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## Schopenhauer's Moral Philosophy

### Introduction

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a system philosopher in the grand tradition of classical German idealism. Broadly an adherent of Kant's transcendental idealism, he is now most noted for his belief that Kant's thing in itself can best be described as 'will', something he argued in his 1819 work *The World as Will and Representation* (WWRI 124/H 2:119).<sup>1</sup>

Schopenhauer's term 'will' does not refer primarily to human willing, that is, conscious striving towards a goal. Following Kant he argues that willing remains conditioned by the forms of representation and therefore cannot be identified with the thing-in-itself. To reach the thing-in-itself, all forms of representation must be removed to arrive at a conception of will as striving without a goal. This conception is at the root of Schopenhauer's pessimism: willing is experienced by conscious beings as suffering; and the world, including each of us, is in-itself endless willing without the possibility of satisfaction. Only two things hold out the prospect of any relief: the disinterested contemplation of works of art provides temporary respite from the striving will for the many; and a very few saintly beings may be able to still or quiet the will completely and achieve a state that Schopenhauer identifies as nirvana.

These concerns—with suffering, meaning, asceticism and renunciation—are already problems in moral philosophy in a wide sense. But Schopenhauer also has a moral philosophy in the 'narrower' sense (WWRII 589/H 3:676; Cartwright 1999) that addresses questions such as freedom of the will, moral responsibility, the proper criterion for right action, moral motivation, and the virtues and vices. Indeed Schopenhauer makes a distinctive and quite contemporary contribution to virtue theory, advocating compassion (*Mitleid*) as the source of all human virtues.

### I Determinism

In his 1839 essay, *On the Freedom of the Will*, Schopenhauer makes a strong case for determinism (75/H 4:56). As a result, Schopenhauer believes that prescription is futile and hence claims not to have any moral philosophy in the usual sense of the term: that is, he eschews a prescriptive, normative role for philosophy, one in which it could 'become practical, guide action, shape character' (WWRI 297/H 2:319). Philosophy, he claims, 'can never do more than interpret and explain what there is' (298/H 2:320). When Marx claims that philosophers have only tried to interpret the world, he is virtually quoting Schopenhauer.

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<sup>1</sup> References to Schopenhauer's works will be to the abbreviations given in the references section. For English translation, I have used the Cambridge edition of Schopenhauer's works; where these have not yet been published (as in the case of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*), I cite page numbers for an alternative translation (usually Payne), but use my own translation.

Schopenhauer gives two rationales for determinism, one a priori and the other a posteriori. The a priori argument is inspired by Kant's Second Analogy: perceptual experience of objects is based on pre-objective sensory affections, and we project objects in exterior space as the empirical causes of our perceptual experience of them. So the concept of 'cause' must precede experience (FW 50/H 4:27). A morally free action, construed as an effect without a cause, would violate the conditions that make experience possible and would therefore be transcendently impossible, an 'inexplicable miracle' (66/H 4:46).

Schopenhauer's a posteriori argument, which occupies most of his time, differentiates various kinds of ground/consequent relations or broadly causal relations. He groups these together under the general head of the principle of sufficient reason [in German, *Grund* or ground]. The a posteriori argument rehearses the *de facto* commitment of various branches of science to one form or other of the principle of sufficient reason, thus showing that the principle is likely also to hold of human actions. This adds little substance to the a priori argument, but he does give an account of how the principle of sufficient reason works in the case of intentional action in human beings. Animals act only on immediately present perceptual motives, while human beings can also act on a different 'class of representations' that of 'abstract concepts, thoughts.' In contrast to Kant, such 'rational' determination of the will is still, for Schopenhauer, strictly subordinated to the principle of sufficient reason: 'all motives are causes, and all causality brings necessity with it' (FW 57/ H 4:35). Every type of cause is necessarily connected to its effect as if by a 'wire'. The 'sole advantage' accruing to human beings is 'the length of the conducting wire' that connects cause to effect (58/H 4:36).

