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MORAL PHILOSOPHY

*Edited by*

SACHA GOLOB

*King's College London*

JENS TIMMERMANN

*University of St Andrews, Scotland*

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## Schopenhauer

ALISTAIR WELCHMAN

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was broadly a Kantian transcendental idealist, notable for his belief that Kant's thing-in-itself is 'will' (WWR1: 124).<sup>1</sup> The term 'will' however is not limited to intentional action, which is an appearance or representation. The thing-in-itself is striving subtracted from the forms of representation, without an ultimate goal. This underlies Schopenhauer's pessimism: striving is experienced as suffering; and each of us is, in-ourselves, an endless striving. Still Schopenhauer is not without all hope: art can free us briefly from the will; moral actions relieve suffering; and the saintly few may succeed in renouncing the will altogether.

These concerns – with suffering, meaning, asceticism and renunciation – are already problems in moral philosophy in a wide sense. But Schopenhauer also has a moral philosophy in the 'narrower' sense (WWR2: 589) that addresses issues such as freedom of the will, moral responsibility, the proper criterion for right action, moral motivation, the moral significance of animals, and the virtues and vices. Indeed Schopenhauer makes a distinctive and quite contemporary contribution to virtue theory, advocating compassion (*Mitleid*) as the source of all human virtues.

## DETERMINISM

In his 1839 *On the Freedom of the Will*, Schopenhauer makes a strong case for determinism (OF: 75). He believes that prescription is futile and hence claims not to have any moral philosophy in the usual sense of the term: that is, he eschews a normative role for philosophy, where it could 'become practical, guide action, shape character' (WWR1: 297). Philosophy, he claims, 'can never do more than interpret and explain' what there is (WWR1: 298).

<sup>1</sup> References to Schopenhauer's works will be to the abbreviations given at the end of this chapter.

When Marx claims that philosophers have only tried to interpret the world, he is virtually quoting Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer gives two rationales for determinism, one a priori and the other a posteriori. The a priori argument follows Kant's Second Analogy: the concept of causation is a priori because it makes experience possible (OF: 50). A free action would be an effect without a cause. But this would violate the conditions of experience and be an 'inexplicable miracle' (OF: 66).

In the a posteriori argument, Schopenhauer differentiates various forms of the principle of sufficient reason (*Grund*) – broadly kinds of ground/ consequent or causal relations – and demonstrates the *de facto* commitment of various branches of science to this principle, thus raising the likelihood that it 'holds of human actions too. This adds little substance to the a priori argument, but he does give an account of how the principle of sufficient reason works in the case of intentional action. Animals act only on immediately present perceptual motives, while human beings can also act on a different 'class of representations', that of 'abstract concepts, thoughts'. In contrast to Kant, such rational determination of the will is still, for Schopenhauer, strictly subordinated to the principle of sufficient reason: 'all motives are causes, and all causality brings necessity with it' (OF: 57). Every type of cause is necessarily connected to its effect as if by a 'wire'. The 'sole advantage' accruing to human beings is 'the length of the conducting wire' that connects cause to effect (OF: 58).

Typically, Schopenhauer uses this distinction to offer a diagnosis of the tendency to believe we are free: we misunderstand the increase in the range of possible motives available to us for the possibility that we can will different things; and the epistemic challenge of figuring out what motivates other people's actions is misunderstood as demonstrating that they are not acting on motives at all, but acting freely.

Determinism, and the consequent requirement for philosophy to have a 'contemplative' attitude (WWR1: 297), are not mere intellectual doctrines for Schopenhauer; instead he regards belief in freedom of the will as essentially childish. We (certainly we philosophers) should grow up and recognize that we are not free (WWR1: 298, BM: 243). In the *Freedom* essay, he claims that determinism is so important that it 'is really a touchstone by which one can distinguish . . . deep thinking minds' (OF: 78).

This is not Schopenhauer's last word on freedom, for he thinks there is a genuine and important sense in which empirical determinism fails to account for moral responsibility. But first, a brief summary of the rest of Schopenhauer's moral philosophy is in order.

