Schopenhauerian Virtue Ethics

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to elucidate Schopenhauer's moral philosophy in terms of an ethics of virtue, and to consider its plausibility relative to competing traditions. The paper consists of three sections. In the first section of the paper I outline three major objections Schopenhauer raises to Kant's moral philosophy, and argue that these plausible criticisms are in essence the same concerns that gave rise to the revival of 'virtue ethics' as a proposed distinctive school of ethical thought in the twentieth century. In section two I extract from these criticisms a sketch of Schopenhauer's own position, distinguishing a brand of virtue ethics from competing versions within the tradition, in which compassion is emphasised as the root of all virtue. I then consider the strengths of such a view. In the third and final section I consider and respond to one possible shortcoming of the ethical theory discussed, and adjudicate between competing solutions in the secondary literature. I conclude that refined forms of Schopenhauer's ethical views offer rich and plausible insights into both virtue and vice which have received less attention than they deserve. Hence, Schopenhauer warrants more serious concern in contemporary discussions of virtue ethics alongside the likes of Aristotle, Hume and Nietzsche.

Key words: *Schopenhauer*; *virtue ethics*; *Kant*; *egoism*; *altruism*; *compassion*

Introduction

Schopenhauer is most notorious for his defence of pessimism: the view that the world is pervaded by meaningless suffering, and that non-existence is preferable to existence. While his arguments for such claims have attracted little attention from anglophone philosophers, it has been suggested that the analytic tradition has much in common with Schopenhauer's moral thought (Atwell, 1990; Cartwright, 1999; Janaway, 2010; Welchman, 2017). In this paper, I consider how this proposal might best be elucidated in light of the mid twentieth century revival in 'virtue ethics' and its dissatisfaction with (particularly) Kantian deontology. In an attempt to advance the secondary literature in this domain, I explore the prospects for a Schopenhauerian ethics of virtue, and assess how its rich and distinctive form fares in contrast with other traditions.

This paper consists of four sections. In the first section I outline three major objections Schopenhauer raises for Kant's moral philosophy, and argue that these criticisms are in essence the same concerns that gave rise to the revival of 'virtue ethics' as a proposed distinctive school of ethical thought in the twentieth century. In section two I extract from these criticisms a framework for Schopenhauer's own position, identifying how his moral psychology underpins a unified and hierarchical conception of virtue and vice. I then ascertain some strengths of this view. In section three I focus in upon the issue of fixed character and moral education as at least one major point of divergence between Schopenhauer's virtue ethics and typical trends within the tradition. In the fourth and final section I consider and respond to this ethical framework's possible susceptibility to the charge of egoism, and adjudicate among competing solutions in the secondary literature.

1. Schopenhauer's Critique of Kantian Ethics

Schopenhauer's critique of Kantian ethics takes up over one third of his *On the Basis of Morals*, and a significant portion of book four of *The World as Will and Representation*. Out of this critique, Schopenhauer espouses an alternative moral framework which he considers 'diametrically opposed to Kant's' (*BM*, §2, p. 122). This opposition is not on consequentialist grounds, which both Schopenhauer and Kant reject in favour of an emphasis on an agent's intentions: a 'morality of disposition [*Moralität der Gesinnung*]' (*W2*, p. 590). Neither is it *typically* over answers to substantive moral issues. Rather, their disagreement centres on (a) the *method* for grounding morality's alleged authority; and (b) the *conceptual framework* for conceiving of moral worth, and its scope.

Schopenhauer's critique resonates with many criticisms of deontological ethics raised during the 'revival' of virtue ethics in the mid-twentieth century. Though these criticisms are

highly sophisticated and developed in Schopenhauer's work, he is rarely credited in the anglophone world with developing them. I shall firstly discuss three of Schopenhauer's major objections to Kant's ethics before attempting to harness them to elucidate his own ethical theory.

1.1. The Incoherence of a 'Moral Law'

Schopenhauer begins his critique by calling into question the coherence of the notion of a moral law. For Kant, the moral law is objective and unconditional, conformity to which is essential to rational agency. Out of practical reason, Kant argues, emerge various commands, obligations, duties or 'oughts' that are *categorically* binding. These laws are not grounded in social institutions which one can opt-in and opt-out of, nor in any divine commands, but are grounded in rational agency itself.

One ought to always keep one's promises, Kant claims, because the maxim "always break your promises when it benefits you to do so" could not be universalised. For a world in which it were possible for everyone to break their promises when it brings them benefit would already assume the existence of the institution of promising, thus generating a contradiction.[1]

Schopenhauer's objection is that Kant commits himself to a conception of a law which is detached from any meaningful context, rendering his 'moral law' incoherent. There are two components to this objection. The first component raises the conceptual issue that deontic concepts such as 'oughts', 'laws', or 'commands' presuppose a law-giver or commander. For instance, it makes sense for members of states/clubs/organisations to follow legal or membership requirements because an appropriate governmental authority has commanded they do so. Or, for example, it makes sense in a Christian system for Christians to follow commands or adhere to laws, because there is the notion a divine commander/law-giver. The problem for Kant, Schopenhauer observes, is that his system has no law-giver: the terms 'ought', 'obligation', 'command' and 'duty' are conceptually tied to frameworks which Kant explicitly seeks to separate *moral* imperatives from, namely: 'human rules, state institution or religious doctrine' (*BM*, §4, p. 126).

The second component of Schopenhauer's attack on the coherence of a 'moral law' concerns Kant's failure to explain how it is *categorically* binding. In other words, what reason does *X* have to act in accordance with the moral law independent of *X*'s desires? Here Schopenhauer delves deeper into how the notion of a law or command can be intelligible in theological and legal contexts, but not in the 'moral' context.

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[1] On the second of Kant's formulations of the categorical imperative, lying-promises would be forbidden on the grounds that they treat others as a means to an end: the reason why I cannot morally break my promises when it benefits me is that it relies upon everyone else keeping their promises whilst I am the exception.

Theological and legal frameworks give 'ought' and 'duty' meaning, Schopenhauer claims, because deontic concepts are 'essentially relative' (*BM*, §4, p. 128) in that we make sense of them in relation to punishments and rewards as *incentives* to obey. Citizens should obey the law *because* not doing so incurs a penalty. In the *moral* domain, Schopenhauer claims that the notion of an 'unconditional ought' finds its origins in the Judeo-Christian tradition: moral language takes the form of *imperatives* or *commands* because they derive from a divine law-giver. This same law-giver is the arbitrator of eschatological punishment and reward. What explains the prevalence of deontic conceptions of morality, Schopenhauer claims, is that 'In the Christian centuries, philosophical ethics has unconsciously taken its form from theological ethics' (*BM*, §4, p. 127). Kant, is no exception: he inherits 'in all innocence and without suspecting' (*BM*, §4, p. 127) a Christian framework which presupposes the authority of the law he is supposed to be establishing.

Schopenhauer detects hints of this prejudice in Kant's terminology.[2] For example, in the Preface to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant expresses the command 'Thou shalt not lie [*Du sollt nicht lügen*]'—one of the ten commandments—as an example of a moral law.[3] What makes this problematic is that 'the concept *ought*, the *imperative form* of ethics, has validity only in theological morals, and outside of that loses all sense and meaning' (*BM*, §13, p. 189). Since Schopenhauer and Kant agree that ethics is distinct from theology, Kant divorces imperatives, commands, and the 'moral ought' from the context that alone give it any sense. Consequently, Kant is not entitled to the conceptual apparatus he presupposes:

> Separated from the theological presuppositions from which they issued, these concepts really lose all meaning as well, and if, like Kant, one thinks to substitute for them by speaking of an *absolute* ought and *unconditioned* duty, then one is turning the reader away with words for food, really giving him a *contradictio in adjecto* to digest. That *ought* has any sense and meaning at all only in relation to threatened punishment or promised reward (*BM*, §4, p. 128; cf. *W1*, Appndx. p. 555).

This objection—that moral laws are rendered meaningless without a divine lawmaker—was a principle thesis in G.E.M Anscombe's influential 1958 paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. Anscombe similarly claimed that an unfortunate feature of contemporary moral philosophy is the unreflective retention of deontic concepts after a rejection of their theological backing: 'they are survivals, or derivative from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without

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[2] Schopenhauer also thinks that they can be detected in Kant's insistence—as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in Schopenhauer's view—that animals have no worth *in themselves* but are seen as 'mere "things", mere *means* to whatever ends you like' (*BM*, §8, p. 162).

[3] As David Cartwright notes, this point is made clearer by Kant's use of the more archaic '*Du sollt*' and not the standard '*Du sollst*'. See Cartwright (1999), pp. 255-256.

it' (Anscombe, 1958, p. 1). Like Schopenhauer, Anscombe finds the idea of a 'moral law' incomprehensible without a God to enact and enforce it: 'It is as if the notion 'criminal' were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten' (Anscombe, 1958, p. 6). Although Anscombe makes this argument and similarly advocates for moral philosophy to consider a return to an ethics of virtue, Schopenhauer is not mentioned.

