

Schopenhauer on Compassion

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Schopenhauer is a system philosopher in the grand tradition of the classical German idealists. So it is hardly surprising that he tries to find some place in his system for compassion. But the notion of compassion [*Mitleid*] is actually genuinely central to his philosophy, and does as a result represent a real precursor to the currently fashionable return of the concept, in its modern guise as empathy.

I will present Schopenhauer's account of compassion, in part by putting it in its context of the role it plays in his philosophical system. Then I will discuss some of the most notable objections to it, which focus on the implausibility of the metaphysics Schopenhauer uses to understand compassion; indeed most commentators, and in particular, David Cartwright, recommend the rejection of this metaphysical baggage as part of an attempt to 'naturalize' Schopenhauer. I think Schopenhauer's view can be defended against these objections. But in order to do so, it is important to see how Schopenhauer's conception of compassion changed between its initial formulation in his 1819 *World as Will and Representation*, and his mature and much more extended discussion in the 1839 'prize' essay *On the Basis of Morality*. The new formulation is not without problems, but I think they can be solved. Finally I will show the extent to which the new formulation can be understood, in the context of contemporary theories of empathy, as entailing a reconsideration of the value of Schopenhauer's metaphysical speculations. The moral? Naturalization is an important task; but it must be undertaken properly and not prematurely.

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The title of *The World as Will and Representation* puts Schopenhauer's metaphysical position pretty much as succinctly as possible: the world is (my) representation, and, at the same time the very same world is also will. The first part of the thesis Schopenhauer understands as essentially a commitment to Kant's transcendental idealism.

Schopenhauer takes this doctrine over with only relatively small modifications: the most salient of which are that he collapses the distinction between intuition and concept and reduces the number of transcendental conditions to a manageable three: space, time and causality.¹

¹ Schopenhauer in fact really reduces Kantian pure concepts to intuitions, putting causal knowledge on a par with space and time, and describing both as 'anschaulich,' and not hesitating to ascribe such knowledge to higher animals. Empirical concepts are a part of reason for Schopenhauer, and function on an empiricist

Each sentient being therefore experiences the external world as representation. Schopenhauer's philosophical originality shows itself in his next move: he argues that if this were all we were, mere representing, cognitive, beings, then the world, including my representational cognition of myself as an object among objects, would be nothing but a series of 'images' that 'pass by us strange and meaningless' (WWR I §17 119/H 2:113), 'empty phantoms' (WWR I §24 144/H 2:142).² But this is not all I am: the world as representation possesses a 'significance' for me because it affects my will: the world *interests* me. This will is what I am over and above mere representation. But my epistemic access to the two aspects of reality is asymmetrical: I can perceive everything (in principle) as representation; but I have direct epistemic access only to my own will. Thus everything else appears to me as a mere representation and other people are, as in the problem of other minds, just façades with no inner life (WWR I §19 129/H 2:124-5). Such a viewpoint is of course wrong, Schopenhauer thinks. But the empirical viewpoint is the natural one (WWR I §61 358-9/H 2:392).

Why is the empirical viewpoint wrong? Because it fails to attend to what things are *in themselves*. Schopenhauer's argument starts phenomenologically: it is from introspection that I discover my inner core to be an incessant willing and being moved by or interested in things. But, in a famous, but also famously controversial move, he then generalizes from this phenomenological basis. If the will is what I am in myself, i.e. over and above mere representation, then will in some sense of the term must be the inner essence of everything.

Schopenhauer presents this argument as a kind of 'analogy' (WWR I §19 129/H 2:125). But it is a much weaker analogy even than the well-known argument from analogy in the philosophy of mind. For in the latter my external behavior is broadly analogous with the external behavior of the other; whereas Schopenhauer wants to argue that everything is in-itself will, and my external behavior is patently not strongly analogous to that of a stone. Some commentators explain the argument in a different way (Wicks 2008: 55-6; Jacquette 2007). In many places Schopenhauer claims that the transcendental forms of space and time are also conditions of possibility of individuation (e.g. WWR I §23 137/H 2:134). Thus where the conditions do not apply, there is no individuation. But transcendental conditions do not apply, by definition, to things as they are in themselves: there is only 'one' thing in itself. So the will that (by means of Schopenhauer's phenomenological argument) I identify the in itself of my body as objective representation is in the fact the same will that is the in itself of everything.

