

Compassion or Renunciation? *That* is the question of Schopenhauer's ethics

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Abstract

The traditional view of Schopenhauer's ethical thought is to see renunciation from the will-to-life as the truest, most ethical response to a world such as ours in which suffering is tremendous, endemic, and unredeemed. In this view, Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion, which he encapsulates in *On the Basis of Morality* in the principle "Harm no one; rather help everyone to the extent that you can" is a second best way of living, valuable only as a step along the path to "salvation" from the will-to-life in complete renunciation. In this paper, we suggest that this traditional picture of the ethics of compassion as ultimately a way station to the normatively preferable option of renunciation *masks a fundamental conflict at the heart of Schopenhauer's ethical thought*. Instead, we argue, Schopenhauer should be interpreted as offering two independent, mutually antagonistic ethical ideals: compassion and renunciation. Bracketing Schopenhauer's resignationism, we then pursue his ideal of compassion and offer a reconstruction of Schopenhauer's ethics that espouses 'degrees of inherent value' among living beings. We aim to show that on this reconstruction, Schopenhauer offers a hybrid Kantian/moral sense theory of ethics that has considerable novelty and philosophical attractions for contemporary ethical theorizing.

Keywords: Schopenhauer; ethics; pessimism; compassion; Kant.

Resum. *Compassió o renúncia?* Aquesta és la qüestió de l'ètica de Schopenhauer

La visió tradicional del pensament ètic de Schopenhauer és veure la renúncia de la voluntat-de-viure com la resposta més vertadera i més ètica a un món com el nostre, en què el patiment és enorme, endèmic i no redimit. Des d'aquesta perspectiva, l'ètica de la compassió, que a *Sobre el fonament de la moral* Schopenhauer resumeix en el principi «No facis mal a ningú sinó més aviat ajuda a tothom en la mesura que puguis», és la segona millor forma de viure, valuosa tan sols com un pas en el camí vers «salvar-se» de la voluntat-de-viure mitjançant la renúncia completa. En aquest treball suggerim que aquesta imatge tradicional de l'ètica de la compassió com una estació de pas en el camí vers l'opció normativament preferible de la renúncia *amaga un conflicte fonamental al cor del pensament ètic de Schopenhauer*. En el seu lloc, argumentem que Schopenhauer ha d'interpretar-se en tant que ofereix dos ideals independents i mútuament antagònics de l'ètica: la compassió i la renúncia. Després, posant el «resignacionisme» de Schopenhauer entre parèntesis,

explorem el seu ideal de compassió i oferim una reconstrucció de l'ètica de Schopenhauer que defensa l'existència de «graus de valor inherent» entre els éssers vius. El nostre objectiu és demostrar amb aquesta reconstrucció que Schopenhauer ofereix una combinació d'ètica kantiana i ètica del sentit moral que té una considerable originalitat i resulta atractiva des del punt de vista de la teorització ètica contemporània.

Paraules clau: Schopenhauer; ètica; pessimisme; compassió; Kant.

Summary

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1. Renunciation *and* compassion? Stating the conflict

The traditional view of Schopenhauer's ethical thought is to see renunciation from the will-to-life as the truest, most ethical response to a world such as ours in which suffering is tremendous, endemic, and unredeemed¹. In this view, Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion, which he encapsulates in his *On the Basis of Morality* (hereafter OBM) in the principle "*Harm no one; rather help everyone to the extent that you can [Neminem laede; imo omnes, quantum potes, iuva]*" (OBM: 140) is a second best way of living, valuable only as a step along the path to "salvation" from the will-to-life in complete renunciation. Those saintly few who can resign themselves from willing thus embody the highest wisdom and take the normatively preferred course; but for those of us who cannot or will not be saints, acting out of genuine compassion expresses some degree of wisdom and is the morally next best course of action.

Christopher Janaway sums up the "instrumental view" of the morality of compassion as follows:

The person who is so morally good that the distinction between him- or herself and others begins to fall away, feels all the suffering throughout the world as if it were his or her own. This leads to resignation, brought about by sedation of the will or its recoil away from life. One grasps the utter lack of value in living and willing as an individual at all. Only by undergoing such an extreme redemptive transformation in consciousness, an extinction of the

1. For a good statement of the traditional view see, Robert Wicks (2008: 127-8): "Resignation from worldly affairs, Schopenhauer believes, is the enlightened moral reaction to realizing that owing to one's very presence, the world is filled with suffering, and that the practical and theoretical sides of our being involve pain ... [and that even] moral awareness [...] involves suffering".

personality that consists in the cessation or self-negation of willing, can the individual's existence attain genuine worth; and *morality has value ultimately, not in its own right, but as a step towards this self-denial of the will.* (2009a: xxxviii; emphasis added).

There is a great deal of textual support for this reading of the secondary, instrumental importance of Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion within his system. In chapter 48 of *The World as Will and Representation: Volume II* (hereafter WWR II), for instance, he describes the moral virtues—justice [*Gerechtigkeit*] and philanthropy [*Menschenliebe*]—as a “means of advancing self-renunciation, and accordingly of denying the will-to-live” (WWR II: 606). He also applauds early Christianity for its recognition that “moral virtues are not really the ultimate end, but only a step towards it” (WWR II: 608). Furthermore, Schopenhauer describes the psychological transition from compassion to renunciation that he thinks is bound to take place in a person who truly exercises the moral virtue of justice:

true righteousness, inviolable justice [...] is so heavy a task, that whoever professes it unconditionally and from the bottom of his heart has to make sacrifices which soon deprive life of the sweetness required to make it enjoyable [...] and thus lead to resignation. (WWR II: 606).

