

Schopenhauer's Ethics: A Metaphysics in Action

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Abstract: *Disputations whether Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) assent to a certain normative system of Ethics in his philosophy has been an interminable topic. Despite his disparaging claim that philosophy can never 'guide conduct' as well as the determinability of character raises the question of how there exists a moral dimension in his works. Indeed, he states explicitly that his views on morality are entirely in the spirit of Christianity, as well as being consistent with the doctrines and ethical precepts of the sacred books of India (The World as Will and Representation, Section 68). Through this, by way of synoptic assessment, many works on Schopenhauer focused on compassion as the basis of his ethics. This paper will then seek to underscore a different vantage point on the grounding of his ethics, i.e., one which is emerging from metaphysics and achieves its embodiment in action. Hence, the principal intent of this paper is to ascertain a possible normative exposition of Schopenhauer's moral philosophy. This entails an elucidation on whether there is a framework of Ethics embedded in his metaphysics and a critical analysis on the plausibility of this moral philosophy.*

Keywords: *Arthur Schopenhauer, Metaphysics, Ethics, Will-to-Live, Compassion, Virtue*

*"It is just as little necessary for the saint to be a philosopher
as for the philosopher to be a saint;
just as it is not necessary for a perfectly beautiful,
person to be a great sculptor, or for a great sculptor
to be himself a beautiful person.*

*In general, it is a strange demand on a moralist
that he should commend no other virtue
than that which he himself possesses."*

-Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation

Introduction

The study of ethics has been an interminable field of concern among philosophers, especially in our contemporary time where it is constantly being confronted with normative and meta-ethical quandaries. It finds itself at a crossroads today. Philosophers and ethicists alike continue to exhaust the moral categories and principles by which we have always lived and further challenge these horizons to a new frontier. The roots of ethics are currently being re-examined for a more robust framework of ethics to address our contemporary issues. Perhaps, the post modern society is now coming to the realization that our moral categories are in need of retooling. It is regrettable that amongst many proponents of normative ethical theories, Arthur Schopenhauer's ideas have been set aside from mainstream discussion.

However, there could be disputations whether Schopenhauer's philosophy may assent to a certain normative system of ethics. Schopenhauer's moral theory might open potentially a plausible post modern ethics which could bear relevance for a much wider audience, particularly, beyond the sphere of traditional philosophy which is proliferated by theological, deontological, existential, utilitarian, and axiological foundations of ethics. As a point of departure, the world is in dire need of moral rejuvenation, that is, any inspiration provided by a major thinker such as Schopenhauer should be heartily welcomed and cogently considered. While it is apparently uncertain that a potent system of ethics is discernible in his metaphysics of action, it is worthwhile to elucidate his ethical thought.

As a rationale for this paper, one of the notable problems with most ethical theories today is that they rationalize or over-intellectualize moral principles and found their groundwork mostly on reason, transcendent/divine laws, or egotistical motivations. An examination of an alternative grounding of morality is being called upon. There is a need to seek an alternative paradigm, i.e., a morality which is not compelled by religious obligation or rational duty; but by a voluntary act of benevolence that is tended towards others, towards humanity. This is where the notions of ethics of Schopenhauer comes in. Schopenhauer's ethics may posit a poignant and feasible option, a framework which is totally devoid

of any religious content, does not anchor from any moral higher ground or the capacity for transcendence, nor a socially-politically committed disposition. It traverses a path that is embedded in his metaphysics.

Method of Inquiry

This paper made use of a philosophical research design, particularly that of an ethical inquiry. Ethical inquiry explores into the moral value of the research and puts in question its bearing towards the good of humanity. Hence, the pursuit of a new framework of ethics and probing into the metaphysics of Schopenhauer are also ethical in the sense that this quandary put humanity in question. Ethical inquiry thus becomes a universalizing discourse, in terms of all human beings and the foundation of authentic human relations.

This paper approached the problem in two modes: first, it probes into the metaphysics of Schopenhauer and elucidates a potent basis of his ethics; and second, it plunges into an inquiry of the plausibility and novelty of this ethics as opposed to other mainstream ethical systems. This ethical inquiry is an elucidation of the metaphysics of Schopenhauer, in an attempt to arrive at an ethics of action.

