

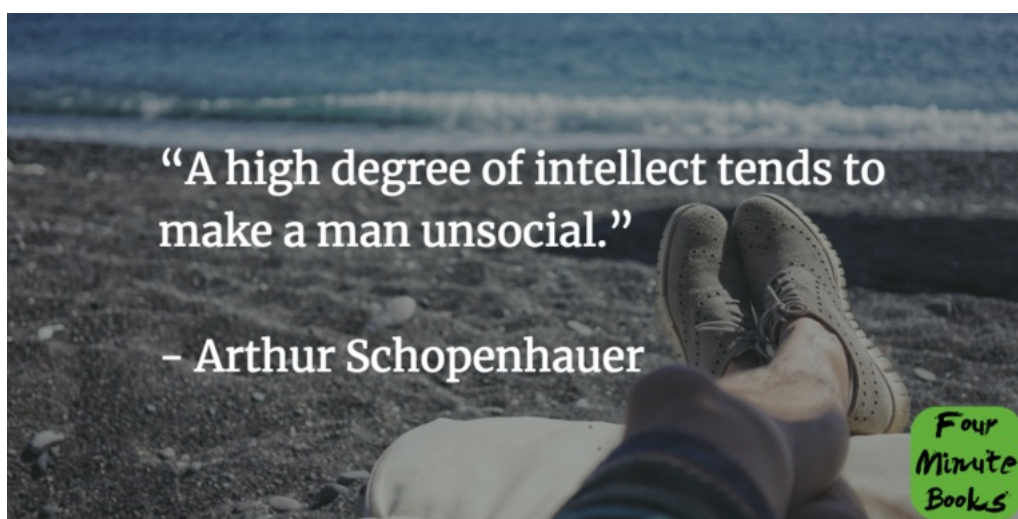
The Wisdom Of Life Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *The Wisdom Of Life is an essay from Arthur Schopenhauer's last published work, which breaks down happiness into three parts and explains how we can achieve it.*

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



One of my favorite quotes comes from Schopenhauer: *"Talent hits a target no one else can hit. Genius hits a target no one else can see."* While most of his quotes are just as pithy, Schopenhauer was also known to be a rather pessimistic and gloomy fellow, albeit one with an excellent sense of humor.

Having lived from 1788 to 1860, this German philosopher is most famous for coining and explaining 'the will to life,' which is our survival instinct, and then relating how it keeps us from achieving peace and calm. Without formulating it as biologically as someone like Richard Dawkins did in *The Selfish Gene*, he figured out our desire to have children is what drives most of our behavior.

Since it distracts us from employing our intellect, has us chasing silly status symbols, and makes us attract many people of the opposite sex, most of which are terrible long-term partners, he saw it as a sort of necessary, but evil force, which had to be kept in check, for example by studying art and philosophy. It's the latter that he provided plenty of, for example with *The Wisdom Of Life*. It is one of two essays from his last work, *Parerga und Paralipomena*, published in 1851, and establishes a simple model of happiness.

Here are the 3 parts it consists of:

1. Personality, which is made up of mental and physical health.
2. Property, which describes three kinds of needs all humans have.

3. Position, which is about what others think of you.

Let's take a closer look!

Lesson 1: Your personality, which consists of your physical and mental health, is the most important factor for happiness.

Not to his credit, but much to his credibility, Schopenhauer re-examined a lot of what the ancient Stoics of Greece had thought about to set up his model. One example is his view of our personality. Besides repeating that it's the only thing you can't escape from, no matter where you go, he also shared their idea that **this psychological construct rests on two pillars: our body and our mind.**

Schopenhauer suggested a healthy body was a necessary prerequisite for a happy soul. Being healthy won't guarantee you're happy, but being unhealthy is sure to make you miserable. The key components to ensuring you remain fit are a simple, natural diet and lots of movement.

In terms of mental fitness, Schopenhauer said intellectuals were never bored, because they could find beauty and enjoyment in even the most mundane of situations. Fools, however, are always stuck with what's in front of them, thus more likely to develop strong desires for entertainment, toxic substances, sex, and so on.

“An intellectual man in complete solitude has excellent entertainment in his own thoughts and fancies, while no amount of diversity or social pleasure, theaters, excursions and amusements, can ward off boredom from a dullard.”

As I like to put it: The only person you are guaranteed to spend the rest of your life with is you. Make sure you're in great company.

Lesson 2: Schopenhauer suggested three kinds of material needs all humans have and summarized them as 'property.'

Well, suggested isn't exactly the right term. He found them, once again in ancient Greece. The model of three human needs comes from Epicurus, a philosopher opposite to the Stoic side of the spectrum. He thought we should live every day as if it were our last, enjoying life as much as possible and indulging in our desires, for it just might be. His three categories of needs are:

1. **Natural and necessary.** Food, a roof over your head, and some clothes to wear. Whatever keeps the elements at bay and helps you survive.
2. **Natural, but unnecessary.** Excess food, excess space, excess sex. Whatever comes out of the same category as above, but goes beyond what you need to live.
3. **Unnatural and unnecessary.** Human inventions that serve to entertain us or satisfy some other, artificial need, like sports cars, luxury hand bags, a home cinema system, etc.

Schopenhauer summarized these as our 'property,' or what a man 'has.' They contribute to our happiness in so far as that they define what we expect of life. The more you expect, the harder it is to be happy. And while some material wealth gives us freedom, returns of more money are marginal and decline pretty quickly.

A number often quoted is about \$65,000 per year if you live in a Western country. Know your needs and want what you have.

Lesson 3: Position is about what others think of you, and it's just an obstacle to happiness, not a supporting factor.

The first factor in Schopenhauer is necessary for happiness. The second is somewhat necessary, but too much decreases our levels of joy. The third is an impediment altogether, and it's about status. To Schopenhauer, 'position' is the cumulated result of what other people think of you.

While he divides it into several components – reputation, pride, rank, honor, fame – I thought his definition of honor was remarkable. He splits it into **objective honor, what others think of you, and subjective honor, what you think of yourself**. Since our own opinion counts so little in the grand scheme of things, we tend to focus on objective honor, which we can hardly influence.

If we instead just ensured we think highly, but not exuberantly, of ourselves, and let society think whatever it wants, we'd have calmer minds and would thus, as per 'personality,' be happier.

The Wisdom Of Life Review

If you think this model is overly simplistic, consider the time and context. Schopenhauer published *The Wisdom Of Life* in 1851, having been one of the first philosophers ever to research Eastern philosophy, reflect it, and bring it into a more Western context. What he came up with here is, in essence, Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, just in a different format. For a 170-year-old self-help piece, that's pretty impressive, don't you think?

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What else can you learn from the blinks?

- How 'property' is different for all of us
- Why reputation and vanity are closely related
- The difference between vanity and national pride
- Who invented the concept of social rank

- Which four subcategories honor breaks down to
- Why fame is better than honor, but you still shouldn't care about it

Who would I recommend The Wisdom Of Life summary to?

The 17 year old, who's about to read Schopenhauer's works in school, the 44 year old senior partner at a law firm, who finds he spends all of his huge salary but doesn't really know why, and anyone who has a chronic health problem that they've so far avoided dealing with.