

"What Boots This Knowledge?"

By Richard Wagner

1880

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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About this Title

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"What Boots This Knowledge?"

A Supplement to "Religion and Art."

(1)

SHOULD ye ask, "Of what use is the knowledge of man's historic fall, since it is just through his historic evolution that we all have become what we are?" one first might waive your question somewhat thus: "Ask those who from all time have made that knowledge wholly theirs, and learn from them to inwardly digest it. 'Tis no new thing, for all great spirits have been led by it alone. Ask the real great poets of every age; ask the founders of true religions." Willingly would we refer you also to the mighty chiefs of States, if among the very greatest of them we could presuppose a full acquaintance with it; that is impossible, however, because their trade has ever pointed them to mere experiments with given historic conditions, but never allowed a free glance past those conditions to their primal state. It therefore is the helmsman of the State himself, by whose miscarriages we may the plainest prove the ill results of non-obtainal of that knowledge. Even a Marcus Aurelius could only attain to knowledge of the world's nullity, but never to the idea of an actual downfall of a world that might have been so different,—to say nothing of the cause of this fall. That worthlessness has ever been the base of absolute Pessimism; by which despotic statesmen, and rulers in general, have but too gladly let themselves be led, were it only for convenience. On the contrary, a more thorough-going knowledge of the cause of our decline leads forthwith to the possibility of a just as radical regeneration; again without all reference to [254] Statesmen, since such a knowledge passes far beyond the - sphere of their violent, but always fruitless action.

Accordingly, to discover of whom we need *not* ask for vital knowledge of the world, we have only to take a general survey of the present so-called "political situation." This latter characterises itself, if we pick up the nearest newspaper and read it in the sense that nothing there concerns us personally: at once we light upon Shalt without Have, Will without Notion, and all with such a boundless greed of Might that even the mightiest thinks he owns none, until he has still more. What he dreams of doing with this Might, one seeks in vain to fathom. Everywhere we see the image of Robespierre, (2) who, when the guillotine had brushed away each hindrance to the revelation of his nostrums, had nothing left to recommend but Virtuousness in general, —a doctrine far more simply gained before him in Masonic lodges. As

far as looks go, all our Statesmen now are striving after Robespierre's prize. Even last century this look was less affected; then men fought frankly for dynastic interests—carefully supervised, to be sure, by the interest of the Jesuits, who recently again alas! misled the last brute-force ruler of France. He deemed needful for insurance of his dynasty, and in the interest of civilisation, to deal Prussia a slap in the face; and as Prussia had no mind to calmly take it, things came to a war for German Unity. That Unity was won in course, and duly fixed by contract; but what it after all might mean, again was hard to answer. They tell us we shall hear some day, when much more Might has been procured: German Unity must first be primed to shew her teeth in every quarter, even if it leaves her with nothing to chew. One thinks one sees Robespierre presiding over his Committee of *Salut Public*, when one conjures up the picture [255] of the strong man armed behind locked doors, in ceaseless search for means of increase to his garnered Might. What there was to do and tell to the world with the Might once proved, might have dawned on that strong man armed in the nick of time, had this *knowledge* but enlightened him. We gladly believe in his love of peace; though 'tis a sorry proof, to be forced into war, and though we sincerely hope that true Peace will some day be won on a peaceful path, it should have occurred to the beater-down of peace's last disturber that the wantonly-provoked and fearful war would be fitly crowned by an other peace than this treaty of Frankfort-on-Main, which points direct to constant readiness for further war. Here a knowledge of the need and possibility of true regeneration of the human race, now crushed by an embattled Civilisation, could well have inspired a pact conducting to peace of the world itself: then would have been no forts to seize, but to demolish, no warrants of surer war to take, but pledges of sound peace to give; whereas historic rights alone were weighed against historic claims, and settled by the one established right of Conquest. With the best will in the world, it would seem that the pilot-of-State can see no farther. They all must prate of universal peace; even Napoleon III. had his mind on it,—but a peace of profit to his dynasty and France: for in no other way can these strong men armed conceive of peace, than under the wide-respected guardianship of countless cannons.

