

In this project, I show that the trajectory of Western European civilization has resulted in increasingly tragic predicaments that are not to be taken as given features of being human. Though suffering is a part of being alive, the sufferings we are subject to and how we experience these sufferings is filtered through the socio-historical context we live our lives in. When the sufferings of life far outweigh the benefits, it's a sign that something must be wrong. Reflecting on this imbalance led nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer to conclude that life must be inherently irrational and tragic. Though Schopenhauer's reflections on this imbalance were genuine, he was nonetheless mistaken to conclude that life is in itself tragic. Putting Schopenhauer in conversation with Jean Jacques Rousseau, I show that tragedy is not so much an intrinsic feature of life (even if suffering is), but a contingent consequence of how pernicious structural processes instituted by humans have tipped the balance of the globe much too far in the direction of destruction.

I take up three types of tragic portrayal-- extraordinary evil, blind misfortune, and ordinary complicity--that Schopenhauer considers endemic to the human experience and apply them to contemporary complex problems to show, in line with Rousseau, that these tragedies are more essentially outcomes of pernicious social structures than a pernicious human "nature." I then make the case that overcoming the tragedy of our predicament requires overhauling the systems through which such tragedies have become entrenched, and that doing so demands the resurrection of our latent eros or creativity, which systems of oppression and extractive capital continue to sabotage. It is through this process of creative awakening that we can also garner the means to build authentic coalitions that allow us to enact our liberatory principles and give our lives meaning.

I conclude by proposing methods for developing a poesis of encounter that frees us to speak through cross-cutting affiliations within the multiplicity of Being and that resists subsumption in oppressive ideologies. Expressing our experiences of suffering is a requirement for shifting the tragic trajectory of our lives, and a fruitful starting point for thinking about freedom and flourishing through pluralism rather than reductive, hierarchical, and exclusionary epistemologies. Harnessing the breadth and depths of our interconnectedness opens up space for communal harmony and challenges the imposed divisions of structural oppression, divisions that prevent us from realizing our liberatory potential.