

# Arthur's advice: comparing Arthur Schopenhauer's advice on happiness with contemporary research

Rozemarijn Schalkx · Ad Bergsma

Published online: 28 February 2007  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

**Abstract** The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) is well known for his pessimism. He did not believe in real happiness. In his view, the best a person can achieve is to reduce misery. At the end of his career, he wrote a book on how to live the most bearable life. This is a practical guide based on his personal experiences and illustrated by quotations from other thinkers subscribing to his views. In this paper, we summarize his recommendations and compare these with conditions for happiness as observed in present day empirical research. Little of the advice appears to fit current research on conditions for happiness. Following Schopenhauer's advice would probably make us unhappier, even if we had the same neurotic personality.

**Keywords** Schopenhauer · Pessimism · Optimism · Happiness · Advice · Social ties · Lifestyle

## 1 Introduction

Optimists think of the earth as a place that is hospitable to the aims and aspirations of human beings, pessimists think of the world as hostile or indifferent. These opposing views are reflected in ideas about happiness. Optimists believe that happiness is within reach and pessimists tend to think of happiness as something rare or only temporary.

The prime defender of the negative view is the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. In his major work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (The world as

---

R. Schalkx (✉)  
University for Humanistics, P.O.B. 797, 3500 AT Utrecht, The Netherlands  
e-mail: r.schalkx@uvh.nl

A. Bergsma  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Erasmus University Rotterdam,  
P.O.B. 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
e-mail: bergsma@fsw.eur.nl

will and representation) he not only defends the idea that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, but takes the view that this is demonstrably the worst of all possible worlds. Schopenhauer painted our world as on the brink of destruction and any changes that one could think of that would make the world worse, would either mean the end of the world or turn out to be an improvement. His treatment of happiness is in line with this bleak picture. He thought it was a mistake to think that people can be happy in this world, since happiness is no more than a transient illusion. As he put it: ‘Everything in life proclaims that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated or recognized as an illusion. The grounds for this lie deep in the very nature of things’ (1958, p573).

### 1.1 View on happiness

How did Schopenhauer come to his pessimistic view of happiness? Reginster (2004) identified the following reasoning behind Schopenhauer’s position.

Schopenhauer thought of happiness as the satisfaction of desires. The opposite of happiness—suffering—was caused by hindrance of ‘the will’, through an obstacle placed between it and its temporary goal. The will is the faculty of desire and this hindrance can be called frustration. Schopenhauer’s approach to happiness can be thought of as a form of hedonistic perfectionism. For true happiness we need the complete absence of all pain and the complete satisfaction of all desires.

With this conception in mind, it is no wonder that Schopenhauer thinks that happiness is impossible to achieve for a long time, but temporary happiness seems to be a real possibility, although perhaps only for the happy few. But even this was an illusion according to Schopenhauer, because of the nature of the will. The satisfaction of desires would only bring boredom. When the desires for all determinate objects (acclaim, friendship, a precious painting, finishing reading this paper and so on) have been fulfilled, and no new wishes come to agitate us, boredom sets in. Schopenhauer describes boredom as empty longing.

So it is impossible to satisfy the will, and we are determined to walk the hedonistic treadmill endlessly. We feel pain if the will is blocked and boredom if the desires are satisfied. We are doomed to swing between pain and boredom. The situation is so grave that it would have been better not to exist, but fear of death prevents this easy way out. Given the fact that we have to live our lives, Schopenhauer wrote a practical guide on how to attain, not so much happiness, but a bearable life with the brief moments of happiness that are sought after by modern people (Goll, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

### 1.2 Relevance

If Schopenhauer did not believe in true happiness, why then discuss him in this study of happiness advice?

The first reason is that Schopenhauer is of historical significance. He was not only one of the first modern philosophers who treated happiness as a central theme, but he is also responsible for the modern ‘philosophical fear of happiness’ (Rehberg, 2000). His description of happiness as an illusion is one of the reasons that social scientists have long ignored the subject.

<sup>1</sup> Neymeyer (1996) has shown that Schopenhauer uses different concepts in his philosophy. In this article, we have used the definition that Schopenhauer adopted for his practical advice.

The second reason is the large readership of Schopenhauer's book. Does success on the reader market imply that the advice is of value for readers? Did Schopenhauer, the pessimist par excellence, find a way to deal with the limits of reality without making the idea that this world has little to offer to its inhabitants a self-fulfilling prophecy?

The third reason is the quality of his ideas. He revolted against "Descartes' error" (Damasio, 1994) for he does not consider thought to be the human essence. He starts his philosophy from the body. Humans are doers that seek control over their environment to meet needs and wants (Young, 1987). If we forget Schopenhauer's archaic phrase of 'the will', then we can recognize the contours of a modern cognitive–motivational–relational theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991) in which cognition is the servant of emotion (Calne, 1999).