1.2. Hypothetical Imperatives and Their Moral Worth

Out of this first criticism we can determine a second. Kant intends to provide an account of the moral law which one has reason to obey regardless of—and even when in direct conflict with—one's desires. He makes the following distinction:

> All imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. The former present the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else which one desires (or which one may possibly desire). The categorical imperative would be one which presented an action as of itself objectively necessary, without regard to any other end. (Kant, 1959, p. 31)

Hypothetical imperatives are those which are demanded by practical considerations for attaining a particular end: if you want *X*, then do *Y*. The categorical imperative, by contrast, is adhered to for its own sake: do *Y*, because it is required by objective necessity. Crucial to this distinction is the possibility that reason alone can motivate action; that the *belief* one ought to φ can be sufficient to motivate one to φ. This is required by Kant's theory, since he distinguishes between acting *from* 'duty [*Pflicht*]'—a special faculty of reason—and acting *in accordance with* duty, with only the former being morally praiseworthy.

Schopenhauer objects to the possibility of acting *from* duty (i.e. that reason alone can motivate) in his endorsement, broadly, of the Humean Theory of Motivation:

> *Humean Theory of Motivation* (HTM): belief is not sufficient for motivation, which always requires, in addition to belief, the presence of a desire or conative state.

Hume famously claimed that 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them' (*T*, 2.3.3.4). Hume's claim is not that reason does not figure *at all* in human action, rather that reason's function is subordinate to desires or 'passions'. Hume provides a number of arguments for HTM which clarify this claim. One such argument, which Schopenhauer also gives, is that abstract reasoning which involves *a priori* inferences cannot posit ends, but only discover causal relations which help attain pre-established ends. Accordingly, Schopenhauer denies that 'rational' and 'vicious' are inconsistent attributes of a particular action. Like Hume, he construes of reason as itself morally neutral, but utilised by a person—virtuous or vicious—to achieve their desired goals. 'One can', in the fashion of a Richard III, 'set to work extremely

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rationally, that is reflectively, thoughtfully, consistently, in a planned and methodical way, yet be following the most self-interested, most unjust, and even the wickedest of maxims' (*BM*, §6, p. 151).

We can distinguish two arguments employed by Schopenhauer which harness HTM against the Kantian view. The first argument is that to provide positive support for the claim that HTM is incompatible with the possibility of a categorical imperative. The upshot of endorsing HTM is that all instances of supposedly 'categorical' imperatives turn out to be merely *hypothetical* imperatives. His explicit denial of reason as being able to solely motivate (and hence, recognition of HTM) can be found in *BM,* when he considers Kant's idea of the moral law originating within us:

> …it is impossible for this to enter his mind spontaneously, and it could do so at most once another moral incentive, positively efficacious, real and announcing itself as such spontaneously, influencing him, indeed pressing itself on him unbidden, had provided the first impulse and occasion for it (*BM, §6,* p. 144)

This is to say that when, according to Schopenhauer's analysis of the true Kantian picture, *A* is morally motivated to φ, *A*'s judgement that they morally ought to φ is accompanied by a desire which aims to be realised by φ-ing.

A second HTM-inspired argument Schopenhauer gives against Kant is to cast doubt upon whether Kant is *himself* committed to the possibility of practical reason required by his theory, and does not concede the truth of HTM by implicitly relying on it. The argument can be briefly canvassed as follows.

Although Kant claims one can act from a special motivation called 'duty', or 'respect' [*Achtung*] for the moral law, his doctrine of the 'highest good' is actually doing the work to establish why anyone would be motivated to abide by the 'categorical' imperative. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant claims the 'highest good' for humanity is happiness in proportion to virtue, with the value of the former conditioned only upon the latter.[4] But, as Stephen Engstrom writes:

> How, it has often been asked, can a law that requires us to act morally regardless of whether our personal happiness follows as a consequence be the source of an obligation to promote a state in which moral conduct has as its necessary consequence precisely such personal happiness? (Engstrom, 1992, p. 742)[5]

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[4] For instance: 'happiness is always something that, though indeed pleasant to one who possesses it, is not for itself alone absolutely and in all respects good, but always presupposes moral, lawful conduct as its condition'. Immanuel Kant, (1956), p. 111.

[5] As well as Engstrom, for replies to Schopenhauer's concern see Allen W. Wood, (1970), pp. 38-49.

This is just Schopenhauer's concern: the happiness constitutive of the 'highest good' turns out to be the impetus for adherence to the moral law, hence that 'utterly *unconditioned ought* subsequently postulates for itself a condition after all' (*BM, §4,* p. 128). He continues:

> That is admittedly necessary as soon as one has made duty and ought the grounding concept of ethics, because these concepts are essentially relative and have any meaning only through threatened punishment or promised reward. This reward postulated afterwards for virtue, which thus was working only seemingly gratuitously, appears, however, decently veiled under the name of the *highest good*, which is the unification of virtue and happiness. But at bottom this is nothing other than the morals that issues in happiness, and is consequently supported by self-interest, or eudaemonism, which Kant had ceremoniously ejected through the front door of his system as heteronomous, and which now creeps back in through the back door under the name *highest good*. (*BM, §4,* p. 128)

The claim is that Kant's moral system is not in the end able to make sense of acting 'purely from duty', since adherence to the moral law is ultimately due to the presence of a conative state.[6] Happiness in Kant's system, Schopenhauer writes, acts 'like a secret article, whose presence turns the rest of the contract into a mere sham. It is not really the reward of virtue, but rather a free gift that virtue furtively seeks out after performing its work' (*W1,* Appndx. p. 555). Schopenhauer once again explains this implicit dependence on the hope of reward of the 'highest good' as a product of inherited theological bias; as an after-the-fact introduction of a context needed to make sense of an imperatival form of ethics.[7]

Since the idea of acting purely from reason—from duty—is erroneous, Kant's proposed moral laws are 'essentially and unavoidably *hypothetical*, and never, as he asserts, *categorical*' (*BM, §4,* p. 128). Laws become '*If* you want to realise the highest good, thou shalt not φ'. This objection to so-called 'practical reason' anticipates the central claims of Phillipa Foot's 1972 paper 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives'. Although Foot does not mention Schopenhauer, significant threads of her argument echo claims discussed above.[8]

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[6] It might be claimed that Kant's attention to 'respect' [*Achtung*] for the moral law is an 'intermediary' kind of 'feeling', which is nonetheless distinct from a desire, or that pure reason is capable of *producing* something motivationally efficacious. This invites claims of inconsistency which we cannot get into here, nor do we need to, since Schopenhauer does not accept that reason has this capacity.

[7] Schopenhauer again doubts the possibility of being motivated by moral laws in the absence of a desire to in his discussion of Kant's morally praiseworthy agent: 'I assert with confidence that (unless he has ulterior intentions) whatever opens the hand of the beneficent agent above can never be anything other than slavish *fear of gods*, never mind whether he entitles his fetish 'categorical imperative' or Fitzliputzli [a Mexican deity]. For what else could move a hard heart but fear alone?' (*BM*, §6, p. 137).

[8] Consider, for example, Foot's claim that 'The fact is that the man who rejects morality because he sees no reason to obey its rules can be convicted of villainy but not inconsistency. Nor will his actions necessarily be irrational. Irrational actions are those in which a man in some way defeats his own purposes, doing what is calculated to be disadvantageous or to frustrate his ends. Immorality does not *necessarily* involve any such thing' (Foot, 1972, pp. 310).

The first part of the argument then, is that Kant's proposed moral laws actually concern prudence. The second component of Schopenhauer's objection is that since the moral laws are always hypothetical (i.e. contingent upon an independent desire), they are based on one of two types of desires, each of which are problematic:

(a)altruistic desires (i.e. furthering the interest of another)
(b)egoistic desires (i.e. furthering one's self-interest)

If an action is performed out of a desire for another's wellbeing, this reduces the imperative to the status of only *instrumentally* good in realising an *already* 'moral' end: 'The only value dogmas have for morality is that they provide a schema or formula for virtuous people whose cognition is already derived from elsewhere…such people can then use this formula to articulate a (mostly fictitious) account of their own non-egoistic deeds for the benefit of their own reason' (*W1*, §66, p. 395).

If, on the other hand, an action is performed out of self-interest, then on *Kantian grounds*, the action is morally worthless. Schopenhauer is in agreement with Kant that actions performed out of self-interest lack moral worth. Morally praiseworthy actions, in Schopenhauer's view, are those born from compassion [*Mitleid*], that is: out of a desire or inclination to alleviate another's suffering (a point I shall elucidate in detail in the next section). Since Kant's moral laws are really just hypothetical imperatives conditioned on personal happiness, they will be 'always self-interested, and so without moral worth' (*BM*, §4, p. 128).

