How Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion can contribute to today's ethical debate*

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Abstract

The article has three parts. The first part exposes Schopenhauer's critique of Kant who tries to derive morality from pure reason. The second part exhibits Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion which is based on the insight that the will can only be moved by the "weal and woe" of a being and that moral action thus can only be possible where the other's well-being or misery is the immediate motive. Schopenhauer claims that we encounter this phenomenon in our experience, namely in the everyday phenomenon of compassion. The advantages of this ethics of compassion over utilitarianism are demonstrated. The third part discusses some difficulties, e.g. whether this approach can cope with the area of justice.

Keywords: compassion; suffering; Kant; utilitarianism; moral motivation; moral rights; animals.

Resum. *Com l'ètica de la compassió de Schopenhauer pot contribuir al debat ètic d'avui*

La primera part d'aquest article resumeix la crítica de Schopenhauer a Kant i destaca l'argument schopenhauerià que l'acció moral només és comprensible si és causada per una motivació empírica. D'acord amb Schopenhauer, aquesta motivació és la compassió adreçada al benestar o dany d'altres individus, siguin humans o animals. La segona part de l'article presenta els aspectes principals de la seva aproximació basada en la compassió i subratlla alguns dels seus avantatges sobre l'utilitarisme. La tercera part assenyala els límits de la posició schopenhaueriana, derivats fonamentalment de la seva transició a una metafísica de la voluntat.

Paraules clau: compassió; sofriment; Kant; utilitarisme; motivació moral; drets morals; animals.

Summary

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Philosophical ethics today has to face the ongoing controversies about questions raised in the context of applied ethics. Given this situation, some types of theory prove to be rather inadequate right from the outset. This holds true for an ethics of pure reason as represented by Kant because founding maxims on reason will lead to diverging results in this case. Contractualism, which is based merely on instrumental rationality, does not appear to be helpful either since only very basic minimum conditions for coexistence can be derived from it and, as far as specific questions are concerned, it can only point towards procedural justice but cannot provide any substantive criteria. Moreover, both theories are faced with the difficulty of being unable to account for the range of morality, which, according to today's common sense view, ought, at least, to include animals. However, utilitarianism, which does meet this requirement and is often used as a solution, also faces severe problems since its strategy of setting off different kinds of pleasure against each other is controversial and, furthermore, since it skips the notion of individual rights and overtaxes moral agents owing to its orientation towards aggregate well-being. On the other hand, it does also not seem satisfactory to completely do without some general focus of orientation and confine oneself to mid-level material norms as some exponents of applied ethics do (Beauchamp and Childress, 2008). I think we do need some general moral conception as a point of reference which, however, must be so designed that it can cope with the material character of the problems in question and tie in with moral agents' ordinary motivational make-up. Here, Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion can make important contributions. Indeed, one may think that his ethical theory is the most current part of Schopenhauer's philosophy (Malter, 1996).

1. Schopenhauer's critique of Kant

In his On the Basis of Morality (BM), Schopenhauer develops his ethical position, thereby setting himself apart from Kant. His critique is directed at four aspects of Kant's conception: (a) the method, (b) the law-like form, (c) the question of motivation, (d) the content.

(a) According to Schopenhauer, Kant's basic error already lies in his notion of morality, according to which morality is concerned with laws about what ought to happen. Schopenhauer's counterproposal is that all we can achieve in philosophy is to clarify and interpret the positively given and that the objective of philosophy is to achieve an understanding of the real phenomena. This contrast between theories in the Kantian tradition, which try to provide a justification of morality in the sense of inference of the normative, and those in the tradition of Schopenhauer, which proceed in a phenomenological or hermeneutic fashion, searching for a justification of morality in the other sense of making visible its implicit foundations, has run through the debates of moral philosophy until

today[1]. In order to decide this controversy, one has to take a closer look at Schopenhauer's critique of Kant's notion of the law.

(b) Schopenhauer first rejects Kant's determination of the form of morality: his notion of the law or the ought. Schopenhauer accepts the common notion of the law which we use to talk about positive laws that have been established by humans arbitrarily. Moreover, one can, in a figurative sense, speak of natural laws, which the human will is also subject to. Contrary to Kant's assumption, human beings do not have a share in pure reason which would place them partly outside of natural causality; instead their will is continously subject to the law of causality, according to which no action can take place without a sufficient motive (BM §4). Then, however, apart from positive laws or religious commandments, there can be no moral laws that exist categorically or absolutely. Such a concept of an absolute ought is, unwittingly, adopted from Christian ethics or it remains, if consistently understood in non-religious terms, vacuous as its sense violates the principle of sufficient reason and is thus unexplainable.