The fourth reason is the well-known negative association between pessimism and well being (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001). Schopenhauer's happiness advice implies that he thinks it possible to combine a bleak world-view with subjective well being. He even argues that pessimism can be productive. He mentions that suicide out of despair is likely to be found in conjunction with facile optimism that considers happiness a birthright. Suffering is more difficult to bear for an optimist, because it is felt as private, unique and accidental. Pessimism alleviates the sense of loneliness and personal failure that comes with suffering, because these evils are a consequence of the state of affairs in the world (Schopenhauer, 1958; Young, 1987). The question is whether Schopenhauer is (partly) right. Several authors think he has a point. Dienstag (1999) argues that pessimism can enable us to understand our world better and to act within its limits. Pisa (1988) thinks that reading Schopenhauer can foster acceptance and resignation. But in psychological studies pessimists do not behave accordingly. Pessimists tend to turn to overt denial, self-distraction and giving up when facing uncontrollable situations, whereas optimists are better in acceptance and are more likely to seek information (Scheier et al., 2001). Does Schopenhauer encourage pessimists to cope more adaptively?

### 1.3 Plan of this paper

We start with an outline of Schopenhauer's life and work and summarize his view on life and recommendations for making life bearable. Next we place these views in the context of his situation and personality, for it is widely acknowledged that Schopenhauer's character and his works are deeply intertwined (Copleston, 1975, ppxxv–xxvi). We conclude with an assessment of the reality value of the advice, by comparing the recommendations with observed conditions for happiness. The strengths and weaknesses of this approach are discussed.

## 2 Life and personality

Arthur Schopenhauer was born on the 22nd of February 1788 in Danzig, which was a Prussian town at that time. His father was a merchant and his mother was a novelist. His father drowned in 1805. His death is generally considered to have been suicide.

## 2.1 Career

The death of his father gave Arthur the opportunity to abandon the career in trading that his father had planned for him and instead to become a scholar. He studied Latin, Greek, the natural sciences and philosophy. In 1813, he received his doctorate in Jena. In 1819, he wrote his major work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, for which he received no acclaim. He started to teach at Berlin University. This was not a success either and he left Berlin for Frankfurt am Main. Schopenhauer lived on the money his father had left him.

In Frankfurt, he started work on his last book, *Parerga und Paralipomena*. This work was easy to read and practical in nature and not as complex as his earlier works. Schopenhauer had great difficulty finding a publisher, but when the book came out it was a best seller. His advice grew very popular with the German bourgeoisie and Schopenhauer became a household name. The book brought Schopenhauer the respect and praise he had longed for. He died in Frankfurt in 1860, at the age of 72 (Driesen, 1992, pp. 242–250; Raven, 1997, pp. 219–229).

## 2.2 Character

According to his contemporaries Schopenhauer had a complicated and ill-tempered character. He was hypersensitive and vain. The difficult nature of his relationships with colleagues is well known. He hated Hegel for instance, and planned his lectures at the same time as Hegel held his. Consequently Schopenhauer did not teach any students at all, for Hegel was far more popular. Schopenhauer was hurt by the fact that his books received no popular or critical acclaim.

His personal life also brought him little joy. Schopenhauer's relationship with his mother was very complex. He blamed his mother for his father's death and accused her of wasting his father's inheritance. His mother was a successful writer and often could not stand her son's presence. At one time she forbade him to stay at her house, because she thought he was a depressing know-it-all. Schopenhauer in turn thought her rather stupid and annoying. Even more painful to him was the fact that his mother's books sold very well, while his own books did not. His relationships with other women were unsuccessful and he never married, which he thought better for a philosopher anyway. He generally spoke of women with dismay and he thought them to be mostly ignorant, wasteful and superficial, although he did admit at the end of his life that he liked women, but believed them not to be interested in him (Raven 1997, p221).

Schopenhauer was preoccupied with his health. Although he was generally in good health, he was always afraid of falling ill. In a document written for himself only (*Eis eauton*), he described how his life was ruled by fear of disease, war and other misfortunes. He liked being alone and was suspicious of friends, whom, he thought, could rarely be trusted. At night he slept with a gun and a sword beside him, ready to defend himself. Everything precious was well hidden and the cleaning lady had strict instructions on how to clean his room. He arranged with his bank that the same clerk always brought his interest to him. He dreaded going to a hairdresser's, fearing that his throat would be cut (Safranski, 1990). He was a rather neurotic man, who preferred the company of dogs to the company of people.

### 3 Recommendations for a bearable life

Schopenhauer considered himself to be a seeker after Truth, however painful that may be. In *Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit: Paränesen und Maximen* (part of *Parerga und Paralipomena*), he takes a practical view on how to make the most of a dreadful situation. The book is not so much a philosophy, as a guide to every-day life. In his introduction, Schopenhauer explains what the book is about and his fundamental pessimism when it comes to the possibility of happiness. The central aim of the book is to assist the reader in ordering his or her life in such a way that he or she can obtain the greatest possible amount of pleasure. Schopenhauer's conception of happiness is purely hedonistic, although he himself uses the word eudemonology.

'Eudemonology teaches us how to lead a happy existence' (Schopenhauer, 1995, p. 9).

