Introduction

The Apolitical Schopenhauer

In the spring of 1803, the teenaged Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) visited a place of abject misery, even a hell on earth. This was a shipbuilding yard in the French port of Toulon with about 6,000 criminals condemned to years and decades of hard labor, often chained to one another or to benches.[1] These prisoners endured what Schopenhauer called a punishment worse than death. In his account of the visit, he wrote of his horror at the sight of this joyless, hopeless, undignified existence – everything he saw filled him with dread. Without a varied vocabulary for his experience, he used the word "horrible [*schrecklich*]" four times in one paragraph.[2] His mother and travel companion Johanna Schopenhauer (1766–1838) described the scene in greater detail, and with greater eloquence, but in the same mood. Among hundreds of men with rattling chains, she noted many with "wildly contorted faces" that looked like "masks of the devil," others who had been reduced to "dull animality," and a few letting out furious screams and deranged laughs.[3] The arsenal in Toulon, she concluded, was a place "similar to hell."[4]

The visit to the naval site took place on a Schopenhauer family tour of Europe. Schopenhauer and his parents were visiting the coast of France, spent some time in Marseille, and went to the port of Toulon; this was where they entered the French navy arsenal where thousands of convicts were building ships as part of the Napoleonic armament.[5] Both Johanna and Arthur Schopenhauer kept travel diaries. Johanna would later turn her journal into a travel book, *A Trip through Southern France* [*Reise durch das südliche Frankreich*] (1817), one of the first books she published in her successful writing career. During her lifetime, she was the more famous Schopenhauer, thanks partly to her travel writing but mostly to a series of novels about women in high society, published in the 1820s; her collected works appeared in 1830–1.[6] The teenaged Arthur was not an aspiring

author. He kept a journal because he had been instructed to write daily to improve his penmanship.[7] The tour of Holland, England, France, and parts of Germany was a step in Schopenhauer's preparation to inherit his father's trade: a businessman needed proficiency in modern languages, international experience – and sober handwriting.

After his father's death in 1805, Schopenhauer would eventually veer away from the planned career path, end his merchant apprenticeship, and begin preparatory studies for a university education meant to pave the way for a different future. A little more than a decade after, in 1818, Schopenhauer finished *The World as Will and Representation*, a book that with great delay would help make him famous as the foremost philosopher of suffering. "If suffering is not the closest and most immediate goal of our life," he wrote in a late essay, "then our existence is the most inexpedient thing in the world" (PP II: 262). But according to Schopenhauer himself, it was his early experiences rather than his later philosophical training that made him realize that suffering was so ubiquitous, inevitable, and overwhelming that the purpose of life must be the endurance of pain.[8] In notes from the year 1832, as cholera swept Berlin and Schopenhauer had relocated to Frankfurt, he wrote that the insight into the "wretchedness of life" gripped him before he acquired any formal schooling in philosophy.[9] Betraying his grandiosity, Schopenhauer added that his confrontation with pervasive suffering in his youth was much like the young Buddha's, whose teachings were shaped by early encounters with "sickness, old age, pain, and death."[10]

Before reaching maturity, Schopenhauer had realized that the world could not possibly be the creation of a benevolent god; it must be the work of a devil.[11] He was, from very early on, an observer of torment in the world, and he drew dramatic philosophical conclusions from his observations. To most of his readers, however, he did not draw political conclusions. For example, the spectacle of thousands of poorly treated prisoners in Toulon horrified the young Schopenhauer, but it did not provoke a clear political judgment. He witnessed a scene of grotesque mass suffering, but he did not explicitly label it as government coercion, a violation of human rights, or the oppression and exploitation of one group by another. He reacted strongly to the depth and scale of human hardship but did not speak as a budding liberal reformer or a passionate radical. And he would not assume any of those roles later in life either. In a text written many decades later, he likened all of society to a "penitentiary" full of criminals (PP II: 273), where it would be best to accept a life full of "repugnancies, sufferings, torments, and distress" (PP II: 272) rather than to rebel against

injustices or seek to change social or economic conditions. The world, he believed, "is simply *hell*" and will remain so forever (PP II: 270).

Schopenhauer focused on the problem of human suffering, but not, it seems, on the political causes of that suffering, or the possibility of eliminating it by political means. Most readers have noted that he saw distress as metaphysically rooted and the human condition as resistant to substantial amelioration.[12] When one of Schopenhauer's early disciples suggested in a conversation that some human experiences of brute physical pain could be softened through anesthesia, Schopenhauer responded by referring to the inexhaustible news reports about homicides, mutilations, bloody fights, shipwrecks, and other horrendous calamities.[13] Newspapers, he implied, confirmed his metaphysical insights daily: suffering was endemic to human lives, and while the human condition could be mitigated locally in some limited ways, it could never be so fundamentally improved that there would be meaningful alternatives to resignation. Medical advances might lessen pain in a few cases, but they would not redeem the fallen nature of the world. Nor would, one could continue, the introduction of democracy, the overthrow of despotic governments, or the overturning of class hierarchies. Is there no role, then, for politics in Schopenhauer's philosophy?

