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Introduction

LIFE IS AN UNPLEASANT BUSINESS

This book is about the power of negative thinking. All of us have dark thoughts: "everything sucks," "people are the worst," and "I'm no good." Those thoughts punctuate our lives, but our broader society pressures us to suppress them. We're supposed to stop wallowing, stop being a downer, look on the bright side, and put on a smile. This social pressure was crystallized by Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 bestseller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which goaded its readers toward optimism.[1]

What happens, though, if we stop pushing aside darker thoughts, and let ourselves *fully* inhabit a pessimistic worldview? Will we collapse into despair, or might life somehow get easier?

In this book, we'll follow the lead of history's greatest pessimist: the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer believed that optimism is false, wicked, and harmful: a lie that poisons our thoughts and misdirects our actions. Pessimism, in his view, provides a clearer

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view of reality than optimism, and can make us both kinder and more insightful. It can also make the course of our lives smoother—not overflowing with happiness, of course, but tolerable.

Schopenhauer tolerated himself for seventy-two years. That was quite an achievement, because Schopenhauer was not a likeable person. He was a depressive, anxious, self-absorbed elitist who spent decades resenting the world for overlooking his brilliance. Born into an unhappy marriage in 1788, he was a disappointment to both of his parents. His father, Heinrich Floris, was a merchant in the port city of Danzig, and hoped for a charming son with good posture who would take over the family business. Young Arthur attempted to improve his posture and learn the mercantile arts, but his heart wasn't in it. Heinrich Floris had to bribe and chastise his slouching son to keep at it, and Arthur abandoned that career path soon after his father's death in 1805—declaring that "[l]ife is an unpleasant business; I have resolved to spend it reflecting upon it."[2]

Yet Schopenhauer's relationship with his father was rosy compared to his relationship with his mother. Johanna Schopenhauer was likeable and extroverted. After becoming a widow, she became a fixture in high society and one of the most successful authors in Germany. Johanna would have loved a similarly extroverted, personable son who could have joined her in hosting soirees and discussing literature. Instead, she was burdened with an awkward, moody child who preferred to brood about the miseries of existence. After years of increasing tensions over their different approaches to life (and finances), Schopenhauer and his mother parted ways permanently in 1814. They exchanged only a few letters until her death in 1838. Schopenhauer did not attend her funeral.

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Schopenhauer's adult life was no better than his childhood. He completed his doctorate in philosophy in 1813, and set to work on his masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*, which he hoped would bring him instant fame. Instead, it sold almost no copies. Schopenhauer then tried pivoting to an academic career in Berlin. But that also failed, not least because he imprudently scheduled his classes to conflict with those of Berlin's leading optimist, the imposing Georg Willhelm Friedrich Hegel.

These failures ate at Schopenhauer as he gradually turned into a scowling old man, settling into a bachelor's life in the city of Frankfurt. He slept with a loaded pistol next to him, and came to accept that few people could stand his company. In his diaries, he lamented his loneliness and admitted that his personality made close relationships difficult—even after his philosophy finally gained popularity in the final decade of his life and he became one of Frankfurt's tourist attractions. Though Schopenhauer needed city life for intellectual stimulation, he hated the constant noise generated by other people. No amount of success could shake his bleak worldview, on which suffering is essential to life, humans are overwhelmingly selfish, and the world is so irredeemably bad that we should wish we'd never been born. Despite all that, as Schopenhauer approached death in his final years, he did so calmly, with a certain measure of contentment. He passed away peacefully in his apartment, next to one of the few creatures whose presence he could stand—a poodle named Atma.

If Schopenhauer could endure himself and a world that seemed hostile to him, there's hope for the rest of us. Our twenty-first-century world can seem bleak too, and many of us also wrestle with anxiety, depression, and imperfect social skills. Of course, you and I face challenges that Schopenhauer

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never had to contend with, so he can't fix all of our problems. But his philosophy offers a number of insights about how to get through life's worst moments. Schopenhauer can meet us at our lowest points and lift us up just enough to keep going.

