Abstract
This paper analyzes the philosophy of Schopenhauer with reference to contemporary cultural attitudes, particularly the standard reaction to this philosopher’s “pessimism.” Schopenhauer’s melancholy thought is most often the subject of a kind of insincere ridicule; he is something of a “philosophers’ joke.” Is this because he is a bad philosopher? I think not. His philosophy is taken less than seriously simply because it is overtly and unmistakably pessimistic. Why is this? And what does it say about our culture if this is the case? I briefly discuss the pessimistic aspects of Schopenhauer’s ideas, and then turn to an analysis of how and why these ideas are more often caricatured than critiqued.

We do not wish to hearken back to the Schopenhauer who laboriously constructed a metaphysical system in *The World as Will and Representation*. Our interest is in the Schopenhauer who is found in those brief thought-pieces, those hyper-critical essays, and those illuminating parables. These are given to us by the philosopher’s second major work, the massive *Parerga and Paralipomena*, and are more manageably handled by means of recent collections like Penguin’s *Essays and Aphorisms*. Let us return, then, to Schopenhauer as aphorist, not as metaphysician.

The system has been all but forgotten, and perhaps not unduly. But the aphorisms remain well known to us only in a sort of cartoonish caricature. This Schopenhauer has become something of a joke. His work is treated at best as a philosophical curiosity; his ideas are seldom given much serious credence. The cover art of a recent collection of Schopenhauer’s essays, *The Wisdom of Life and Counsels and Maxims*, depicts a sunny day and a figure carrying an umbrella—and rain is failing from *under* the umbrella:

The reason for this churlish condescension and subtle derision is clear: Schopenhauer is a pessimist. But is it not disingenuous of us to reproach a philosopher for pessimism, as though this were some sort of
fallacy or oversight? Is pessimism equivalent to philosophical duplicity? What does it say about our culture that we are so quick to reject or ridicule an idea simply because its tone is negative? To say that one is pessimistic is not to say that one is wrong.

So, let us give the pessimist another look, and consider his ideas without such a foregone conclusion. And more importantly, let us consider why his position is so often treated with an attitude of presupposed refutation. Our intent here is not so much to defend Schopenhauer’s outlook, but rather to critically analyze the standard interpretation of and reaction to this outlook. We will begin with a brief summary of the pessimistic aspects of Schopenhauer’s thought. Then we will turn to an analysis of how and why this thought has come down to us almost invariably in the form of caricature.

Schopenhauer thinks that existence is a misfortune. Much of what we call his pessimism lies in this assertion. “Human life is some kind of mistake,”1 he announces emphatically. If existence were designed for pleasure and happiness, if life were somehow meant to be enjoyed, then “mere existence would fulfill and satisfy us.”2 But, our philosopher notes, existence is overwhelmingly unsatisfactory. In fact, Schopenhauer is adamant that the distinctive characteristic of life is suffering: “Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim.”3 There are of course occasional respites, but “misfortune in general is the rule.”4 Schopenhauer is vehemently opposed to the optimistic notion that this is the best of all possible worlds, and that evil is only the absence of good. For him, evil is precisely what is positive, and good is only the absence of evil. There is nothing particularly admirable or pleasing about this kind of existence, this pessimist thinks. It is rather a portrait of the damned. “[T]here is some wisdom in taking a gloomy view,” he writes, “in looking upon the world as a kind of Hell, and in confining one’s efforts to securing a little room that shall not be exposed to the fire.”5 We should not address other people as ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am,’ but as “fellow sufferer.”6

The well of pessimism runs even deeper. Schopenhauer is also incredulous toward ideas about transcendental salvation and religious leanings in general. A staunch atheist, he rejects any notion of an afterlife, along with the assumption that human existence has some sort of ultimate meaning, purpose, or significance. Our lives are described as “an episode unprofitably disturbing the blessed calm of nothingness,”7 and as an “infinitesimal moment between two eternities.”8 Particularly unkind towards any kind of religious faith, he writes that religions “are the children of ignorance”9 and that they are “like glow-worms; they need darkness in order to shine.”10 There is no happiness and no hope either in this world or beyond it.