(c) Thus, Schopenhauer's critique of Kant's notion of an absolute moral law at the same time implies the reproach that Kant cannot provide an adequate explanation for the moral motivation. According to today's theorists, this is in fact one of the main difficulties of the Kantian approach. Schopenhauer rightly points to Kant's doctrine of the highest good, which shows that Kant has to postulate the concurrence of virtue and happiness at least as a regulative idea, thus tying the absolute ought in a way to the idea of a reward or the avoidance of a negative consequence like unhappiness after all. Then, however, Schopenhauer argues, the ought is hypothetical in turn as it is based on rewards and punishments; and an action that aims at receiving rewards or avoiding punishments is egoistically motivated and is thus ultimately selfish and without any moral value (BM §4). But even if we do not reduce Kant's position to this conditional reading of the ought, his theory still remains inappropriate as an explanation of morality since the idea of self-legislation of the will, which occurs in a person spontaneously, is impossible. According to Schopenhauer, moral action, like any other form of action, can only be brought about by a motivating force that exists in the empirical world (BM §6), for human beings are consistently subject to the law of causality, and consequently the motivating force needs to be positively efficient, i.e. real or empirical.

(d) In this context (BM §6), Schopenhauer criticises another mistake in Kant's conception which he claims has been given little attention so far and which concerns the content of morality, namely the lack of real substance. This

1. On Schopenhauer's method in ethics and in philosophy in general see Dieter Birnbacher, *Schopenhauer*, Stuttgart, reclam 2009, 116 f.; Tilo Wesche, "Leiden als Thema der Philosophie", in Lore Huehn, ed., *Die Ethik Arthur Schopenhauers im Ausgang vom Deutschen Idealismus*, Ergon Verlag, Freiburg 2005, 133-145, 134; Paul Guyer, *Schopenhauer, Kant, and the Methods of Philosophy*, in Christopher Janaway, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, Cambridge, CUP 1999, 93-137.

point is closely linked with the aspect of motivation in as much as purely abstract concepts cannot move human beings and like Kant's content-free morality has no carrying capacity.

Let me anticipate my assessment of Schopenhauer's critical objections against Kant: I consider the first two points to be inspiring though problematic whereas I deem the last two points to be central and irrefutable. The first point, which concerns the method, is difficult, and one can certainly admit that Schopenhauer is partly right here: we cannot derive morality from a form of reason that is located in a higher intellectual world but rather have to reconstruct the form in which moral acting is possible in the real world. On the other hand, moral theory can, contrary to Schopenhauer's descriptive approach, always transcend the factually encountered moral understanding and try to improve it by eradicating inconsistencies, elaborating substantive ideas in a clearer and more differentiated manner and so on. Therefore, moral theory is never purely descriptive but always also contributes to the further development of a normative conception.

As far as the other points are concerned, I first deem the classification of the moral aspects that Schopenhauer discusses successively to be very helpful: form, motivation, content. The ethical debate is often flawed as only a single concept or principle is discussed without an awareness of the complexity of morality as a phenomenon. In what follows, I will adopt this tripartite division since I deem it fit and proper indeed.

As far as the first aspect, the form, is concerned, the question is whether Schopenhauer's critique of the notions of law and rights is really adequate. It is certainly impossible to derive morality from a kind of pure reason which is located in a higher world. One clearly has to agree with Schopenhauer that moral acting can only be rendered comprehensible if a factually given, i.e. empirical, motive can be shown. This emphasis on the law of causality, that human beings are subject to, ties in neatly with today's discourse which stresses human beings' natural endowment and the continuity between humans and animals, owing to the insights of evolutionary theory, neurophysiology and ethology (Beisel, 2013). But even if we take this understanding as a basis, morality is something normative, containing an "ought" as part of its form. So, even if we consider the purpose of moral theory to be of a rather reconstructive nature, we are dealing with a phenomenon that is only partly factually given; partly, however, it is of a normative kind. The positive law is not the only thing that exists for there are also moral social norms, the adherence to which the members of a society mutually demand from each other. As a matter of fact, humans are social beings who exist in relations of mutual recognition and have a need for such recognition. Why does Schopenhauer rule this motive out? The reason is that it is an egoistic motive. Those who adhere to social moral norms with the intention of being appreciated as moral persons by other persons act selfishly. Schopenhauer here rightly identifies a problem of the social norms approach.