Schopenhauer was aware that he had written a remarkable book, considering his pessimistic views. He writes:

...Such an existence might perhaps be defined as one which, looked at from a purely objective point of view, or rather, after cool and mature reflection—for the question necessarily involves subjective considerations—would be decidedly preferable to non-existence; implying that we should cling to it for its own sake, and not merely from the fear of death; and further, that we should never like it to come to an end. Now whether human life corresponds, or could possibly correspond, to this conception of existence, is a question to which, as is well known, my philosophical system returns a negative answer... Accordingly, in elaborating the scheme of a happy existence, I have had to make a complete surrender of the higher metaphysical and ethical standpoint to which my own theories lead; and everything I shall say here will to some extent rest upon a compromise (1995, p. 9).

#### 3.1 Views on life

In *Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit*, Schopenhauer holds three ingredients to be responsible for the destiny of a person. First, what man is (personality and health), second, what man has (property) and finally, man's place in the estimation of others (social position). Schopenhauer emphasises that the first category is the most important, because the perspective on 'reality' depends largely on man's character, and not on the objective events themselves. 'Personality, with all it entails, is the only immediate and direct factor in his happiness and welfare. All else is mediate and indirect, and its influence can be neutralized and frustrated; but the influence of personality never' (1995, p. 20).

##### 3.1.1 Personality, or what a man is

According to Schopenhauer (1995, p. 21) personality includes health because the two are intertwined. Good health leads to a cheerful character.

Therefore, subjective blessings—a noble nature, a capable head, a joyful temperament, bright spirits, a well-constituted, perfectly sound physique, in a word, *mens sana in corpore sano*, are the first and most important elements in happiness; so

that we should be more intent on promoting and preserving such qualities than on possession of external wealth and external honour.

Schopenhauer explains that superior mental ability helps to prevent tedium and keeps people from pursuing passions that lead to problems. We have to take our character into account and should only do things that suit it.

### *3.1.2 Property, or what a man has*

Property is far less significant. Schopenhauer does not believe that wealth is important for happiness and states that satisfaction with one's wages is strongly related to subjective factors. One man can be satisfied with small wage, whereas another man will feel poor with twice the amount. We need enough wealth to live, but more is not necessary. It is preferable to look after our health and try to grow intellectually. Wealth can free us from working, but for many people this is not a blessing as most people would be terribly bored.

### *3.1.3 Position, or man's place in the estimation of others*

Our position is least important of all. According to Schopenhauer, people are all born with a desire to be respected, but it is important to realize that other people's opinions of us are not what really count. Vanity makes people vulnerable and lack of respect and fame can make one very unhappy.

### *3.1.4 Stages of life*

Schopenhauer divides life into different phases.

- Early youth is the time when we learn about the world around us and we are relatively alone. This is a happy time, because children are naturally close to nature, which changes when they grow up.
- Later youth and adolescence are unhappy because we are constantly looking for happiness that cannot be found in human life. We are disappointed and unhappy.
- In the last period of our life, life is dominated by fear of misfortune. We have come to understand that there is no true happiness to be found in our lives and we will be satisfied with a painless existence. Our energy diminishes, but our experience and insight grow. We can finally see our lives in perspective. Since our libido, which causes trouble, dies away; we can become truly reasonable.

But when old age is reached, all this is over and done with, partly because the blood runs cooler and the senses are no longer so easily allured; partly because experience has shown the true value of things and the futility of pleasure, whereby illusion has been gradually dispelled, and the strange fancies and prejudices which previously concealed or distorted a free and true view of the world, have been dissipated and put to flight (Schopenhauer, 1995, Part 2, p. 115).

In his description of the phases of life, Schopenhauer comforts us with a vision of a relatively pleasant old age when we have finally learned to accept the true nature of life. A life without the illusions and passions of youth is preferable to the constant striving for pleasure that hardly exists at all.

### 3.2 Advice for a happier life

In the chapter *Paranäsen und Maximen*, Schopenhauer presents us with a set of practical rules to live by. He starts with a set of general rules, followed by rules about the relationship with oneself. The third set of rules (and greatest in number) deals with behaviour towards other people.

#### 3.2.1 General rules

The general rules reflect Schopenhauer's pessimistic view on 'The Will'. It is of no use to walk the hedonistic treadmill, because even if you fulfil your wishes, you will still feel an empty longing. Therefore, it is better not to try too hard. Try to be happy with little and do not pursue happiness, but try to find freedom from pain. A painless state is the closest we can get to happiness. Schopenhauer also proposes a measure for happiness to fit his views:

'To estimate a man's condition in regard to happiness, it is necessary to ask, not what things please him, but what things trouble him; and the more trivial things are in themselves, the happier the man will be' (Schopenhauer, 1995, Part 2, p. 14).

Schopenhauer's general rules are influenced by the philosophy of the Stoa and by Buddhism. These philosophies hold that we should limit our expectations of life. The Stoa also strongly propagates an unemotional attitude towards life. We must never let ourselves be ruled by our emotions. The emphasis on freedom from pain is plainly Buddhist. In Buddhism, life automatically means suffering. It is our task to find a way to handle this suffering, for instance by asceticism.

'Whatever fate befalls you, do not give way to great rejoicings or lamentations; partly because all things are full of change, and your fortune may turn at any moment; partly because men are so apt to be deceived in their judgement as to what is good or bad for them' (Schopenhauer, 1995, Part 2, p. 90).