There is one more aspect of Schopenhauer’s pessimism that must be mentioned: his virulent and unequivocal misanthropy. Our philosopher thinks that human beings are, for the most part, alarmingly unintelligent and unsophisticated. He is aghast at his fellows’ lack of perspicacity:

How very paltry and limited the normal human intellect is, and how little lucidity there is in the human consciousness, may be judged from the fact that, despite the ephemeral brevity of human life, the uncertainty of our existence and the countless enigmas which press upon us from all sides, everyone does not continually and ceaselessly philosophize, but that only the rarest of exceptions do so. The rest live their lives away in this dream not very differently from the

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2 Ibid.
4 Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, 41.
7 Ibid., 47.
9 Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, 197.
10 Ibid., 109.
animals, from which they are in the end distinguished only by their ability to provide for a few years ahead.\textsuperscript{11}

Such remarks concerning the intellectual shortcomings of “the rest” run throughout Schopenhauer’s later work. He writes that most individuals are characterized by “mental vacuity and barrenness of soul”\textsuperscript{12} and that they “exist without really being aware of it.”\textsuperscript{13} This reality is odious to those “rarest of exceptions” who choose to live the life of the mind. The philosopher is therefore alienated from (and elevated above) the unthinking majority; s/he has good cause for looking upon the cretins of the world with scornful disdain. Schopenhauer writes: “[A]ny man of the slightest power of mind—any man, that is, who has more than the sorry share of intellect with which Nature has endowed five-sixths of mankind—will hardly fail to show some trace of misanthropy.”\textsuperscript{14} And, in much more direct terms: “[A] high degree of intellect tends to make a man unsocial.”\textsuperscript{15} The thinker is not at home in the world. S/he cannot reconcile ‘the examined life’ with the lives of the decidedly non-intellectual majority, and s/he resents this situation. One more aphorism on this point begs to be quoted at length:

\[ \text{In dealing with fools and blockheads, there is only one way of showing your intelligence—by having nothing to do with them. That means, of course, that when you go into society, you may now and then feel like a good dancer who gets an invitation to a ball, and on arriving, finds that everyone is lame:—with whom is he to dance?} \textsuperscript{16} \]

There is another facet to Schopenhauer’s misanthropy. The shortcomings of other people are not limited to an annoying but ultimately harmless lack of intelligence. This misanthrope also finds human beings to be violent, base, and cruel. “Only consider what men sometimes inflict upon men,” he writes, “with what ingenious torments one will slowly torture another to death, and ask yourself whether devils could do more.”\textsuperscript{17} The human race is something to regret, and is indeed unredeemable, in light of the vile and monstrous behavior which it so often exhibits. Schopenhauer even rejects the notion that human beings are somehow more ‘advanced’ than animals: “No animal ever torments another for the sake of tormenting; but man does so.”\textsuperscript{18}

In sum, Schopenhauer’s infamous pessimism is correlated essentially to his misanthropy, his unambiguous atheism, and his belief that it is a misfortune to be born. Humankind is rendered a miserable and insignificant wretch. There are other aspects to his lexicon of negativity—he thinks that this is “the worst of all possible worlds,” for instance—but the positions already discussed will suffice for the purposes of this paper. It gives us a portrait of the pessimist who is mocked on the cover of his own collected work, of the grumpy old man who has become a philosophers’ joke.

Although he has his share of readers (for a philosopher), Schopenhauer does not have many friends. His pessimism, though notorious, is more often the subject of jibing ridicule than of serious critique. It is true, at the very least, that Schopenhauer’s universal statements about the nature of human existence are unnecessarily generalized, and that his rhetoric is grandiloquent at best. But we are inclined to dismiss this philosopher’s ideas well before considering these specific objections. He loses most of his audience at the mere appearance of the word “pessimism,” at least in the United States. The pessimist is morbid and misanthropic, unkind to religion and to human beings in general, perpetually morose and unable to see the silver lining or the sunny side of life. Nobody likes a downer.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{12} Schopenhauer, \textit{The Wisdom of Life and Counsels and Maxims}, 97.
\textsuperscript{13} Schopenhauer, \textit{Essays and Aphorisms}, 173.
\textsuperscript{14} Schopenhauer, \textit{The Wisdom of Life and Counsels and Maxims}, 153.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 120.
\textsuperscript{17} Schopenhauer, \textit{Essays and Aphorisms}, 186.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 139.
This reflexive resistance to Schopenhauer’s ideas (and to pessimism in general) reflects American culture’s obsession with optimism and positive thinking. Since the mass proliferation of consumerist ideology in the early years of the twentieth century, a “smiles and sunshine” cultural movement has attempted to transform the human being into a “happiness machine.” Sponsored by major business interests, developed by new age spiritual leaders, and legitimized by patriotic philosophers, this “mind cure” ideology rejected negative thinking as defeatist and unproductive, a hindrance to progress and a threat to profit.¹⁹ This cult of happiness remains a prominent cultural fixture, from the official classification of “depression” as a mental disorder in 1980 to the cover story of a recent issue of the Harvard Business Review:

![Harvard Business Review Cover](image)