The Scholarly Consensus

Scholars have generally agreed that Schopenhauer made no meaningful contribution to political thought. A recent short biography of Schopenhauer in English states that he was "singularly uninterested in political philosophy," unusually so for a German philosopher in the first half of the nineteenth century.[14] An introduction to a companion to his philosophy speaks of the "brazenly ahistorical and apolitical cast of Schopenhauer's thought,"[15] and a monograph with a synoptic overview of his thought states that his philosophical system is "totally free from the political turmoil of his time."[16] Even an entry on Schopenhauer in an encyclopedia of political thought begins with the admission that he had "relatively little concern for political philosophy," just as he was largely indifferent to "the politics of his day."[17]

In anthologies and multi-author introductions devoted to Schopenhauer's philosophy, his reflections on politics are often not treated in a separate entry. The *Cambridge Companion* and the *Blackwell Companion* to Schopenhauer's works have no section on his politics, while the *Oxford Handbook* includes one chapter on his views of "law and justice."[18] For the sake of comparison, the

same handbook features an article each on Schopenhauer and Christianity, Schopenhauer and Hindu thought, Schopenhauer and Buddhism, Schopenhauer and Confucian thinkers, and Schopenhauer and Judaism. A similar pattern appears in a recent German handbook, which dedicates separate chapters to Schopenhauer's relationship to Asian and Western religious traditions but none to his political thought, with the implication that it requires no extensive comment.[19] In recent years, a small number of illuminating treatments of Schopenhauer's political thought have appeared, but then in the form of articles;[20] there are no book-length treatments of the topic in English.

This widespread sense that Schopenhauer was apolitical was established early in the scholarship. The first books on his life and thought, written by people who knew him personally, conceded that the great thinker had little interest in politics. The first generation of Schopenhauer biographers bickered about the correct image of their idol,[21] but they all agreed that he was not a political philosopher. For the jurist Wilhelm Gwinner (1825–1917), who wrote the first biography (1862), Schopenhauer was "alien" to any kind of political enthusiasm.[22] According to the musicologist and journalist Ernst Otto Lindner (1820–67), who wrote another portrait in 1863, Schopenhauer did not have a particularly good grasp of jurisprudence or public law.[23] Another early admirer, the provincial court judge Friedrich Dorguth (1776–1854), wrote a brief, pamphlet-like book on Schopenhauer (1845) and included an appendix on the concept of right, or *Recht*, but the appendix strangely only referred to Schopenhauer in passing.[24] An ambitious 1850 overview of contemporary German, French, and English legal and political philosophy by the philosophy professor Immanuel Hermann Fichte (1796–1879), who was the son of the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), featured a short chapter on Schopenhauer's ethics but not on his politics, and Fichte made profuse excuses for the inclusion of the then marginal thinker.[25] Even Schopenhauer's most sophisticated and prolific early evangelist, the philosopher Julius Frauenstädt (1813–79), dedicated only one of almost thirty chapters to Schopenhauer's conception of right, the state, and history in his 1854 book *Letters on Schopenhauer's Philosophy*.[26]

After the first generation of portraits of and introductions to Schopenhauer, it became something of a tradition to dispute that the philosopher had any interest in political thought. During the era of Schopenhauer's greatest influence, the period from the final decades of the nineteenth century to the First World War,[27] many aspects of his thought received a more comprehensive treatment, including his legal and

political ideas. Yet the small number of studies of his thoughts on politics exhibited a timid, apologetic character. An 1899 German dissertation on Schopenhauer's politics immediately acknowledged that the philosopher had "little inclination" to occupy himself with "political and social questions."[28] Another dissertation on Schopenhauer's conception of law and statehood (1901) admitted that his "doctrine of right" was little more than a "torso."[29] The authors evidently deemed every facet of Schopenhauer's system worthy of a dissertation-length discussion but refrained from making any claims about the philosopher's importance as a political thinker.

The image of Schopenhauer as an apolitical philosopher was shared across the political spectrum, and across disparate ideological traditions with different, even conflicting conceptions of politics. Writing in the national-liberal periodical *Prussian Yearbooks* [*Preußische Jahrbücher*] in 1884, the Bismarck supporter and government-employed publicist Constantin Rößler (1820–96)[30] argued vehemently against the erection of a Schopenhauer monument in Frankfurt am Main, the philosopher's hometown in the latter half of his life. Schopenhauer's "opiate metaphysics [*Opiummetaphysik*]" as well as his celebration of political despotism and individual resignation were wholly unsuited to the dynamism of a strong and unified Germany.[31] The German Reich, Rößler stated confidently, does not "bend its knee before a cynic."[32] Rößler also claimed that Schopenhauer had only become popular after the pan-European 1848 revolutions. For those disappointed and discouraged by the failure of 1848, Schopenhauer's philosophy of "misery" had proved congenial during a collective political "hangover," but it should be dismissed as Germans headed into a new epoch of great achievements.[33] The idea of pessimism's post-1848 popularity among the politically alienated bourgeoisie remains a conventional element of Schopenhauer portraits to this day.[34]

In a more technical-juridical article on Schopenhauer's philosophy of right (1914), the young legal scholar Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), who would later be recognized as a major right-wing thinker and become infamous as a collaborator with National Socialism, characterized the philosopher's ideas on the principles of law and the state as a mere "ornament" added to his philosophical system.[35] Schopenhauer's thinking was so sharply focused on the desires and vulnerabilities of the individual subject vis-à-vis others, Schmitt claimed, that he neglected to spell out how a state was authorized to intervene in society. To Schmitt, Schopenhauer did not deliver a full-fledged justification for the authority of the state as

the embodiment of a genuine "over-individual [*überindividuellen*]" will.[36] In view of this, Schmitt concluded, Schopenhauer's reflections on the concept of right and on law possessed no enduring value as stand-alone contributions to legal or political thought.