Typically, Schopenhauer uses this distinction to offer a diagnostic explanation of the tendency people have to believe they are morally free: people mistake a subjective increase in the range of possible motives available to humans for a range of different things they can *will*; and the epistemic challenges of figuring out what motive another person's action follows from is misunderstood as demonstrating that they are not acting on motives at all, but freely willing their actions.

Determinism and the consequent requirement for philosophy to have a 'contemplative' attitude (WWRI 297/H 2:319) are however not mere intellectual doctrines for Schopenhauer; instead he regards belief in moral freedom of the will as essentially childish, and we (certainly we philosophers) should grow up and recognize that we are not free (298/H 2:320-1; BM 4:258/243). In the *Freedom* essay, he claims that determinism is so important that it 'is really a touchstone by which one can distinguish deep thinking minds' (78/H 4:59).

This is not Schopenhauer's last word on freedom, for he thinks there is a genuine and important sense in which 'empirical' freedom fails to account for moral responsibility. His solution to this dilemma is based on Kant's distinction between empirical and intelligible character. But before outlining it, a brief summary of the rest of Schopenhauer's moral philosophy is in order.

## II Critique of Kant

Schopenhauer's critique of Kant takes up almost a third of the text of his second major treatise on moral philosophy, *On the Basis of Morality*, and he regards his own views as 'only half

intelligible' if not situated in relation to his great predecessor (BM 122/H 4:115). Schopenhauer details several specific argumentative flaws in Kant's work, but underlying the logic of Schopenhauer's objections is another important diagnostic claim. Schopenhauer regards morality as having entered into a crisis period during the nineteenth century. Traditionally morality had been unquestioningly grounded in theology; but that grounding has come loose, in part because Kant's critique destroyed the 'basis for *speculative theology*' (119/H 4:112). Kant however does not succeed in freeing himself entirely from theological presuppositions, and his moral philosophy is a kind of compromise formation. As Schopenhauer puts it, in an admittedly uncharitable moment, Kant's work is a 'mere dressing up of theological morals' (181/H 4:185). Kant's inability to let theology go underlies and explains the specific incoherencies that Schopenhauer objects to.

The primary symptom of vestigial theology in Kant's ethics is its law-like, prescriptive and 'imperative' (BM 125ff/H 4:120ff) form, that is to say, its denial of the merely descriptive understanding of ethics that Schopenhauer maintains. Schopenhauer's critique of the notion of the freedom of the will therefore dovetails with the main thrust of his critique of Kant. The fact that Kant writes in archaic Lutheran German 'thou shalt [du sollt] not lie' is a neat giveaway for Schopenhauer that Kant is rationalizing the Mosaic Decalogue. At the very least, Schopenhauer claims, the view that ethics must take an imperative form 'ought not to be assumed as existing without proof' (126/H 4:121), though really his rejection of prescriptive ethics is much stronger, partly because of his commitment, both intellectual and emotional, to a purely descriptive stance, but also because the attempt to eliminate god from this residually theological form is incoherent: an imperative makes sense 'only in relation to threatened punishment or promised reward,' and hence is hypothetical (128/H 4:123). So Kant's attempt to develop a *categorical* imperative is conceptually incoherent.

Schopenhauer uses a similarly structured incoherence argument several times,<sup>2</sup> but one example stands out as particularly significant: Schopenhauer regards duty as a relational notion, conceptually connected with a concrete context, like the relation between 'master and servant, superior and subordinate, regime and subject' (BM §4 129/4:124). And it is the preservation of this aspect of theological morality that Schopenhauer objects vehemently to. On Kant's view every morally worthy act must be *commanded*: 'What a slave-morality,' Schopenhauer exclaims, continuing 'I assert with confidence that (unless he has ulterior intentions) what opens the hand of the beneficent agent ... can never be anything other than slavish *fear of gods*, never mind whether he entitles his fetish 'categorical imperative' (§6 134/4:137). Here Schopenhauer anticipates—and in part inspires—Nietzsche's (1887) critique of Christian morality.