Schopenhauer's critique of Kant takes up almost a third of the text of his second major treatise on moral philosophy, *On the Basis of Morality*, and he regards his own views as 'only half intelligible' if not situated in relation to Kant (BM: 122). At the bottom of Schopenhauer's objections is another diagnostic claim. He thinks morality has entered a crisis. Traditionally morality had been based in theology; but that grounding came loose, in part because Kant's critique destroyed the 'foundations of *speculative theology*' (BM: 119). Kant however does not succeed in freeing himself entirely from theological presuppositions, and his moral philosophy is a kind of compromise formation. As Schopenhauer puts it, Kant's work is a 'mere dressing up of theological morals' (BM: 181), and this inability to let theology go underlies the objections Schopenhauer makes to Kant.

The primary symptom of vestigial theology in Kant's ethics is its law-like, prescriptive, 'imperative' (BM: 125ff) form, i.e. its denial of Schopenhauer's purely descriptive notion of ethics: Schopenhauer's critique of freedom of the will dovetails with his critique of Kant. The fact that Kant writes in archaic Lutheran German 'thou shalt [*du sollt*] not lie' is a giveaway for Schopenhauer that Kant is rationalizing the Mosaic Decalogue. At the very least, Schopenhauer claims, the view that ethics must take an imperative form 'ought not to be assumed as existing without proof' (BM: 126), though really his rejection of prescriptive ethics is much stronger, not only because of his commitment to a descriptive stance, but also because god cannot be coherently eliminated from this residually theological form: an imperative makes sense 'only in relation to threatened punishment or promised reward', and hence is hypothetical (BM: 128): a *categorical* imperative is contradictory.

Schopenhauer uses a similarly structured incoherence argument several times, but one example stands out: duty is a relational notion, conceptually connected with a context, like the relation between 'master and servant, superior and subordinate, regime and subject' (BM: 129). Schopenhauer objects vehemently to this aspect of theological morality: on that view every morally worthy act must be *commanded*: 'What a slave-morality', Schopenhauer exclaims, continuing 'I assert with confidence that . . . what opens the hand of the beneficent agent . . . can never be anything other than slavish *fear of gods*, never mind whether he entitles his fetish "categorical imperative"' (BM: 137). Here Schopenhauer anticipates, and inspires, Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality.

Many elements of Schopenhauer's Kant critique resonate with similar critiques in the twentieth century motivated by the resurgence of virtue

ethics. The accusation that deontological ethics is a rationalization of theological ethics anticipates Anscombe and the claim that there are only hypothetical imperatives anticipates Foot.<sup>2</sup> But more striking still is the similarity between Schopenhauer's criticism of the motivational inadequacy of Kant's theory, and Michael Stocker's indictment.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the invective against Kantian ethics as a 'slave morality' is directly tied to a Stocker-type objection: we must, on Kant's view, be 'commanded' to do the right thing because actions motivated by inclination lack moral worth. This is Schopenhauer's outraged reaction:

Worth of character is to commence only when someone, without sympathy of the heart, cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, and *not properly born to be a philanthropist*, nevertheless displays beneficence merely for the sake of tiresome *duty*. This assertion . . . outrages genuine moral feeling, [it is an] apotheosis of unkindness. (BM: 136-7)

And this is the very context in which Schopenhauer inveighs against Kant's residual theism: the quotation is the continuation of the passage on 'slave morality'. Thus the various strands of Schopenhauer's critique are knotted together: Kant's theism represents a failure to think through the consequences of Kant's own critique of speculative theology; it is 'slavish' (as Nietzsche will go on to argue more thoroughly); and it is also inconsistent with the exercise of the virtues: morally worthy actions spring from compassion, not from a grudging sense of duty. And, since Schopenhauer identifies commandment with normativity in general, his Kant critique also dovetails with his determinism and purely descriptive ethics.