Embarking From Metaphysics

The first claim Schopenhauer makes with respect to metaphysics is the assertion that through intuitive perception we are composed of some physical substance located in time and space that makes our actions susceptible to the causal forces of nature. We also are able to recognize, claims Schopenhauer, “the manifold weaker or stronger movements of our own will, to which all inner feelings can be traced”¹. Motives are those which are responsive to causality. He does not think that the causal world stops at the doorstep of the mind, but instead, he wants to claim that there are certain conditions upon which we cannot help but be affected and that this effect occurs in the causal or physical realm. For example, I

¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. by E.F.J. Payne (Indianapolis: The Bobbs Merrill Company, 1965), 205. Henceforth cited as *On the Basis of Morality*.

may think to myself that I decided freely, to eat a fried chicken for lunch, where in fact, Schopenhauer would claim that certain causal motives influenced my decision in such a way that the reverse is not, and could never be, true. So, just as my body is causally motivated, so are the decisions I make. Although such a claim seemingly alludes to determinism, Schopenhauer does aim to preserve autonomy. However, instead of pairing our causally motivated actions with the freedom of agency, he finds a place for contingency at the essence of our being. Despite the fact that we are situated in a causal world, we are still responsible. This responsibility, however, stems not from our actions, but from our essence [*esse*]².

Affirming the foregoing, we cannot assume to have full knowledge of ourselves. This is apparent, Schopenhauer concurs, as a perennial testament arising from the history of philosophy. On the one hand, we are able to assert that as bodies, we are extended physically in space, and that through these external motives we are aware of “the continuous series of our aspirations and acts of will which arise on the occasion of external motives”³. In addition, we can be certain of the “manifold weaker or stronger movements of our own will, to which all inner feelings can be traced”⁴. Despite this knowledge, we are not aware of the nexus or origination of the will. Despite this uncertainty, however inevitable, we can intimate that “it may be one and identical in all”, or in other words, that which lies hidden and which the phenomenon cannot approach is perhaps a unifying force⁵. Since plurality and difference can only ever be understood in terms of space-time, that which eludes space time, cannot be so conceived⁶. If plurality is reserved only for those things which appear phenomenally, in space and time, then when we think of that which cannot be represented, our only recourse is to unity, and it is necessarily so⁷. If this is the case, that the notion of plurality is viable only in the realm of the appearances, then Schopenhauer's

² Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.195.

³ Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.205.

⁴ Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.205.

⁵ Cf. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, trans. by E. F. J. Payne, (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), p.412. See also Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.205.

⁶ It is worth noting that Schopenhauer is a post-Kantian and subscribes fully to the noumena-phenomena distinction: “If in the information that is given to the world by the marvellous depth of Kant's mind there is anything that is true beyond all doubt, it is the Transcendental Aesthetic, the doctrine of the ideality of space and time. It is so clearly established that to raise even an apparent objection to it has not been possible” Cf. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, and Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.206.

⁷ Schopenhauer attributes this doctrine of the unity of an existing essence to the Vedas in the Upanishads, as well as Pythagoras. Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.207.

claim concerning the abolishment of the ego and the other, must stand. Schopenhauer phrases it in the following manner:

*“Accordingly, if plurality and separateness belong only to the phenomenon, and if it is one and the same essence that manifests itself in all living things, then that conception that abolishes the difference between ego and non-ego is not erroneous; but on the contrary, the opposite conception must be. We find also that this latter conception is described by the Hindus as Maya, i.e. illusion, deception, phantasm, mirage. It is the former view which we found to be the basis of the phenomenon of compassion; in fact, compassion is the proper expression of that view. Accordingly, it would be the metaphysical basis of ethics and consist in one individual’s again recognizing another his own self, his own true inner nature.”*⁸

In the phenomenal world, or as Schopenhauer puts it “the world as representation”, man is susceptible to acknowledge differences, appearances, and separateness; however, our inner being or essence, “exists in every living thing as directly as it makes itself known in (one’s) self-consciousness only to (oneself)”⁹. This knowledge, according to Schopenhauer, is the basis for loving, caring, and virtuous action. Such knowledge reminds us that “we are all one and the same entity”¹⁰. Schopenhauer claims that individuals are either inherently good or bad and this results from the presence of these modes of knowledge. Those who understand themselves as distinct egos and define their ego as separate from the non-ego will necessarily be predisposed to behave according to this view, that is, egoistically and unjustly. On the other hand, those who recognize the dissolution of our distinctness will act accordingly, that is, compassionately and altruistically¹¹:

“The world [to the bad man] is an absolute non-ego and his relation to it is primarily hostile...the good character, on

⁸ Schopenhauer, On the Basis of Morality, p.209.

⁹ Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, I.

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, On the Basis of Morality, p.211.