Many elements of Schopenhauer's Kant critique resonate with similar critiques in the twentieth century motivated by a resurgence of interest in virtue ethics. The accusation that deontological ethics is ultimately a rationalization of theological ethics anticipates Anscombe (1958) and the claim that there are only (systems of) hypothetical imperatives anticipates Foot (1972). But more striking still is the similarity between Schopenhauer's rejection of Kant's moral theory on the

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<sup>2</sup>The notion of an end in itself is incoherent because something can be an end only in relation to a person whose end it is); the notion of absolute worth is incoherent because something can be of value only in relation to a person who wills it); and incomparable worth, is incoherent because worth is intrinsically comparative (BM 161/H 4:161).

basis of its motivational inadequacy, and Michael Stocker's (1976) indictment. In fact, the invective against Kantian ethics as a 'slave morality' is directly tied to a Stocker-type objection: we must, on Kant's view, be 'commanded' to do the right thing because actions motivated by inclination, whether calculatingly egoistic or spontaneously compassionate, lack moral worth. This is Schopenhauer's outraged reaction:

Worth of character is to commence only when someone, without sympathy of the heart, cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, and *not properly born to be a philanthropist*, nevertheless displays beneficence merely for the sake of tiresome *duty*. This assertion ... outrages genuine moral feeling, [it is an] apotheosis of unkindness (BM 137/H 4:134).

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

### III Egoism, Compassion and Malice

In fact, yet another strand of Schopenhauer's critique of Kant also emerges from Schopenhauer's commitment to empirical determinism: his rejection of Kant's view that reason is a sufficient moral incentive. In part this criticism is grounded in Schopenhauer's general scepticism—a stark contrast to his German idealist contemporaries—about the strength and ultimate significance of human reason. Human beings are metaphysically, and hence also primarily, will; reason, intellect and cognition in general are quite secondary:

[f]or the most part, cognition always remains subordinated to the service of the will, as it in fact developed in this service, and indeed sprang from the will like the head springs from the trunk of the body (WWRI 200/H 2:209; see also WWRII Chapter 19).

Schopenhauer's account of human reason is strikingly modest: reason is a merely passive storehouse for perceptual knowledge. The latter is like the 'direct light of the sun' while the former is the 'borrowed light of the moon' (WWRI 57-8/2:41).

But it is not just that reason is too weak overcome the will. There is a deeper problem. For Kant rational determination of the will in morally worthy action depends on the postulation of (at least possible) intelligible causes. But this is impossible for Schopenhauer: causes (all kinds) are necessarily only empirical. Reason, therefore, cannot be practical.

So, if the category of morally worthy actions is not to be empty, there must be some empirical incentive for moral actions. Identifying this incentive is Schopenhauer's 'modest path in ethics'

(BM 189/4:195). After his blistering critique of Kant, it is striking that Schopenhauer nevertheless takes his cue as to what constitutes a morally worthy action directly from Kant: *'the criterion of an action of moral worth'*, he claims, is concern for the well-being of the other in *'[t]he absence of all egoistic motivation'* (197/H 4:204).<sup>3</sup> The basic problem of moral philosophy, for Schopenhauer, is therefore to give an empirical explanation for moral actions, uncovering the incentive that could lead to disinterested actions.

Making the minimal assumptions of a distinction between (a) one's own interests ('weal and woe') and those of others and (b) a positive and a negative valorisation of these interests, Schopenhauer has a matrix of four possible incentives for human action: one can want to further one's own interests, or those of others; or one can want to frustrate the interests of others, or even of oneself.<sup>4</sup> The desire to frustrate others (*Bosheit* or maliciousness) is theoretically disinterested, and forms the basis of Schopenhauer's informed and original account of evil, but cannot be a moral incentive. Thus the explanation of morally worthy actions must lie in the claim that there are actions that originate in a disinterested concern for the welfare of others as opposed to a calculation of one's own egoistic interests.