#### EGOISM, COMPASSION AND MALICE

In fact, another strand of Schopenhauer's critique of Kant also emerges from Schopenhauer's commitment to empirical determinism: his rejection of Kant's view that reason is a sufficient moral incentive. In part this criticism is grounded in Schopenhauer's general scepticism about the strength and ultimate significance of human reason:

[f]or the most part, cognition always remains subordinated to the service of the will, as it in fact developed in this service, and indeed sprang from the will like the head springs from the trunk of the body. (WWR: 200)

<sup>2</sup> Anscombe 1958; Foot 1972. <sup>3</sup> Stocker 1976.

Reason is merely a passive storehouse for experience: it is like the 'borrowed light of the moon' as opposed to perception's 'direct light of the sun' (WWR1: 57). But reason is not simply too weak a force to overcome the will. For Kant rational determination of the will depends on the postulation of (at least possible) intelligible causes. But this is impossible for Schopenhauer: all causes are empirical. So reason cannot be practical.

If the category of morally worthy actions is not to be empty, there must be some empirical incentive for moral actions. Identifying this incentive is Schopenhauer's 'modest path' in ethics (BM: 189). After his blistering critique of Kant, Schopenhauer's 'criterion of an action of moral worth' is still more or less Kantian: concern for the well-being of the other in '[t]he absence of all egoistic motivation' (BM: 197). For Schopenhauer, the task of moral philosophy is to give an empirical explanation for altruistic actions.

Making the minimal assumptions of a distinction between (a) one's own interests ('weal and woe') and those of others and (b) a positive and a negative valorization of these interests, Schopenhauer has a matrix of four possible incentives for human action: furthering one's own interests, or those of others; or frustrating the interests of others, or even of oneself. The desire to frustrate others (*Bosheit* or maliciousness) is theoretically disinterested, and grounds Schopenhauer's account of evil, but cannot be a moral incentive. So morally worthy actions must originate in a disinterested concern for the welfare of others.

It is not obvious that any actions do in fact fall into this category, a claim that Schopenhauer equates with moral scepticism (BM: 181ff). Certainly Schopenhauer is aware of the power of egoism. It is the practical corollary of the asymmetry between our awareness of our selves and of others: we experience the external world, including others, only indirectly, as representation; but we are aware of our own selves directly as willing, striving beings. So others appear to me as mere representation; they are, in the first instance, just façades with no inner life. Such a viewpoint is of course wrong, Schopenhauer thinks, for at the level of the thing-in-itself everything is an expression of the same non-individuated will. But the empirical viewpoint is the natural one, and its practical expression is egoism:

Egoism is colossal: it towers above the world. For if the choice were given to any individual between his own destruction and that of the world, I do not need to say where it would land in the great majority. (BM: 190)

Widespread egoism is consistent with people *appearing* to perform morally worthy acts: it would be a 'great and very juvenile error' Schopenhauer remarks, 'if one believed that all [the externally] just and legal actions of human beings were of moral origin' (BM: 182). As a result, Schopenhauer has a Hobbesian view of the state, which is required to provide a series of counter-incentives against the egoistic 'war of all against all', incentives that cow us into at least the semblance of moral order (BM: 192).

The primacy of the will over reason makes Schopenhauer sensitive to self-deception as well as the deception of others:

*Hope* makes us regard what we desire, and *fear* what we are afraid of, as being probable and near, and both magnify their object . . . *Love* and *hatred* entirely falsify our judgment; in our enemies we see nothing but shortcomings, in our favourites nothing but merits and good points, and even their defects seem amiable to us. (WWR2: 216–17)

How then can Schopenhauer show that morally worthy actions are indeed possible? He regards it as an 'empirical' (BM: 189) issue, citing examples (BM: 106). In fact Schopenhauer does offer an argument: although altruistic actions may be questionable, they are nevertheless grounded in a quite familiar experience, that of *compassion* (BM: 200).