We now have the full argument, which—for the sake of clarity—may be reconstructed formally as follows:

P1. If categorically binding moral laws are possible then the Humean Theory of Motivation must be false.
P2. The Humean Theory of Motivation is true.
C1. Categorically binding moral laws are not possible; moral laws can only ever be hypothetical. [via *Modus Tollens* from P1 and P2]
P3. If moral laws are hypothetical then adherence to them lacks moral worth.
C2. Adherence to all moral laws lacks moral worth. [via *Modus Ponens* from C1 and P3]

Schopenhauer's criticisms so far centre on the notion that Kantian morality reflects a hangover from Christianity. Kant's categorical imperative is an instance of how 'morals in fact destroy themselves through moral theology' (*W1*, Appndx. p. 555).

1.3. Impracticality and Alienation

A third major objection that Schopenhauer makes to Kant's ethics is what he describes as its 'utter lack of reality and hence of possible efficacy' (*BM*, §6, p. 145). Again, we can distinguish two claims at work here. The first claim is that Kant sets off on the wrong foot by seeking to ground moral principles *a priori* in abstraction from what human beings *actually* experience:

> …the moral principle to be put forward, as it must be a *synthetic principle a priori, of merely formal content*, and thus solely a matter for *pure reason*, is as such supposed to be valid not for *human beings alone*, but rather *for all possible rational beings* and 'only because of that' to be valid for human beings as well, on the side and by accident. (*BM*, §6, p. 134)

We have already seen how Schopenhauer thinks an *a priori* method of grounding moral principles is problematic for human motivation, but here the point is that because Kant's system of ethics has been constructed without the human being *per se* in mind, it is insensitive to how people actually engage in moral behaviour. In other words, Kant focuses on what is demanded by the rationality of *any* being which may possess it, and in doing so underdetermines the contingencies of human experience. The problem is that because this assertion of morals is 'not for humans as humans, but rather for *all rational beings* as such' (*BM*, §6, p. 134), it is alienating from genuine moral practice. Universalising maxims and categorical imperatives are 'fantasies' of which 'no human being outside the lecture halls knows anything of, nor has ever felt' (*BM*, §13, p. 189).

As an example, Schopenhauer refers to supposed self-regarding duties, and in particular the moral status of suicide. Schopenhauer considers the application of Kant's *a priori* system of ethics here to be hopeless, at least partly because his arguments—while 'well suited to resound in the lecture halls and provide practice in acumen' (*BM*, §12, p. 181)—are too far removed from the human experience. No one, he thinks, would deliberate about suicide in such a way, as if abstract principles which could be 'universalised', or possible 'contradictions' in practical rationality, were at all in people's minds at the time. He remarks that it is *laughable* to think that 'reflections of that sort were supposed to have wrested the dagger from the hands of Cato, Cleopatra, Cocceius Nerva, or Arria, wife of Paetus' (*BM*, §5, p. 132). For this reason, Schopenhauer considers the Kantian foundation for morals as comprised of 'maxims on stilts, looking down from whose heights one can no longer see real life and its tumult' (*BM*, §12, p. 181).

A consequence of this alienation is that Kantian ethics is deeply impractical and unhelpful: 'real life will pronounce its scorn' (*BM*, §12, p. 181). Ethics, Schopenhauer claims, should investigate which things have genuine moral worth and why, but also reflect the recognisable practices and experiences of human beings. This has the practical benefit of explaining

varying behaviours, and identifying which features of a given situation are morally salient. Yet, a non-empirical approach to ethics is bound to fail in this respect:

> For morals has to do with the *real* [*reale*] acting of human beings and not with a prioristic building of houses made of cards, to whose outcomes no human being would turn in the seriousness and stress of life, and whose effect, therefore, in face of the storm of the passions, would be as great as an enema syringe at a raging fire. (*BM*, §6, p. 145)

Schopenhauer has a great deal more detailed and nuanced objections to Kantian ethics which I will not have time to address here. However, the three discussed provide us with the conceptual materials to reconstruct Schopenhauer's own ethical position.

2. An Ethics of Virtue

2.1. Developing an Alternative Ethical Framework

Earlier, I claimed that Schopenhauer rejects the deontic framework that is characteristic of Kantian ethics. However, Schopenhauer does not think that such a framework is essential to moral discourse. Contra Kant, he explicates his own method for grounding morality:

> I set ethics the task of clarifying and explaining ways of acting among human beings that are extremely morally diverse, and tracing them back to their ultimate ground. So there remains no other path to the discovery of the foundation of ethics than the empirical one, namely investigating whether there are any actions at all to which we must assign *genuine moral worth*—which will be the actions of freely willed justice, pure loving kindness and real noble-mindedness. These, then, are to be regarded as a given phenomenon that we have to explain correctly, i.e. track back to their true grounds, and so demonstrate the particular incentive that moves a human being on each occasion to this kind of action, a kind specifically differentiated from all others. This incentive, together with receptivity for it, will be the ultimate ground of morality, and the cognition of it the foundation of morals. This is the modest path to which I direct ethics…this path [contains] no construction *a priori*, no absolute legislation for all rational beings *in abstracto*… (*BM*, §13, p. 189)

This passage features multiple claims typically championed by virtue ethicists. Schopenhauer seeks to offer an empirically based, descriptive ethics that concentrates on the features of an agent's psychology which constitute their *character*—namely: the role of emotions in both motivation and responsiveness. Additionally, emphasis is placed on the significance of contingent circumstances, and practical deliberation particular to *human* experiences, not merely abstract 'rational' beings.

Virtue ethicists think about morality in terms of what kind of person one should be. The most prominent tradition is anchored in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which starts from an account of human nature and what the good life for a human—*eudaimonia*—is, which the

virtues are then derived from.[9] Nevertheless, alternatives have been developed in, for example, the Humean (e.g. Slote, 2001), Confucian (e.g. Yu, 2007), and Nietzschean (e.g. Swanton, 2011) traditions. These traditions differ in form and content, yet are unified in their endorsement of the idea that ethically right actions consist in dispositions of character that manifest at appropriate times, to the appropriate extent, due to a sensitivity to relevant features of a given situation (rather than acting out of duty, or to bring about good consequences).

Virtue ethicists *typically* draw a distinction between a habit and a virtue. Virtue is not simply a tendency to act in a certain way—many people are habitually loyal, yet are not 'virtuous', on the grounds that they do not *understand* why it is appropriate to act in the way they do. Virtue is a more complex concept that requires one to have a distinctive set of perceptions, motives and emotions towards objects, events, circumstances, and actions. As we shall see later, how to precisely understand this point will be important for Schopenhauer.

With a priority on disposition, virtue ethicists also *typically* emphasise the importance of moral education and upbringing in developing the virtues. If it just so happens one feels the need to help a co-worker on a particular occasion because they happened to be in a good mood, we would be less inclined to call this an act from virtue. Moral decisions require emotional maturity and sound judgement. The reason, according to virtue ethicists, is that morality is too complex and prone to contingencies to function using precise principles such as 'maximize utility' or 'act in accordance with the moral law'. Instead, moral understanding and right action follows from training, experience, and practice.

Schopenhauer has sometimes been interpreted as a virtue ethicist of sorts (e.g. Cartwright, 1999). However, it is by no means obvious whether Schopenhauer is a *virtue ethicist* as such, or in fact a consequentialist interested in how virtues can be *instrumental* in reducing suffering. Schopenhauer is most explicit in distancing himself from consequentialism when he claims that 'In themselves…all deeds (*opera operata*) are just empty images that acquire moral significance only by virtue of the disposition [*Gesinnung*] that produces them' (*W1*, §66, p. 396). In what follows, I seek to add to the existing literature by elucidating which of Schopenhauer's views are archetypal of the tradition, and identifying the ways in which they diverge from the typical trends mentioned above. To begin, consider a familiar case:

> *Shopkeeper*. Anna owns a small bread shop. One day, a very poor man comes in to buy a loaf of bread for himself and his struggling family. Anna realises that she could short-change the man and get away with it, thereby increasing her profits. However, Anna decides to give the man the correct change.

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9 Typically falling within this tradition are Phillipa Foot (2003) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1997).

Both Kant and Schopenhauer would agree that Anna's actions are potentially morally praiseworthy. However, they would disagree about *what would make* them so. The Kantian answer is that Anna's action is praiseworthy *iff* she decides to give the correct change out of *respect for the moral law*; that she recognises that she *has a duty* to give the correct change, regardless of her desires (e.g. to increase her profits, either by taking the man's money, or to keep other customers happy). In this framework, Anna may even be deserving of *more* praise if she did *want* to take the man's money, but overcame her inclination to cheat and gave the correct change.