Yet Schmitt was respectful when compared with Schopenhauer's critics on the left. Prominent Marxist critics have often construed Schopenhauer's alleged disinterest in political matters as a damning symptom of self-serving bourgeois myopia. In a portrait of Schopenhauer published in 1888, the hundredth anniversary of the philosopher's birth, the Marxist theorist and Social Democrat politician Karl Kautsky (1854–1938) suggested that Schopenhauer's apathetic attitude toward politics made him an example of the kind of egocentric, practically solipsistic figure that his own philosophy decried.[37] For Schopenhauer, Kautsky observed, social and political questions mattered little, focused as he was on his own material comfort and philosophical reputation.[38]

In his critical portrait in *The Destruction of Reason* (1954), the Marxist philosopher and literary critic Georg Lukács (1888–1971) categorized Schopenhauer's pessimism as a calculated antipolitical strategy. The purpose of the philosophy was precisely to corrode people's faith in the efficacy of collective revolutionary action.[39] Schopenhauer, Lukács argued, meant to devalue society and history in order to consolidate the status quo. In effect, Schopenhauer was an apologist for capitalist bourgeois society, but then only an oblique one since he never wrote an explicit tract on social and political issues. In a sense, right-wing and left-wing commentators agreed: Schopenhauer, they all argued, could not quite conceptualize community, coordinated action, or a collective will. He seemed to care little about the significance of rising social classes, dynamic nations, or powerful states.

Schopenhauer's Politics

With such a strong consensus on the near absence of a political philosophy in Schopenhauer's work, the attempt to produce any form of revisionist account might seem absurdly contrarian. Yet *Schopenhauer's Politics* sets out to challenge the widespread image of the apolitical philosopher. Schopenhauer may not be a major political thinker, but he is not brazenly apolitical, totally indifferent to the politics of his day, or ignorant of or uninterested in the political events and ideologies of his age. Instead, this book argues, he developed a sharply defined conception of politics; rejected rival conceptions; articulated a defense of the purpose,

importance, and legitimacy of political action; and then used it to assess regimes and countries.

Schopenhauer's conception of politics is grounded in his philosophy. The major problem of existence, he famously argued, is suffering. Life is profoundly and pervasively marked by all sorts of misery: constant worries and fears, unfulfilled desires, disappointed hopes, accidents that frustrate any plans, physical pains, sicknesses, injuries, and inevitable decline (WWR II: 588–92). "Every life history," he wrote in *The World as Will and Representation*, "is a history of suffering" (WWR I: 350). Yet Schopenhauer also believed that a major source of suffering for humans – the greatest such source – is human conflict. The world is indeed a "hell," but the devils are other humans (WWR II: 593); in their interactions with one another, people are chronically indifferent, hostile, unfair, unjust, hard, cruel, and vicious. This mutual aggression of humans is a symptom of their ferocious egoism. Every human being, Schopenhauer argued, must be seen as an individuated vehicle of a relentless, metaphysical drive that he called the will, which endlessly and inexorably strives for its own satisfaction. As such, all incessantly seek to fulfil their own desires, with little or no regard for the well-being of others. The inevitable result in a world of finite resources is that people clash, often violently, and cause each other harm – "each only has," Schopenhauer claimed, what they have "torn away from another" (WWR I: 335). Yet his unsparing focus on the perpetual cruelty of metaphysically rooted human conflict did not automatically lead to a "action-paralyzing" skepticism about the futility of all coordinated action.[40] Instead, Schopenhauer advanced politics as the pragmatic use of the rational intellect – a distinctively human capacity – for the purpose of prudently preventing and moderating human strife.

For Schopenhauer, politics was synonymous with rational conflict management. As such, he deemed it a fundamental and indispensable human activity. The moderation of hostility involved two complementary means: first, the strategic and cooperative establishment of a state that enforces social order and ensures public security and, second, techniques used by individuals for averting and neutralizing interpersonal discord. The first is apparent to most readers of Schopenhauer (although rarely comprehensively analyzed), while the second has not attracted much attention. Yet Schopenhauer believed that only this two-pronged program of containing aggression and preventing harm would give humans the peace to pursue more sophisticated and even potentially redemptive responses to the agony of life, such as aesthetic experience, philosophical contemplation, or religious asceticism. Understood as the use of the intellect to arrange and

moderate fractious human affairs, politics serves to prevent basic existential risks and thereby enables higher forms of human activity. In an indirect way, politics might even be a precondition for salvation.[41]

There are two reasons why Schopenhauer's distinct conception of politics has been consistently overlooked. First, Schopenhauer intentionally kept his explicit comments on politics quite concise, creating the false but enduring impression that he had little interest in the topic. In fact, he pursued a deliberate rhetorical strategy of deflation, downplaying the possible achievements of politics. He did so because he felt that the political philosophy of his own era had overburdened politics with too many hopes and aspirations, and that the debate had become inflated and bloated, riddled by a lack of realism. For Schopenhauer, the conduct of politics was an important civilizing program thanks to its moderating effect on human conflict, but it was not tantamount to redemption.

Second, Schopenhauer did make numerous politically relevant comments on regime types, contemporary states, and modern ideologies, but they are scattered throughout his works rather than systematically presented in the roughly 70 pages out of 3,000[42] where he explicitly discussed the state and law. Even though he was a regular newspaper reader who kept an eye on developments in Germany and abroad as well as something of a pragmatic sage who gave readers counsel on how to act prudently, the resulting wealth of comments on political institutions and behaviors are spread out rather than concentrated, and therefore easy to ignore. Two features of his works have thus hindered an understanding of his politics: when Schopenhauer addressed politics explicitly, he was intentionally brief, and when he made comments on a wide range of political phenomena, he avoided being systematic.