The metaphysical picture of the world that Schopenhauer paints involves two quite

model as mere repositories and summaries of intuitive/perceptual knowledge. There is one other difference that is worth mentioning: Schopenhauer is critical of what he thinks is Kant's vacillation between treating 'representation' ('Vorstellung') as a mental item, entertaining a representational relation to the (still presumably transcendently constituted empirical world) and treating the empirical world itself as just *Vorstellung*. Schopenhauer thinks the former is incoherent; and he is (and thinks Kant is also) a direct perceptual realist. This will become important in what follows.

² References to Schopenhauer's texts are to the abbreviations given in the references, followed by a section number where appropriate, then the cited English translation page number, and then the volume and page numbers of the Hübscher edition ('H').

different aspects. At the empirical level, where the striving of the will is individuated, the natural condition of things is egoism: each individual will strives for what it (under the conditions imposed by representation) wants. Schopenhauer describes egoism as 'boundless' and 'colossal' (BM §14 190/H 4:196-7). But at the metaphysical level, each individually striving representational aspect of the will is identical. It is this situation that leads to Schopenhauer's famous descriptions of the will as something that 'constantly lives and feeds off itself in its different forms' (WWR I §27 172/H 2:175).

3

Schopenhauer develops his account of compassion as part of his moral philosophy. He rejects Kant's view of the role of reason in morality: for Schopenhauer, reason does not determine the nature of moral actions; and even if it did, it would not be able to serve as an incentive for action. As a result, there must, if the category of morally worthy actions is not to be empty, be some empirical incentive for moral actions: identifying this incentive is Schopenhauer's 'modest path in ethics.' (BM §13 189/4:195) After a long critique of Kant however, 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' (BM §15 197/H 4:204).³ 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.

Egoism is, on metaphysical grounds, the most important incentive for human actions; and the primacy of the will over the intellect shows that we are prone in individual cases 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 §13 189/H 4:195) issue. The best that can be done is to present cases of disinterested concern for others. He cites for instance the case of Arnold von Winkelried who sacrificed his life for his comrades in 1386 at the battle of Sempach (BM §15 106/H 4:203). The drawbacks of such a procedure, especially given a lively understanding of the human capacity for rationalization, are obvious. But in fact I think 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 and everyday experience, that of *compassion* (BM §16 200/H 4:208-9).

Schopenhauer regards compassion against the backdrop of the second aspect of his metaphysics, the unity of the will, although the relations are not always clear. The virtuous person, for Schopenhauer canonically a man,

shows in his way of acting [*Handlungsweise*] that he *recognizes* his own essence ... in foreign appearances that are given to him as mere representations. ... [He] sees through the *principium individuationis*, the veil of māyā: and to this extent he

³ 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.

equates the essence outside of himself with his own: he does not harm it ... [H]e makes less of a distinction than is usually made between himself and others. (WWR I §66 397-8/H 2:439-9)

Beyond the veil of *māyā*, i.e. the empirical world as representation, lies a unified metaphysical essence that we all share: ‘recognizing’ this, ‘seeing through’ the merely phenomenal nature of individuation, ‘equating’ oneself with others, ‘making less of a distinction’ between oneself and others: this is what people do when they perform morally worthy acts.

There is a well known serious to this analysis: how can it be distinguished from egoism? For if my incentive for helping others is that I now (metaphysically) regard those others as identical with myself, then that incentive is egoist, and hence the action it results in is not disinterested, and hence the action is not morally worthy.⁴ Indeed if there were not distinctions between persons, it is hard to see how there could be actions under the description ‘helping others’ at all.

The dominant (but often tacit) view in the literature is that the metaphysical analysis should be simply equated with compassion: in compassion, we see through the veil of *māyā*, identify with others, and thereby have an incentive to help them. If this is so, then Schopenhauer’s understanding of compassion cannot explain the possibility of morally worthy actions for the same reason as his metaphysical analysis fails.