It is not obvious that any actions do in fact fall into this category, a claim that Schopenhauer equates with moral scepticism (BM §13). Certainly Schopenhauer is aware of the power of egoism. Indeed he regards it as the practical corollary of the necessary asymmetry between our awareness of our selves and of others. We experience the external world, including others, only indirectly, as representation. But we are aware of our own selves directly as willing, striving beings. So others appear to me as mere representation; they are, in the first instance, just façades with no inner life. Such a viewpoint is of course wrong, Schopenhauer thinks, for at the level of the thing-in-itself everything is an expression of the same non-individuated will. But the empirical viewpoint is the natural one, and its practical expression is egoism:

This *egoism*, both in an animal and in a human being, is linked in the most precise way with his innermost core and essence, and indeed is properly identical with it. So all his actions, as a rule, spring from egoism and the explanation of any given action is always to be sought in it first of all ... Egoism is colossal: it towers above the world. For if the choice were given to any individual between his own destruction and that of the world, I do not need to say where it would land in the great majority (BM 190-1/4:196-7).

The wide scope and high intensity of egoism are not of course inconsistent with people *appearing* to perform morally worthy acts: it would be a 'great and very juvenile error' Schopenhauer remarks, 'if one believed that all [the externally] just and legal actions of human beings were of moral origin' (BM 182/H 4:187). As a result, Schopenhauer has a Hobbesian view of the state, which is required to provide a series of counter-incentives against the egoistic

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<sup>3</sup> As it stands, disinterest is in fact only necessary and not sufficient for morally worthy action: it does not exclude the possibility of disinterestedly malicious actions, as Schopenhauer immediately suggests.

<sup>4</sup> In *On the Basis of Morality* Schopenhauer claims there are only *'three fundamental incentives* for human actions' (201/4:210), omitting the masochistic aim of frustrating one's own interests. In WWR II (607 note/H 3:697 note) Schopenhauer adds the fourth logically possible incentive and names it as 'asceticism.' Schopenhauer does not treat asceticism as part of moral philosophy in the 'narrower sense' (WWR II 589/H 3:676), but rather as part of the religious doctrine of the denial of the will.

‘war of all against all,’ incentives that cow us into at least the semblance of moral order.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, now closer to La Rochefoucauld than to Hobbes, Schopenhauer’s general doctrine of the primacy of the will over reason makes him highly receptive to the possibility that we deceive ourselves as to our true motives—including moral ones—as often as we deceive others about this:

*Hope* lets us see what we want, and *fear* lets us see what we are afraid of, as near as well as probable, and both magnify their objects ... *Love* and *hate* corrupt our judgment completely: we see nothing but faults in our enemies, while nothing but merit in our loved ones, and even their flaws seem lovable to us (WWR II 216-7/H 3:242-4).

Egoism is therefore the most important incentive for human actions because we are phenomenally individuated; and we are prone to deceive both others and ourselves about this. How then can Schopenhauer show that morally worthy actions are indeed possible? He claims not to give any philosophical argument for this position, regarding it as an ‘empirical’ (BM 189/H 4:195) issue: he cites for instance the case of Arnold von Winkelried who sacrificed his life for his comrades in 1386 at the battle of Sempach (106/H 4:203). But in fact Schopenhauer actually does offer an argument in favor of the possibility of disinterested actions: although such actions may be rare and seem on the face of it highly unlikely, they are nevertheless grounded in a quite familiar experience, that of *compassion* (200/H 4:208-9).

Schopenhauer understands compassion against the metaphysical backdrop that the will is not, as thing-in-itself, individuated. Representation, Schopenhauer argues, broadly following Kant, is conditioned by three transcendental structures: space, time and causality.<sup>6</sup> These structures are also the conditions of individuation, Schopenhauer argues. It follows that the will in itself is not individuated. Thus, at the most basic metaphysical level things are ‘one’ or at least non-multiple.<sup>7</sup> The virtuous person [*Mensch*]

sees through the *principium individuationis* [principle of individuation], the veil of *māyā*<sup>8</sup> ... [and] *makes less of a distinction than is usually made between self and others* (WWR I 397-9/H 2:439).