#### 3.2.2 Our relationship with ourselves

In his 'Our relationship with ourselves', Schopenhauer further explores his general rules and puts them into practice. For example, he tells us that limitation contributes to happiness. The less the Will is excited, the less we suffer. Concentrate on living in the present. Try to make the present time as painless as possible and enjoy it. Use the one thing you can control, your mind, to guide you.

'We must set limits to our wishes, curb our desires, moderate our anger, always remembering that an individual can attain only an infinitesimal share in anything that is worth having; and that, on the other hand, everyone must incur many of the ills of life (...) and if we fail to observe this rule, no position of wealth or power will prevent us from feeling wretched' (Schopenhauer, 1995, Part 2, p. 46).

Especially noteworthy is his idea that happiness can only be found in solitude. The adaptation needed to be around with other people robs you of being yourself; and the company of other people offers no compensation for this loss. Related to pessimism is also his advice to accept your misfortunes, and only to think about them if you are partly responsible for them. Try not to worry about all the things that can go wrong. It is no use building castles in the air.

Schopenhauer advises us to look back on our lives from time to time, because we can learn from it; to fight envy for it contributes to unhappiness; to find a proper

proportion between thoughts about the past, the present and the future; to think before acting, but not to waste any time afterwards by rethinking the path we have chosen; to consider what we have instead of what we lack; to concentrate on mental (intellectual) work; to keep busy; to avoid being led by phantoms of our imagination; to use reason to control our thoughts; and to take good care of our health.

### 3.2.3 *Our relationship with others*

In his advice on how to deal with other people in our lives, Schopenhauer's pessimism and personal experiences take a lead. Schopenhauer thinks being together with other people is in most cases a terrible ordeal. His view of people in general is very bleak. People are dumb, selfish, out to harm you and can therefore never be trusted. Being around with others is dangerous, so one has to be careful and cunning to avoid being hurt.<sup>2</sup>

His recommendations for dealing with other people fall into two categories. The first fosters acceptance of imperfection, the second is plainly pessimistic about the possibility of having satisfying relationships. A few examples:

- People are essentially only interested in themselves. Therefore, they are both easily offended and flattered. People's opinions and judgements are usually corrupt and easily bought.
- Being friendly and kind to other people will make them arrogant and intolerable. Never let yourself become dependent on someone. Always behave with a little disregard.
- Friendship is usually concealed self-interest.
- True friendship is extremely rare. Maybe it does not exist at all.
- Exhibiting intelligence and discernment makes you very unpopular because it confronts other people with their intellectual inferiority.
- Trust is often a sign of laziness, selfishness and vanity.
- Extraordinary people find ordinary people very annoying and will prefer solitude.

This negative attitude about other people is softened by his advice that deals with acceptance. Schopenhauer tells his readers to accept people for what they are. They cannot change themselves and neither can you. Accepting the fact that there are many fools in the world will save you a lot of conflict. Do not despair when wrong statements, for instance in books, are made. Be patient; the truth will come out in the end.

## 4 Reality value of the advice

Schopenhauer based his advice on his philosophy and personal experience in 19th century Germany. How well does it fit the situation of the average citizen today? We

<sup>2</sup> The way Schopenhauer describes other people says a lot about him. It seems he had what we may call a superiority complex, which means that you have an exaggerated striving for superiority to compensate for deep feelings of inferiority. Schopenhauer's inability to adapt himself to the outside world made him hate and despise other people. This might have to do with the unloving family he grew up in and the attachment to his mother (cf. Hitschmann, 1989; Carver & Scheier, 1992, pp. 290 and 311–313).



can check by comparing his recommendations with the empirical research findings on conditions for happiness in modern society. For instance, if Schopenhauer is right that one can better keep away from people, empirical studies would show loners to be happier than people who socialize. Below we consider the reality value of his recommendations one by one. For each we check whether there is corresponding empirical research and to what extent the available findings fit the advice. We draw on a large body of empirical research on happiness. The abundance is such that we cannot separately cite all the studies we used. Instead, we used the empirical findings that are gathered in the World Database of Happiness (WDH) (Veenhoven, 2006). We will note the section in the WDH where these data can be found, in particular the relevant sections of the 'Catalogue of Correlational Findings', which can be browsed on the web. (<http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>). We also used the narrative reviews by Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith (1999) and Veenhoven (1997) and the book *Understanding Happiness* by Headey and Wearing (1992).

#### 4.1 Do not seek wealth

Schopenhauer writes that a lot of money does not make one very happy. Everybody needs a basic income to be able to survive, but after that, wealth is very relative. This view is corroborated in the findings of contemporary empirical research. The many correlational studies listed in the WDH (findings on 'Income') typically show little relationship between objective income and happiness in affluent nations. Satisfaction with income is more strongly related to happiness than actual income. Schopenhauer is right when he states that satisfaction with income is more a matter of interpretation than of objective circumstances.

#### 4.2 Do not seek status

Schopenhauer sees social status as fundamentally unimportant, but acknowledges that it is difficult to accept that people do not respect you. This view is not wholly supported by contemporary research findings. Many studies have found positive correlations between happiness and indicators of social prestige—in particular with occupational prestige, managers and professionals being typically happier than clerks and unskilled labourers (WDH, findings on 'Occupation'). Satisfaction with perceived popularity is more strongly related with happiness than actual sociometrical popularity (WDH, findings on 'Popularity').