Schopenhauer's answer, by contrast, is that Anna's decision is morally praiseworthy *iff* she acted out of *inclination to prevent suffering to the man and/or his family*. Instead of adherence to some impersonal sense of duty, we would admire Anna because of her compassionate disposition that would manifest at the time of the event, and acting *from* that disposition. Schopenhauer makes his profound difference from Kant in this respect explicit. For Kant:

> 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, which outrages genuine moral feeling, [is the] apotheosis of unkindness [*Lieblosigkeit*]… (*BM*, §6, pp. 136-137)

The reason we should admire Anna in *Shopkeeper*, Schopenhauer would say, is precisely *because* of her inclinations. This claim requires us to pay close attention to Schopenhauer's moral psychology.

2.2. Schopenhauer's Moral Psychology and Criterion of Moral Worth

A distinctive feature of Schopenhauer's philosophy is his view that all sentient beings are local manifestations of the same underlying will to life [*Wille zum Leben*]: an irrational force ever striving to manifest itself in the phenomenal world. Each manifestation of the will aims at self-preservation and the minimisation of their own suffering, which breeds conflict and dissension amongst other manifestations of the will. Out of this metaphysics of the will, Schopenhauer affirms the view that (a) all action is goal-orientated toward ends in accord with or contrary to one's will; and (b) wellbeing [*Wohl*] is constituted by ends in agreement with a will, and misfortune [*Wehe*] by ends inimical to a will (*BM*, §16, p. 198; *W1*, §56).

Holding both (a) and (b) leads Schopenhauer to endorse what I shall call the *Minimal Psychological Thesis* (*MPT*):

> *MPT*: for any human action *X*, *X* is ultimately reducible to at least one of four fundamental incentives, each of which can be exhibited in degree; each of which every human agent is susceptible to.

These incentives are:

> (1) Egoism [*Egoismus*]: a desire to for one's own wellbeing.
>
> (2) Compassion [*Mitleid*]: a desire for the wellbeing of another.
>
> (3) Malice [*Bosheit*]: a desire for the misfortune of another.
>
> (4) Unnamed Incentive: a desire for one's own misfortune.

Schopenhauer does not mention (4) in *BM*, and only explicitly labels it 'in the interest of systematic consistency' (*W2*, p. 607) in a footnote from *W2* concerning asceticism in Indian philosophy. Concerning (1), (2), and (3), Schopenhauer recognises the epistemic limits of determining the worth of an action, given the complexity in how the human mind manifests these incentives. The question of an action's value 'cannot be answered purely empirically, because in experience only the *deed* is given every time, while the *impulses* are not open to view: so the possibility always remains that an egoistic motive might have had an influence on a just or good action' (*BM,* §15, p. 196).

This scepticism is warranted not only in evaluating the actions of *others*, but also in the actions of the agent *themselves*. Schopenhauer observes the profound effects of cognitive biases in shaping one's own evaluations: '*Love* and *hatred* entirely falsify our judgement; in our enemies we see nothing but shortcomings, in our favourites nothing but merits and good points, and even their defects seem amiable to us'. He continues that our '*advantage*, whatever kind it may be' masks something's genuine value: 'Hence so many prejudices of social position, rank, profession, nationality, sect, and religion. A hypothesis, conceived and formed, makes us lynx-eyed for everything that confirms it, and blind to everything that contradicts it' (*W2*, p. 217).

While the incentive for an action is always to some degree opaque, Schopenhauer dismisses the sceptic who here would conjure an egoistic incentive for any proposed altruistic act. Schopenhauer is confident that most will agree that some acts, though rare, have no egoistic motive,[10] and that to dispute even clear cases of this would—like 'astrology and alchemy'—be a 'waste of time' (*BM*, §15, p. 196) to discuss. He therefore addresses only 'those who accept the reality of the matter' (*BM*, §15, p. 197); i.e. those who allow that non-egoistic actions genuinely can and do occur. This point is relevant because, as we shall see, Schopenhauer wants to ground virtue in a form of altruism, and maintain that we can identify at least some people as virtuous or vicious.

While humans are susceptible to all of the above incentives in degree, Schopenhauer follows the likes of Plato, Hobbes and La Rochefoucauld in considering egoism to be

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[10] As a paradigmatic case he takes the egoistic to have to clutch at straws to be able to explain, Schopenhauer cites the story of Arnold von Winkelried (*BM*, §15, p. 196; p. 239).

primary; a 'natural perspective' and 'essential to everything in nature' (*W1*, §61, p. 358). He claims that the 'chief and fundamental incentive in a human being, as in an animal, is *egoism*, i.e., the urge to existence and wellbeing' (*BM*, §14, p. 190).

Various abhorrent practices can stem from egoism—murder, theft, slavery, etc—however, since egoism is purely concerned with one's *own* wellbeing, the harm caused to others is not the final end of these actions: 'Egoism can lead to crimes and misdeeds of all kinds: but the harm and pain others that is thereby caused is merely a means for egoism, not an end, and thus occurs only accidentally' (*BM*, §14, p. 194). Similarly, egoistic acts, such as saving a drowning person to impress a romantic interest, do not aim at another's wellbeing, but may positively affect it instrumentally.

For this reason, Schopenhauer (in agreement with Kant) considers the incentive of egoism to ordinarily be morally indifferent [*moralisch indifferente*]. I say 'ordinarily', since Schopenhauer does distinguish between two versions of egoism: (a) the significant yet defeasible incentive for self-interest, present in all; (b) an extreme egoism [*aüsserster Egoismus*] in which self-interest is the defining and indefeasible incentive. As we shall see shortly, Schopenhauer takes this second form of egoism to be an immoral incentive, unlike the moral indifference of ordinary egoism. He contrasts ordinary egoism with the incentive of malice and cruelty, in which 'the sufferings and pains of others are an end in themselves and achieving them is a pleasure. For that reason they constitute moral badness raised to a higher power' (*BM*, §14, p. 194). Egoists do not *necessarily* recognise the suffering of others, yet malicious agents do, since it is part of their final aim. It is on these grounds that only acts done from a malicious incentive are morally reprehensible [*moralisch verwerfliche*]. From this 'arises the appearance of genuine cruelty, the thirst for blood that is so often seen in history, in the Neros and the Domitians, in the African Deys, in Robespierre, etc' (*W1*, §65, p. 391).

The final incentive that Schopenhauer discusses is *Mitleid* or compassion: the desire for the wellbeing of another. When one witnesses the suffering of another and desires to alleviate it for the sake of the *sufferer*, this is the incentive of compassion. A compassionate character is both necessary and sufficient for moral virtue, according to Schopenhauer: 'Only insofar as an action has sprung from [compassion] does that action have moral worth: and even action that proceeds from any other motives whatever has none' (*BM*, §16, p. 200).

But some detail is required here. To what *extent* must the incentive of compassion be present for an action to have moral worth? Let us first consider evidence for the claim that Schopenhauer holds that morally worthy actions are *purely* altruistic. In several places in *BM*, Schopenhauer appears to endorse this view. For example, he writes that 'There is only one single case' in which there is genuine moral worth: 'if the ultimate motivating ground for an

action, or an omission, resides directly and *exclusively* [*ausschließlich*] in the *wellbeing* and *woe* of someone *other'*. (*BM*, §16, p. 199 - first emphasis mine). He later talks of the virtue of justice as having a 'purely moral origin, *free of any admixture* [*von aller Beimischung freien*]' (*BM*, §17, p. 205 - emphasis mine), and that moral worth surfaces only in the 'absence of *all* egoistic motivation' (*BM*, §18, p. 197 - emphasis mine). This indicates that Schopenhauer believes that any degree of egoism in the motive robs an action of its value.

However, Dale Jacquette argues that this interpretation is mistaken, and that morally worthless actions are those in which egoism is the *sole* motive: 'The slightest taint of self-interest does not morally invalidate an action in Schopenhauer's moral philosophy, as in Kant's. Rather, an action is altogether lacking in moral value if it is undertaken entirely and exclusively for egoistic motives' (Jacquette, 2005, p. 220). He quotes the following passage in support: 'the discovery of a self-interested motive entirely removes the moral worth of an action if it is the only motive, and reduces it if it had an accessory effect' (*BM*, §15, p. 197). This passage is explicit that an egoistic motive does not void an action's worth, but only 'diminishes' it. However, it appears hard to square in light of the passages quoted above.

While Schopenhauer is less than clear on this point, Jacquette's interpretation—although less supported by the weight of textual evidence—would entail a much more independently plausible position. Consider a case in which a teacher encourages one of their students to do the best work they can, offering them extra classes, recommending them reading, and so forth. The teacher genuinely wants the student to succeed for the *student*'s sake, but also knows that if they succeed, the teacher is likely to receive a good evaluation and subsequently a good reputation, helping their own career. If the teacher is partly motivated by egoistic and altruistic motives here, this does not seem to imply that the teacher's actions here are devoid of moral worth. Perhaps they would be *more* morally praiseworthy if they received nothing in return, but it seems implausibly strong to describe this case as lacking any moral value.