Many people find this metaphysical analysis to be intrinsically implausible and, even if it is acceptable, it cannot be the basis either for compassion or for disinterested morally worthy action. For if my incentive for helping others is that I now (metaphysically) regard those others

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<sup>5</sup> Schopenhauer quotes Hobbes at BM 192/H 4:198.

<sup>6</sup> Schopenhauer is inspired by the basic outline of transcendental philosophy, but jettisons much of the complexity of Kant’s apparatus: he eliminates the concept/intuition distinction and telescopes both the Analytic and the Aesthetic into the claim that there are just three transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience.

<sup>7</sup> Many commentators have pointed out the flaws in this argument: minimally it suffers from the same defect as its Kantian original, Trendelenberg’s ‘neglected alternative’ that space and time and both forms of representation and properties of things in themselves. Young (2005:182) is particularly biting.

<sup>8</sup> The reference to the veil of *māyā* (the phrase crops up repeatedly in Schopenhauer’s works) shows this as one of the places where Schopenhauer’s thought comes close to Buddhism. Schopenhauer himself made a lot of this convergence: he was a subscriber to William Jones’ journal *Asiatic Researches*, which was at the forefront of introducing Indian culture into Western Europe; and, late in life, he went so far as to describe himself as a Buddhist (Hübscher 1987: 87).

as identical with myself, then I am no longer feeling with the other (there is no other), and my incentive is egoist.<sup>9</sup>

Schopenhauer mentions a quite different account of identification in his discussion of Urbaldo Cassina, author of a 1788 treatise on compassion. Cassina argues that compassion is an *imaginative* identification of oneself with the other: ‘we ourselves substitute ourselves in place of the sufferer and then, in our imagination, take ourselves to be suffering *his* pains in *our* person’ (BM 203/H 4:211). This is less metaphysically problematic, but it does not solve the other difficulties, which rest on the notion of identification itself rather than whether identification is explained metaphysically or psychologically. In fact Schopenhauer rejects Cassina’s view on rather acute phenomenological grounds: we do not confuse our selves with the other, as the Cassina view requires, ‘it remains clear and present to us at every single moment that he is the sufferer, not *us*: and it is precisely *in his* person, not in ours, that we feel the pain’ (203/H 4:211). Here my experience of your suffering is irreducible either to first personal projections or third personal description.<sup>10</sup>

However it is explained, compassion is the basis of morality for Schopenhauer. It is the incentive that must be causally implicated in all morally worthy, disinterested, actions. Schopenhauer is clearly committed to some form of virtue theory because a compassionate character is both necessary and sufficient for morally worthy actions. But Schopenhauer is also interested in other virtues, in particular, what he calls the two ‘cardinal virtues’: justice [*Gerechtigkeit*] and loving kindness [*Menschenliebe*] (BM 192/H 4:199). At least by the time of *On the Basis of Morality*, he regards an understanding of these virtues as depending on a demonstration that they can be ‘derived’ from the supervirtue of compassion (201/H 4:209).

Schopenhauer expresses the content of his moral theory in an admirably pithy slogan: ‘harm no one; rather help everyone as much as you can’ (BM 140/H 4:137). The first part of this slogan corresponds to justice, and the second to loving kindness. The distinction corresponds more or less, Schopenhauer argues, to the Kantian distinction between duties of right and duties of virtue or beneficence, or between perfect and imperfect duties (WWRI 398/H 2:439; BM 204/H 4:212-3).

Although most evil stems from the vice of egoism, Schopenhauer also has an account of genuinely malicious, evil or ‘devilish’ actions, those that are motivated by a disinterested desire to cause harm, pain and suffering even to the detriment of the agent’s own interests (WWRI 359/H 2:393; BM 192f/H 2:199f). Schopenhauer opposes the vice of malice to the virtue of loving kindness (as he opposes the vice of egoism to the virtue of justice): in loving kindness, I see the suffering of the other, and compassion motivates me to come to their aid; in maliciousness, I see the happiness of the other and envy motivates me to eliminate it (PII 204/H 6:216-7); or I see the suffering of the other and *schadenfreude* motivates me to heighten it in cruelty (BM 193f/H 2:200f). Schopenhauer’s psychology of vice is acute, and his indictment of

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<sup>9</sup> This point was first made by one of Schopenhauer’s acolytes, August Becker (L 220-1) and among recent commentators Young (2005: 181-2) makes it out most forcibly. See Cartwright (2008: 297-8) for a summary.