At anyrate we may conclude that, if *our* knowledge is to be treated as useless, the world-knowledge of our great Statesmen works us positive and serious harm.—

In the past I have found that my exposures of the downfall of our Public Art met little contradiction, but my ideas on its regeneration were violently opposed. If we leave out of count the flat Optimists proper, the hopeful babes of Abraham's bosom, we may take it that the sight of a degenerate world, of the perversion and badness of men in general, does not especially repel: what all think in secret of each other, they know right well; but Science [256] herself does not confess

it, for she has learnt to find her reckoning in " constant progress." And Religion? Luther's main revolt was against the Roman Church's shameless Absolution, which went so far as to accept deliberate prepayment for sins not yet committed: his anger came too late; the world soon managed to abolish Sin entirely, and believers now look for redemption from evil to Physics and Chemistry.

We will admit that it is no easy task, to persuade the world of the use of this our knowledge, even though it leave the uselessness of its mean knowledge ungainsaid. But let us not therefore refrain from a closer search into that use. For this we must turn, not to the dull-brained throng, but to those better minds whose own prevailing cloudiness as yet prevents the freedom-bearing rays of rightful knowledge from piercing to that multitude. This cloud is still so dense, that it is truly astounding to see the highest minds of every age since the rise of the Bible enveloped in it, and thereby led to shallowness of judgment. Take Goethe, who held Christ for problematical, but the good God for wholly proven, albeit retaining the liberty to discover the latter in Nature after his own fashion; which led to all manner of physical assays and experiments, whose continued pursuit was bound, in turn, to lead the present reigning human intellect to the result that there's no God whatever, but only " Force and Matter." It was reserved for a master-mind—how late alas!—to light this more than thousand-years' confusion in which the Jewish God-idea had plunged the whole of Christendom: that the unsatisfied thinker at last can set firm foot again on a soil of genuine Ethics, we owe to Kant's continuator, large-hearted *Arthur Schopenhauer*.

Who would gain an idea of the confusion of modern thought, the maiming of the intellect of to-day, let him consider the untold difficulty that impedes a proper understanding of the most lucid of all philosophical systems—that of Schopenhauer. The reason is simple enough, when we recognise that the perfect understanding of this. [257] philosophy would effect as radical a revolution in our hitherto established modes of thought, as that demanded of the heathen by their conversion to Christianity. Nevertheless it is quite appalling to find this philosophy, based as it is on the most perfect of ethics, described as shorn of hope; from which it follows, that we wish to be of good hope without the consciousness of true morality. That upon this very depravation of men's hearts rests Schopenhauer's relentless condemnation of the world—in its only aspect shewn to us by history, —affrights all those who take no pains to track the paths so plainly traced by Schopenhauer for turning the misguided Will. Yet these paths, which well may lead to hope, are clearly and distinctly pointed out by our philosopher, and it is not his fault if he was so fully occupied with the correct portrayal of the only world that lay before him, that he was compelled to leave their actual exploration to our own selves; for they brook no journeying save on foot.

In this sense, and as guide to an independent treading of the path of surest hope, nothing better can be recommended in our present state than to make Schopenhauer's philosophy, in its every bearing, the basis of all further mental and moral culture; and at nothing else have we to labour, than to get the necessity of this acknowledged in every walk of life. Should that succeed, the beneficial, the truly regenerative result were then immeasurable; for on the contrary we see to what mental and moral unfitness the lack of a right, all-permeating knowledge of the world's root-essence has now debased us.

The Popes knew well what they were doing, when they withdrew the Bible from the Folk; for the Old Testament in particular, so bound up with the New, might distort the pure idea of Christ to such a point that any nonsense and every deed of violence could claim its sanction; and such a use they deemed more prudent to reserve for the Church herself. Wellnigh we must view it as a grave misfortune, that Luther had no other weapon of authority against the degenerate Roman Church, than just this Bible; from [258] whose full text he durst drop nothing, without disarming. It even had to serve him for the drafting of a catechism for the poor neglected Folk; and with what despair he clutched at it, we may see from the heart-rending preface to that little book. If we hear aright the true deep note of pity for his people, that lent the soulful Reformer the sublime precipitance of the rescuer of a drowning man (3); that haste wherewith he brought the people in extremis the only spiritual food and covering that came to hand,— if we follow this, we may take example by himself for the provisional repairing of that food and clothing, now found no longer adequate, to last for stouter service. To denote the starting-point of such an undertaking, let us cite a fine passage from one of Schiller's letters to Goethe:—