¹¹ Brap, A brief description of Schopenhauer’s ethic of compassion, retrieved from <https://philophysis.wordpress.com/2010/03/04/a-brief-description-of-schopenhauers-ethic-of-compassion/>, 2010.

the other hand, lives in an external world that is homogeneous with his own true being. The others are not a non-ego for him, but an "I once more." His fundamental relation to everyone is, therefore, friendly; he feels himself intimately akin to all beings, takes an immediate interest in their weal and woe, and confidently assumes the same sympathy in them"¹².

Here lies the crux of Schopenhauer's foundation for his ethics. This already alludes to the metaphysical reality of one's being as acting sympathetically towards everyone as "I-once-more". The act of relation becomes a reiteration of the self.

On the Critique of other Moral Systems

According to Schopenhauer each moral system aims to satisfy the following maxim: "do unto others as you would have them do unto you", which one can rephrase as: "Injure no one; on the contrary, help everyone as much as you can"¹³. This even includes Kant's categorical imperative. This being the case, then clearly altruism is the foundation upon which this premise rests. The assumption here lies that moral behavior is metaphysical, that is, our actions reach beyond the phenomenal realm. It is for this reason that we conceive our actions to be dictated or guided by duties, laws, imperative, and obligations, or even theological origins. If this is indeed the case that duty, as conceived by Kant's system, is undeniably conditioned, and conditioned by reward or punishment, and in religious beliefs, immorality of the agent, then it must also be the case that all impetus for action is inherently selfish¹⁴. This is where Schopenhauer critiqued the foundations of other moral system as rooted, not on altruistic tendencies, but specifically on egoism. He affirms that: "accordingly, everyone makes himself the centre of the world and refers everything to his selfish interest"¹⁵.

Schopenhauer also argued that reason alone cannot grasp all that is pertinent in moral decision making. Neither reason nor understanding is able to capture that which is so integral to moral behavior. Acting in accordance to reason or understanding may lead

¹² Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.211.

¹³ Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.92.

¹⁴ Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.56.

¹⁵ Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.132.

us to sheer moral obedience; however, it is without voluntariness that we appeal to love or compassion for others. Schopenhauer points out that with regards to construing morality, we must be wary of building an ethical schema that orders us to act out of respect for a law, rather than out of mere compassion or love for other individuals. Morality, then, must surpass its egoistic tendencies to become truly moral.

Compassion: The Route to Ethics

On Schopenhauer's book *On the Basis of Morality*, he asks the question: What can motivate individuals to overcome their egoistic tendencies? As presented in the foregoing, surely it is not through the adherence of theistic commandments or the categorical imperative that will render to answer the question. Schopenhauer implies that morality does not originate in human rationality, which is merely instrumental, and concerned with the means towards some end. For Schopenhauer, all moral actions can be expressed by the Latin phrase *Neminem laede, imo omnes quantum potes, juva* ("Injure no one; on the contrary, help everyone as much as you can"). According to Schopenhauer, man's three fundamental ethical incentives, egoism, malice, and compassion are present in everyone in different and incredibly unequal proportions. In accordance with these, motives will operate on man and actions will, then, ensue¹⁶.

Therefore, a truly moral act is an altruistic (non-egoistic) act which has no compulsion to actually practice it. This is where Schopenhauer coins compassion as the sublime altruistic act. For the egoist, Schopenhauer says, humanity is the non-ego, but to the compassionate man, it is "myself, once more", a recognition of the fundamental connectedness of all life. It is no wonder, then, that Schopenhauer calls compassion as the basis of ethics. He was intrigued by the examples and the discussions of compassion found within the Christian, Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

It is compassion, or *Mitleid* (fellow-feeling), which Schopenhauer argued as the real basis of morality, rather than rational rules or God-given commandments. Moral behavior consists of an intuitive recognition that we are all manifestations of the will-to-live. All the

¹⁶ Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.29. See also Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Will in Nature* trans. by E.F.J. Payne (New York: Berg Publishers, 1992).

great religions, he felt, were attempts to express this metaphysical reality, but they all lost sight of this due to their endless doctrinal disputes. What unites us all is the realization that life itself consists of endless suffering through the pursuit of goals which can never be satisfied. This pursuit ultimately results in a meaningless death¹⁷. However, compassion is prompted by the awareness of the suffering of another person, and Schopenhauer characterizes it as a kind of felt knowledge. Compassion is born of the awareness that individuation is merely phenomenal. Consequently the ethical point of view expresses a deeper knowledge than what is found in the ordinary manner of viewing the world. Indeed, the feeling of compassion is nothing other than the felt knowledge that the suffering of another has a reality equal to one's own suffering insofar as the world in itself is an undifferentiated unity. Schopenhauer asserts that this knowledge cannot be taught or even communicated, but can only be brought about by experience.