Yet, a potential problem here is how to account for altruistic behaviour *at all*: how can one reconcile what Schopenhauer says about the pervasiveness of the egoistic incentive with the *possibility* for compassionate action? Other philosophers before Schopenhauer—for example: Hutcheson and Hume—had taken the sentiment of compassion or sympathy to be the basis of genuine moral virtue. But Hutcheson and Hume did not conceive of humans as having a significant propensity towards egoism. But for Schopenhauer, if man 'is ready to negate the world just to preserve his own self, this drop in the sea, for a little while longer' (*W1*, §61, p. 358), then when *could* compassionate action occur?

His answer is that genuine compassion occurs when an agent identifies with the sufferer, as the German 'Mitleid', or 'suffering with', suggests. But this is not simply *imagining* what

the sufferer is feeling, but genuine compassion is *literally* experiencing another's suffering as one's own[11]:

> …only by that other's becoming *the ultimate end* of my will, just as I myself otherwise am: by the fact that I will *his* well-being and do not will *his* woe, and that I do so quite immediately, as immediately as I otherwise do only *my own*. Bu this presupposes necessarily that in the case of *his* woe as such I directly suffer along with him, feel *his* woe as otherwise I feel only mine, and so will his well-being immediately as otherwise I will only mine. But this requires that I *be identified with him* in some way, i.e., that the total *distinction* between me and the other, on which precisely my egoism rests, be removed at least to a certain degree (*BM*, §16, p. 200)

It is no surprise that Schopenhauer finds the satisfaction of this requirement for genuine compassion to be 'the great mystery of ethics [*das große Mysterium der Ethik*]' (*BM*, §16, p. 201). Altruistic compassion—the only incentive with moral worth—is an extra-ordinary feat: a process 'certainly worthy of astonishment, and indeed mysterious' (*BM*, §16, p. 201). In order to explain it, Schopenhauer depends upon his metaphysics of the will.

As stated earlier, Schopenhauer holds that each person is a manifestation of the same underlying '*Wille*'—the thing-in-itself—which constitutes their essence. Time and space are the *principium individuationis* which characterise only the phenomenal world of appearances, making the notion of a plurality of individual selves merely an illusion. Let us call this view —the position that all beings share the same essence—the *Metaphysical Identity Thesis* (MIT).

Schopenhauer defends MIT at length in *The World as Will and Representation*, and finds it best expressed in the Vedic phrase '*Tat tvam asi* ('You are that!')' (*W1*, §66, p. 401). The compassionate agent is only possible once they have this metaphysical insight: 'The veil of Maya has become transparent for this person who is practiced in works of love, and the delusion of the *principium individuationis* has deserted him' (*W1*, §66, p. 400). Hence Schopenhauer claims that 'to be just, noble, and benevolent is nothing but to translate my metaphysics into actions' (*W2*, p. 600).[12] He makes the connection between MIT and compassion explicit when he writes that 'All genuine virtue proceeds from the immediate and *intuitive* knowledge of the metaphysical identity of all beings' (*W2*, p. 601).

2.3. Unity and Hierarchy of the Virtues (and Vices)

Out of the *Minimal Psychological Thesis*, and Schopenhauer's corresponding conception of moral worth, we can determine two positions which give shape to an ethics of virtue.

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[11] The issue of whether compassion involves literal or imagined suffering is controversial. I discuss this issue in detail in the next section.

[12] Egoism not only has no moral worth, but is thus also *erroneous* in that it fails to see through this illusion.

The first concerns the classification of character. The incentives constitutive of the MPT, Schopenhauer claims, are 'present in each one in different and incredibly diverse proportions' (*BM*, §20, p. 238). *Virtues* and *vices* themselves—or as Schopenhauer calls them: 'qualities of the will' (*P2*, §110)—are stable dispositions which manifest these incentives. One's *character* is a function of the orientation of one's incentives: 'The predominance of the one or the other [incentives]…provides the main line in the ethical classification of characters' (*BM*, §14, p. 194).

As it stands, the idea of the 'predominance' of an incentive as a sufficient classification of character would appear to offer only a crude and unsophisticated way of demarcating types of agents: one is either 'egoistic', 'malicious', or 'compassionate' depending on which incentive is acting on most frequently. While Schopenhauer did not attempt to further specify how MPT can account for the complexity of character-types, one may ascertain what he might have had in mind in the following way:

> Given scenarios in which it would be logically possible to for *A* to act from any of the incentives specified by MPT, *A*'s character-type is classified by the degree to which *A*'s acts from their predominant incentive are absent of resistance generated by *A*'s competing incentives.

For example, we could firstly say that John has an *egoistic* character because John predominantly acts in his own self-interest when in situations where it was logically possible for him to act from another incentive. Moreover, we can further classify the type of egoistic character John has by the extent of his *readiness* to act in his self-interest (i.e. by how little conflict there was with his other incentives). This two-level classification is consistent with Schopenhauer's framework, and allows a complex range of characters to be possible from a simple theory of motivation (i.e the MPT). Given Schopenhauer's account of moral worth stated above, the moral worth of one's character corresponds to the extent to which it is orientated in this two-fold manner toward the incentive of compassion.

The second feature of Schopenhauer's ethics that emerges from the *Minimal Psychological Thesis* and his account of moral worth is a unified theory of both virtue and vice. Vices which fall under the category of extreme egoism, according to Schopenhauer, include 'greed, gluttony, lust, self-interest, meanness, covetousness, injustice, hard-heartedness, pride, haughtiness' (*BM*, §14, p. 194). These dispositions are born from the incentive to increase one's own wellbeing. In Schopenhauer's framework, the worthlessness of each can be explained in light of this common root. The same can be done for the disvalue of traits born from malice, which is at the root of 'jealousy, envy, ill-will…*Schadenfreude*, prying curiosity, calumny, insolence, petulance, hatred, anger, treachery, guile, vengefulness, cruelty' (*BM*, §14, p. 194).

Schopenhauer's taxonomy of moral virtue and vice is also hierarchal. As stated above, Schopenhauer understands the incentive of compassion to be the sole criterion of moral worth. Compassion, he claims, is the natural root of two cardinal virtues, from which 'all the rest issue practically and can be derived theoretically' (*BM*, §17, p. 204). These cardinal virtues are justice [*Gerechtigkeit*], and loving kindness [*Menschenliebe*].[13] Justice is *negative* in the sense that 'it prevents me from causing a suffering to the other…and myself becoming the cause of someone else's pains' (*BM*, §17, p. 203). Because Schopenhauer holds, plausibly, that humans have a natural propensity towards egoism—that 'originally we are all inclined to injustice and violence' (*BM*, §17, p. 204)—the restraint from harming another out of concern for *them* is the 'first degree' of compassion (*BM*, §17, p. 204). *Menschenliebe*, on the other hand, is the 'second degree' of compassion in that it is *positive* in nature: it 'drives me on to help' (*BM*, §17, p. 216). Not only will one restrain from harming others, but acting from the cardinal virtue of *Menschenliebe* will involve seeking to alleviate the suffering of others.

Schopenhauer provides a 'supreme principle of ethics' which summarises his unified account of morally worthy actions: 'Harm no one; rather, help everyone as much as you can [*Neminem laede; imo omnes, quantum potes, juva*]' (*BM*, §16, p. 203). The virtue of justice is encapsulated in the former directive 'harm no one', and *Menschenliebe* in the latter. It may seem puzzling that Schopenhauer offers a moral principle, given his attack on deontic concepts which I addressed in the first section. But while he does hold that '*principles* and abstract cognition' are 'in no way the original source or prime basis of all morals', he nevertheless considers them to be 'indispensable for a moral life' (*BM*, §17, p. 205), as…

> …the container, the reservoir, 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…Without firmly formed *principles* we would be irresistibly at the mercy of the anti-moral incentives when they are excited into affects by external impressions (*BM*, §17, pp. 205-206)

This passage may appear anecdotal and ambiguous. However the idea here is straight-forward: while principles are not the basis of morality, they are useful as heuristic devices in guiding behaviour. This view is analogous to how even the moral particularist might view moral principles. Moral particularism is the view that moral principles are neither sufficient nor necessary for genuine moral judgement, which is determined instead by sensitivity to the morally relevant reasons which feature in any given context. Particularists may nevertheless hold that principles can act as auxiliary tools—or to put it in a contemporary particularist like

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[13] This is sometimes translated (as in the case of Payne) as 'philanthropy', which , since the English usage of 'philanthropy' has now somewhat shifted in meaning, is not appropriate. "Loving kindness", too, does not seem to capture the weight and scope of Schopenhauer's usage of the concept. I shall henceforth stick to the German *Menschenliebe.*

Jonathan Dancy's terms: "reminders" (Dancy, 1985, p. 150) or "crutches" (Dancy, 2017)—for the less morally sensitive to aid their judgement.[14]

The simplicity in Schopenhauer's unified account of virtue is appealing. But there are grounds for scepticism about whether a *complete* taxonomy of moral virtues can be derivable from justice and *Menschenliebe* (thus, ultimately to compassion). Cartwright, for example, argues that while Schopenhauer thinks of the paying of debts; keeping of promises; and *honesty* more broadly, as a virtue, we could think of scenarios 'in which agents perform such actions, not out of self-interest, and in which the failure to do so would not cause any form of suffering that a compassionate agent would seek to prevent' (Cartwright, 2012, p. 64). Perhaps the case of a very poor man who returns a rich man's £50, even though he (i.e. the rich man) does not need or miss it, but because it *belongs* to him. If Cartwright is correct that an awareness of suffering does not enter into this picture, compassion alone is not comprehensive enough to have the resources to explain a key virtue.