Similarly, the virtue of *Menschenliebe* when seriously exercised leads “even more quickly” to resignation because “a person [who] takes over also the sufferings that originally fall to the lot of others” takes on a “hard lot”, and consequently “clinging to life and its pleasures must now soon yield, and make way for a universal renunciation [...] [and] denial of the will” (WWR II: 606-7).

Two reasons emerge from these passages for the almost inevitable transition from moral virtue to renunciation. First, the task of genuine justice and philanthropy will come to seem rather futile – a local, minute decrease in an endless ocean of suffering. Second, serious exercise of these virtues is such as to divest one of the pleasures she takes in her own life, leading to greater detachment from her own will-to-life.

Although there is much textual support for this instrumental view of Schopenhauer's ethics, some of its entailments create tensions within his thought approaching the level of paradox. One tension lies in the fact that notwithstanding the normative priority of renunciation over compassion, the ethics of compassion is still proclaimed as an ethical ideal in its own right, normatively to be preferred to egoism or malice. But as we shall detail below, when looked at in light of Schopenhauer's espousal of renunciation, compassion—unlike egoism and malice—actually works in a manner that is antagonistic to the ideal of renunciation; and the ideal of renunciation works in a manner contrary to the ideal of compassion.

What we would like to suggest in this paper, is that the traditional picture of the ethics of compassion as a step in the right direction, but ultimately a

way-station to the normatively preferable option of renunciation, *masks a fundamental conflict at the heart of Schopenhauer's ethical thought*. Rather, we suggest that Schopenhauer should be interpreted as offering two independent, mutually antagonistic ethical ideals: compassion and renunciation. Furthermore, which ideal is preferable within Schopenhauer's system depends on the grounds on offer for hope that suffering in the world may be significantly diminished—in other words, whether or not hope is reasonable is the fulcrum on which this decision should be based.

2. Schopenhauer's ethical principle

There are actually two fundamental tensions within Schopenhauer's ethical thought that have gone largely unnoticed by commentators. The first lies between the two distinct parts of Schopenhauer's ethical principle: "Harm no one; rather help everyone to the extent that you can", and the second lies in Schopenhauer's claim that compassionate action—understood as preventing or alleviating the suffering of others—is actually beneficial to the recipients of compassionate action. We will address these tensions in turn.

Schopenhauer's ethical principle does not function within his system in the same way that the Categorical Imperative does in Kant's. The principle is not the source or foundation of morality, but rather is simply a reservoir for that source or foundation which is *the feeling of compassion*. Nonetheless, the principle encapsulates the maxim of a morally good person (OBM: 205), and having such a principle is "indispensable for a moral life, as the container [...] in which the disposition that has risen out of the source of all morality, which does not flow at every moment, is stored so that it can flow down through supply channels when a case for application comes" (OBM: 205). Thus, Schopenhauer's principle is not imperatival in form and force; rather, the morally good person is, as a matter of empirical fact, motivated by compassion to harm no one; rather to help everyone to the extent that she or he can.

Living in accordance with this principle is nonetheless extremely demanding given the nature of organic existence. In Schopenhauer's proto-Darwinian view, organisms are essentially driven by the will-to-life, which he believes necessarily involves competition with other living beings for the basic means to sustain life and propagate the species. This competition brings tremendous suffering to the self and others in its wake. In a famous passage, Schopenhauer comments on this Darwinian struggle for existence:

[...] in Java he [Junghuhn] saw an immense field entirely covered with skeletons, and took it to be a battlefield. However, they were nothing but skeletons of large turtles [...]. These turtles come this way from the sea, in order to lay their eggs, and are then seized upon by wild dogs [...] with their united strength, these dogs lay them on their backs, tear open their lower armour, the small scales of their belly, and devour them alive. But then a tiger often pounces on the dogs. Now all this misery is repeated thousands and thousands of times, year in year out. For this, then, are these turtles born. *For what offence*

must they suffer this agony? What is the point of this whole scene of horror? The only answer is that the will-to-live thus objectifies itself. (WWR II: 354; emphasis added)

In the human world as well, ordinary relationships result in tremendous suffering. This is illuminated well for Schopenhauer through bourgeois tragedies in which “morally ordinary characters in everyday circumstances are positioned with respect to each other in such a way that their situation forces them knowingly and clear-sightedly to cause each other the greatest harm without the injustice falling on one side or the other” (*The World as Will and Representation: Volume I*, hereafter WWR I: 281-2). Given Schopenhauer's view of the affirmation of the will-to-life as inevitably causing harm and suffering to others in the animal and human world alike, the injunction to “harm no one” is impossible to respect *insofar as one continues to participate in the will-to-life at all*. Thus, it seems that the only way to strictly live up to the “harm no one” part of the principle is to give up willing altogether through renunciation.

But what of the other half of the principle: “help everyone to the extent that you can”? This second part is decidedly *not* served by renunciation, for the truly resigned person no longer actively helps anyone. Schopenhauer describes the transition from moral virtue to ascetic renunciation as one from “loving others as himself and doing as much for them as for himself” to having a “loathing for the essence that is expressed as his own appearance, the will-to-life [...]” (WWR I: 407). Consequently, the person on the way to achieving salvation is “careful not to let his will attach itself to anything, and tries to steel himself with the greatest indifference toward all things” (WWR I: 407); and for the fully resigned person “this world of ours which is so very real with all its suns and galaxies is—nothing.” (WWR I: 439). The resigned Saint seems to have achieved an existence that is beyond all caring and *ipso facto* beyond all compassion.