"If one would lay hand on the characteristic mark of Christianity, distinguishing it from all mono-theistic religions, it lies in nothing less than the *upheaval of Law*, of Kant's 'Imperative,' in whose place it sets free Inclination. In its own pure form it therefore is the presentation of a beautiful morality, or of the humanising of the Holy; and in this sense it is the only *æsthetic* religion."—

From this fair picture let us cast one glance upon the Ten Commandments of the Mosaic tables of the Law—which even Luther found needful to take as first instruction to a people both mentally and morally brutalised under rule of the Roman Church and Germanic fist-right—and we there shall discover no faintest trace of a truly Christian thought; taken strictly, they are mere *forbiddals*, to most of which the character of *commands* was first assigned by Luther's running commentary. We have no idea of entering upon a criticism of those Commandments, for we should only encounter our police and criminal legislation, to which their supervision has been committed in the

interest of civic order, even to the point of punishment for Atheism—wherefrom, perchance, the "other gods" alone would pass scot-free.

[259]

If we leave these edicts on one side, as fairly well safeguarded, we come at once to the Christian command— if so we may term it—in the setting-up of the three so-called Theologic Virtues. These are commonly arranged in an order that appears to us not quite the right one for development of the Christian spirit; we should like to see "Faith, Hope, and Charity" transposed into "Love, Faith, and Hope." It may seem a contradiction to uphold this sole redeeming and engladdening trinity as the essence of all *virtue*, and its exercise as a *commandment*, seeing that its units, on the other hand, are claimed as grants of Grace. What a merit lies in their attainment, however, we soon shall see if first we weigh the almost exorbitant demand on the natural man conveyed by the injunction of "Love," in its exalted Christian sense. Through what is it, that our whole civilisation is going to ground, if not through lack of Love? The heart of youth, to which the world of nowadays unveils itself with waxing plainness, how can it love this world when it is recommended naught save caution and suspicion in its dealings with it? Surely there can be but one right way of guidance for that heart, the path whereon the world's great lovelessness should be accounted as its *suffering*: then would the young man's roused compassion incite him to withdraw himself from the causes of that Suffering of the world's, to flee with knowledge from the greed of passions, to lessen and avert the woes of others. But how to wake this needful knowledge in the natural man, since the first and most un-understandable to him is his fellow-man himself? Impossible, that commandments here should bring about a knowledge only to be woken in the natural man by proper guidance to an understanding of the natural descent of all that lives.—The surest, nay, in our opinion almost the only thing to lead to this, would be a wise employment of the Schopenhauerian philosophy, whose outcome, to the shame of every earlier philosophic system, is the recognition of a *moral meaning of the world*; which crown of all Knowledge might then be practically realised [260] through Schopenhauer's Ethics. Only the love that springs from pity, and carries its compassion to the utmost breaking of self-will, is the redeeming Christian Love, in which Faith and Hope are both included of a—*Faith* as the unwavering consciousness of that moral meaning of the world, confirmed by the most divine exemplar; *Hope* as the blessed sense of the impossibility of any cheating of this consciousness.

And whence could we derive a clearer guidance for the heart afflicted by the cheat of this world's material semblance, than from our philosopher, if only we could bring that understanding within the natural powers of unlearned men? In such a sense we fain would see

an attempt to draft a popular version of his matchless treatise "On apparent Design in the Fate of the Individual": how surely were the term "eternal Providence—so frequently employed for very sake of its equivocation—then justified in its true sense; whereas the contradiction thus expressed now drives despairing souls to flattest atheism. To people harassed by the arrogance of our chemists and physicists, and who begin to hold themselves for weak of brain if they shrink from accepting a resolution of the world into "force and matter,"—to them it were no less an act of charity, could we shew them from the works of our philosopher what clumsy things are those same "molecules and atoms." But what an untold boon could we bring to men affrighted on the one hand by the thunders of the Church, and driven to desperation by our physicists on the other, could we fit into the lofty edifice of "Love, Faith, and ,a a vivid knowledge of the *ideality* of that world our only present mode of apperception maps out by laws of Time and Space; then would each question of the troubled spirit after the "when" and "where" of the "other world" be recognised as answerable by nothing but a blissful smile. For if there be an answer to these so infinitely weighty-seeming questions, our philosopher has given it with unsurpassable beauty and precision in that phrase which [261] he merely meant, in a measure, to define the ideality of Space and Time: "Peace, rest and happiness dwell there alone where is *no When, no Where.*"