Schopenhauer holds that the ultimate identification of human beings with another as the basis of compassion will counter the egoistic impulse and persuade actions of moral worth¹⁸. 'It is the apprehension of suffering that takes one out of the narrow scope of egoism (which is the source of evil) into compassionate participation in the life of the other'¹⁹. In this sense, compassion as beneficence fellow-feeling signifies a morally desirable attitude towards evil, a desire to eliminate it. Further, he claims that:

*"Compassion is not egoistic because the compassionate person does not feel different from the suffering person or animal that is seen. Even though the sufferer is experienced as an external being, "I nevertheless feel it with him, feel it as my own, and not within me, but in another person... But this presupposes that to a certain extent I have identified myself with the other man, and in consequence the barrier between the ego and the non-ego is for the moment abolished...."*²⁰.

Schopenhauer thus considered it to be true that "compassion, as

¹⁷ Timothy J. Madigan, "Nietzsche & Schopenhauer On Compassion", retrieved from Philosophy Now https://philosophynow.org/issues/29/Nietzsche_and_Schopenhauer_On_Compassion, 2000, para 6.

¹⁸ Christopher Janaway, ed. "Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's Educator". (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1998). Cf. Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.144.

¹⁹ David Cartwright. "Scheler's Criticisms of Schopenhauer's Theory of Mitleid," in *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch*, 62, 1981, p.145.

²⁰ Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.18.

the sole non-egoistic motive, is also the only genuinely moral one".²¹ He propounded the theory that the source and foundation of morals had nothing at all to do with knowledge, rather it is in compassion. Compassion consists of the denial or negation of the will-to-live. This can only occur when another individual becomes "the ultimate object" of my will²². In turn this can only happen if the pain felt by the other is felt as if it were my own, that is, I must be able to identify myself with another. This ability to actually represent an individual in one's own head so as to be able to identify the other's suffering and pleasure as one's own, Schopenhauer affirms as compassion, and it is on the basis of this alone that "genuine loving-kindness" and "voluntary justice" are possible²³. It is only the case in compassion that the absolute difference between an individual and myself, dissolves. Any other action, no matter to what benefit or hindrance, if it is not accompanied by compassion, it does not lie within the realm of ethical action. Among the precepts he respects are those prescribing that one treat others as kindly as one treats oneself, that one refrain from violence and take measures to reduce suffering in the world, that one avoid egoism and thoughts directed towards revenge, and that one cultivate a strong sense of compassion.

Conclusion

What is central in the ethics of Schopenhauer is the "stamp of moral worth" that can only be attained once an action is fulfilled without a trace of egoism. So long as the action is performed entirely for the sake of another, the action is a moral one. Otherwise, it is tinged with egocentrism and therefore cannot be considered moral outright. Conversely, if the action is performed with the pure intention of causing harm in another then this action is immoral. Thus Schopenhauer distinguishes the just person from the good person not by the nature of their actions, but by their level of compassion: the just person sees through the principle of individuation enough to avoid causing harm to another, whereas the good person sees through it even further, to the point that the suffering he sees in

²¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Wisdom of Life and Counsels and Maxims*, trans. by T. Bailey Saunders. (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1995). See also Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.19.

²² Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I. p.412. See also Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.143.

²³ Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p.144.

others touches him almost as closely as does his own. Such a person not only avoids harming others, but actively tries to alleviate the suffering of others. At its highest point, someone may recognize the suffering of others with such clarity that he is willing to sacrifice his own well-being for the sake of others, if by doing so the suffering he will alleviate outweighs the suffering he must endure. This, says Schopenhauer, is the highest point in ethical conduct, the path to happiness.

I concur with the article written by Cartwright that "Schopenhauer deserves to be considered a first-rate moral philosopher because of his analysis of the ethical significance of compassion (*Mitleid*)"²⁴. Schopenhauer's metaphysical demonstration that the ultimate foundation of morality is to be in human nature itself, discovered by insight in the essence of being should be set down as significant in establishing a consistent foundation for ethics. The philosophical contribution of Schopenhauer's ethical thought lies in the tenet that compassion 'consists in one individual recognizing again in another his own self, his own true inner nature'²⁵. Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion may be rendered as an active stance in translating his metaphysics into action. As he affirmed that "[T]o be just, noble, and benevolent is nothing but to translate my metaphysics into action"²⁶

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²⁴ Cartwright, Schopenhauer's Theory of *Mitleid*, p.60.

²⁵ Cartwright, Schopenhauer's Theory of *Mitleid*, p.209.

²⁶ Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, Vol. II, p.600.

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