However, it is caring for others—and, more particularly, the action motivated by such caring—that is called for by the second half of the moral principle. It would seem, then, that renunciation is opposed to the second part of the moral principle. Compassionate affirmation of the will-to-life, while non-egoistic, is clearly non-resignationist as well.

The result of this analysis therefore uncovers a dilemma within Schopenhauer's ethical principle. On the one hand, in order to fully honor the “harm no one” part of the principle, resignation is required. But, on the other hand, if one resigns, one is thereby not “helping everyone to the extent that one can.” It appears as though we cannot simultaneously honor both parts of the principle – and this despite the fact that its wording would appear to imply that we can. Schopenhauer never acknowledges this dilemma. As it stands, then, Schopenhauer's ethics requires that we choose between two mutually exclusive parts of an ethical principle. And what is more, choosing either entails violating the other!

To complicate matters further for the standard view, there is a second major tension within Schopenhauer's ethical thought represented by his notion that

compassionate action—understood as preventing or alleviating the suffering of others—actually *benefits* others. Schopenhauer describes the virtue of justice as preventing a person from causing suffering to others—and therefore, refraining from harming them—and the virtue of loving-kindness/philanthropy [*Menschenliebe*] as moving a person actively to sacrifice something (one’s time, bodily or mental exertions, wealth, health, freedom, or even one’s life [cf. OBM: 216]) in order to help alleviate another’s suffering or prospective suffering. These virtues therefore clearly aim at the good of others in the form of prevention of or lessened suffering. And they are virtues rather than vices precisely because they do so. But can preventing or lessening another’s suffering be consistently construed as a good for the recipient of compassion within Schopenhauer’s system?

In chapter 49 of *WWR II*, titled “The Road to Salvation”, Schopenhauer elaborates the two paths to negation of the will-to-life he set out in *WWR I*. These paths involve recognizing the essential, irredeemable suffering of existence that is cognized, on the one hand, from the cases of others, or, on the other, from “one’s own immediate feeling of suffering” (*WWR I*: 424). In this supplementary chapter, Schopenhauer stresses that very few people will achieve salvation along the first path and that it is personal suffering that has the greatest promise as a “sanctifying force” (*WWR II*: 636):

The [first] way, leading to just the same goal [renunciation] by means of mere knowledge and accordingly the appropriation of the sufferings of a whole world, is the narrow path of the elect, of the saints, and consequently is to be regarded as a rare exception. Therefore, without that [path of personal suffering] it would be impossible for the majority to hope for any salvation. But we struggle against entering this path, and strive rather with all our might to prepare for ourselves a secure and pleasant existence, whereby we chain our will ever more firmly to life. (*WWR II*: 638)

Given that the majority of us have no hope of reaching salvation—which is the highest good—without personal suffering, it seems that compassionate measures taken by others to prevent or alleviate our suffering may not be in our truly best interests after all! If one takes a narrow view of things, compassionate action may appear beneficial; but in the broad view, this is precisely the sort of action that will help to “chain our will ever more firmly to life”, thereby leading us away from the possibility of salvation². Now, it could be

2. We should acknowledge a possible resolution of the second dilemma described, i.e. that one cannot honor the ideal of renunciation without *ipso actu* running contrary to the ideal of compassion. One might argue that the ideal of renunciation serves the ideal of compassion by providing the sufferer with proof that one can be freed of the pains of the will-to-life. The great ascetics reveal that the dominion of the will-to-life is not total. But this solution threatens to make Schopenhauer’s extension of compassion to non-human animals, who are incapable of renunciation, mysterious. What makes a being ethically considerable for Schopenhauer is, it seems, not sapience but sentience. Thus, we shall devote no further attention here to the compassion-via-modeling-saintly-renunciation solution. We address the moral considerability of sentient beings below in §§IV and V.

that the person one is aiming to help through compassionate action could not attain salvation, and in this case, the action would actually be beneficial. So the problem here is a kind of epistemic paradox: how does one know that the person one “helps” through compassionate action is not thereby being hindered on his or her path to salvation?³

Now, this epistemic paradox of the beneficial-yet-for-that-reason-potentially-harmful aspect of compassion is limited to actions directed at beings who are capable of salvation – that is to say, rational beings. Compassionate actions are unproblematically beneficial to non-human animals who are incapable of salvation (either through the renunciation of the will-to-life by personal suffering or by an understanding of the suffering of others). In the case of rational animals, however, the problem is that the compassionate actions that reduce the suffering of such beings also stand to diminish their progress toward salvation. In light of Schopenhauer's commitment to the normative primacy of renunciation, it would seem that egoistic or malicious actions could ironically be more beneficial to other rational beings inasmuch as they would ratchet up their suffering, thereby leading them—potentially—to unchain their will-to-life, and thus, further along the path toward salvation.

Thus, the standard picture of a continuum of morally worthy options culminating in renunciation masks the fact that compassion and renunciation seem upon closer investigation to be mutually exclusive ethical ideals. If our analysis is correct, instead of an unproblematic hierarchy between morally-worthy ways of being—one which tends psychologically, logically and ethically to lead to the other—Schopenhauer's ethical system confronts a person with a choice between which of two fundamentally incompatible ideals one should honor.