Schopenhauer argues that the conditions of representational experience (space, time and causality) are also the conditions of individuation. It follows that the will in itself is not individuated. Thus, at the most basic metaphysical level things are 'one' or at least non-multiple. The virtuous person

sees through the *principium individuationis* [principle of individuation] . . . [and] makes less of a distinction than is usually made between himself and others. (WWR1: 397, 399)

This metaphysical analysis is not very popular, and is open to internal objections as well. For if I am identical with others, then my incentive looks egoist.

Schopenhauer mentions a different account of identification in his discussion of Urbaldo Cassina, author of a 1788 treatise on compassion. Cassina argues that compassion is an *imaginative* identification of oneself with the other: we 'substitute ourselves in place of the sufferer and then, in our imagination, take ourselves to be suffering his pains in *our* person' (BM: 203). This is less metaphysically problematic, but it does not solve the other difficulty, which rests on the notion of identification itself. In fact Schopenhauer rejects Cassina's view on rather acute phenomenological grounds: we do not confuse our selves with the

other, as the Cassina view requires; 'it remains clear and present to us at every single moment that he is the sufferer, not us: and it is precisely in his person, not in ours, that we feel the pain' (BM: 203). Here my experience of your suffering is irreducible either to first personal projections or third personal description.<sup>4</sup>

However it is explained, compassion is the basis of morality for Schopenhauer: it is the incentive in altruistic actions. This alone makes Schopenhauer a virtue theorist because a compassionate character is both necessary and sufficient for morally worthy actions. Schopenhauer is also interested in other virtues, in particular 'justice [*Gerechtigkeit*] and loving kindness [*Menschenliebe*]' (BM: 192), but tries to 'derive' them from compassion (BM: 201).

Schopenhauer expresses the content of his moral theory in an admirably pithy slogan: 'harm no one; rather help everyone as much as you can' (BM: 140), the first part corresponding to justice, and the second to loving kindness. The distinction is close to the Kantian distinction between duties of right and duties of virtue or beneficence (WWR: 398, BM: 204).

Although most moral wrong stems from the vice of egoism, Schopenhauer also has an account of genuinely malicious, evil or 'devilish' actions, those that are motivated by a disinterested desire to harm, even to the detriment of the agent's own interests (WWR: 359, BM: 192f). Schopenhauer opposes the vice of malice to the virtue of loving kindness (as he opposes the vice of egoism to the virtue of justice): in loving kindness, I see the suffering of the other, and compassion motivates me to come to their aid; in maliciousness, I see the happiness of the other and envy motivates me to eliminate it; or I see the suffering of the other and Schadenfreude motivates me to heighten it in cruelty (BM: 193f). Schopenhauer's psychology of vice is acute, and his indictment of humanity is at its most pathetic when he discovers this same devilish malice in such commonplace occurrences as teasing and practical jokes (P2: 195–6).

This diabolism is the only thing that separates humans from animals. Suffering is the only bad for Schopenhauer, and animal suffering is qualitatively identical to human suffering. So our responsibility not to harm extends to animals. Indeed Schopenhauer regards the Kantian view that animals have no moral status as 'outrageous and revolting', a *reductio* of Kant's moral

<sup>4</sup> The disagreement between Cassina and Schopenhauer here on the nature of compassion anticipates contemporary cognitive scientific accounts of 'empathy', which divide between psychological 'simulation' theories and phenomenologically inflected direct perception (Zahavi 2008).

philosophy (BM: 161). Moreover, since compassion, the basis of morality, doesn't involve reason, animals can even be (unconscious) moral actors (BM: 206).

Schopenhauer is an excellent moral psychologist and a sensitive, informed interpreter of human virtue and vice; and it is in his analyses especially of compassion, but also of loving kindness and the extent of self-deception in egoism, that he is at his best, rather than in the systematic presentation of a theory of morality.

#### RESPONSIBILITY, PESSIMISM AND ASCETICISM

The *Freedom* essay shows the impossibility of inferring that we are free from the fact that we think we are free. So it is surprising that at the end of that same essay Schopenhauer accepts at face value our 'wholly clear and sure feeling of responsibility for what we do' (OF: 105), and even more surprising that he endorses the standard view that responsibility presupposes freedom (OF: 106).