But I want to suggest a different view, one that gives the notion of compassion some autonomy in relation to Schopenhauer’s metaphysics. There is some textual evidence for this. The main source we have for Schopenhauer’s understanding of compassion comes from his 1839 ‘prize’ essay *BM*. Since it was submitted anonymously for a competition, Schopenhauer could not integrate his views on morality into his metaphysics: a bald statement of his metaphysical views would have clearly identified him to the jury. So he presents the material, including his account of compassion, more or less independently of his metaphysics. This feature has endeared the book to recent commentators who seek to ‘naturalize’ Schopenhauer and see what is left after you get rid of the metaphysical baggage.

In both texts Schopenhauer presents the same admirably pithy slogan for his moral philosophy: ‘harm no one; rather help everyone as much as you can [*neminem laede; imo omnes, quantum potes, iuva*]’ (BM §6 140/H 4:137). The first part of this slogan corresponds to the virtue of justice, and the second to the virtue loving kindness [*Menschenliebe*].

In *BM* compassion appears as an ubervirtue, from which both the ‘cardinal virtues’ of justice and loving kindness are derived (BM §14 192/H 4:199). Thus it is compassion that is the basis of morality. But in *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer introduces the metaphysical analysis in his discussion of justice (§62) but does not

⁴ This point was first made by one of Schopenhauer’s acolytes, August Becker, as well as by Max Scheler. Among recent commentators, it is made most forcibly by Young (2005: 182f). See Cartwright (2008: 297f) for a summary and references.

mention compassion until he talks about loving kindness several sections later (§67). This absence of compassion in the discussion of justice in *The World as Will and Representation* suggests the possibility that Schopenhauer may have an account of compassion distinct from the thesis of metaphysical unity.

What would this account be? The introduction of compassion in §16 of *On the Basis of Morality* presents the *experience* of compassion as the solution to a problem. The problem is that morally worthy actions must be ‘*for the sake of the other*’ so that ‘*his well-being and woe must be my motive immediately, just as my own is.*’ But how can the well-being and woe of another move me *without mediation*? How can it become my ‘*ultimate end*?’ I must ‘*directly suffer along with him,*’ something that is itself only possible if I am ‘*identified with him* in some way.’

But now, since I am not lodged *in the skin* of the other, it is solely by means of the *cognition* that I have of him, i.e. the representation of him in my head, that I can identify with him to such an extent that my deed proclaims that distinction to be removed. ... However, the process analysed here is not one that is dreamt up or plucked out of the air, but a wholly real and indeed by no means a rare one: it is the everyday phenomenon of *compassion*, i.e. the wholly immediate *sympathy*, independent of any other consideration, in the first place towards another’s *suffering*, and hence towards the prevention or removal of this suffering. (200/H 4:208-9)

Some process is necessitated by the idea of an incentive for morally worthy actions. Although this process sounds improbable or arcane, it is in fact known to us familiarly as compassion. His argument is phenomenological: the experience of compassion should not be *equated* with the thesis of metaphysical identity; rather the experience of compassion is the mechanism by means of which the metaphysical identity claim is able actually to operate upon us as an incentive: compassion is our phenomenological mode of access to metaphysical identity, ‘the empirical emerging of the will’s metaphysical identity’ (WWR II Chapter 47 602/H 3:691).

If the ‘identification’ at issue in the experience of compassion is not the same as the metaphysical identity claim, then what is it? A view common in the contemporary literature on empathy is that it involves some form of imaginative identification with the other.⁵

This appears sensible. But the view is explicitly rejected by Schopenhauer, in his discussion of Ubaldo Cassina, the author of a 1788 treatise on compassion. Cassina argues that in compassion: ‘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 §16 203/H 4:211) This is quite wrong, Schopenhauer says. We do not experience a ‘deception of fantasy’ and ‘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, to our

⁵ Goldman (2006) distinguishes this kind of use of imagination, ‘enactment imagination’ from its merely propositional counterpart.

distress. We suffer *with* him, thus *in* him: we feel his pain as *his*, and do not imagine that it is ours.’ (BM §16 203/H 4:211)

Such a view can seem implausible: how can I literally feel the other’s pain *as the other’s*? And David Cartwright, the most prominent expert on Schopenhauer’s conception of compassion, rejects the view without argument as ‘extraordinary’ (Cartwright 2012: 260-1). But this rejection is unwarranted. In fact Schopenhauer is proposing a form of direct perceptual realism about my encounter with the emotional states of the other that has been a long-term staple of the phenomenological tradition, stretching back as far as Husserl (in fact arguably to Kant, especially on Schopenhauer’s reading of Kant).