2. Schopenhauer's compassion approach

According to Schopenhauer, then, every action has to be caused by an empirically given motivating force. He distinguishes three such motivating forces: egoism, malice and altruism. The main motivating force in humans and animals alike is egoism, the striving for one's own well-being (BM §14). Schopenhauer's explanation hereof is not psychological but epistemological: each subject is given to itself in an immediate way whereas the others are given to a subject only in a mediate way. As a result of this immediate givenness, each subject is the whole world to itself; everything else, however, only exists as the subject's representation or idea. Egoism is not the only anti-moral motivating force; another instance is ill-will or malice, into which egoism can degenerate, so that one wants the "woe" ("unhappiness") of the other. Thirdly, however, there are actions that have true moral value, which are characterised, first of all, by the absence of any egoistic motives and are thus termed altruistic actions (BM §15). If there is no action without an empirical motive, the question arises as to what this motive could be if egoism is factually inherent in the very form of existence of beings.

In Schopenhauer's view, the will or an action is always motivated by the "weal and woe", which means that the lives of beings that have the requisite capabilities can fare well or badly. Such a being is either the actual agent or another being. If it is the agent, the action is egoistic. If the action is egoistic, it cannot have moral value. Therefore, an action can only be moral in its relation to other beings; this is the only way for it to be an action of true philanthropy and justice. If such an action is to be possible, the other's well-being needs to be my immediate motive. I must want the other's well-being – or not want his ill-being – as if it were my own, and Schopenhauer claims that we encounter this phenomenon in our experience, namely in the everyday phenomenon of compassion. Feeling compassion, we identify with others and immediately take part in their suffering, we feel their "woe" as if it were our own and thus want their well-being as if it were our own. So it is this hint at the existence of compassion which provides the basis for the possibility of identification or non-egoistic actions, i.e. the basis of morality[2].

Schopenhauer no longer explains the question of how this phenomenon is to be ultimately understood by way of a mere analysis of the given. Instead, in compassion he sees at the same time "the great mystery of ethics, its archetypal phenomenon and its boundary stone", about which only metaphysical speculation, as we find it in his major work The World as Will and Representation, can make any claims. According to this conception, the possibility of identification is based on the assumption that all things and living beings are objectivations of a single will. The human individual is such a realisation of the will, although with the special characteristic of having understanding or representations, including, in particular, a representation of the fact that it is will or

2. Cartwright (2013: 249), stresses the uniqueness of this central role of compassion within the whole tradition of Western moral philosophy (and also metaphysics).

drive itself. Since human beings are material objectivations of the will, they are isolated. An isolated individual suffers not only now and then but, in fact, constitutionally since the will is boundless and impossible to satisfy. Compassion draws attention to the fact that other individuals suffer likewise. The insight into the universality of suffering, on the other hand, can lead to the insight into the arbitrariness of the distinction between individuals. The next step is the insight into the futility of willing and the renunciation of life and willing. This step goes beyond the problems of moral philosophy which is why I will not deal with it here. However, the ethical ideas Schopenhauer develops before this transition into metaphysics contain a number of important insights.

As already alluded to in Section 1., we should pay attention to Schopenhauer's hint that morality is a complex phenomenon, the explanation of which requires elaborating on at least the three aspects of the form, the content and the motivation. Usually, Schopenhauer's ethics is considered with regard to the aspect of motivation and is categorised as an ethics of compassion. However, the idea that this motive is always directed at the "weal and woe" of others makes an equally important contribution to the determination of the content of morality; moreover, both aspects are closely correlated.

Schopenhauer conceives of both compassion and the life orientation of beings in a fundamental sense when he relates both to the "weal and woe". I would like to briefly outline the advantages of this conception for a substantiation and elaboration of an ethics of universal consideration by drawing a comparison to utilitarianism which, at first glance, seems to be similarly oriented owing to its reference to happiness and unhappiness. As far as the content is concerned, utilitarianism refers to the total sum of well-being, whereby it violates the common idea that morality is about the consideration of individuals whose lives can fare well or badly; and as far as the corresponding motive is concerned, utilitarianism invokes the feeling of benevolence towards total happiness, a feeling which does not exist as a given motive in our experience. This lack of a possible empirical motive in utilitarianism leads to an unrealistic overtaxing of moral agents whereas Schopenhauer's orientation towards the negative emotion of compassion implies that moral acting consists in not making others suffer and helping them in time of need.

The utilitarian orientation towards the sum of happiness also goes with the use of a reduced notion of suffering and happiness as it takes these to be isolated states and considers individuals merely as receptacles for these states. Schopenhauer, by contrast, speaks of the "weal and woe" of human beings and animals; here, experiences of pleasure and suffering are viewed as constituents of life as a whole. Compassion does not simply refer to states of suffering as such but to another being that suffers. Therefore, Schopenhauer can, like utilitarianism but with an ethical conception that is more in line with common sense morality, include animals (BM §19, 7). The emotion of compassion, which makes altruistic acting possible and is thus constitutive of moral acting, can refer to animals in the same way as to humans; and therefore, animals are

included in the ranks of moral objects straight away. This inclusion, however, differs from the utilitarian one insofar as moral objects are considered to be fully-fledged living beings striving for their well-being.