3. Compassion *or* renunciation?

In order to see if we might yet find greater unity between Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion and his doctrine of renunciation, we might try to resolve the dilemma confronting us by imposing a lexical ordering on Schopenhauer's ethical principle. And there is some evidence in the text of *OBM* that he sees the first part of the principle, “harm no one”, as more important than the second, “help everyone to the extent that one can”, inasmuch as he claims that justice is “the first and the fundamentally essential cardinal virtue” (*OBM*: 215). So we might construe his ethics of compassion as ranking the parts of the principle thusly:

- (1) Harm no one;
- (2) Help everyone to the extent that you can.

3. We are grateful to Allen Wood for pointing out that the paradox is really an epistemic one.

Given the way in which Schopenhauer phrases and discusses his ethical principle, we might take him to hold in a similar fashion to Rawls' lexical ordering of the two principles of justice, that it is at least possible simultaneously to respect both component principles of his fundamental principle of morality⁴.

However, given Schopenhauer's pessimism concerning the will-to-life—and particularly, the notion that it is essential to any affirmation of the will that harm be done to others—it would seem that these principles cannot be simultaneously respected. One needs to violate at least to some extent the “harm no one” principle in order to satisfy “help everyone to the extent that you can” and vice versa. What results from this lexical priority, though, is that the conflict can be rationally adjudicated by honoring the first principle and sacrificing the second through renunciation. This outcome also implicitly acknowledges the illusoriness of “benefitting” other human beings through preventing or alleviating their suffering, insofar as it may be counter-productive for their highest good or salvation.

By this line of reasoning, however, *egoistic or even malicious actions* to human beings may be ethically preferable to just or philanthropic actions, for these would better stand to help other human beings attain salvation by ratcheting up their suffering. Yet, Schopenhauer clearly decries rampant egoism, injustice, and malice, and argues that compassionate action constitutes objectively, morally praiseworthy action insofar as it embodies greater metaphysical insight than the other two attitudes. So it seems that the lexical ordering strategy will not save Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion from conflict with his doctrine of renunciation after all.

We suggest that a more promising approach to these difficulties can be found especially, but not exclusively, in his (non-)prize-winning essay *OBM* where Schopenhauer develops the ethics of compassion by bracketing his doctrine of pessimism and assumes that some significant progress toward a world with less suffering is possible⁵. In this work, wherein he was forced by the strictures of the prize competition to write ‘incognito,’ Schopenhauer actually strikes a hopeful tone, and endorses individual and institutional action to promote justice and alleviate suffering. In fact, there are many passages in this essay where he cites measures that had greatly alleviated suffering. The British nation comes in for special praise in this regard for having spent “up to 20 million pounds sterling to buy the negro slaves in its colonies their freedom” (*OBM*: 218), and for their animal protection societies which introduced leg-

4. We are grateful to Kyla Ebels-Duggan for suggesting this lexical-ordering solution as a potential way to resolve the paradox.
5. There are places in *WWR I* and *II* as well, however, where Schopenhauer strikes a more hopeful tone. See for instance his remarks on how improvements in a State could eliminate “all kinds of evil to bring about something approaching a utopia” though “there would still exist countless evils that are absolutely essential to life” (*WWR I*: 376). A bit later on Schopenhauer admits that it is “conceivable that all crime could be prevented by a perfect state [...]” (*WWR I*: 396).

isolation criminalizing the cruel treatment of non-human animals. In a distinctly non-resignationist tone, Schopenhauer even dedicates his citation of newspaper reports detailing the criminalization of animal cruelty to “the associations against the torture of animals now established in Germany, so that they see how one must attack the issue if anything is to come of it” and he praises Councilor Perner in Munich who has spread the animal protection initiative “throughout the whole of Germany” (OBM: 230, note).

The question we shall now investigate, then, is whether this compassionate strand of Schopenhauer's ethical thought may be rescued from the fundamental dilemmas that arise given his doctrine of pessimism and renunciation.

4. Inherent value

In his *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy*, Christopher Janaway quite rightly characterizes the basic motivating idea of Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion as the “essential parity of all beings who strive and suffer” insofar as they “share a single common essence or inner nature” (2009b: 61). Janaway suggests that this essential parity may be interpreted in two ways: first, in a *substantively metaphysical* way, i.e. as holding that individuation is transcendently ideal and that the common essence of all phenomena is the metaphysical will; and second, in an *axiological* way, i.e. as a claim that “there is nothing of any fundamental importance about the individual that I am” such that, from a universal moral standpoint, “it is a matter of indifference whether my ends are promoted and the other's thwarted, or vice versa” (Janaway 2009b: 62). Although Schopenhauer certainly develops the metaphysical interpretation of the “essential parity of all beings who strive and suffer” in the final section of *OBM* and in *WWR I & II*, there are also textual grounds for holding the axiological interpretation (though, as we shall detail below, even the axiological interpretation involves a metaphysical commitment).

In pursuing the axiological interpretation, Janaway understands this essential parity as consisting in the fact that, from the universal moral standpoint, *no one* is any more or less worthy of suffering than any other being because, from that ultimate standpoint, we are all *worthless* (or are *nothing* – see *WWR I*: 439). Taking into consideration Schopenhauer's ultimate embrace of renunciation as embodying the highest wisdom, this is a reasonable interpretation. But this interpretation invites the aforementioned paradoxes that threaten to undermine the normativity of compassion over egoism and malice.