These days, people seeking philosophical self-help are more likely to turn to Buddhism or the Stoics than to Schopenhauer. Even in Germany, he's often treated as a second-rate philosopher, especially compared to luminaries such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, or Heidegger. Yet between his death in 1860 and World War I, Schopenhauer was the most popular philosopher in Germany.[3] He also attracted a surprising range of enthusiastic readers around the globe. In Russia, Leo Tolstoy wrote of his "[c]onstant raptures over Schopenhauer."[4] In Germany and then America, Albert Einstein read and reread Schopenhauer's works. The Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges declared that he hadn't recorded his own philosophical views because Schopenhauer had already gotten things right.[5] George Eliot helped champion his philosophy in England, and Iris Murdoch found deep, "humane wisdom" in Schopenhauer.[6] The list could go on: Schopenhauer's pessimism inspired thinkers and artists from Richard Wagner to Franz Kafka to David Foster Wallace.

What is so appealing about Schopenhauer's thought? The social theorist Max Horkheimer suggests the appeal is simply its bleakness:

> There are few ideas that the world today needs more than Schopenhauer's—ideas which in the face of utter hopelessness, because they confront it, know more than any others of hope.[7]

I think Horkheimer gets it right. When I'm feeling down, the last thing I want is someone telling me that life is a blessing,

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that I'm a good person, and that everything will be fine. Those vacuous reassurances might help us get over a minor setback or two. But they're useless when we're worried about our country falling apart, about whether we're good people, or about whether it's even worth getting out of bed. At those times, the only helpful reassurances come from people who appreciate our worries without sugarcoating them. And that's what Schopenhauer offers.

For much of his life, Schopenhauer lived in a relatively optimistic age. Many of his compatriots felt that Europe, and Germany in particular, was headed toward a shining future where the promise of the European Enlightenment would finally be realized. Recognizing that trend, Schopenhauer declared: "I am not a man of my times."[8] He didn't know which times he *did* belong to, but the twenty-first century is a pretty good fit. Almost nobody today believes we are headed toward a glorious future. Some people yearn for simpler times, while others have sunk into despair. Still other people try to avoid thinking about our point in history altogether. Schopenhauer may be *the* philosopher for our era—a troubled philosophical hero for our troubled times.

Some people idolize their philosophical heroes. Aristotelians, Stoics, Kantians, and Nietzscheans are all prone to treating their namesakes as oracles, who were above ordinary human mistakes and oversights. Not so with Schopenhauer. Even his most devoted admirers see a deeply flawed human. I've mentioned his paranoia and megalomania, but those weren't even his worst sides. At times, he writes like a twenty-first-century online troll. It couldn't have escaped Jewish readers like Einstein and Horkheimer that Schopenhauer was antisemitic—occasionally referring to a "Jewish stench" surrounding philosophical views he opposed.[9] Likewise, female readers like Eliot and Murdoch

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couldn't have missed Schopenhauer's misogyny, as when he declared that women were "big children their whole life long, a sort of intermediate stage between a child and a man."[10] None of these repulsive views are hidden in his writings or buried in private journals. Schopenhauer's bigotry, alongside his thin skin and inflated ego, are obvious in every one of his books.[11]

Why didn't Schopenhauer's fans write him off when they encountered his bigotry? One reason is that his biases and other flaws are so blatant that they're easy to skip over—like spam emails or unwanted ads. Another, deeper reason is that Schopenhauer's dim view of human nature helps *explain* our faults and how to deal with them: as we'll see, he thinks we have to face the fact that humans are driven by selfishness and shortsightedness, with only rare moments of rationality and compassion. He did not exempt himself from this diagnosis, and he insisted that a philosophy can be better than the philosopher who penned it:

> [I]t is just as unnecessary for the saint to be a philosopher as it is for a philosopher to be a saint: just as it is completely unnecessary for a perfectly beautiful person to be a great sculptor or a great sculptor to be beautiful. In general, it is strange to demand that a moralist not recommend any virtues other than the ones he himself possesses.[12]

Though Schopenhauer doesn't quite say it, a sculptor might be acutely aware of others' beauty *because* of their own (perceived) ugliness. We are often fascinated by what we lack. Schopenhauer's vices gave him a distinctive perspective on virtue and decency. As a result, he thought hard about how people can best *manage* their shortcomings.

