits a limited ego in opposition to a limited non-ego'. Quite evidently, understanding Fichte's philosophy is no easy matter.)

Schopenhauer was bitterly disappointed by Fichte's lectures. The frustrated complaint, recorded over and over again in the lecture notes he struggled to compile, is simple: Fichte's flights of conceptual fancy are unintelligible, 'lunatic babbling', 'raving nonsense', (MR 2: 134). Eventually, frustration gives way to satire. When Fichte reports that 'the Ego seats itself' Schopenhauer draws a picture of a chair. When Fichte reports that 'the Ego is not clarified by anything else', Schopenhauer comments: 'As today he only supplied the pure light but no taper [to light it with] these notes could not be continued' (MR 2: 211).

It is important to take note of the fact that Schopenhauer's objections to Fichte's pretentious obsurantism appear early in his life. After it became clear that he was not going to obtain a paid university position, Schopenhauer's writings start to overflow with frenetic abuse of the 'professors of philosophy' – Fichte, Hegel et al. The central objection is always to the mud-like unintelligibility of their prose. Expressing the sentiment – to which he always adheres in his own wonderfully lucid writing – that authentic philosophical writing should, like a Swiss lake, reveal its depth precisely through its clarity, Schopenhauer asserts as a fundamental principle that 'clarity is the good faith of philosophers' (FR: 4). It is this principle

which he uses to convict Fichte and company, not just of ugly obscurantism, but of intellectual dishonesty. Since this is often put down to mere jealousy of those who managed to get paid to philosophise, it is important to see that the objection appeared long before personal disappointment could play any role.

Another reason it is important to take note of Schopenhauer's early dislike of Fichte is that his philosophy is sometimes dismissed as little more than reheated Fichtianism. Given the actual character of his encounter with Fichte, this is inherently implausible.

WEIMAR

In May of 1813 Schopenhauer left Berlin for Weimar, a town dominated by the figure of Johann Goethe. A universal man – lover of many women, scientist, politician, civil servant, poet and playwright of the highest genius, as well as being a person who inspired deep affection – Goethe had become, as a result of his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the first European superstar. When the novel appeared Europe was swept by a wave of suicides imitating the fate of its hero.

Joanna Schopenhauer had lived in Weimar since 1806, conducting a regular salon visited by the great and the good, including Goethe himself. Though the deterioration of his never-good relations with his mother made it prudent to withdraw to nearby Rudolstadt, Schopenhauer attended his mother's tea parties, where he met Goethe and for a short time collaborated with him on his anti-Newtonian theory of colours. This led, in 1815, to Schopenhauer's own *On Seeing and Colours*. Though the topic was relatively peripheral to the main line of his thinking, Schopenhauer was greatly flattered by the attention of the great man. Goethe is one of the few figures of his age for whom he never has a bad word. (The same is true of Nietzsche.)

A more philosophically significant encounter in his mother's salon was with the orientalist F. J. Majer, who, in 1813, introduced him to the *Upanishads*. Though Schopenhauer employs the phrase

‘veil of Maya’ taken from Hindu metaphysics in the first (1818) version of the main work, it was not however until after its appearance that his serious concern with Buddhism – which he came to regard as the greatest of all religions – began. That it took him some time to fully appropriate what he really wanted from Eastern thought helps explain, as we will see, certain changes that took place in the development of his philosophy.

While at Rudolstadt Schopenhauer completed his Ph. D. dissertation, *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, which was published in 1813. This is a technical, purely theoretical work devoted to simplifying the complicated machinery which Kant had postulated as the mind’s method of transforming sensory input into intelligible output. According to Schopenhauer’s (not, I think, very plausible) argument, all the mind ever does is to apply one of the, as he sees it, four forms of the principle that everything has a reason for being as it is. Though he always insisted that the work should be read as an introduction to *The World as Will*, it in fact contains hardly a hint of the vast imaginative construction that was soon to follow.

DRESDEN AND BERLIN AGAIN

After a final break with his mother, Schopenhauer spent the years 1814–18 in Dresden. This was the period of the most intense and sustained creativity of his entire life. What gave birth to it was that he thought he had cracked the problem of the ‘thing in itself’. As he wrote in a note of 1815, it seemed to him he had made the revolutionary discovery that ‘the will is Kant’s thing in itself’ (MR 1: 319). With the inspirational excitement of seeming to have solved the problem that preoccupied all his contemporaries – an excitement akin, perhaps, to Watson and Crick’s excitement at beating everyone else to the discovery of the structure of DNA – the whole vast edifice of the first edition of *The World as Will* poured from his pen. Though he considered himself a good Kantian, and was, during the same period, criticising Schelling for claiming to know what Kant had shown to be unknowable, the nature of the thing in itself

(MR 2: 358–60), he does not seem to have been unduly troubled by the appearance that he was doing exactly the same thing himself. And neither does he at this stage seem to have been unduly troubled by the thought that the will, as the creative ground of a world of suffering, must itself be fundamentally evil – an account of ultimate reality hardly conducive to the admission of a realm of ‘salvation’ accessible to a ‘better consciousness’.

Seeming to have solved the fundamental problem of philosophy, Schopenhauer decided, in 1820, to let the world know about it. The venue was the University of Berlin where he obtained the right to lecture. Deciding on a clash of Titans, he deliberately timetabled his lectures to coincide with Hegel’s. The result was a fiasco. While over two hundred people listened to Hegel, almost no one turned up for Schopenhauer.

Given Schopenhauer’s acumen in other fields – finance, character assessment and self-analysis, for example – his challenge to Hegel exhibited a strange naivety. For Hegel, then at the height of his power and influence, was the philosopher for the times. He was popular with the Prussian upper and middle classes because he digested for them the still uneasily remembered events of the French Revolution (1789) and the ‘Terror’ that followed. His telling of the history of the West as an inexorable, ‘dialectical’ process of self-education whereby the ‘Absolute Spirit’ embodied in human society proceeds from the primitive to the perfect, affirmed the shattering events of the Revolution yet, at the same time, endorsed the authoritarianism of the Prussian state as a still higher state of perfection. All, it seemed, was working towards the best in the best of all possible worlds. And though Hegel’s notion of Absolute Spirit might not be exactly the transcendent God of traditional theology, its proximity to God’s benevolent hand was close enough to keep both state and ecclesiastical authorities happy. (Since the Prussian king’s legitimacy rested on the idea of ‘divine right’, his direct appointment by God, he was distinctly averse to the raising of doubts about God’s existence.) In general, therefore, Hegel’s