Schopenhauer's own life illustrates the importance of fame. He was said to have been quite happy after the success of *Parerga und Paralipomena*, because he was finally as popular as he thought he should be. He died, relatively satisfied, at the ripe age of 72.

#### 4.3 Personality is crucial

Schopenhauer declares that a person's character is the basis for a relatively happy life. Other circumstances are less important. Our lives are destined by luck and the characteristics with which we are born. Schopenhauer therefore advises us to seek happiness in ourselves.

Many empirical investigations on happiness consider its relationship to personality. The results of much of this research are stored in the WDH (findings on

‘Current personality’), and the correlations are typically strong. Diener et al. (1999) describe personality as ‘one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of subjective well being’, although the complicated interaction between personality, life events, coping strategy and circumstances of the environment has not been explored in full. Schopenhauer’s emphasis on the characteristics with which we are born is also justified. Happiness is partly dependent on inheritance and has trait-like properties (Diener et al., 1999), although the actual circumstances of life are important as well (Headey & Wearing, 1992; Veenhoven, 1994).

#### 4.4 What kind of personality makes you happy?

Extraversion enhances well being, because of the greater sensitivity to rewards and by seeking more pleasant social interactions. Optimism stimulates happiness by generalized positive expectancies of the future and the related thought that outcomes in the future are under personal control. Neuroticism lowers well being by its focus on the negative aspects of the world (Diener et al., 1999). This is almost the exact opposite of what Schopenhauer proposes to his readers.

A defender of Schopenhauerian pessimism can ask what the relevance is of the differences of opinion about personality. As stated, personality is largely inheritable, and in a happiness enhancing self-help book it is not as important to be right about the happy personality traits, as it is to give solid advice on changing the interaction with the environment. It can even be said that Schopenhauer offers solace to people without happiness-enhancing personality traits. He warns that negative affect has nothing to do with personal inferiority, but is a logical consequence of the state of the world. This stimulates acceptance and may serve as an antidote to negative rumination.

However, the position of Schopenhauer on personality is problematic in a self-help book, because personality also influences the interaction with the (social) environment. Schopenhauer tells his readers not to try to solve problems in the interaction with others, but to avoid them altogether and to use emotion-focused coping for the remaining negative affect.

Headey and Wearing’s (1992) analysis of the interaction patterns of different personality types yield a different conclusion. They found that certain types of personality encounter certain types of events in their lives. The same people keep telling us that they made new friends, that a friendship with someone of the opposite sex became closer, that they got promoted at work, or were sacked. Harmony or fights in the family also tend to be recurring experiences. Headey and Wearing use the personality traits extraversion and neuroticism (emotional (in)stability) to explain the differences in types of events people encounter. Headey and Wearing distinguish between positive and negative life events and between well being and psychological distress. Table 1 gives an overview.

The phlegmatic type rates low on well being and low on psychological distress. These people lead a rather monochrome life. The sanguine type rates high on well being and low on psychological distress. They lead a rather happy and social life, without worrying too much. The choleric type has both high levels of well being but also of psychological distress. The melancholic type rates low on well being and high on psychological distress. According to Headey and Wearing, people experience a personal dynamic equilibrium in patterns of life events. This means that people’s

**Table 1** Personality

	Stable	Neurotic
Introvert	I Phlegmatic: <i>Passive, careful, thoughtful, peaceful, controlled, reliable, even-tempered, calm</i>	II Melancholic: <i>Quiet, pessimistic, unsociable, sober, rigid, moody, anxious, reserved</i>
Extrovert	III Sanguine: <i>Sociable, outgoing, talkative, responsive, easygoing, lively, carefree, leader like</i>	IV Choleric: <i>Active, optimistic, impulsive, changeable, excitable, aggressive, restless, touchy</i>

Adapted from Headey and Wearing (1992)

lives are strongly influenced by their personality and will in time return to the pattern of events that is typical for their personality type. History will repeat itself.

Headey and Wearing (1992, pp. 172–192) also offer advice on how to increase our chances of happiness. Since social interaction is one of the more important satisfiers, one of the possibilities is to learn the social skills that extrovert and stable people have naturally. It is also important to find some kind of meaning or purpose in life. In general it might help to explore fully the activities one likes to do best. Headey and Wearing tell their readers to enthusiastically seek interaction with the environment, and not to limit themselves to emotion-focused coping. This is the opposite of what you would do if you were to follow Schopenhauer's self-help book.

A weakness in their argument is that they base their advice for the people low on well being on the behaviours that work well for the people with other personality traits, whereas Schopenhauer strongly emphasizes that personality is given. Can the advice to change the interaction with the environment be counterproductive, as it requires from people that they change something that is outside their control, their personalities? We were unable to find intervention studies that enable us to answer this question directly, but a secondary analysis of the Australian Panel Study allowed us to test if the benefits of intimate social ties had equally strong positive effects for different personality types (see below).