If this pessimistic, resignationist strand of Schopenhauer's thought is bracketed for the time being, however, then another interpretation of this essential parity of striving beings emerges. According to this interpretation, all sentient beings—that is, all beings capable of pain and pleasure—have positive, inherent value. In this view, it is a parity of the intrinsic *worth* of all beings capable of suffering, rather than a parity of the intrinsic *worthlessness* of all beings, that gives content to the claim that another's ends are *prima facie* on a level with one's own. This is because suffering is the experience of deprivation of one's

(expected) good; and that which has a good has, we understand, *pro tanto* inherent value and thus moral considerability.

Support for our interpretation against that of Janaway can be found in the context of Schopenhauer's critique of Kant's Formula of Humanity of the Categorical Imperative insofar as it has—Schopenhauer claims—deeply counter-intuitive implications for the putative moral considerability of non-human animals. In section 8 of *OBM*, Schopenhauer is critical of Kant's describing persons as “ends in themselves”, and thereby having “dignity beyond all price” for Schopenhauer claims that an “end” properly refers only to the goal or aim of willing rather than to *the being who does the willing*. He also objects to the terminology that human beings have “absolute worth” (*OBM*: 161), as he maintains that “worth” is a comparative term, and thus, that there is no content that can be given to the notion of “absolute” worth, just as there can be no content given to notions of the “highest” number or the “largest” space. The crux of Schopenhauer's criticism of Kant's Formula of Humanity, then, is his undermining of the sharp moral distinction between human and non-human animals: Schopenhauer does not believe that the ability to set one's own ends rationally endows a being with an incommensurable value—a “dignity beyond all price”.

It might seem, however, that in criticizing Kant's Formula of Humanity, Schopenhauer jettisons the view that anything has inherent value. As alluded to above, this is how Janaway reads him—namely, that everything at bottom is worthless—and Bernard Reginster also holds that Schopenhauer rejects any notion of intrinsic goodness. So, it might seem that our favored interpretation—which places the moral considerability of all striving and suffering beings on their positive inherent value—cannot be tenable given Schopenhauer's other commitments in the metaphysics of value⁶.

6. Reginster claims on the basis of *WWR I*, §65, p. 387 that Schopenhauer rejects the notion of intrinsic value. He adduces the following passage in support: “we call everything good that is just as we want it to be” (see Reginster 2013: 162; cf. Reginster 2006: 98-99, 173-174). Reginster glosses this assertion as *something's agreeing with some desire of ours is a necessary and sufficient condition for our calling it good*, and thus goodness must be relative to someone's desires, and thus, there cannot be intrinsic goodness according to Schopenhauer. But this interpretation fares badly when the passage is read in context, for Schopenhauer is considering the conditions upon which we *call* something good, not as such the conditions in virtue of which something *is* good. This can be seen in the fact that Schopenhauer is explicit in §65 that his subject matter is “[what] is intended in [or what is the content of] the concept of good” (387; emphasis original). The concept of good is – as are all concepts for Schopenhauer – an abstract representation, or a higher-order representation of intuitive representations (cf. *WWR I*, §9). But, for Schopenhauer, “true virtue does not arise from abstract cognition in general, but must come from intuitive cognition that recognizes in another individual the same essence as in its own” (394; emphasis original). We take it that compassionate action is a form of true virtue for Schopenhauer, if not *the* form of true virtue, and consists in recognition of the inherent value in another. Since true virtue does not consist in the application of concepts to objects in judgments, e.g. “x is good”, but is rather an intuitive grasping of “the same essence [in another's as one's own” (cf. *OBM*, §12: 181), we should not read Schopenhauer's

But Schopenhauer can hold that human and non-human animals have positive *inherent value* without having *absolute value* or “dignity beyond all price”. And Schopenhauer utilizes the idea of inherent value for human beings and non-human animals in several passages regarding the kind of treatment owed to these beings. In a passage in which Schopenhauer chides Kant (and Western theological ethics generally) for his lack of regard for non-human animals, he writes:

Bah! What a morals of pariahs, chandalas, and mlechchas—which fail to recognize the eternal essence [*das ewige Wesen*] that is present in everything that has life [*in Allem, was Leben hat*], and that shines out with unfathomable significance [*unergründlicher Bedeutsamkeit*] from all eyes that see the light of the sun. (OBM: 162)

Here Schopenhauer espouses not the equal *worthlessness* of “everything that has life”, but rather their equal inherent value, which he describes as the “unfathomable significance” [*unergründlicher Bedeutsamkeit*] of all living beings. This significance “shines out” from “all eyes that see the light of the sun”; thus, presumably, the significance can be directly perceived in and by the many sentient animals with whom we interact, such as horses, dogs, cats, cows, sheep, etc. From this passage, then, it seems that Schopenhauer does not object to Kant's recognition of the inherent value of human beings as such, but rather to his calling it “*absolute worth*”, and to his seeing *only* human beings as inherently valuable.

Another passage that supports our interpretation comes again from Schopenhauer's discussion of what he sees as the bias against non-human animals in Western theological ethics:

European priestliness [...] in its profanity thinks it cannot go far enough in its *denial and defamation of the eternal essence* [*des ewigen Wesens*] that lives in all animals; whereby it has laid down the basis for the hardness and cruelty to animals that is customary in Europe. (OBM: 227; emphasis added)

What European theological ethics has “denied” and “defamed” seems not to be the parity of the worthlessness of all living beings—after all, it makes little sense to say that worthlessness can be “defamed”—but precisely the parity of their inherent value obtaining by virtue of the “eternal essence” living in all of them.