Yet the Folk—from whom we stand so lamentably far, alas I—demands a realistic notion of divine eternity in the affirmative sense, such as Theology herself can only give it in the negative "world without end.a' Religion, too, could ease this craving by naught but allegoric myths and images, from which the Church then built that storeyed dogma whose collapse has become notorious. How these crumbling blocks were turned to the foundation of an art unknown to the ancient world, I have endeavoured to shew in my preceding article on "Religion and Art"; of what import to the "Folk" itself this art might become through its full emancipation from unseemly service, and upon the soil of a new moral order, we should set ourselves in earnest to discover. Here again our philosopher would lead us to a boundless outlook on the realm of possibilities, if we sought out all the wealth contained in the following pregnant sentences:—"Complete contentment, the truly acceptable state, never present themselves to us but in an image, in the *Artwork*, the Poem, in Music. From which one surely might derive the confidence that somewhere they exist in sooth." What here was hardly utterable without an almost sceptic smile, through its intrusion on a strictly philosophic system, for us might well become the starting-point of very serious inferences. The perfect "hikeness'a of the noblest artwork would so transport our heart that we should plainly find the archetype, whose "somewhere" must perforce reside within our inner self, (4); filled full with time-less, space-less Love and Faith and Hope.

But not even the highest art can gain the force for such a revelation while it lacks the support of a religious symbol of the most perfect moral ordering of the world, through which alone can it be truly understood of the people: [262] only by borrowing from life's exercise itself the likeness of the Divine, can the artwork hold this up to life, and holding, lead us out beyond this life to pure contentment and redemption.

A great, nay, an immeasurable field of search were thus defined in outlines sharp enough, perhaps, yet not so easily discernible through their remoteness from the common life; and its closer survey might well repay the trouble. That the Politician cannot guide us here, we have felt necessary to state quite plainly; and it further seems to us of weight to pursue our searches quite apart from the unfruitful field of Politics. On the other hand we must follow with the utmost diligence, and to its farthest bifurcation, each path whereon man's mental culture may lead to the establishment of true morality. Our heart's desire must be no less, than to win comrades and helpers on every one of these domains. Already we have gained some; our sympathy with the movement against Vivisection, for instance, has made us acquainted with kindred spirits in the realm of Physiology, who, armed with special scientific knowledge, have stood by our side against the impudent assertions of legalised defilers of Science,—though unresultfully alas!, as at present is unavoidable. Those peaceable associations to whom the practical fulfilment of our thoughts seems allotted by their very nature, we have mentioned elsewhere; we now have only to express the hope that their useful workers will turn to us, and combine their separate interests in that one great interest which might be expressed somewhat as follows:—

We recognise the cause of the fall of Historic Man, and the necessity of his regeneration; we believe in the possibility of such Regeneration, and devote ourselves to its carrying-through in every sense.

It may be open to question, whether the work of such a fellowship would not by far transcend the immediate scope of addresses to a Patronate of Stage-festivals. We [263] will hope, however, that the honoured members of this Verein have hitherto lent a not unwilling ear to kindred subjects. As far as the author of the present lines is concerned, he must in any case declare that henceforth nothing but advices from the aforesaid field may be expected of him.

Notes

1

"*Was nützt diese Erkenntniss?*" *Ein Nachtrag zu: Religion und Kunst* originally appeared in the *Bayreuther Blätter* for December, 1880.—Tr.

2

A striking repetition of the thought expressed (to some extent in the selfsame words) in Wagner's letter to August Roeckel of January 25, 1854. The parallelism is easily accounted for, however, as these *Letters to Roeckel* only returned to their author after the death of their recipient (June 18, 1876), and apparently but a little while before the present article was written.—Tr.

3

Cf. Nietzsche's perversion of the idea of Pity: "One springs to the rescue of a man, who has fallen into the water, just twice as fast when witnesses are present who do not dare."—*Menschliches*, Aph. 325.—Tr.

4

Cf. *Luke*, xvii. 21: "Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for behold, the kingdom of God is within you."—Tr.

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