#### 4.5 Avoid problems

In Schopenhauer's general rules, the emphasis lies on finding freedom from pain and being satisfied with little. This advice is unfortunate for two reasons. The first is that absence of distress is not sufficient to warrant happiness. We have described above that phlegmatic people are low on distress and low on well being. Also, choleric people are high on distress, but high on well being as well. It can be concluded that happiness is a more positive state than the mere absence of pain.

The second reason is that emotion-focused coping keeps people from actively pursuing the goals in life they find important. Schopenhauer tells them not to try too much, because in the end nothing lasts. Research, however, shows that having goals can add structure and meaning to daily life and that progress towards goals can produce high well being (Diener et al., 1999). Reaching a certain goal makes people feel more in control of their lives and increases feelings of self-worth (Baumeister, 1991, pp. 119–127). Happy people are usually active, outgoing, concerned in the world and involved in the lives of other people (Veenhoven, 1988).

#### 4.6 Do not be optimistic

We mentioned above that optimism is correlated with higher well being, and it is worthwhile to go deeper into this subject, because Schopenhauer believed that superficial optimism would render people vulnerable to depression. He advised people not to be too optimistic, because the worst is yet to come. Research however shows that optimism is also a positive trait in challenging circumstances. It helps people to see the negative in perspective: by seeing the future as enjoyable, you are more likely to see negative events as temporary. Optimism gives people the strength to deal with the negative, because it helps people to focus on aspects of a given situation that are within their personal control, so they can make the best of adversities. Optimism correlates positively with well being (Scheier et al., 2001).

Pessimism however is not always bad. Norem (2001) explains that defensive pessimism (the cognitive strategy where individuals set low expectations for an upcoming performance, despite having done well in the past) helps people high on anxiety to prepare for challenges. People using this strategy usually perform well. They realize what a bad performance can mean for them and this inspires them to put effort into the preparation. By expecting the worst they curb anxiety about failures. In these circumstances the low expectations are not self-fulfilling. Unrealistic optimism can lead to risk behaviour and quitting when things turn out to be more difficult than expected. People need enough optimism to start something new and enough pessimism to see that the road ahead might be difficult.

Schopenhauer's position has some characteristics that can be thought of as a form of defensive pessimism. His message is that no matter how terrible our ordeal is, we must try and make the best of it. We should never give up, and should never let our misfortune get to us. He also makes it easier to accept misfortunes by helping people to acknowledge that they are only partly to blame for them. After all, we must realize that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Try to face the negative aspects of life bravely, and concentrate on what you have instead of what you lack: this is also a form of advice that is almost optimistic. The same is true for his idea that we should not hesitate to spend time or money to avoid misfortunes.

Schopenhauer's pessimism is not absolute and he avoids important pitfalls of pessimism (suppression of thoughts, giving up, self-distraction, cognitive avoidance, focus on distress and overt denial), but this does not mean that he uses his pessimism constructively. His idea is that we can teach ourselves to adapt to a miserable world by changing our reactions to it and to enjoy Byron's 'solitude of kings', but he forgets that it often works out better to try to change the world according to our needs and wants. Not all people are awful and we can even find some friends and a partner of our liking. Our well being is greatly served by it.

#### 4.7 Shun people

According to Schopenhauer people and friendship should not be trusted and especially the talented should prefer loneliness. The empirical findings indicate that this is not correct. A positive attitude towards social interaction and friendship shows a positive correlation with happiness and so does the number of visits of relatives, the number of friends, the number of close friends, the attendance at parties, the amount of intimate discussions and social participation (WDH, correlational findings on happiness and 'Friendship', 'Family' and 'Social involvement').

#### 4.8 Do not marry

In Schopenhauer's view, marriage has been created by women to make sure that men take care of them financially, and is something that would make men unhappy. This idea is not supported by contemporary data.<sup>3</sup> In fact, being married is good for the well being of both men and women, but the correlations are even higher for men (WDH, correlational findings on happiness and 'Marital status'). It seems that women are more able to form social networks that buffer the loneliness of being single. Below we will see that marriage is especially profitable for neurotics.

#### 4.9 Remain yourself

Schopenhauer warns his readers about the dangers of conformism. You can better be yourself and not pay too much attention to the opinions of others. The existing findings on this subject are mixed. There is a positive correlation between happiness and being courteous, cooperative, tactful, conscientiousness, trustworthy and with seeking social approval, which seems to indicate that compliance with a group raises happiness. On the other hand happy people appear to be less conforming, more independent, less inhibited and less inclined to feel guilty (WDH, correlational findings on happiness and 'Personality').

The advice of Schopenhauer may have been too extreme in his emphasis on self-determination, but his emphasis on internal motivation instead of giving in to societal pressures, is probably conducive to happiness. Internal motivation goes with more interest, excitement and confidence, which explains enhanced performance, persistence and creativity and heightened vitality, self-esteem and happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

### 5 Applicability for neurotic people

The foregoing section casts doubt about Schopenhauer's advice, since most of his recommendations appear to lead to conditions that work out negatively with regard to happiness. Yet our assessment of reality consequences was largely based on investigations among the general population. Possibly, the recommendations work out differently for different people, and it is not far-fetched to think that the advice could work out positively for people like Schopenhauer.