To recover Schopenhauer's political thought, this book employs two strategies. To begin with, it provides the historical context that can clarify the polemical meaning of his political philosophy and help us see the urgent intervention that he was trying to make. In addition, it highlights and synthesizes the politically relevant ideas dispersed across all his texts to reconstruct the patterns of his political opinions and attitudes. Combining these two approaches, *Schopenhauer's Politics* presents a new image of Schopenhauer as a thinker committed to offering a corrective to the German political thought of his day.

Schopenhauer's Politics in Its Historical Context

Understanding Schopenhauer in his historical context makes it possible to see his approach to politics as a break with prevailing ideas of his time.

Schopenhauer's objective was to offer a critique of politics, that is, to delimit its purpose and domain of relevance. Specifically, he viewed politics as a response to a fundamental problem, namely, the inescapable agony of collective human existence. He believed that politics, rightly understood as an important but far from comprehensive or final human reaction to a central predicament of life, had its place in a broader range of activities, such as religious practice, morally virtuous behavior, aesthetic perception, philosophical reasoning, and ascetic resignation. Reflections on politics were therefore not so much peripheral and insignificant to Schopenhauer as they were circumscribed and positioned within the whole of his thought. For him, politics assumed a particular function – the rationally organized prevention of the injury and harm that humans cause each other – and occupied a particular slot in his writings.

Committed to a strict definition of politics, Schopenhauer also indicated that political activity in the form of state building or prudent action cannot and should not do more than to guarantee a modicum of social peace. For him, politics can mute but never eliminate the symptoms of an ultimately metaphysical pathology; it can channel and constrain the metaphysical will that animates all human beings, but not transcend or dissolve it. For instance, he argued that the state fulfils its function by serving as an institution of legal enforcement and deterrence. To him, this meant that the state and its leadership cannot or should not try to answer questions about existence, edify its subjects, embody their collective ethnic identity, provide them with a spiritual purpose, or deliver liberation. The state elite may be very ambitious and aspire to create a near-utopian condition of universal prosperity and ease, but even if they were to succeed in this project of great material improvement, politics would still fail to achieve the nobler, higher purpose of existence, namely, the recognition and tranquilization of the metaphysical will in all its "awfulness."[43] Similarly, actions informed by maxims of prudence can help an individual obtain some good in a particular situational context and lead to some momentary victory and satisfaction, but they do not bring that individual closer to a state of metaphysical insight and redemption. In some sense, Georg Lukács' critique was correct: Schopenhauer wanted people to accept the limited scope of political action and reject the belief that it can radically transform the human condition.

Schopenhauer's tight circumscription of politics set him apart from many other thinkers in his own age, known for its expansive, even grandiosely aspirational conceptions of politics. His lifetime coincided with the French Revolution, the drawn-out Napoleonic Wars, multiple territorial

reconfigurations of German lands, legal emancipation from feudal privileges and obligations, and the rise of large-scale manufacturing. These were all transformative political, economic, and social developments that sparked debates on fundamental issues such as popular sovereignty, constitutional rights, national unity, and pervasive immiseration. Responding to the challenges of the era, German philosophers produced accounts of rationally justified revolution (Fichte in 1793),[44] perpetual international peace (Kant in 1795),[45] kingdoms as communities of love (Novalis in 1798),[46] the modern state as a complex ethical system (Hegel in 1821),[47] or society as egalitarian collaboration (Marx in 1844).[48] Against the backdrop of this parade of visions, Schopenhauer's reflections on politics were relatively sparse and modest, but polemically so. He was entirely open about his rhetorical aim. In comments on politics, he stated that he wanted to avoid the bombast that accompanied most German philosophical talk of the state and law and focus on the provision of basic protections rather than the realization of lofty ideals (PP II: 217–19). To say that he made no meaningful contribution whatsoever to political thought is misleading, as he himself thought he made an intervention precisely by means of a consciously austere attitude, even a demonstrative reticence. Properly contextualized, the oppositional gesture of Schopenhauer's writings on politics can come into view more clearly.

Compared with other thinkers of his era, Schopenhauer saw himself as unusually pragmatic about politics, not as unusually indifferent to it. Contrary to other prominent philosophers from about 1820 to 1860, he did not believe in the possibility of revolutionary emancipation, the historical fulfilment of humankind's destiny, or the reconciliation of all with all. He even seems willfully anachronistic in his choice to speak about politics in terms introduced by seventeenth-century thinkers who, in his mind, had a more acute sense of existential danger than did his more optimistic – or more deluded – nineteenth-century contemporaries. When writing about statehood, Schopenhauer liked to refer to the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and viewed the state as a contractually based institution for mutual protection. When writing about individual political action, Schopenhauer was inspired by the Spanish advocate of prudence Baltasar Gracián (1601–58) and identified politics with carefully calibrated maneuvering, even poker-faced manipulation of others for the achievement of personal ends. In political matters, Schopenhauer indicated, people should focus on the maintenance of a precarious social order and the defense of individual material and reputational interests vulnerable to attacks.