In these passages Schopenhauer seems to appeal to an inherent value of all sentient beings that is comparative—rather than absolute—and thus may come in degrees. His key point against Kant is that it is not the possession of

statement in §65 cited by Reginster as concerning true virtue. Instead, his claim in §65 is meant to characterize a deficient, egoistic form of morality, viz. a “morality without grounding, which is to say mere moralizing” (§66: 394). Thus, there seems to be no good reason to take Schopenhauer's discussion in *WWR I*, sections 65 & 66 as implying a rejection of any notion of intrinsic value.

reason which endows a being with inherent value, thereby making that being morally considerable and even a holder of rights; instead, it is sentience that makes one morally considerable. In what follows, we shall return to the all-important question of exactly which characteristics one must have to be morally considerable in Schopenhauer's view. Since it is in virtue of the "eternal essence"—which seems most naturally understood as the metaphysical will—that beings are endowed with "unfathomable significance", this provides a clue as to what comprises the possession of positive inherent value. The details of this account, however, must be pieced together from various passages. From the passages we have adduced thus far it is unclear, for example, whether *all living beings* should be understood as morally considerable or perhaps only the subset of living beings who are sentient, or even something narrower still, such as a being that is the "subject of a life", to borrow a phrase from Tom Regan.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of the scope of compassion, the compassionate outlook is clearly normatively preferable to the egoistic or malicious outlook for Schopenhauer. His reasoning can be explained as follows: first, those beings with cognition—sentient beings who possess intuitive knowledge—are "bearers of a world" (WWR I: 358), and from an egoistic perspective, each cognizing individual feels as though he or she is "a microcosm equal in value to the macrocosm [the entire world]" (WWR I: 358). What the compassionate person recognizes intuitively—contrary to the egoist—is that another individual has the same essence as herself, and *ipso facto*, the value of the other's microcosm is equivalent to her own, and both are equivalent to the macrocosm. In other words, Schopenhauer's explanation for the moral objectivity and normativity of the attitude of compassion is that other sentient beings *matter morally speaking* in exactly the same way as one's own microcosm matters—the inherent value of all of these microcosms is (roughly) on a par. One only seems truly to recognize this moral fact, however, via intuitive knowledge—the knowledge of feeling—rather than through abstract reasoning.

Schopenhauer's view on the normativity of compassion should not be construed along the lines of the Classical Utilitarian who maintains that the only things that matter intrinsically are pleasure and pain; on the contrary, Schopenhauer holds that sentient beings *themselves*—*qua* microcosms—matter and that *these sentient beings themselves* have "unfathomable significance". Indeed, it is precisely because these beings have unfathomable significance that their pleasure or pain matters. This positive inherent value of (at least) sentient subjects also explains why the clearest expression of the fundamental principle of ethics is for Schopenhauer "Harm no one; rather, help everyone to the extent that you can". If Schopenhauer held that the sole intrinsic good were pleasure and/or lack of pain and suffering, then the first part of the principle "harm no one"—a principle that respects the separateness of persons—would not be stressed as it is in Schopenhauer's ethics. Insofar as harming some brings about far less suffering and far more pleasure for everyone

else, then, all things considered, the Classical Utilitarian must endorse it⁷. This is not Schopenhauer's view. He understands the ethics of compassion as enjoining us to harm no one even if doing so would bring about better consequences all things considered.

5. What kind of moral theory does Schopenhauer provide?

In this reconstruction where we have bracketed Schopenhauer's pessimism and espousal of renunciation, Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion offers a hybrid Kantian-Moral Sense theory of ethics. In a Kantian vein, the feeling of compassion is normative, for Schopenhauer, because *it tracks the inherent value of sentient beings*, and the feelings of egoism and malice are non-normative because they fail to track the roughly equal inherent value of all potentially suffering beings. In saying this we do not ignore his significant departures from Kant's ethics. Schopenhauer rejects the imperatival form of ethics and ridicules the Categorical Imperative as the supreme principle of morality, although he retains his own formula of the supreme principle in "harm no one; rather help everyone to the extent that you can". But in his ethics of compassion, it functions only as a rule of thumb and, especially, as a reservoir for the feeling of compassion. Crucially, it is the *feeling* of compassion that is, *pace* Kant, the foundation of all actions with moral worth (OBM: 199).

Nonetheless, we should note before pressing the differences further that it has largely gone unnoticed by commentators that Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion actually retains other elements of the Kantian picture. For example, while Schopenhauer jettisons the notion of the absolute worth or "dignity beyond all price" of humanity, his ethics retains the intelligible/empirical character distinction, the possibility of individual freedom to change one's own character (though the mechanism for this must remain mysterious), the useful role of moral principles, and most importantly, as we have argued, a commitment to the inherent value of human beings, though, for Schopenhauer, it is *qua* living, striving, *cognizing subject of a life at all*—i.e., *qua* microcosm—rather than *qua* rational being—that endows humans with that value.

Related to the crucial difference from Kant regarding the normative force of the feeling of compassion is Schopenhauer's moral epistemology: according to Schopenhauer, the inherent value of living beings is *known* exclusively *via* intuitive knowledge (of which feeling is a species), rather than—in Kant's view—through any empirical or synthetic *a priori* "fact of reason" (cf. WWR I: 394). With respect to his moral epistemology, then, it seems Schopenhauer comes closer to moral sense theorists insofar as the feeling of compassion is epistemically privileged over conceptually mediated cognition in his view. And while Schopenhauer agrees with Kant that even the simplest and least educated person can have a morally good character, he diverges from him with

7. We are putting to one side, of course, sophisticated rule-utilitarian attempts to ground a view of rights as trumps in the principle of utility.

respect to the reason for this. For Schopenhauer, even the simplest person can embody the highest ethical insight insofar as she is endowed with innate compassion, and through this feeling she tracks the “unfathomable significance” of other sentient subjects. Not perceiving this inherent value in another is the result of a person’s character being predominantly egoistic or malicious.