<sup>10</sup> The disagreement between Cassina and Schopenhauer here on the nature of compassion anticipates contemporary cognitive scientific accounts of ‘empathy,’ which divide between psychological ‘simulation’ theories and phenomenologically inflected direct perception (Zahavi 2008).

humanity is at its most pathetic when he discovers this same devilish malice in such commonplace occurrences as teasing and practical jokes (PII 214-15/H 6: 229-30).

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

#### IV Responsibility, Pessimism and Asceticism

The *Freedom* essay is devoted to demolishing any attempt to infer that we actually are free from the fact that we think we are free. So it is surprising that at the end of that same essay Schopenhauer accepts at face value our 'wholly clear and sure feeling of responsibility for what we do' (105/H 4:93), and even more surprising that he endorses the standard view that responsibility requires freedom (106/H 4:94).

Since Schopenhauer's determinism commits him to the belief that individual human actions are exhaustively explained by the combination of empirical character and stimulus (i.e. motive), he argues that moral evaluation cannot take individual actions as its proper target. Rather evaluation targets the virtuous or vicious *character* that is revealed by someone's actions. Such views are common among virtue theorists from Aristotle to the present day. However they do not seem to help answer the question of how we can be responsible or free, since it seems prima facie less plausible that we should be responsible for and freely choose our characters than that we are responsible for our individual actions. The problem is especially acute for Schopenhauer because he regards character as 'inborn and unalterable' (106/H 4:94; see also 68f/H 4:49f).

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

Schopenhauer outlines a suggestive moral phenomenology: we sometimes do have to take responsibility for elements of our character that are 'inborn and unalterable. And in particular he has a singular account of the phenomenon of conscience: its bite is not informed by the thought that we could have done otherwise (for, according to Schopenhauer we could not have); but rather by an agonized recognition our action really does reveal what we are. Still the view raises a large number of problems: the notion of a non-temporal act is problematic; the act itself appears to be criterionless; the notion of self-choice appears incoherent; and Schopenhauer helps himself to a notion of individuation at the level of the thing-in-itself to which he is not entitled. One recent suggestion (Janaway 2012) has been simply to drop the requirement that responsibility entails freedom and read Schopenhauer as claiming that we are sometimes responsible for things, not only inborn and unalterable, that we did not choose.



Perhaps this is a harsh doctrine; but it pales by comparison with Schopenhauer's signature pessimism.<sup>11</sup> Schopenhauer is a hedonist of sorts: pleasure and pain are the only values, and pessimism is the view that life is of no value in this sense, that its pains outweigh its pleasures. Although Schopenhauer often gives a posteriori evidence that people very often do not get what they, and are unhappy as a result, his pessimism is based on the claim that we are unhappy *even if we do get what we want*.

The argument is simple, and rests on two claims: (1) we *are* will, so that we can never stop willing; (2) willing is an intrinsically painful state, at least to some degree (WWRI 335-6/H 2:365; 219f/H 2:231f). Although (1) follows straightforwardly from Schopenhauer's metaphysics, he also provides phenomenological evidence for it in the familiar experience of achieving some aim that one has been striving at, and finding almost at once that another aim demands satisfaction. Schopenhauer argues for (2) by claiming that when one wills an object, one must lack the object that lack is painful. Schopenhauer seems to realize that the conjunction of (1) and (2) does not entail the pessimistic conclusion that conscious life is painful—I could experience a series of episodes of willing, each of whose successful conclusion yielded more satisfaction than the willing itself caused pain. So Schopenhauer goes on to claim that pleasure or satisfaction is nothing more than the elimination of the pain of willing, not anything positive in itself (345f/2:376f). Thus the hedonistic balance of conscious existence consists only of negative or null entries, or as Schopenhauer pithily expresses it 'we would have been better off not existing' (WWRII 605/H 3:695).<sup>12</sup>