What's more, Schopenhauer's faults make his compassionate, clear-eyed moments all the more compelling. Because

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all humans are weighed down by suffering and shortsightedness, we should treat each other with "tolerance, patience, forbearance and love of one's neighbor." He even suggests that we address one another as "my fellow sufferer."[13] While other philosophers ignored the widespread misery of the nineteenth century, Schopenhauer argued passionately for the end of slavery and for the moral rights of nonhuman animals. He railed against delusions of European intellectual superiority, arguing that the deepest insights in philosophy's history came from India—he may have been the first European writer to call himself a Buddhist. If someone as flawed as Schopenhauer can have such moments of moral clarity, then maybe the rest of us can also (occasionally) rise above our flaws.

I first encountered Schopenhauer in college, but I didn't start seeing him as a guide to life until the 2016 US presidential election. That election shattered my naive assumption that humanity was steadily climbing toward some liberal utopia. As my simplistic worldview fell apart, I struggled to think about the future, especially as my wife and I were about to have our first child. I was no longer sure that bringing someone into this world was an act of love.

As history has barreled onward since then, Schopenhauer has become central to how I approach each day. The more I read, the more I find that resonates with me. This is partly because I see some aspects of myself in him. I'm also prone to anxiety, and I also turn to philosophy for help. As a result, both of us ended up penning self-help books—his being the *Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life*, which I draw on extensively below. We both love reading Kant, though both of us enjoy criticizing Kant as well. We also both happen to be bald white men who play the flute, and we both spend too much time thinking about Schopenhauer himself. Finally, we both had two daughters.

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On most other dimensions, though, Schopenhauer and I have very different lives. His two daughters were born out of wedlock and died in infancy, and Schopenhauer never married. By contrast, I'm a devoted family man. Where he was antisemitic and misogynistic, I'm a convert to Judaism who gravitates toward feminists. He found interactions with other people difficult beginning in childhood. By contrast, I can't have a good day without some socializing, and I get along well with my parents. Pessimism came naturally to him, whereas my default setting is hopeful optimism. We also have different political leanings. I'm inclined toward activism and shaking things up, whereas Schopenhauer was a "law and order" type who thought we should always choose despotism over anything close to anarchy.[14] When I think about these differences, I'm tempted to set Schopenhauer aside and shift to other philosophers—but something keeps drawing me back. Even on the issues where we're most opposed, wrestling with Schopenhauer's ideas has shaped my life for the better.

In this book, I offer some perspectives and insights from Schopenhauer. It's very much a curated collection. I only offer things that I've found helpful, whether for myself or for my friends, my students, and my family. In fact, it was through the lens of parenting that I really became convinced of some of Schopenhauer's ideas. (I'm not sure what he would have made of that.)

Readers who are already familiar with Schopenhauer will notice that I offer an unusual spin on certain topics and that I leave a lot out. I only touch on Schopenhauer's metaphysical system, and I say little about his quasi-mystical doctrines of "eternal justice" or the "negation of the will." Those are fascinating topics, and I've tried to make sense of them in more academic venues.[15] But I haven't yet found any practical benefits

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to those views, and this book is practical through and through. Everything I discuss has a concrete payoff—something to help you get through your darker moments, or through the drudgery of ordinary life. Like me, you might not always agree with Schopenhauer. Even when he's wrong, though, he's a powerful conversationalist, who can prompt us to reexamine assumptions we'd never questioned before.