As noted earlier, Schopenhauer seems to have been an introvert, to have had trouble making and keeping friends, to have been lonely, thoughtful and emotionally unstable (anxious, nervous). This makes him a melancholic personality. His characteristics should then be, according to Eysenck, quiet, pessimistic, unsociable, sober, rigid, moody, anxious and reserved (Carver & Scheier, 1992, pp. 68–69). This seems to fit the description of Schopenhauer very well. Actually, Schopenhauer (1995, p23) himself refers to this personality type: 'A genius is one whose nervous power or sensitiveness is largely in excess; as Aristotle has very correctly observed.

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that the concept of marriage has changed over time. It is impossible to say what Schopenhauer might have said about the modern idea of marriage in the Western world in which women are far less dependent financially on men than in Schopenhauer's days.

**Table 2** The correlation between life satisfaction and marriage for different personality types

	No partner			With Partner			Difference (profit)
	Happiness		N	Happiness		N	
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD		
Neurotics	6.10	1.10	85	6.89	1.31	140	+0.79
Other personalities	6.81	1.08	214	7.32	1.06	473	+0.51

Men distinguished in philosophy, politics, poetry or art, appear to be all of a melancholy temperament'.

Headey and Wearing (1992, p. 121) found that people with this kind of personality, 'rate low on well being and high on psychological distress. They have poor social networks. They feel relatively helpless, vulnerable and unable to control their lives. They worry a lot. There are relatively large gaps between their expectations and their perceptions of their current life'. Schopenhauer fits this picture very well.

Would Arthur's advice be apt for this kind of person? Are neurotics like him better off if they cultivate their misanthropy, avoid social contacts and forego marriage? We cannot answer these questions with research papers, because positive psychology has almost nothing to say about the fit between advice offered about personality characteristics (Norem & Chang, 2002), but we checked the latter hypothesis in a secondary analysis of the Victoria Quality of Life Panel Study by Headey and Wearing. We investigated if the effects of marriage for melancholic people are as strong as for people with sanguine, phlegmatic and choleric personalities. If the objection to Headey and Wearing's advice is right, then people high on neuroticism and low on extraversion have a personality that is least likely to profit from advice that tells them to copy the behaviour of happy extraverts.

The data strongly suggest that intimate personal relationships add to well being, especially for people high on neuroticism and low on extraversion. The correlation between happiness and marriage is even higher for melancholic people (+0.79), than for the other personality types (+0.51). The correlations are presented in Table 2.

So Schopenhauer was also wrong on the subject of marriage for neurotic people.

## 6 Discussion

In this article, we assessed the reality value of Schopenhauer's recommendations for a happier life by comparing them with contemporary research findings on the conditions for happiness. Is such a comparison appropriate? At first sight there are reasons to doubt it.

First, one could object that the paradigms are too different, since Schopenhauer was a philosopher, while contemporary research is done by social scientists. We do not consider this to be a problem, as the social sciences did not exist in Schopenhauer's time and have evolved from philosophy. The questions asked are similar. Furthermore, the particular book by Schopenhauer we are considering is not a straightforward philosophical book, but a practical guide.

It is more difficult to judge whether Schopenhauer's book was meant for our age, or can only be understood in the light of its time. Did Schopenhauer consider his

work as universal and timeless? His book is still very readable, but some of his remarks, for example on honour, have little bearing on our times. Other values are more implicit and consequently more difficult to understand. Some concepts deserve extra attention, such as Schopenhauer's view on marriage. Marriage was a different institution during Schopenhauer's era. His advice, which was predominantly aimed at men, was to refrain from marrying, for in his times women depended on marriage for their income. Even if it is sound advice now—according to recent data—to marry, it may be that this was different in his times. It may be that the concept of marriage has changed too much over time to make Schopenhauer's advice applicable.

Schopenhauer himself, however, in his introduction answers the question whether his philosophy was intended to be. He constantly quotes other writers and philosophers from as much as 2000 years before him. According to Schopenhauer, the wise have, said the same throughout the ages, and the fools have said the complete opposite. Therefore, we conclude that Schopenhauer considered his statements to be timeless, although we may not agree with him about this.

Another question we have to ask is: Are Schopenhauer and contemporary researchers concerned with the same thing? Note that we use a modern definition of happiness as the subjective appreciation of life as a whole. There are some differences between Schopenhauer's definition of happiness and the one we now use. Schopenhauer's original definition is more hedonistic: he defines happiness as the complete absence of all pain and the complete fulfilment of all desires. However, as this is—according to him—an unattainable state, his advice is meant to enhance durable life-satisfaction. This comes very close to a modern definition of happiness as the subjective appreciation of life as a whole. Schopenhauer's book is partly a literature study on what other writers and philosophers have said on the subject, but he only uses quotes that mesh in with his views. In a sense, his book is empirical, but exclusively based on his personal findings in life. Contemporary research is empirical and based on other people's own perceptions of their happiness.