To return to the issue of our axiological interpretation’s metaphysical commitment alluded to toward the beginning of §IV, Schopenhauer explicitly agrees with Kant that actions of moral worth have a metaphysical import. It is for this reason that, after a long empirical investigation of moral phenomena in *OBM*, Schopenhauer believes he must turn to a “metaphysical explanation” in order to show that the person who acts out of compassion has gotten things objectively right, whereas egoistic and malicious agents have gotten them objectively wrong. The metaphysical reason he gives for why the compassionate person sees things aright, and the malicious and egoistic person sees things incorrectly, is that ultimately all sentient beings share the same metaphysical essence, and from the perspective of the world as will, the distinctions between us qua spatio-temporal beings are an illusion. Even though our axiological interpretation does not rely on the notion of individuation as illusory from the perspective of the world as will, in the final analysis, then, our interpretation of Schopenhauer’s claim regarding the essential parity of all sentient beings, namely, that they all share roughly equal inherent value, is, at the same time, a metaphysical one inasmuch as it involves an appeal to the objective moral fact of the matter. Thus, in our reconstruction, Schopenhauer’s ethics embraces moral realism—along the lines of Allen Wood’s interpretation of Kant’s ethics—but it widens the scope of the beings that have inherent value from rational beings to sentient subjects of lives, or “microcosms”.

So while there may be a rather large number of questions raised by our reconstruction, due to space restrictions we can only address one of them and this is the question of scope. Given that *all* beings, including even non-living beings such as rocks and pools of water, are for Schopenhauer at bottom ‘Will’, it would seem that anything endowed with the “eternal essence” [*ewiges Wesen*] would be morally considerable on this view. It is apparent from the above-cited passages, however, that the “unfathomable significance” which calls on our feelings of compassion and justice is had only by living beings – beings that manifest the will-to-life [*Wille zum Leben*]. Yet, even more specifically, Schopenhauer focuses on animals capable of feeling weal and woe – that is, sentient beings. Indeed, the passages quoted above rail against cruelty to non-human animals, with “eyes capable of seeing the light of the sun”. Specifically, the question that confronts us then is this: insofar as, say, plants (which do not appear sentient) and insects (which could be sentient but only to a very limited degree) manifest the will-to-life, should Schopenhauer have held that *all* living beings are endowed with inherent value and are thus morally considerable?

This is where Schopenhauer’s thought requires fairly heavy reconstruction. Nevertheless, we do think that he lends himself to a nuanced reconstruction in

terms of “degrees of inherent value” and corresponding degrees of moral considerability. Schopenhauer's system is in general characterized by degrees (e.g., he talks of grades of the manifestation of the metaphysical will captured by the doctrine of the Ideas; grades of insight into the metaphysical reality—in aesthetic experience, compassion and resignation—and these correspond to degrees of will-lessness). Kant's ethical system, on the other hand, is in general characterized in more either/or terms: there are persons who have absolute worth or mere things; there is action from duty or merely in accordance with duty, etc. To use a prosaic metaphor: Schopenhauer's ethical system is a dimmer switch whereas Kant's is a straight on/off switch.

Because of the general tendency in Schopenhauer's system toward a continuum of ‘degrees of x,’ it is natural to interpret him as holding this while all manifestations of the metaphysical will (i.e., everything in the phenomenal world) have some inherent value and that this value accounts for the fundamental parity of all beings that are part of the single “eternal essence”. This inherent value comes in degrees and *ipso facto* calls for different responses according to the relevant degree. Take the following as a rough sketch of a few of the pertinent gradations:

- i. First and highest is the degree of value and moral considerability inherent to human beings by virtue of their individuality, transcendental freedom, and highest capacity for suffering. Schopenhauer does describe human beings as special within the animal kingdom for each “having the dignity of an Idea of [his or her] own” (WWR I: 251).
- ii. Second, and descending, is the degree of value inherent to sentient, cognizing subjects, that is, the non-human animals we might describe, after Tom Regan, as “experiencing subjects of a life”. These animals experience emotions and have lives which matter to them (Regan, 2004).
- iii. Finally, there are beings that are not conscious of themselves as experiencing subjects of a life but that are still capable of suffering and of feeling pleasure.

We take it that these gradations exhaust the scale of *morally considerable* beings. Non-sentient living beings, however, such as plants, that are endowed with the will-to-life would not possess inherent value because they are non-sentient. And rocks, soil and pools of water, even though they are manifestations of the metaphysical will in the axiological interpretation, do not have inherent value. Notwithstanding their lack of inherent or moral value, this does not mean that in this view plants and inorganic beings should not be given some kind of consideration as well, but the sort that seems most appropriate is *aesthetic* rather than *moral*.

Although we cannot do it justice here, we might offer a brief sketch of how this distinction might be drawn in a principled way: beings that have feelings or representations of their own value are appropriately responded to compassionately, and therefore, morally. Compassion constitutively involves one's

feeling *with/as* the other. Plants, rocks and pools of water do not—presumably—have feelings. It is not the fact that sentient beings have or are instances of the will-to-life, then, that makes them morally considerable, but the fact that this will-to-life is something *to/for* them. That is, they have feelings and representations concerning this life. The absence of such representations is sufficient to exclude a being from moral consideration. To sum up, we understand that Schopenhauer restricts the scope of moral consideration to beings that can care—in some measure—about their lives. Again, such care need not require rational self-consciousness. Thus, while every being may have aesthetic and/or instrumental value, only those beings who are capable of feeling concern for or care about their lives are the appropriate objects of our compassion.