In response, Gerard Mannion has argued that awareness of suffering does feature in such cases, though in a more refined manner:

> even the repayment of a debt to a rich man could involve the apprehension of the possibility of his experiencing psychological hurt or a sense of being wronged or inconvenienced (provided that the repayment is made for the 'right' (i.e. moral) reasons and not out of fear of unpleasant consequences). Or, again, more positively, the repayment could be made to balance the economic stability of a particular community and contribute to the promotion of lawfulness, thus, eventually, sparing potential suffering for many and promoting their weal, indeed, the commonweal. At some level suffering, or the prevention of it, must be involved (Mannion, 2002, p. 110)

Mannion's account is certainly possible, but the second explanation offered in terms of long-term and far-reaching effects seems a stretch as an account of what would *motivate* an agent in the above case. But allowing that Mannion's view is plausible, other virtues are potentially still at risk of being left of Schopenhauer's unity thesis. One example may be loyalty. It is plausible that the reasons one has to be loyal to a friend, group, club, and so forth, may indicate it to be a *prima facie* good regardless of whether abandoning them would bring about any suffering. If this is correct, then there would need to be a supplementary account of at least some virtues in addition to Schopenhauer's unity thesis.

But we might exercise suspicion about whether loyalty poses a problem for Schopenhauer here. It might be that postulating certain traits as virtues which Schopenhauer's ethical framework would need supplementing to account for seems to beg the question insofar as it assumes that we have, in advance, a list of moral virtues which Schopenhauer would

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14 It is an interesting question the extent to which Schopenhauer in fact *is* a moral particularist. Deep affinities between particularism and virtue ethics have long been noted. Unfortunately, this question would take us beyond the scope of present concern.

somehow be constrained to recognise as such. Moreover, Schopenhauer does not even consider courage or wisdom as *moral* virtues (*P2*, §110, §111). He accepts the traditional distinction between moral virtues—"qualities of the will" (*P2*, §110)—and intellectual virtues which are instrumental in aiding one's incentives.[15] Wisdom, for example, he classifies as belonging to the intellect. So why would it be safe to assume that loyalty—and perhaps others such as integrity, cunningness, reliability, sincerity—is something that he must account for as a specifically *moral* virtue? While there isn't space to explore this defence further, it remains for the opponent of the ethical framework considered to press their objection in a non-question begging way.

3. Fixed Character and Moral Education

Earlier in the paper, I claimed that traditional virtue theorists typically emphasise the importance of upbringing, practice, and habit-formation in cultivating the virtues. One's character can be *improved*, it is thought, via a moral education of sorts. But this traditional view is not found in Schopenhauer. Virtues and vices, he claims, are fixed and unalterable features of a person's character. The fact that someone might be malicious in nature, for example, is 'inborn and ineradicable' (*BM*, §20, p. 235). He continues: 'The malicious man's malice is born in him as the venomous teeth and venomous sac are in the snake; and he can alter it no more than the snake' (*BM*, §20, p. 235). People's character's do sometimes *appear* to change, but Schopenhauer maintains that such perceptions are merely derived from epistemic constraints and resulting mistakes in the original character judgement (*W1*, §55, pp. 321-322).

This thesis does not entail that moral education has *no* effect on behaviour, but its influence will be limited to the stable parameters of one's innate character. Revealing descriptive matters of fact (e.g. the actual long term effects of actions on oneself and others) can improve the efficiency in *how* to attain one's goals, but cannot alter the goals themselves: 'Teaching can the alter the choice of means, but not the choice of ultimate universal ends: each will sets these for itself in accordance with its original nature' (*BM*, §20, p. 240; cf. *W1*, §55).[16] For instance:

> One can show the egoist that by giving up small advantages he will attain greater ones; or the malicious man that causing someone else's sufferings will bring greater sufferings upon

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[15] Though, he does not use this strict terminology.

[16] In light of this point, Schopenhauer is clear that the fixity of one's character neither entails a static and rigidly consistent mode of living. Since knowledge can influence conduct insofar as it alters choice of means, gradual changes in empirical character appear in different periods of life: 'a passionate and wild youth can be followed by a sedate, temperate, manhood' (*W1*, §55, p. 322).

himself. But one will not persuade the egoism itself, the malice itself, out of anyone—any more than one can persuade the partiality to mice out of a cat (*BM*, §20, p. 240)

This view—which Schopenhauer ultimately justifies again via his metaphysics, accepting the Kantian distinction between empirical character and one's 'transcendental' or 'intelligible' self—marks a distinctive departure from the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics in which virtues can be acquired through practice. Interestingly, Schopenhauer quotes the *Nicomachean Ethics* in order to recruit Aristotle as a defender of his own position:

> Aristotle expresses himself in the same sense: 'For each of us seems to possess his type of character to some extent by nature, since we are just, brave, prone to temperance, or have another feature, immediately from birth' (*BM*, §20, p. 236)

However, this claim seems to rest on a confusion concerning Aristotle's position. There are two problems. Firstly, the passage Schopenhauer quotes is isolated from the context in which it is given. Here Aristotle makes a distinction between 'natural virtue' and 'virtue in the full sense' (Aristotle, 2004, Book VI: pp. 164-165). He claims although many believe humans have dispositions towards certain behaviours, what is 'good in the strict sense is something different, and that moral qualities are acquired in another way' (Aristotle, 2004, Book II: p. 31). The point being made is that while humans have the *capacity* for virtue, it is actually acquired and developed through instruction and practice. This differs from the stronger view Schopenhauer endorses. The second problem is that if Schopenhauer's interpretation was correct, it would create problems concerning Aristotle's project in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a whole, and would contradict some of its major claims. The crucial distinction between capacity and actual virtue is made clearer in Book II:

> none of the moral virtues is engendered in us by nature, since nothing that is what it is by nature can be made to behave differently by habituation. For instance, a stone, which has a natural tendency downwards, cannot be habituated to rise, however often you try to train it by throwing it into the air;…nor can anything else that has any other natural tendency be trained to depart from it. The moral virtues, then, are engendered in us neither *by* nor *contrary* to nature; we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit (Aristotle, 2004, Book II: p. 31)

So if Schopenhauer is claiming that whatever has a fixed nature cannot change the behaviour determined by it, then Aristotle would agree. But he disagrees that moral virtues are a fixed and innate part of human nature. Hence, in taking character to be unalterable, Schopenhauer's virtue ethics is distinctive.

Yet it is worth mentioning a second sense in which Schopenhauer can allow a *form* of 'moral education' despite the fixed character thesis. He asks: 'can [ethics] re-fashion the hard-hearted human being into a compassionate one, and thereby into a just and loving, kind one?', and emphatically answers: 'Certainly not: the difference of characters is inborn and

eradicable' (*BM*, §20, p. 235). This much is clear. But earlier in *W1*, he has a more modest account of how behaviour can be influenced with respect to what he calls *acquired character*.

While one's 'empirical character'—which is 'merely the unfolding' (*W1*, §55, p. 328) of one's 'transcendental' or 'intelligible' character that resides outside of time and causal necessity—is fixed and unalterable, Schopenhauer suggests that an awareness of this very fixity can *itself* alter behaviour. The thought here is that if one comes to understand the futility of trying to transform one's character and acquire new virtues, and instead strives to ascertain (as best as can be done) the *nature* of ones character, then one is better equipped to conduct oneself in achieving ends. As opposed to persistently desiring ends and unhesitatingly trying to attain them 'like children at a fair' who '[grab] at everything that tickles [their] fancy' (*W1*, §55, p. 330), significant self-understanding can bring an awareness of one's potential limitations (e.g. an overbearing sexual appetite; propensities to offence and violence; tendencies to trust people too easily, and so on), as well as one's potential strengths. When we have this refining ability of discovery, according to Schopenhauer, we 'show character' (*W1*, §55, p. 330). The character he refers to is the '*acquired* character', which is simply a particular threshold of self-knowledge: it is 'nothing other than the greatest possible familiarity with our own individuality…of the invariable qualities of our own empirical character' (*W1*, §55, p. 331).

