

BOOK REVIEW

Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic Standpoint: Philosophy as a Practice of the Sublime. By SOPHIA VASALOU. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. viii + 237. Hardcover, \$90.00. ISBN 978-1-107-02440-3.

Vasalou starts out forthrightly by declaring that Schopenhauer's arguments are so bad—"vulnerable to multiple stress fractures upon the lightest probing" (4)—that his claims cannot be understood as conclusions but should be interpreted as "symptoms". (142) But Schopenhauer's philosophy is not the expression of idiosyncratic biographical facts. The "temptations" he gave in to are also ones "to which we ourselves are inescapably exposed". (209) For Vasalou Schopenhauer's pessimism is an expression of the "sense of evaluative collapse" (196) in Alasdair MacIntyre's account of modernity as disenchantment and de-traditionalization.¹ To correct Schopenhauer's position, we need a little help from the classical tradition, and especially Aristotle's portrait of the great-souled man. But Vasalou's title comes not from this correction, which occupies the second half of the text, but from her novel analysis of Schopenhauer's philosophical position as inseparable from the aesthetically sublime.

In common with many appropriations of Longinus after Boileau's 1674 translation, Schopenhauer's account of the sublime focuses not on literary style but on a class of perceptual objects and correlative affects. Specifically, Schopenhauer considers nature "in stormy motion; ... enormous, barren, hanging rocks ...; rushing, foaming masses of water; complete desolation; the howling of the wind" (paraphrased 34). Such objects engender a two-fold affective response: first I see myself humbled by my "dependency" in the face of this "hostile nature" (cited 34), I am a "vanishing nothing in the face of stupendous forces" (cited 36); but then I reflect that this whole world is nothing more than my representation, that I am its "condition". This second affective moment calms me, and reverses my degradation before nature, enabling me to rise in my turn above it, part of a rhetoric of "ascent" (23) that is a significant component of Vasalou's analysis as

¹ See e.g. Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth 1987).

well as of the fundamental metaphor embodied in the term ‘sublime’ (hýpsous, *das Erhabene*).

Schopenhauer often sees philosophy as the achievement of a “cosmic” viewpoint’ (80) in which we (philosophers) “look down” on the world as if from the outside, taking up a ‘view from nowhere.’ (78) Vasalou demonstrates that this practice of philosophy is sublime (83). She resists understanding the aesthetic as a (mere) illustration of the philosophical. Not only is philosophy (the conceptual discipline par excellence) drawn back towards the aesthetic in its reliance on the irreducibly perceptual vividness of intuition [*Anschauung*], but equally the aesthetic (25–40) is also moved away from the passive contemplation of a static visual image, as Schopenhauer sometimes presents it, to an actively engaged transcendence and self-transformation. Particularly impressive is Vasalou’s sensitive attention to the detail of Schopenhauer’s habitual use of striking imagery, for instance of ascent towards a sublime position, and her skill in highlighting its philosophical consequences.

The second half of the book is less successful, in part because it eschews close analysis of Schopenhauer’s text to bring in foreign corrective material from the classical tradition. Schopenhauer’s pessimism leads him to advocate this sublime contemplation of the world as one of a menu of strategies for escaping the relentless pressure of willing, culminating in the infamous doctrine of renunciation, complete denial of the will. Vasalou shows that in classical thought there is a similar rhetoric of ascent, but one matched by a correlative ‘redescent’ (Chapter 6): one disengages from the things of the world, ascends to a divine or sublime position, and then returns, armed with divine wisdom, to the world to achieve greatness, a greatness that Vasalou ultimately connects to Aristotle’s virtue of greatness of soul. Schopenhauer’s failure here is a symptom of the wider cultural collapse of modernity, that leaves us all in a “location of exile, reflecting the spiritual homelessness of one standing in a world newly disenchanted and freshly purged of its gods” (208).

Certainly Vasalou finds a thought-provoking similarity between Aristotle’s portrait of the small-souled nature of the aged in the *Rhetoric* and Schopenhauer’s *Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life*: they (Aristotle says) “desire nothing great”; and Schopenhauer echoes this, claiming that one should not ‘ardently aspire to anything in the world’ (cited 193). But Vasalou’s concentration on the *Aphorisms* makes it harder for her claim to stick to Schopenhauer generally. Particularly problematic is the sidelining of Schopenhauer’s actual ethics from a book with a whole section devoted to “engaging Schopenhauer ethically” (148–170). There

are certainly problems with Schopenhauer's position here. But on the face of it at least, Schopenhauer thinks that philosophical insight, the adoption of a 'cosmic' and sublime point of view, one that sees "through the veil of Maya" (a commonplace slogan in Schopenhauer, but something that Vasalou never quotes) and recognizes that we are all one, finds a feeling of compassion that motivates works of justice and loving kindness [*Menschenliebe*] and that therefore does "re-descend" into the world.

Vasalou's symptomatological method means that her book runs almost orthogonal to recent Schopenhauer scholarship, which often plays the role of an object of analysis rather than a dialogic partner. But perhaps this is a small price to pay for such a novel and sensitive intervention, even one that is not always fully convincing.

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