Indeed, Schopenhauer's many passages on the rights of non-human animals and of their enjoined compassionate treatment by human beings, show that he maintains that all sentient beings should be given more than aesthetic consideration. Moreover, they show that human beings—by virtue of their complexity, individuality, and freedom, and by virtue of their intelligible character—are owed the highest degree of moral consideration, including even respect for their individuality and freedom. Accordingly, he describes all of the will's manifestations as “[forming] a pyramid, of which the highest point is man” (WWR I: 28). But there is nothing in Schopenhauer's writings to suggest that some human beings are worth more than others, and he has very harsh things to say about racist slave traders who take people, without right, from their homelands and away from their families. So it can be understood that Schopenhauer (unlike Nietzsche) puts all human beings on a par with respect to moral considerability, due to the fact that all human beings share these basic features of individuality, having an intelligible character, and transcendental freedom.⁸

6. Degrees of inherent value

In conclusion, our axiological reconstruction of Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion shows that his considered view should be that only sentient beings have inherent value. However, this value comes in degrees and propriety of response maps onto the relevant characteristics of the given being that determine its degree of value. All manifestations of will, it seems, are the proper objects of aesthetic consideration, and thus, of aesthetic respect. But sentient beings are the proper subjects not just of aesthetic consideration, but also of compassionate or moral consideration. And while human beings, due to their individuality, rationality and freedom are the subjects of a higher degree of moral consideration than less complex, non-human animals, we hold that there is no reason to think that Schopenhauer would maintain that the moral consideration owed to human beings is different in kind.

A significant philosophical attraction of this reconstruction is that it presents a novel ethical-theoretical hybrid of Kantian and moral sense theories

8. For Schopenhauer's views on freedom see Neill and Shapshay (2013).

of ethics, which should facilitate a less anthropocentric way of doing normative ethics and, we hope, a more intuitively appealing orientation for dealing with the complex ethical issues concerning the treatment of non-human animals and the environment. It is necessary to point out, however, that we have developed this interpretation of Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion by bracketing his doctrines of thoroughgoing pessimism and renunciation. If we no longer bracket these issues, how do things stand with Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion? The ethics of compassion is still, it would seem, in direct conflict with renunciation. As we have described the dialectic thus far, the question becomes which axiological interpretation of the essential parity of all beings is metaphysically justified: the universal inherent *worth* of sentient beings (our positive ethics of compassion) or the universal inherent *worthlessness* of sentient beings (à la Janaway)?

In deciding the issue it is helpful to return to Schopenhauer's discussion of the transition from moral virtue to religious asceticism:

If we compare life to a circular path made of red-hot coals with a few cool places, where we are forced to keep going around and around the circle, someone entrapped in delusion is comforted by the coolness of the place where he is standing [...] But someone who has seen through the *principium individuationis* and recognizes the essence of things in themselves, and thus the whole, is not susceptible to such comfort: he sees himself on all points of the circle simultaneously, and steps away [...] Specifically, he is no longer satisfied with loving others as himself and doing as much for them as for himself; instead he has conceived a loathing for the essence that is expressed as his own appearance, the will to life, the kernel and essence of that world he recognizes as a miserable place. (WWR I: 406-7).

This transition is effected by one's sickening recognition that the *world itself* is, ultimately, a miserable place, and *not* that the beings that inhabit this world are worthless. The efficient component of this recognition is that the world—and, at bottom, the will-to-life as such—systematically frustrates and disrespects the inherent value of sentient beings.

Recall the source of Schopenhauer's disgust and outrage at the fate of Junghuhn's turtles: "for what offence must they suffer this agony? What is the point of this whole scene of horror? The only answer is that the will-to-live thus objectifies itself" (WWR II: 354). What brings about his turn from hopeful compassion to hopeless renunciation is precisely not seeing everything as worthless, but rather seeing that the world is so configured as necessarily to torture, as it were, sentient beings. Indeed, it is precisely not that the turtles are seen as worthless, but rather that the order of the world is such that their value or worth goes unrecognized and they are forced to suffer unjustly ("for what offence must they suffer this agony?").

The truly nauseating, renunciation-inspiring thought is that the *value* of sentient beings is—and horrifically, forever and necessarily will be—systematically dishonored by the way the world is. Given this doctrine of pessimism,

there is no satisfactory way of adhering to ethical principles in this world. And given the impossibility of realizing ethical ideals, renunciation appears normatively preferable to participating in this disgusting, futile and immoral tragic-farce of a world. If, however, the grounds for pessimism are wanting; and if there is hope that some measure of progress might be made in preventing and alleviating suffering, a hope which is, we have urged, the perspective of *OBM*; then, assuming the universal inherent value of sentient beings, the normatively preferable path is compassion. What is more, if the grounds for pessimism are wanting, then it is renunciation that is immoral, wicked—demonic—and not the world.

What results from this investigation, then, are two distinct and incompatible but genuinely Schopenhauerian ethical perspectives: the ethics of compassion emerges as normatively preferable insofar as there are grounds for hope, while the ethics of renunciation is normatively preferred insofar as things are, ultimately, hopeless. It is crucial, then, to the justification of the ethics of compassion that the grounds for Schopenhauer's thoroughgoing pessimism be evaluated—a task which must be left for another paper.

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