Individual actions cannot be evaluated morally because they are the inevitable product of character and circumstance. Instead evaluation targets the *character* that is revealed by someone's actions. Such views are common among virtue theorists from Aristotle to the present day. However they do not seem to help answer the question of how we can be responsible or free, since it seems *prima facie* less plausible that we should be responsible for and freely choose our characters than that we are responsible for our individual actions. The problem is especially acute for Schopenhauer because he regards character as 'inborn and unalterable' (OF: 106, 68f).

Here Schopenhauer appeals to Kant: the content of my character is fixed like any other phenomenon, caught in the causal nexus; but in itself my will is no longer determined, for it is no longer subordinated to the principle of sufficient reason. The will in itself is free. Schopenhauer here adopts the vocabulary of Kant in distinguishing between my empirical character and my intelligible character, which is the non-temporal ground of the former. My empirical character is the result of a free but non-temporal deed. Because the deed is non-temporal it has, as it were, always already happened (so that its effect, my character, appears phenomenally as 'inborn and unalterable'); but because it is still my free act, I am responsible for my character, its effect.

Schopenhauer outlines a suggestive moral phenomenology: we sometimes do have to take responsibility for elements of our character that are 'inborn and unalterable'. In particular he has a singular account of conscience:

we feel its bite not because we could have done otherwise (for, according to Schopenhauer we could not have); but rather because of an agonized recognition that our action really does reveal what we are.

Still the view raises a large number of problems: the notion of a non-temporal act is problematic; the act itself appears to be criterionless; the notion of self-choice appears incoherent; and Schopenhauer helps himself to a notion of individuation at the level of the thing-in-itself to which he is not entitled. One recent suggestion has been simply to drop the requirement that responsibility entails freedom and read Schopenhauer as claiming that we are sometimes responsible for things that we did not choose.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps this account of responsibility is a harsh doctrine; but it pales by comparison with Schopenhauer's signature pessimism. Schopenhauer is a hedonist: pleasure and pain are the only intrinsic values, and pessimism is the view that life is of no overall value in this sense, that its pains outweigh its pleasures. Although Schopenhauer often gives a posteriori evidence that people very often do not get what they want, and are unhappy as a result, he also argues that we are unhappy *even if we do get what we want*.

The argument rests on two claims: (1) *we are will*, so that we can never stop willing; (2) willing is an intrinsically painful state, at least to some degree (WWR1: 335–6, 219f). Although (1) follows straightforwardly from Schopenhauer's metaphysics, he also provides phenomenological evidence for it in the familiar experience of achieving some aim that one has been striving at, and finding almost at once that another aim demands satisfaction. Schopenhauer argues for (2) by claiming that when one wills an object, one must lack the object, and that lack is painful. Schopenhauer seems to realize that the conjunction of (1) and (2) does not entail the pessimistic conclusion that conscious life is painful – I could experience a series of episodes of willing, each of whose successful conclusions yielded more satisfaction than the willing itself caused pain. So Schopenhauer goes on to claim that pleasure or satisfaction is nothing more than the elimination of the pain of willing, not anything positive in itself (WWR1: 345f). Thus the hedonistic balance of conscious existence consists only of negative or null entries, so that 'it would be better for us not to exist' (WWR2: 605).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Janaway 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Just to cap the argument off, Schopenhauer also claims that the absence of will is experienced negatively as boredom or languor (WWR1: 189, 338). Schopenhauer's analysis of boredom bears comparison with Baudelaire and Heidegger.

Schopenhauer's pessimism has been extremely influential, especially on Nietzsche's conception of nihilism. Similarly, the negative understanding of pleasure is taken up essentially unchanged by Freud. But most commentators have found his arguments unconvincing. Nietzsche proposes two of the most famous objections: that willing itself, striving to attain a goal, may be experienced positively as a kind of pleasure,<sup>7</sup> and the famous denial of hedonism – pain is not an objection to life.<sup>8</sup>

Morality – compassion – takes the edge off Schopenhauer's pessimism, but the most valuable kind of life involves denial of the will. This idea is frankly religious, and shows that, like Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer does not think that ethical values are ultimate.