3. Problems of Schopenhauer's approach

The great importance that Schopenhauer attaches to the notion of well-being or suffering could also be used to eradicate a difficulty that some critics see in his approach. With regard to compassion, Schopenhauer claims to have found the moral drive out of which flow both the virtue of justice and the virtue of philanthropy (BM §17). This distinction roughly corresponds to Kant's distinction between negative and positive duties, between the prohibition of injuring and the precept of assistance. The fact that the prohibition of injuring or inflicting suffering follows from the conception of compassion is certainly without problems. It is less clear, however, whether this really covers the area of justice and whether compassion can be the adequate basis here (Cartwright, 2012: 258). For it seems rather odd to say that, for example, one keeps a promise out of compassion.

This problem might be solved if, following Schopenhauer, the notion of suffering is understood in a more comprehensive sense so that it includes not only feelings of pain and unpleasure. In his words (BM § 16, 3rd axiom), the motives that move the will are "weal and woe in general and in the broadest possible sense of the word". One could then say that those moral objects who are persons are susceptible to (sometimes purely symbolic) violations of a higher-order and that contempt, disregard, violations of reciprocal social relations, as they occur in the case of injustice, belong to this class. To me, this seems to be plausible indeed; for motives are intelligible only if they can be integrated in some way into the striving for the good life.

By mentioning the two cardinal virtues, we have already come across another important point whose interpretation requires some clarification. One common objection against an approach based on the empirical motive of compassion is that this emotion, like all other emotions, is erratic and thus inappropriate as a basis for a universalistic morality (Tugendhat, 2006). But Schopenhauer does not claim that moral acting requires the moral agent to be determined by the factual occurrence of feelings of compassion. Instead we can, based on this affect, form the general maxim not to inflict suffering on anyone and develop this maxim into a solid resolution, a virtue (BM §17).

The critical question as to why we should develop compassion, of all emotions, into an expanded attitude, and not any adverse affects like glee, becomes superfluous given Schopenhauer's methodological approach. For his aspiration is not to derive morality from something pre-moral but to explain what morality, as a given fact, is constituted of. The feeling of compassion explains how moral acting is empirically, and thus motivationally, possible. Morality, however, consists of a generalised altruistic attitude, an attitude of regard for the well-being of other sentient beings but not its opposite.

More difficult is the question of where Schopenhauer takes the concept of moral virtues from and how he can explain the decision to make a permanent resolution to act in accordance with the generalised form of compassion. This step is necessary for Schopenhauer because, as individualized objectivations, we cannot completely identify with others and thus have to use cognition to reach the insight that all other beings suffer too. Thus reason turns compassion into a "solid resolution to respect the rights of individuals, not to interfere with these rights, to avoid the self-reproach of being the cause of other beings' suffering" (BM §17).

But on what basis can Schopenhauer speak of a moral right? On a first level, one could reply, as indicated above, that rights and duties do exist within a specific part of morality in a harmless sense, i.e. that they form a dimension that is central for human life in particular. That would correspond roughly with Bernard Williams's view that the notion of a moral ought is pointless but that a locally limited everyday notion of obligation, for example in the context of promising or more generally in the context of reciprocal social relations, does in fact make good sense (Williams, 1985). But this is just the way Schopenhauer's notion of rights is not limited. For the social form of morality is factually not universal but limited to a community whose members conceive of themselves accordingly whereas generalised compassion has no limits; according to its own sense, generalised compassion refers exactly to all beings who can suffer (Tugendhat, 2006: 29). This is the very reason why this attitude is fundamental for the comprehensibility of the universal content of contemporary morality.

What Schopenhauer unwittingly makes use of here is a strong universal notion of moral rights to which a strong notion of ought should correspond; with his critique of the law-like form of morality, however, Schopenhauer has just tossed this concept overboard. In fact it is also part of the common idea of morality that there are basic moral rights that normally constitute a boundary for other moral agents' actions; and it seems to be part of the idea of a moral virtue, as distinct from a virtue of character related merely to the success of one's own life, that one accepts corresponding obligations and that one makes the demand that all other moral agents ought to develop this virtue and act accordingly as well. Without a foundation on religious authorities, pure reason or other absolute values, however, it is impossible to derive absolute obligations or absolute rights. The special weight of morality that one would like to ensure with these notions cannot be extracted from a conception of consideration for the weal and woe of all sentient beings based on an attitude of generalised compassion. For this is only one among other attitudes to life, and it is, for the time being, an open question of how much weight it has among these various attitudes. However, it is exactly the openness of this question that can also be seen as an advantage. Moral theories which take as a basis some notion of absolute value tend to deny the very existence of this question right from the outset.

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