The meaning of Schopenhauer's deliberately minimalist political thought emerges more clearly when placed in the context of the rise of nineteenth-century ideological movements, such as liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, and socialism. His overt comments on these rival systems of political concepts and beliefs are brief and scattered, but nonetheless exhibit a pattern. Contrary to many radical political intellectuals in the nineteenth century, he dismissed the idea that there could be collective agents and he opposed teleological visions of history, according to which humankind would progress from stage to stage to some final point of triumph and freedom. For Schopenhauer, as pointed out by the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) in 1907, history exhibited no "course of development" but was a hopelessly monotonous spectacle.[49] Committed to this radically bleak view, he distanced himself from increasingly prominent nineteenth-century visions of how nations or social classes would materialize in history as genuinely collective subjects, engage in struggles with enemies and oppressors, and eventually decide the fate of humanity.[50] Unsurprisingly, his creed was anathema to those who believed that a unified German nation would usher in an age of rapid advancement and practical accomplishments.[51] Schopenhauer also did not side with romantic conservatives who wanted to defend the idea of an organic social community nourished by piety and tradition and guarded by paternal and patriarchal hierarchy.[52] He was not a reactionary in the sense that he did not nostalgically posit a lost social wholeness and call for its reconstitution. Nor, finally, did he appear as a forward-looking liberal arguing that constitutionalized rights and liberties would deliver prosperity and continual improvement toward a state of general contentment. In the 1853 English-language appreciation that was to boost his reputation, the long essay "Iconoclasm in German Philosophy," the translator and dramatist John Oxenford (1812–77) noted that Schopenhauer's pessimism was an affront to the contemporary "liberal mind," which confidently anticipated the benefits of modern education, political rights, and international diplomacy.[53] Schopenhauer's writings did not feature radical prophecies about collective emancipation, conservative hopes for reverent restoration, or liberal optimism about human progress through commerce and communication.

In some sense, Schopenhauer's contribution to the political discourse of his era consisted in skepticism and refusal. Speaking against nationalists, he rejected the idea that coordinated political action should seek to achieve perfect ethnic or cultural unity or that co-nationals owed each other special solidarity and respect. Speaking against socialists, he dismissed the notion

that collective efforts should aim for class liberation and egalitarianism or that individuals could transcend their egoism on the scale of an entire society. For him, human history was not the medium of advancement toward a condition of healed national fraternity, perfect social justice, or universal freedom.[54] Instead, the past, present, and future were a continuous spectacle of conflict and war,[55] in which ceaselessly willing and desiring individuals collided violently with one another.[56] The endless struggle of all against all that led to endless suffering could be held in check with political means, by the circumspect actions of individuals, and above all by a strong state headed by an incontestably legitimate sovereign, but it could not be thoroughly and conclusively resolved. For Schopenhauer, redemption from the world of strife was tied to individually focused practices of rigorous asceticism and was never a collective project. He saw some degree of collective coordination as a necessary dimension of human life but also a severely limited one, without deep ethical or metaphysical significance. Politics itself was never-ending and mitigatory rather than final and salvific.

Yet Schopenhauer's distance from the grandiose political projects and ideologies of his time also allowed him to discern phenomena that, while marginal in his milieu, have gained greater salience in ours. Dismissive of a human society that considers itself ethical but treats animals cruelly on a mass scale, Schopenhauer noted a bias against nonhuman animals in Western theology,[57] pioneered a philosophical defense of animal welfare,[58] and understood animal suffering as a justification for pessimism.[59] A human being who is cruel to animals, he stated simply, cannot be a "good human being" (BM: 229). Repelled by displays of patriotic enthusiasm, he never showed interest in the founding of national states and instead championed a cultural cosmopolitanism that many may now see as refreshing. Without connection to the Christian Church and alienated by official theology, he found solace and philosophical confirmation in tracts of Eastern religion, in "Brahmanism and Buddhism" (WWR I: 514; WWR II: 461, 480; PP I: 35), and consciously departed from the notion of Western supremacy in matters of religion and thought.[60] Finally, he denied that the modern revolutionary republicanism that he observed in his own time constituted an advance over ancient republics, or even over the traditional European royal regimes of his own epoch, and he saw American slavery as a telling symptom of an inherently corrupt republican system rather than an aberration.[61] The systematic cruelty of enslavement was, to Schopenhauer, not a betrayal of modern republican principles that would be rectified over time,[62] but a manifestation of republicanism

itself, possibly because the removal of the one royal sovereign led to the proliferation of numerous petty lords and oppressors rather than perfect egalitarianism.

Convinced of the centrality of suffering to an account of existence, one could say that Schopenhauer noticed it where others ignored it. His political program of harm reduction was rooted in an unusual sensitivity to beings in pain[63] across divisions between cultures, populations, and even species. In his own time, he struck observers as a politically apathetic figure, dismissive of the most modern and progressive causes, such as democratic participation, republican constitutionalism, proletarian mobilization, or national unification. From our vantage point today, however, his critique of human cruelty toward animals, his global cultural consciousness, and his unsparing look at the violence within modern republics may appear quite prescient. To claim that Schopenhauer was indifferent to politics might then partly reflect an obsolete judgment of what kinds of questions and concerns should count as political in the first place. To put it more bluntly: to call Schopenhauer apolitical might be ahistorical.

The Structure of Schopenhauer's Political Thought

Historical contextualization is important for understanding the contemporary significance and polemical intent of Schopenhauer's reflections on politics. It is not, however, sufficient when it comes to recovering its scope. The breadth of his political philosophy can only come into view through considerable efforts of reconstruction. In some cases, this reconstruction involves piecing together numerous comments to discern a coherent pattern. To recover his critique of nationalism, for instance, one must assemble ideas stated under several different headings and in different sections, such as those devoted to historiography, art, and language. The nationalists of Schopenhauer's time celebrated the unifying power of a shared culture, and his skepticism about the value of nationalist commitments is often found not in explicit comments on politics, but in reflections on languages and literatures. Previous commentators have similarly missed Schopenhauer's textually dispersed but nonetheless philosophically coherent discussion of prudence as the political virtue par excellence. For Schopenhauer, political action is a species of instrumental, interest-oriented action. The fullest analysis of the nature and limits of self-interested strategic thinking is found not in his chapters on the state and on legislation, however, but in his explorations of the relation between the will and the intellect, writings not typically mined for politically relevant

content. Schopenhauer's political philosophy is simply not confined to the pages explicitly devoted to statehood and jurisprudence.