In fact, the debate between ‘psychological’ mechanisms like imagination and direct encounter with the other’s emotional states (usually painful ones, for Schopenhauer, a pessimist) is a live one today, but under the heading of ‘empathy’ rather than compassion (Gallagher 2012, Zahavi 2008, 2011). On one view (‘simulationism’) when we perceive the mental states of others, we run a simulation of them (‘wow, that’s an interesting expression on Juan’s face, let me try it out in my motor cortex, oh, that makes me happy, it must be a smile’). This is effectively the position that Cassina takes, Cartwright endorses, but that Schopenhauer rejects: for ‘simulation’ simply read ‘imagination’. On the other, phenomenological view, we do not run mental puppet shows, but are simply sharing in the feelings of the other (Zahavi 2011).

It is the simulationist view that runs the bigger risk of failing to take seriously the distinction between persons. For on that view I have access only to my own mind and the behavior of the other, just as in the argument from analogy. In the simulationist view, the logical process of inference is supplemented by an imaginative reconstruction of the emotions of the other. But the problems are similar: it is I who have the emotion reconstructed in the simulation, and my attribution of it to the other appears to presuppose that I am already ‘with’ the other.

For instance, Heidegger’s analysis of *Mitsein* in Chapter 4 of *Being and Time* can clearly be thought of in relation to the cognate term *Mitleid*. There Heidegger argues that Dasein’s experience of (encounter with) the other, its ‘Being towards Others’ is an ‘irreducible relationship,’ irreducible specifically either to its ‘Being to itself’ (1927: 124-125) or to ‘some Thing which is proximally just present-at-hand’ (118). Heidegger specifically targets the term ‘empathy’ in this passage. Here the German is ‘Einfühlung.’ The psychologist Edward Titchener (1867–1927) introduced the term “empathy” in 1909 into the English language as the translation of the German term “*Einfühlung*” (or “feeling into”), a term that by the end of the 19th century was in German philosophical circles understood as an important category in philosophical aesthetics (Sober and Wilson 1998: 232). But, then as now with mirror neurons, *Einfühlung* was understood as a psychological process attempting to bridge a theoretical gap between self and other. Heidegger’s point is not just that there is no such gap, but that the illusion that there is one makes it impossible to conceive of the specificity of the second person: there is not just my experience plus the prima facie non-experiencing other; there is also and irreducibly my encounter with your suffering and feeling it along with you. ‘We suffer *with* him, thus *in* him: we feel his pain as *his*, and do not imagine that it is ours.’ (BM §16

203/H 4:211) To the extent that *Mitsein* is plausible, *Mitleid* is too: when I see the pain written on your face, I feel it directly as your pain.

One does not therefore have to choose between Cassina's psychology of imaginative identification and Schopenhauer's metaphysical explanation of compassion: Schopenhauer's phenomenological account of compassion stands perfectly well on its own.

Moreover, one can regard the theory of compassion as itself going some way towards explaining the metaphysics. Reversing the logic suggested by the metaphysical view of compassion, rather than metaphysical knowledge providing the incentive for virtuous action, it is instead the bond with others we experience in compassionate action that comprises a practical understanding of our togetherness. Schopenhauer's thesis of metaphysical identity may still be true, but it is not theoretical knowledge of this fact that motivates me to help the other: I am motivated by my perception of the others' suffering.⁶ And if one wanted to 'naturalize' Schopenhauer, one might claim that the metaphysical identity thesis should be reinterpreted just as the basic solidarity with sentient creatures presupposed by Schopenhauer's analysis of virtuous action.

⁶ Cartwright, the most ingenious commentator on Schopenhauer's notion of compassion, points out that Schopenhauer chooses his words very carefully when he discusses the role of metaphysical knowledge in moral action: virtuous actions express but are not necessarily motivated by philosophical knowledge of the metaphysical identity thesis (2008: 301-2).

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