As a warning: things will get grim. Schopenhauer directs our attention to features of life that we generally try to ignore: pain, cruelty, social instability, physical decline, and death. Directly facing those things has certain benefits. Schopenhauer might crush your hopes and dreams, but he'll offer you something to replace them with. That said, if you're honestly, sincerely happy with your life right now, then this isn't the book for you. Schopenhauer himself would encourage you to go out and enjoy your cheerfulness . . . while it lasts.

On the other hand, when that cheerfulness disappears, Schopenhauer can help. Behind all of his work is a gentle sadness and a profound love for his fellow sufferers. He is not, as one recent writer dubs him, the "philosopher of gloom."[16] Instead, he is someone who can acknowledge the awfulness of whatever is weighing you down and offer you something small but solid to hold onto. Somehow, he even manages to make it kind of fun—recall Tolstoy's "raptures" when reading Schopenhauer. He can also help you help others. I've found that Schopenhauer quotes can be the best gift for friends who are struck with failure, doubt, or despair. In fact, the seed of this book dates back several years, when a good friend had just faced some professional humiliation. Knowing he was struggling, I texted him Schopenhauer's line: "the best that the world has to offer is a painless, quiet, tolerable existence."[17] My friend laughed, giving him a break from sinking despair.

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Aside from his unwarranted reputation as a purveyor of gloom, Schopenhauer is also sometimes described as a *nihilist*—someone who thinks the world is barren of value and that nothing ultimately matters.[18] There is a bit of truth to this. Schopenhauer is an unapologetic atheist, so he rejects any value that requires a god. More generally, he rejects every optimistic promise of flourishing or lasting fulfillment—whether it comes from religious leaders, philosophers, or politicians. Echoing the book of Ecclesiastes, he declares that ordinary life is vain and empty. Even so, Schopenhauer never crosses the line into genuine nihilism. He firmly believes that certain things *do* matter.[19]

Which things matter, for Schopenhauer? For one, he insists that suffering matters, because it is intrinsically bad. It matters whether we increase or decrease suffering as we live our lives. That simple moral truth often gets lost, and Schopenhauer warns against ideologies like nationalism that obscure it. For Schopenhauer, the badness of suffering is the core of morality. This doesn't mean we have to avoid all suffering, which would be impossible. In fact, it can be prudent to accept a little short-term suffering (say, getting a cavity drilled) to avoid more long-term suffering (say, an infected tooth). Still, if we really internalized the fact that suffering is bad, we would treat ourselves and others with more compassion than we typically do. Compassion drives much of Schopenhauer's philosophy: he wants to help us suffer less.

Still, Schopenhauer doesn't think suffering is the only thing that matters. He is guided by another, more positive value, which he calls his one and only "North Star." This guiding star is *truth*, "the naked, thankless, friendless, and often persecuted truth."[20] As we'll see, truth for Schopenhauer isn't about memorizing facts or fetishizing science. For all their inventions and advancements, he thinks Europeans are no closer to the

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real truth than anyone else. Instead, truth for him is about *insight*. The one genuine, solidly good thing he finds in life is the opportunity to face reality and come to understand it. That includes understanding our own character and the character of the world as a whole.

As we'll see in the chapters that follow, Schopenhauer thinks that facing the naked truth can do a lot for us. It can save us grief by revealing sides of reality that sneak up on simpleminded optimists. It can lay out basic features of human nature, letting us move beyond indignation at others and disappointment in ourselves. Embracing truth can reconcile us to our failures in life, seeing them as opportunities for self-knowledge. That self-knowledge, he thinks, is more valuable than any fleeting pleasure, and it lets us leave behind childish delusions. Truth is not cold, for Schopenhauer—he believes that *beauty* is founded on timeless truths. When you stop to take in a sunset or let yourself sink into a song, you escape from ordinary suffering to engage with a deeper level of reality. The pessimistic life can be calm and gentle.

Most importantly, Schopenhauer thinks that truth undergirds compassion and love. A firm recognition that other people are genuinely real brings us together into a unique kind of community. That community reaches across times and borders, and it has room for even the most unlikeable people, including Schopenhauer himself. Truth can't bring us a happy life. But it can open up the path to a tolerable one.

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