Yet the work of reconstruction consists in more than uncovering a whole in fragments or discovering politically relevant ideas in unexpected places. The best way to understand how Schopenhauer viewed the function and significance of politics involves a structural interpretation of his works, which demonstrates how he implicitly but quite systematically compared and contrasted politics, as an activity with specific goals and methods, to other distinct activities, such as religious worship, philosophical contemplation, and sociable interaction. Schopenhauer's political thought is found not only in the seventy or so pages explicitly dedicated to questions of right, law, and the state, but also in the varied and complex relations among the various domains of his philosophical architecture. Central questions about the function, character, and limits of politics become legible in parts of his work devoted to the relationships *between* politics and religion, politics and philosophy, or politics and sociability.

For instance, Schopenhauer distinguished between politics as the centralized deployment of force to curb the war of all against all, on the one hand, and religion as the institutionalized response to an ineradicable human metaphysical need, on the other. Yet to work effectively, Schopenhauer indicated in various places, political rule can seek to affiliate itself with the existential authority of religion, and political elites can try to harness the persuasive power of clerical circles. Schopenhauer thus explored the sources of regime legitimacy in the borderlands between two fields, politics and religion, but in a way that has previously eluded the scholarship. His discussions of political authority take place not only under the rubric of the law and the state, but in the places where he writes about the uses (and abuses) of religion in politics.

In a similar way, the specificity of political reasoning only becomes apparent through a series of contrasts with the activity of philosophizing, which Schopenhauer understood as the disinterested pursuit of truth. In his extensive reflections on the will and the intellect, for example, Schopenhauer's view of genuine thought as independent and unbiased contemplation emerges in contrast to a political kind of reasoning and calculation that is strictly subservient to the will. He even repeatedly differentiated the figure of the authentic philosopher or artist from that of the statesman, the pure genius from the savvy political entrepreneur. In this way, the defining features of a distinct political competency emerge in contrast to philosophical and artistic talent.

Schopenhauer's understanding of the political community likewise emerges more fully when one sees its relation to his elaborate characterization of sociability, the interaction of individuals for the purpose of mutual distraction and entertainment. Politics, Schopenhauer thought, is humankind's attempt to manage the strife that originates in the rivalrous desire for resources, whereas sociability is humankind's attempt to escape the looming existential desolation of boredom when the desires for material resources have been (temporarily) satisfied. While politics may seem a grave and important topic and sociability a frivolous and insignificant one, Schopenhauer nonetheless suggested that they are mutually illuminating: politics deals with human hostility to other humans, whereas sociability addresses the human need for other humans. His thoughts about the challenges and benefits of human togetherness thus span his philosophy of politics *and* his philosophy of sociability, and a complete discussion of his approach to human plurality and collectivity must consider the contrasting character of both.

As these examples indicate, Schopenhauer's conception of politics is best reconstructed when we attend to how he articulated politics with other fields such as religion, philosophy, sociability, and morality. A more structurally oriented interpretation of all his writings allows us to examine how Schopenhauer tackled a range of questions in political philosophy, such as the perceived legitimacy of political rule, the defining features of political thought and action, or the specific nature of the political community. In Schopenhauer's writings, the discussion of politics and religion together yields a discussion of the features of legitimate rule. Further, the distinction between the intellect operating autonomously and the intellect operating in the service of the will produces a concept of specifically political behavior and even a portrait of the consummate politician. Finally, the elaborate critiques of linguistic and cultural nationhood and of polite sociability help uncover the foundations of a specifically political community. When we look only at the sections in which Schopenhauer addressed the state and the law, his political philosophy may indeed seem rather narrow. When we work more holistically to recover the manifold interconnections between distinct areas of his thought, however, he emerges as a more nuanced political thinker.

In sum, this book joins two means of reconstructing Schopenhauer's politics. First, historical contextualization serves to highlight the contrarian nature of Schopenhauer's approach to politics. He was not so much uninterested in the political thought of this time as he was actively opposed to it. Second, a holistically oriented interpretation will uncover the way

that his seemingly thin conception of politics is enriched by its manifold connections to a range of related domains. This double historical and structural procedure does not, it should be added, foreclose criticisms of Schopenhauer. On the contrary, the deepened understanding of his political ideas will expose tensions in his work more clearly, such as the conflict between his commitment to uncensored philosophical investigations and his support for a state whose rule can be fortified by religious authorities. Whereas previous commentators have mostly faulted Schopenhauer for his apparent lack of any political philosophy, this book will examine the problems within his political philosophy.

Chapter Outlines

This book has seven chapters. Chapter 1 has a biographical focus and reconstructs Schopenhauer's political beliefs against the backdrop of his socialization, social location, and financial resources. Schopenhauer was a well-traveled, polyglot son of a merchant who failed to gain a foothold in academia and never pursued another career in the professions, business, or government. Without traditional prospects, he instead settled into a lifelong rentier existence. He was not apolitical but rather retained much of his background's bourgeois attitudes toward rights, property, individual industry, and frugality. But confined to a life outside all professional and ideological circles, he self-consciously came to occupy an outsider position and opposed both conservatives and progressives, orthodox Christians and secular radicals, political Hegelians and Germanophile nationalists. Over the course of several decades, from the 1810s to the 1850s, he rejected most of the emerging ideologies that he encountered. Committed to the idea of a natural intellectual elite to which he himself belonged, he was especially skeptical of collective political movements, such as the nationalism and socialism of his own time. Yet he was also critical of the aristocracy with its traditional privileges and relative independence from the modern state. His preferred political regime was a nondemocratic, monarchical statism that would protect diligent individuals and their property. From a present perspective, Schopenhauer's positions can often seem paradoxical and elusive: he was an elitist anti-aristocrat, a reactionary antinationalist and cosmopolitan, and an antisocialist advocate of compassion.