In an engaging passage, Schopenhauer describes the behavioural effects of achieving this degree of self-knowledge:

> We will no longer act like novices, waiting, trying, fumbling around to see what we really want and are capable of doing; we know it once and for all…We are acquainted with our will on a general level, and we will not let ourselves be misled by moods or external demands into deciding on something in a particular case that runs contrary to the will as a whole. We are aware of the nature and extent of our abilities and our weaknesses, and this saves us a great deal of suffering. This is because there is really no other pleasure than the use and feeling of our own powers. and the greatest pain is the feeling that we lack strength when we need it. Now if we have investigated where our strengths and weaknesses are, we will develop our salient natural talents, make use of them, try to apply them however we can, and go where they are appropriate and effective; at the same time, we will always exercise self-restraint and avoid projects where we do not have much natural aptitude…Only someone who has achieved this will always be calmly and confidently himself; he will never let himself down, because he always knows what he can expect of himself. (*W1*, §55, p. 332)

Given the claim from section two about the opacity of motives, this is no easy task. However, Schopenhauer is clear that it is gradually achievable when we 'learn through experiences what we want and what we can do' (*W1*, §55, p. 331). The importance of *experience* finds agreement with Aristotelian-inspired virtue ethics that emphasise habit-formation, but there is strict disagreement as to its potency with respect to character.

A feature of this discussion which warrants acknowledgement is that (1) since Schopenhauer, I have argued, is a virtue ethicist, and (2) the emphasis on habit formation which pervades traditional virtue theories is absent in Schopenhauer's ethical framework, then the link between moral education, habit, and virtue is only a *contingent* aspect of virtue ethics. Moreover, since Schopenhauer defends the idea that virtue and vice are unalterable, he takes the stronger line that habit-forming components of virtue theories are hopeless. Familiar slogans from some contemporary virtue-ethical theorising—such as 'do as the virtuous person, acting in character, would do'—would, for Schopenhauer, be fruitless, and perhaps even damaging: 'Imitating other people's qualities and idiosyncrasies is much more shameful than wearing other people's clothes, because it is the judgement we ourselves pass on our own worthlessness' (*W1*, §55, p. 333).

Few now may be inclined to defend the fixed character view on the *metaphysical* grounds Schopenhauer offers. Nevertheless, one can extract from his discussion of the acquired character a sensible thesis, namely: that all people have limitations, tendencies, vulnerabilities, and that achieving a degree of self-knowledge about them can positively influence one's behaviour. The nuanced psychological insight offered in Book IV of *W1* here has significant import for both possible naturalised versions of the fixed character thesis which allow for a greater (though still restricted) degree of character flexibility,[17] and for virtue ethical theories broadly.

Let us briefly recapitulate in order to clarify the dialectic. So far I have attempted to elucidate the framework of Schopenhauer's ethical thought, presenting it as a form of virtue ethics that centres on compassion as the root of morally worthy action. The *Minimal Psychological Thesis* allows for a plausible unified and hierarchical account of the virtues (and vices), yet also accounts for the complexity of characters in the degree and kind to which their incentives are orientated. I have also elucidated how Schopenhauer's form of virtue ethics diverges from typical traditions in at least one major respect: character, for Schopenhauer, is innate and (not withstanding the two limited forms of behaviour-influence he grants) *fixed*.

A significant point raised earlier was that Schopenhauer's view of egoism as the primary incentive for action seems to force him to posit an extraordinary account of how compassion is possible. The appeal of his virtue ethics of compassion thus may be purchased at too high a metaphysical cost. However, I now wish to consider how this brand of virtue ethics invites a charge of egoism which is particular to Schopenhauer's framework, and how serious this

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17 For instance, an interpretation of Nietzsche as endorsing a naturalised and less restrictive version of the fixity thesis can be found in Brian Leiter's account of his 'doctrine of types'. See Leiter, (2002), pp. 8-10. It is significant that the familiar Nietzschean rhetoric of 'becoming who you are' is very similar to Schopenhauer's in *W1*, §55.

charge is. In doing so, we shall be in a better position to consider whether his account of compassion is sustainable independently of this metaphysical cost.

4. The Charge of Egoism

One familiar contemporary objection to various forms of virtue ethics is that they are inherently egoistic.[18] If this is the case, it poses a major problem for Schopenhauer's project, since, as we have seen, he explicitly holds that egoistic incentives, and the actions born from them, are morally worthless.

The basis of the general charge of egoism is that (a) the virtues benefit their possessors, and that (b) this is the ultimate justification for developing them. Different traditions explain the first claim in various ways. Many follow Aristotle in holding that cultivating the virtues will constitute living a valuable life. More specifically, that the virtues themselves are dispositions *necessary* and (on some stronger versions) *sufficient* for the final end of one's flourishing or *eudaimonia*. But if the virtues are valuable because they are constitutive of *my* flourishing and not another's, then it looks like that what justifies procuring them is their contributing to my interests or personal good. For example, if being merciful is a disposition that it is valuable for me to have, then acquiring and exercising it will be justified in it's ability to contribute to my good, with the object mercy is directed towards being a means to my good. Schopenhauer himself appears to launch a version of this objection against the 'Eudaimonism' he attributes to 'the ancients' (i.e. Aristotle, and the Cynics, and Stoics) (*BM*, §3, p. 123).

However, while it is an interesting question whether a version of this general objection should concern Schopenhauer's virtue ethics, his radical account of how compassion is possible leaves him open to an alternative and idiosyncratic objection of egoism. I wish to address this here. Recall that genuine compassion occurs when I witness another's suffering and 'I suffer as well in *him*, despite the fact that his skin does not enclose my nerves. Only in this way can *his* woe, *his* distress, become motive *for me*: apart from that only my own can ever do so' (*BM*, §18, p. 218). But if the reason A desires to help B is because A recognises B as A, then it seems A desires to help A.

This objection has been identified in the secondary literature as posing a significant problem for the consistency of Schopenhauer's ethical framework (e.g. Gardiner, 1963, p. 276; Hamlyn, 1980, p. 145; Jacquette, 2005, p. 230; Young, 2005, p. 182; Cartwright, 2012, p. 262). Julian Young, for example, claims that 'it becomes clear that, after all, the altruist does act for the sake of his own self-interest, the only difference between him and the egoist

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[18] A helpful exposition of the charge and a plausible defence of virtue ethics can be found in Julia Annas (2008).

being that he acts for the sake of his *metaphysical* rather than his empirical self' (Young, 2005, p. 182). Dale Jacquette similarly writes that if I am moved to alleviate the suffering of another because I see them as identical to myself, then 'why is my motivation in that case not also at least a disguised form of egoism?' (Jacquette, 2005, p. 230). Cartwright too, writes that 'By emphasising that compassionate characters see others as an "I once more", Schopenhauer severely provokes this analysis [of egoism]' (Cartwright, 2012, p. 262).

There are various attempted solutions to this problem, each of which differ in the degree to which they understand Schopenhauer's metaphysical framework as necessary. One possible response—in spirit with a transcendental idealist view—is to claim that 'ego' is a term that corresponds only to the empirical self of the phenomenal world; the willing subject that already accepts the *principium individuationis*. Given that Schopenhauer thinks compassion requires seeing beyond this, the charge that 'I' seek to increase 'my' wellbeing by alleviating 'your' suffering becomes meaningless.[19] This view is taken by Jacquette, who writes in response to the charge of egoism:

> The answer is that for Schopenhauer the word ego does not apply to the intelligible character or thing-in-itself, but only to the superficial phenomenal psychological willing subject also known as the empirical or acquired character, the self, soul or person, with which we associate our individual personalities. If this is ego for Schopenhauer, then his metaphysics of compassion as a moral motivation for helping others in need clearly transcends egoism, just as the intelligible character of every willing subject, the one and only Will as thing-in-itself, transcends the phenomenal psychological or phenomenological ego (Jacquette, 2005, p. 230)

At least one problem with this counter-argument is that it is susceptible to a related criticism first raised by Max Scheler in his *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*. Scheler claimed that the transcending of the empirical ego which Schopenhauer has to appeal to in order to escape the charge ends up undercutting the basis for Mitleid: 'Mitleid presupposes a distinction between individuals, and if this is an illusion, Mitleid itself must be another. The dissolution of the self in a common stockpot of misery eliminates genuine Mitleid altogether'(Scheler, 1954, p. 55).[20] This objection is developed by John Atwell, who argues that the cognitive process required by Schopenhauer's claims about compassion removes all individuality, and in doing so precludes the possibility of both compassion and egoism. If one recognises the *Wille zum Leben* as the thing-in-itself that constitutes my essence as well as yours, then 'I am aware of nothing that might move me to compassion' (Atwell, 1990, p. 123). In other words, the solution to the problem of how compassion is possible undermines

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[19] As Cartwright (2012, p. 262) notes, Schopenhauer seems to endorse something similar to this response to the objection in personal correspondence with Johann August Becker. He writes that the charge of egoism 'rests solely on your wanting to take the phrase, 'I once more', literally, while it is simply a figurative turn of expression. For "I" in the proper sense of the term refers exclusively to the individual and not to the metaphysical thing in-itself which *appears* in individuals…but which is directly unknowable'.