This image is remarkably illuminating, as it reveals both the ideology of this ‘optimism’ and its contradiction. Without even reading the article, we know the thesis: happiness is good for business. The face is smiling, and the dimples of the mouth are rendered as dollar signs. Negative thinking may slow down production; unhappy workers will not work as hard. This kind of ideology stresses happiness and optimism as keys to progress and prosperity (and in the case of this periodical, to profits). But take another look at the image. It has no eyes, nose, or ears. Blind and deaf to the world around it, it is completely without perception or experience. It is nothing but a smiling mouth. Its eyes have seemingly been replaced by the promotional text. Schopenhauer claims that the truth of his philosophy (or any philosophy) rests on an unobstructed “acquaintanceship with the world.”²⁰ With almost no sensual faculties, this visage decidedly lacks such acquaintanceship.

This image—a smiling “happiness machine” blind to the world around it—encapsulates the problematic implications of the cult of happiness. Such a line of thinking assumes that optimism is somehow desirable in and of itself. Whether or not there is anything about which to be optimistic is made irrelevant. The thesis of this ideology, and a central operating mantra of contemporary culture, is “happiness no matter what.” Schopenhauer’s downerism is obviously unwelcome here. Is this because he is incorrect? Perhaps he is incorrect, but that is not why this philosopher is unwelcome. He is a pessimist, and therefore not meant to be taken seriously. Such is the fundamental fallacy of optimistic thinking.


An objection will be made at this point: Perhaps such optimism does in fact have a closer relationship to reality than any Schopenhauerian gloominess. Must “acquaintanceship with the world” necessarily translate to pessimism? To staunch misanthropy? To incredulity toward notions of hope and salvation? How are we to know that Schopenhauer’s ideas are not also a foregone conclusion, a cult of sadness which demands pessimism even though there may be nothing about which to be pessimistic? Whether or not reality calls for optimism or pessimism is a matter for empirical investigation. It also calls for an examination of the kinds of value judgments used when arguing for a pessimistic viewpoint as opposed to an optimistic one. This is a legitimate objection which deserves consideration.

But we live only shortly after the most hideously violent century the world has yet known. Even today, distance is all that separates us from commonplace rape and torture. We live in a world where some collapse from starvation while others boisterously purchase a second yacht (one just isn’t enough). Obesity problems exist next-door to starvation problems. In our time, some individuals own dozens of pairs of shoes while others get infected blisters from barefoot traveling. Our world overflows with oppression and hatred, with violence and war. And this climate of nihilistic brutality sustains itself by distraction. We don’t have the time to seriously address these things: we are too busy partying, networking, or writing philosophy papers. This tragedy goes on, and few seem to notice. After all, we must be positive and optimistic. One does not have to look far to see the empirical support for pessimism. If not wholly vindicated, and if not free of some kind of value judgment, Schopenhauer’s gloominess is at the very least given legitimacy by the demoralizing daily news.

Whether or not this philosopher is right in his pessimism is not our concern here. The question is one of rejecting Schopenhauer’s ideas in the name of optimism, for the sake of keeping pessimism at bay. The reality described above is not seen by the grotesque image on the cover of The Harvard Business Review, for it has no eyes to see it. “Happiness machines” are lacking in “acquaintanceship with the world” inasmuch as they keep such truths at a distance so that they may go on smiling. Schopenhauer’s philosophy may have its flaws, but a glance at the actual state of affairs of the world—a glance away from the all-powerful cult of happiness—shows that there is something to be said for his pessimism. This is what we mean when we suggest a return to Schopenhauer. If and when we take account of the devastating violence and staggering injustice which characterizes contemporary life, we will begin to see that the pessimist’s conception of existence as a mistake, his cynicism with regard to divine supervision, and his unflattering misanthropy are not altogether unwarranted. We will not dismiss his claims on grounds of pessimism, nor will we mock them derisively.

“The flag to which I have sworn allegiance is truth,” Schopenhauer writes. Instead of swearing allegiance to the flag of optimism, we might do well to follow his example. Rather than using a reflexive and unreflective cult of happiness as an antidote for Schopenhauer’s pessimism, we may instead look back to this melancholy thinker as an antidote for the philosophically and morally questionable tyranny of sunshine. Perhaps, contrary to the cover art for The Wisdom of Life and Counsels and Maxims, it is in fact raining outside of the umbrella. We do not mean to suggest something like pessimism for pessimism’s sake, only a rethinking of our cultural proclivity for an optimism without eyes. Nobody likes a downer. But perhaps it is time to give the downer his due.

21 Schopenhauer, Essays and Aphorisms, 107.
REFERENCES