## 7 Conclusion

Schopenhauer wrote one of the first self-help books. It gives the reader advice on how to make life bearable. Some of his remarks are very apt. For instance he advises the reader to restrain from striving for wealth; and contemporary data shows that once a basic income is achieved, more money does little to increase happiness. He also advises us to stay busy, which is a valid suggestion. Schopenhauer rightly observed that a person's character is a key determinant of happiness. Ironically, he did not realize the strong interaction between his own personality and his view on happiness. His gloomy view on human interaction dominates his advice about happiness. Contemporary data prove Schopenhauer wrong in these remarks on social interaction. Social interaction is a key determinant for happiness. His advice to shy away from people and to distrust others is probably the worst advice for anyone to follow. The book is amusing and well written, but it would be a mistake to follow all of its recommendations. Schopenhauer did not succeed in using his pessimistic world-view constructively for creating happiness enhancing advice. Misanthropy and social isolation will make you unhappy, even when you are someone with a neurotic personality like Schopenhauer.



**Acknowledgements** Many thanks to Ms. T.M. Schalkx-van Dijk, Ms. S. Hibberd, Ms. M.A. Schalkx, Mr. R. Veenhoven and two anonymous reviewers for their comments. A special thanks to Mr. J. Ehrhardt for his statistical analysis of happiness and neuroticism.

## References

- Baumeister, R. (1991). *Meanings of life*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Calne, D. B. (1999). *Within reason; Rationality and human behavior*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Carver, C., & Scheier, M. (1992). *Perspectives on personality*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Chang E. C. (Ed.) (2001). *Optimism and pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Copleston, F. C. (1975). *Arthur Schopenhauer: Philosopher of pessimism*. London: Bernes and Noble.
- Damasio, A. R. (1994). *Descartes error; Emotion, reason and the human brain*. New York: Putman.
- Diener, E., Suh, E., Lucas, R., & Smith, H. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, *125*, 276–302.
- Dienstag, J. F. (1999). The pessimistic spirit. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, *25*, 71–95.
- Domino, N., & Conway, D. W. (2001). Optimism and pessimism from a historical perspective. In E. C. Chang (Ed.), *Optimism and pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Driessen, H. (1992). Nawoord. In A. Schopenhauer (Ed.), *Bespiegelingen over levenswijsheid* (pp. 242–250). Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek.
- Goll, M. (2006). Glück à la carte: Über die Machbarkeit des Glücks in der Ratgeberliteratur. In A. Bellebaum, & D. Herbers (Eds.), *Glücksangebote in der Alltagswelt* (pp. 87–106). Münster: Aschendorff Verlag.
- Headay, B., & Wearing, A. J. (1992). *Understanding happiness*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Hitschmann, E. (1989/1913). *Schopenhauer: Proeve van een psychoanalyse van de filosoof*. Amsterdam: Uitgave in de reeks Psychoanalytische Cahiers.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1991). Progress on a cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion. *American Psychologist*, *46*(8), 819–834.
- Neymeyr, B. (1996). Pessimistische Eudaimonologie? Zu Schopenhauers Konzeptionen des Glücks. *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch*, *77*, 133–165.
- Norem, J. K. (2001). Defensive pessimism, optimism and pessimism. In E. C. Chang (Ed.), *Optimism and pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice* (pp. 77–100). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Norem, J. K., & Chang E. C. (2002). The positive psychology of negative thinking. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *58*(9), 993–1001.
- Pisa, K. (1988). Das Vermächtnis der Gelassenheit; Schopenhauer als ‘Philosoph für die Welt’. *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch*, *69*, 67–73.
- Raven, W. (1997). Nawoord door Wim Raven. In A. Schopenhauer (Ed.), *Er is geen vrouw die deugt* (pp. 219–229). Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers.
- Reginster, B. (2004). Happiness as a faustian bargain. *Daedalus*, *133*, 52–60.
- Rehberg, K. S. (2000). The fear of happiness: Anthropological motives. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *1*, 479–500.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68–78.
- Safranski, R. (1990). *Schopenhauer and the wild years of philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Bridges, M. W. (2001). Optimism, pessimism, and psychological well-being. In E. C. Chang (Ed.), *Optimism and pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1958/1818). *The World as will and representation* (translated by E. F. J. Payne). New York: Dover Publications.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1992a). *De wereld deugt niet (brieven), samengesteld door A. Hübscher*. Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1992b). *Bespiegelingen over levenswijsheid*. Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek.



- Schopenhauer, A. (1995/1890). *The wisdom of life and counsels and maxims* (translated by T. Bailey Saunders). New York: Prometheus Books
- Schopenhauer, A. (1997). *Er is geen vrouw die deugt*. Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihaly, M. (2000). Positive psychology; An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5–14.
- Van Nierop, M. (1996). Subjectiviteit en illusie (Subjectivity and Illusion). *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 58, 631–642.
- Veenhoven, R. (1988). The utility of happiness. *Social Indicators Research*, 20, 333–354.
- Veenhoven, R. (1994). Is happiness a trait? *Social Indicators Research*, 32, 101–160.
- Veenhoven, R. (1997). Advances in understanding happiness. *Revue Quebecoise de Psychologie*, 18, 29–74.
- Veenhoven, R. (2006). *World database of happiness*. Retrieved from <http://www.eur.nl/fsw/research/happiness>.
- Young, J. (1987). A Schopenhauerian solution to Schopenhauerian pessimism. *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch*, 68, 53–69.