Denial of the will and compassion are based on a similar metaphysical insight, but denial of the will extends the insight: where the compassionate person distinguishes 'less' between self and other, denial of the will is predicated on a complete dismantling of the distinction between self and other; similarly, where the compassionate person is equipped to see and react appropriately to at least some suffering, resignation depends on seeing that the world as a whole is suffering. This precipitates a dramatic change: it acts as a 'tranquillizer' on the will, 'turning' it away from life in 'renunciation', 'resignation' and ultimately 'complete will-lessness' (WWR1: 406), a state that Schopenhauer describes in religious terms as both saintly and akin to Buddhist nirvana (WWR1: 383).

Schopenhauer's account looks paradoxical, for I cannot consistently will not to will: the higher order willing defeats the lower order non-willings. But for Schopenhauer only suicide is self-defeating (WWR1: 425ff) while the will cannot (despite Schopenhauer's sometimes inconsistent use of language) be denied intentionally: Schopenhauer identifies denial as 'the *effect of divine grace*, which comes to us as if from outside, without any effort on our part' (WWR1: 433). What this solution gains in resolving the paradox, it loses in religious mystery.

These broader ethical issues help to situate Schopenhauer's moral philosophy, in part by highlighting his own understanding of its limits: we are responsible without being free; and at the most basic axiological level, conscious existence lacks any overall value, so that the best, most knowing, response to life is not ultimately ethical at all, but to renounce it – or to let it be renounced in you. These views had a deep impact on Nietzsche's conception of the ascetic ideal.

<sup>7</sup> Soll 2012: 304. <sup>8</sup> Nietzsche 1888: 124.



BM	Schopenhauer 1841b ("On the Basis of Morality")
OF	Schopenhauer 1841a ("On the Freedom of the Will")
P2	Schopenhauer 1851 ( <i>Parerga and Paralipomina</i> , vol. 2)
WWR1	Schopenhauer 1818 ( <i>The World as Will and Representation</i> , vol. 1)
WWR2	Schopenhauer 1844 ( <i>The World as Will and Representation</i> , vol. 2)

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## Kierkegaard

R. ZACHARY MANIS

Introductory treatments of Kierkegaard's thought are best prefaced with a warning to the reader: scholars disagree about even the most fundamental aspects of Kierkegaard's thought, so any such summary – whether it be of Kierkegaard's ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, or just about any other topic – will be controversial. It is a fascinating feature of the Kierkegaardian corpus that it has elicited such a vast array of interpretations in its readers, and there seem to be two primary and interrelated reasons for it, especially in regard to Kierkegaard's views on ethics. The first is that Kierkegaard employed a number of interesting and complex literary methods – including extensive use of pseudonyms, the Socratic method, and something he called "indirect communication" – all aimed at the goal of edifying, rather than merely informing, his readers. The second is that we find in Kierkegaard's writings numerous approaches to ethics that are not obviously compatible with one another. The following essay will introduce some of the most important of these ethical views, first saying a word about the importance of properly understanding Kierkegaard's methods in interpreting the texts, then offering a possible explanation of what Kierkegaard hoped to achieve in presenting these opposing views in his writings, and finally developing the major contours of Kierkegaard's own, explicitly Christian ethic.

THE ETHICS OF THE "LOWER" PSEUDONYMS: EITHER/  
OR AND FEAR AND TREMBLING

Kierkegaard's ethic often has been the subject of vehement criticism, but what has been labeled "Kierkegaard's ethic" is in fact an array of views comprised of (1) the views represented and/or discussed by various Kierkegaardian pseudonyms, (2) Kierkegaard's own Christian ethic, presented primarily in *Works of Love* and other non-pseudonymous writings, and (3) caricatures of Kierkegaard's view. (1) and (3) are often closely