Chapter 2 reconstructs key tenets of Schopenhauer's political thought with a focus on his view of the state. Scholars have observed that Schopenhauer did not develop much of a political philosophy but have often failed to recognize that this is a deliberate deflationary strategy.

Schopenhauer's aim was to circumscribe the function of politics narrowly and assign it a place in a broader range of human responses to the agony of existence. However, his attempt to differentiate politics from religion and the state from the church led to contradictions. One the one hand, Schopenhauer favored a strong state that could control social strife and noted that political leadership can rely on religious justification to ensure an all-important stability. On the other hand, he observed that state-affiliated religious institutions often protect themselves by silencing independent philosophical reflection, a strategy that he could not accept. Schopenhauer thus ended up with an ambivalent conception of statehood and political leadership as simultaneously protective of life and property and damaging to free inquiry. He felt that monarchical statism best served his wish for financial stability and individual safety but that its reliance on religious support ultimately worked against the intellectual interest he had in the unsupervised and uncensored pursuit of truth.

Chapter 3 recovers Schopenhauer's previously neglected account of prudent political action. To begin with, the chapter points out the connections between the rational governance of society and the rational self-control of the individual in Schopenhauer's works. Based on this correspondence, it argues that a full analysis of his political thought must include his treatment of personal prudence as a key concept. In fact, Schopenhauer supplemented his account of the modern state as an instrument of society-wide pacification with an account of disciplined self-governance as an obligation for the modern political subject. Most importantly, the state could impose constraints on egoism from above while prudence could mask and soften egoism in interpersonal encounters. In Schopenhauer's view, Hobbes' theory of statehood could be constructively supplemented with Baltasar Gracián's account of prudence; implemented together, they could strengthen the prospects of peace. To be sure, Schopenhauer did not see counsels of prudence on how to survive and succeed in treacherous human environments as constituting a guide to redemption from a world of suffering, but he nonetheless placed his reflections on political skill and statesmanship in a systematic relationship with his more famous notions of philosophical genius, moral sainthood, and self-denying asceticism. The chapter thus demonstrates that Schopenhauer deemed political savvy a distinct kind of response to the agony of existence, one ultimately doomed to failure but nonetheless worthy of philosophical attention.

Chapter 4 delineates Schopenhauer's complex discussion of social community. It shows how Schopenhauer thought that neither politics nor morality can truly conceive of human togetherness. For him, the areas of

politics and morality correspond to the controlled exercise of egoism and the spontaneous feeling of compassion, respectively. But he added that egoism is ultimately rooted in a form of practical solipsism and compassion rooted in a metaphysical insight into the inessential nature of individuals. It follows that neither egoistic nor compassionate individuals ultimately care about or need *others*. To remedy these treatments of others as reducible, Schopenhauer turned to sociability. His analysis of social interaction exemplified by salon conversations, games, parties, and so on includes accounts of interpersonal harmony and friction, attraction and repulsion, *among* individuals. Even though Schopenhauer typically dismissed sociable interaction as inherently superficial and sometimes seemed to embrace misanthropy, his elaborate reflections on sociability nonetheless express his interest in the benefits and drawbacks of human community.

Chapter 5 supplements the preceding ones by reconstructing Schopenhauer's critical engagement with political thinkers from his own era. It argues that Schopenhauer's most intense scrutiny of Kant and Hegel focused on their political arguments, the conceptions of prudential and moral action in the case of Kant and the philosophy of the state in the case of Hegel. In other words, the study of Schopenhauer's central and most elaborate objections to Kant and Hegel can help uncover his own political thought. The chapter further demonstrates that Schopenhauer's demystifying critique of statehood in German Idealism places him in a position that was similar to the contemporaneous radical Young Hegelians, including the early Marx. Yet while the young Marx attacked the bourgeois vision of firm state rule over a market society composed of atomized, competitive individuals, Schopenhauer affirmed precisely this vision.

Chapter 6 reconstructs Schopenhauer's critique of a key modern ideology that grew increasingly strong during his own lifetime: nationalism. First, the chapter articulates Schopenhauer's case against the idea of the nation as a community that is supposed to give shape to the allegiances of its members. He did not think that ethnic sameness could ground any moral obligations of individuals. Second, it turns to his critical dissolution of teleological national history, according to which nations are collective agents with a singular fate. For Schopenhauer, nations were not subjects with one shared destiny. Third, it reviews his caustic criticism of the increased importance of the vernacular in scholarly communication and the early Germanist attempt to establish an exclusively German literary canon. Nationhood was to him not even a useful category of cultural appreciation. Through this reconstruction, Schopenhauer emerges as a

fiercely antinationalist thinker who questioned the importance of the nation as a supposedly cohesive community of mutual care, a unified historical subject, or even a meaningful cultural or literary phenomenon.