[20] Heath translates Mitleid as 'pity'. To avoid confusion and to maintain consistency, I keep the German here. For a discussion concerning Scheler's interpretation of Schopenhauer, see Cartwright, (1981); Mannion (2002).

itself by having to take extreme measures, akin to curing a headache by cutting off one's own head.

The metaphysical underpinning of Schopenhauer's account of compassion appears to create more problems than it solves. On this point I agree with Cartwright, who claims that:

> Schopenhauer's account of compassion would be more adequate if he dropped the claim that it involves the agent literally suffering with another by experiencing another's pain in the others body, and if he viewed the experience of another's woe, in some instances, as something imagined. (Cartwright, 2012, p. 261)

One could *imagine*—rather than *literally* experience—what it feels like to be in the position of the sufferer, Cartwright suggests, and in doing so be moved to desire its alleviation. This, it seems, gives a more plausible explanation of what moves people to donate money to relief efforts for disasters far removed from one's own social sphere. Cartwright notes that there is some textual evidence that Schopenhauer explains compassion in this way, without recourse to metaphysics. For example, Schopenhauer regards weeping as a '*compassion for ourselves*' which is 'conditioned by a capacity for love…and *by the faculty of imagination*' (*W1*, §67, p. 403 - emphasis mine). Moreover, he remarks how people can reaffirm commitment to following principles of justice when it conflicts with desires by imagining the suffering of others: if someone loses a possession and it is found by another, then 'Nothing…will so readily bring him back to the path of justice so readily as the idea [*Vorstellung*] of the worry, of the heartbreak, of the woeful lamentation of the one who lost it' (*BM*, §17, p. 219).[21]

Nevertheless, this would require a significant revision of Schopenhauer's official view concerning the phenomenology of compassion, and counters textual evidence which explicitly rejects understanding compassion in terms of *imagining* the suffering of another. For instance, most clearly: 'We suffer *with* him, thus *in* him [*Wir leiden mit ihm, also in ihm*]: we feel his pain as *his* and do not imagine that it is ours' (*BM*, §16, p. 203). Mannion makes this objection, and argues that to eject the metaphysics from Schopenhauer's account of compassion would be too great a revision. It…

> appears to overlook that this would alter the entire character of Schopenhauer's theory. For to participate in the suffering of another in an imaginative sense is surely more akin to empathy rather than Mitleid. Indeed, Schopenhauer appears to rule out such a suggestion himself. Once again, Schopenhauer is misrepresented if the metaphysical elements of his ethics are dismissed or removed. (Mannion, 2002, p. 109)

But it is not clear that Mannion's complaint here is warranted. It is by no means obvious that to participate in the suffering of another in an imaginative sense is 'surely more akin to

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[21] It is significant that the word Schopenhauer uses here—*Vorstellung*—is closely related to the standard German verb 'to imagine' [*sich vorstellen*].

empathy rather than Mitleid'. The dialectic Mannion wishes to pursue here rests upon an alleged major conceptual distinction between Mitleid and empathy, but unfortunately Mannion is unclear about what he understands empathy to involve. This is significant since there are a variety of competing conceptions in the relevant literature, some of which blur the proposed distinction.[22] What Mannion may have in mind here is a conception of empathy as the capacity to *understand* or *comprehend* another's suffering (or in principle, any emotion), without necessitating a desire to alleviate that suffering. It is true that *imagining* the suffering of another might *require* empathy, but it does not follow that this is *all* that is going on in Cartwright's interpretation. I might need to be able to understand the suffering of another in order to be sufficiently moved by it, and subsequently desire to alleviate it. But there is no argument given for the primacy of a literal rather than imaginative experience in producing such a desire. For this reason, Mannion's argument begs the question.

It will be helpful to consider a further possible solution to the problem of egoism proffered by Young. Like Cartwright, Young claims that Schopenhauer provides valuable insights into the phenomenology of compassion, but that 'gripped by the will to create a grand metaphysical system which he shares with all nineteenth century German contemporaries', Schopenhauer 'forces what is essentially a non-metaphysical insight into ill-fitting metaphysical clothing' (Young, 2005, p. 183). In other words, a *metaphysical* underpinning of compassion creates more problems than it solves, but is also not necessary.

Young's own solution to the problem of egoism is to rely less upon the controversial *Metaphysical Identity Thesis* (MIT), and instead consider compassion as the recognition of a plurality of sufferers which make up a moral community: 'suppose what really moves the altruist is that she loves *us*, and is therefore moved to care equally for all members of the "us", for self and others' (Young, 2005, p. 183). On this view, egoism is avoided since the 'fundamental object of concern'—i.e. the category of '*us*'—'is a non ego' (Young, 2005, p. 183). Young cites Schopenhauer's consideration of the '*universal* standpoint' (*W2*, p. 600) as evidence that he sometimes understands the egoism/altruism contrast in this way (Young, 2005, pp. 183-184). While for Schopenhauer this universal standpoint is from that of the *Wille*, a naturalised version which does not depend on the MIT is available: from the perspective of the universe, *no one matters*, but all struggle to survive their sufferings.[23]

One quality inherent to this view is that it allows for a highly inclusive moral community: the criteria for membership of 'us' is merely the *capacity to suffer*, which unproblematically

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[22] For instance, see (Batson et.al, 1995), Darwall (1998), Prinz (2011).

[23] The notion of a 'community of sufferers' in this sense hits home when read against the backdrop of Schopenhauer's pessimism, in which suffering is a fundamental and pervasive feature of all sentient life.

accounts for non-human animals.[24] But importantly, this non-metaphysical reconfiguration of compassion can subsist without having to claim that it involves the *literal* experience of another's suffering. Imagining the suffering of another is sufficient to move one to act once they are identified as belonging to 'us', which is the ego-independent object of concern.

This section has argued that Schopenhauer's account of compassion in metaphysical terms faces a unique charge of egoism. Given his ethical framework maintains that egoistic actions are morally worthless, this charge threatens its internal consistency. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer's metaphysics that create the charge of egoism—as well as being controversial on their own terms—can be abandoned or naturalised in ways that retain the plausibility of his ethical insights. I have not argued here that Schopenhauer's metaphysics is implausible, only that those sympathetic to elements of his ethical framework are not forced to adopt it.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to clarify Schopenhauer's ethical views, and to advance the existing literature on the topic by engaging with some of their more controversial components. I have argued that Schopenhauer offers a distinctive brand of virtue ethics which aims to account for the complexity of human character; a unified theory of both virtue and vice; and an inclusive moral community. I have also considered the charge that his explanation for how compassion is possible via his metaphysics leaves him open to a distinct charge of egoism. I have suggested that Schopenhauer's ethics of virtue is able to defend against this attack. Moreover, that those sympathetic to his brand of virtue ethics, but are unwilling to adopt his controversial metaphysics, can consistently do so. Not only can his account of compassion be naturalised (and by doing so avoid the specific charge of egoism thought to be problematic), but by divorcing his ethics from his metaphysics one isn't forced to endorse the controversial thesis of fixed and innate character. While this feature of Schopenhauer's theory does indicate that habit-formation is not a necessary feature of the virtue ethical tradition, those unwilling to defend it can abandon it without giving up other more attractive components of this brand of virtue ethics. Schopenhauer's ethical views contain a wealth of psychological insight which bear direct relevance to contemporary issues within virtue ethics, hence his thought deserves greater attention alongside the more canonical figures of the tradition.[25]

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[24] For detailed engagement with Schopenhauer's deliberate attempt to account for the moral status of non-human animals see Shapshay (2017).

List of Abbreviations

Works by Schopenhauer are cited by section and page number using the following abbreviations and translations:

W1 = *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume One, J. Norman & A. Welchman & C. Janaway (eds./trans.), Cambridge University Press, 2010.

W2 = *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume Two, E.F.J Payne (trans.), Dover Publications, 1966.

P2 = *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol. 2, C. Janaway & A. Del Caro (eds./trans.), Cambridge University Press, 2015.

BM = *On the Basis of Morals*, in *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, C. Janaway (eds./trans), Cambridge University Press, 2009.

For the German: *Schopenhauer: Sämtliche Werke*, Arthur Hübscher (ed.), 7 vols. (3rd edn.; Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1972; 4th edn.; 1988).

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