Schopenhauer's pessimism has been extremely historically influential, especially on Nietzsche's conception of nihilism. Similarly, the negative understanding of pleasure is taken up essentially unchanged by Freud. But most commentators have found his arguments very unconvincing. Nietzsche proposes two of the most famous objections: that willing itself, striving to attain a goal, may be experienced positively as a kind of pleasure (Soll 2012: 304), and the famous denial of hedonism—pain is not an objection to life (Nietzsche 1880: 124)

Still, even Schopenhauer found grounds for hope: in art, which gives some a temporary respite from suffering; in morality, which, as we have seen, is a collective undertaking to care for each other and reduce each other's suffering; and finally in the denial of the will. This last idea is frankly religious, but sheds light on his ethical views negatively by showing that, like Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer does not think that ethical values are ultimate.

Denial of the will and compassion are based on a similar metaphysical insight, but Schopenhauer presents denial of the will as the result of taking the insight further: where the compassionate person distinguishes 'less' between self and other, denial of the will is predicated on a complete

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<sup>11</sup> In fact Schopenhauer does not use the word 'pessimism' until the second edition of the *World as Will and Representation* (Janaway 1999: 318f). But the conclusions which he will later term pessimism are already clearly articulated in the first.

<sup>12</sup> Just to cap the argument off, Schopenhauer also claims that the absence of will is experienced negatively as boredom or languor (WWRI 189/H 2:196 33/H 2:367-8). Schopenhauer's pioneering analysis of boredom should be compared with Baudelaire's and Heidegger's.

dismantling of the distinction between self and other; similarly, where the compassionate person is equipped to see and react appropriately to at least some suffering, resignation depends on seeing that the world as a whole *is* suffering, i.e. recognition of the doctrine of pessimism. This insight precipitates a dramatic change: it acts as a ‘tranquillizer’ on the will, ‘turning’ it away from life in ‘renunciation’, ‘resignation’ and ultimately ‘complete will-lessness’ (WWRI 406/H 2:448), a state that Schopenhauer immediately describes in religious terms as both saintly and akin to Buddhist nirvana (383/H 2:421).

Schopenhauer’s account is paradoxical, for I cannot consistently will not to will: the higher order willing defeats the lower order non-willings.<sup>13</sup> Schopenhauer makes a virtue out of this paradox by distinguishing explicitly between denial of the will and suicide (WWRI §69): it is only the latter that has this self-defeating structure. By contrast the denial of the will cannot (despite Schopenhauer’s sometimes inconsistent use of language) be undertaken intentionally or willed at all: Schopenhauer identifies it as ‘the *effect of divine grace*, which comes to us as if from outside, without any effort on our part (433/H 2: 481). What this solution gains in resolving the paradox, it loses in religious mystery.

These broader ethical issues help to situate Schopenhauer’s moral philosophy, in part by highlighting his own understanding of its limits: we are responsible without (in any meaningful, empirical sense) being free; and at the most basic axiological level, conscious existence lacks any overall value so that the best, most knowing, response to life is not ultimately ethical at all, but to renounce it—or to let it be renounced in you.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> As Schopenhauer also points out, denial of the will also threatens inconsistency with the fixed nature of character (if it represents a genuine conversion) and with his phenomenal determinism (if it represents a case in which transcendental freedom leaks into the empirical).

<sup>14</sup> It goes without saying that these views had a deep impact on Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism. In particular, on the ascetic ideal of Book III of the *Genealogy* (1887).

## References

The following abbreviations are used for Schopenhauer's writings

- H            *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Arthur Hübscher (4th edn., Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1988), 7 vols.
- WWRI        *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. and ed. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010), vol. 1.
- WWRII       *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. J. F. Payne (New York: Dover 1969), vol. 2.
- PPI/II        *Parerga and Paralipomina*, trans. E. J. F. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1974) 2 vols.
- OF            'On the Freedom of the Will' in *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, ed. and trans. Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009).
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