Chapter 7 reconstructs Schopenhauer's views of different political regimes by examining his remarks on North America, Europe, and China. Schopenhauer understood the United States as the purest realization of a modern republic geared toward maximum individual freedom. He also took note of its high levels of interpersonal violence. Most importantly, he repeatedly returned to US slavery as the worst and most telling example of institutionalized exploitation, brutality, and sadism in his own epoch. In his treatment of the United States, he then connected republicanism to violence and slavery and concluded that they were associated. He also put forward this critique of modern republicanism as an argument in favor of European-style monarchy with the subjection of all subjects under one king. However, Schopenhauer's criticism of American secular republicanism does not mean that he accepted traditional theological conceptions of monarchical sovereignty. Against both the United States and Europe, Schopenhauer instead held up the example of China, an immensely populous and culturally advanced state that was hierarchical and imperial and yet resolutely nontheist. For Schopenhauer, China successfully combined political stability and hierarchy with a philosophically sound atheism and thus demonstrated the realization of his political *and* his philosophical ideals on a civilizational scale. Both authoritarian and atheist (in his conception), China more closely approximated his political ideal than any country in the Western world. In other words, the mature Schopenhauer thought China resolved the tensions between politics and religion that are analyzed in Chapter 2.

Notes

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2 Schopenhauer, *Reisetagebücher*, 155–6.
3 Johanna Schopenhauer, *Reise durch das südliche Frankreich* (Rudolstadt: Verlag der Hof-, Buch- und Kunsthandlung, 1817), 290. My translation.
4 Schopenhauer, *Reise durch das südliche Frankreich*, 290. My translation.
5 Schopenhauer, *Reise durch das südliche Frankreich*, 280.

6 Gustav Sichelschmidt, *Liebe, Mord und Abenteuer: Eine Geschichte der deutschen Unterhaltungsliteratur* (Berlin: Haude & Spenersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1969), 150–1.
7 David Cartwright, *Schopenhauer: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 42.
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9 Schopenhauer, *Der handschriftliche Nachlaß*, vol. 4.1, 96. My translation.
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11 Schopenhauer, *Der handschriftliche Nachlaß*, vol. 4.1, 96. My translation.
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18 Raymond B. Marcin, "Schopenhauer on Law and Justice," in *The Oxford Handbook of Schopenhauer*, ed. Robert Wicks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 311–27.
19 *Schopenhauer Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, 2nd ed., ed. Daniel Schubbe and Matthias Koßler (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2018).
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23 Otto Lindner, *Arthur Schopenhauer. Von ihm. Über ihn: Ein Wort der Vertheidigung* (Berlin: A. W. Hayn, 1863), 13.
24 Friedrich Dorguth, *Schopenhauer in seiner Wahrheit mit einem Anhange über das abstrakte Recht und die Dialektik des ethische und des Rechtsbegriffs* (Magdeburg: Heinrichshofen'sche Buchhandlung, 1845).
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von der Mitte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts bis zur Gegenwart (Leipzig: Dyk'sche Buchhandlung, 1850), 415.

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28 Karl Weigt, *Die politischen und socialen Anschauungen Schopenhauers* (Hannover-Linden: Wilh. Oppermann, 1899), 2. My translation.

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30 Hermann Lübbe, *Politische Philosophie in Deutschland: Studien zu ihrer Geschichte* (Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1963), 81–4.

31 Constantin Rößler, "Ein Denkmal für Arthur Schopenhauer," *Preußische Jahrbücher* 53.5 (1884): 493–502; 498. My translation.

32 Rößler, "Ein Denkmal für Arthur Schopenhauer," 501. My translation.

33 Rößler, "Ein Denkmal für Arthur Schopenhauer," 499. My translation.

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36 Schmitt, "Schopenhauers Rechtsphilosophie," 30. My translation.

37 Karl Kautsky, "Arthur Schopenhauer," in *Arthur Schopenhauer*, ed. Wolfgang Harich (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1955), 156–201; 158.

38 Kautsky, "Arthur Schopenhauer," 158.

39 Georg Lukács, "Arthur Schopenhauer," in *Arthur Schopenhauer*, ed. Wolfgang Harich (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1955), 206–64; 219.

40 Jean-François Drolet, *Beyond Tragedy and Eternal Peace: Politics and International Relations in the Thought of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 41.

41 See the discussion of the importance of the state in the Conclusion.

42 Rudolf Neidert, *Die Rechtsphilosophie Schopenhauers und ihr Schweigen zum Widerstandsrecht* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1966), 165.

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44 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urteile des Publikums über die französische Revolution*, ed. Richard Schottky (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1973).

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52 John Morrow, "Romanticism and Political Thought in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 39–76; 52–9.
53 John Oxenford, "Iconoclasm in German Philosophy," *Westminster Review* 3.2 (April 1853): 388–407; 394.
54 Frauenstädt, *Memorabilien*, 130.
55 Frauenstädt, *Memorabilien*, 301.
56 Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophie in Deutschland 1831–1933* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 81–2.
57 Shapshay, *Schopenhauer's Ethics*, 182.
58 See, for instance, Stephen Puryear, "Schopenhauer on the Rights of Animals," *European Journal of Philosophy* 25.2 (2017): 250–69.
59 Mara van der Lugt, *Dark Matters: Pessimism and the Problem of Suffering* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 356 and 358.
60 For overviews of Schopenhauer's lifelong engagement with Eastern religion and thought, see, for example, Moira Nicholls, "The Influences of Eastern Thought on Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Thing-in-Itself," in *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 171–212; Urs App, "Schopenhauer and the Orient," in *The Oxford Handbook of Schopenhauer*, ed. Robert Wicks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 88–107.
61 See Chapter 7 on the cruelty in and of republics.
62 This argument is critically discussed by Domenico Losurdo, who deems it a form of "vulgar historicism" designed to disavow the pro-slavery stance of prominent liberal and republican thinkers. See *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), 27.
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