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Schopenhauer's great and small ethics: On the mysteriousness, (im)mediacy, and (un)sociability of moral action*

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Abstract

Schopenhauer bases morality on the concept of compassion, which he assumes to be the “great mystery of ethics”. He sees it and as a spontaneous action that can neither be taught or planned. However, some elements of his theory of human action allow us to conceive of an ethical-moral action (the compassionate act) as something less mysterious or immediate, rather a mediated and planned action in its social or sociability dimension, or even as one which is suggested. In this paper I propose what may be called a “valorization of the empirical apparatus” of Schopenhauerian thinking on human action (vis-a-vis the metaphysical apparatus) by distinguishing between what I call *great ethics* and *small ethics*, a differentiation that I believe can be inferred from some of the philosopher's elaborations.

Key words: spontaneous action, planned action, compassion, great ethics, small ethics.

Zusammenfassung

Schopenhauers Konzept des Mitleids, die Grundlage der Moral, wird als das „große Mysterium der Ethik“ und als eine spontane Handlung angenommen, die

* This paper is a modified and updated version of “A grande e a pequena ética de Schopenhauer,” published in *ethic@: An International Journal for Moral Philosophy*, Florianópolis, 14/1, Jul. 2015, 36–56. The same theme and the same hypotheses have been laid out in “A teoria da ação humana de Schopenhauer como grande e pequena ética”, in: *Per mari inesplorati: Studi in onore di Domenico M. Fazio*, ed. by S. Apollonio, M. Carparelli, F. Giordano, Lecce 2017, 187–214; *A outra face do pessimismo: caráter, ação e sabedoria de vida em Schopenhauer*, São Paulo 2020; and in the chapter “Das Behältnis der Quelle aller Moralität”. La “piccola etica” como la cistifellea della morale schopenhaueriana, in: *Prospettive. Tredici saggi a duecento anni dal Mondo come volontà e rappresentazione di Arthur Schopenhauer*, ed. by D. M. Fazio and M. Vitale, Lecce 2022, 47–60. Here, however, I put forward a more detailed version of my thesis of Schopenhauer's small and great ethics in a more synthesized and perhaps clearer fashion.

nicht gelehrt oder geplant werden kann. Doch einige Elemente seiner Theorie des menschlichen Handelns erlauben es uns, ethisch-moralisches Handeln (mitleidiges Handeln) weniger als etwas Mysteriöses oder Unmittelbares zu begreifen, sondern vielmehr als vermitteltes und geplantes Handeln in seiner sozialen Dimension oder Geselligkeit; oder sogar als vorgeschlagenes Handeln. Um diese Hypothese zu demonstrieren, stelle ich in diesem Artikel vor, was man eine „Aufwertung der empirischen Konzeption“ der Schopenhauerschen Betrachtungen des menschlichen Handelns (gegenüber der metaphysischen) nennen kann, indem ich eine Unterscheidung mache zwischen dem, was ich große, und was ich kleine Ethik nenne, eine Differenzierung, die sich meines Erachtens aus einigen Ausführungen des Philosophen ableiten lässt.

Schlüsselwörter: spontane Handlung, geplante Handlung, Mitleid, große Ethik, kleine Ethik.

In honor of Ludger Lütkehaus (1943–2019)

1. Introduction and background

More than the philosopher who rejected the prescriptive and formalistic model of Kantian ethics to propose a descriptive basis for morality, it was Schopenhauer who insisted that no seriously thought-out ethics could be conceived of without the presupposition of a metaphysics (N, 315)¹. In the case of his system this demand was to be met by the so-called immanent metaphysics of the will to live, which enables us to deal with the in-itself of the world, the volitional essence that objectifies itself in varying degrees in the phenomenal world including that of human beings. Such an immanent metaphysics permits, then, that the basic assumptions regarding the discussion of moral action be grounded upon it and that the phenomenon of compassion, the basis of morality, be assumed to be the “great mystery of ethics” (BM, 201). It is seen to be something spontaneous, something that cannot be taught or planned. However, some elements of his theory of human action allow us to conceive of the ethical-moral action (the compassionate action) as something less mysterious or immediate, rather a mediated and planned action in its social or sociability dimension, or even as a suggested one.

1 Schopenhauer is quoted from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Schopenhauer*, ed. Christopher Janaway e. a., Cambridge 2009–2018, in particular for WWR 1/2 = *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I/II, and BM = *Prize Essay On the Basis of Morals*. For PP 1/2 = *Parerga and Paralipomena*, vol. I/II from the Oxford University Press edition, transl. by E. F. J. Payne, and for N = *Ueber den Willen in der Natur* (in this case according the German abbreviation) from the *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. III. Hg. v. Ludger Lütkehaus, Zürich 1988–1999.

To demonstrate this hypothesis, I will refer below to elements of the objective realm of the production of human action that can be encompassed within the idea of an active, relatively mediated, and unquiet compassion. To this end, I propose what may be called a “valorization of the empirical apparatus” of Schopenhauerian considerations of human action (in face of the metaphysical apparatus) by drawing a distinction between what I call *great ethics* and *small ethics*², a differentiation I believe can be inferred from some of the philosopher’s elaborations³. This reading key would permit us to uncover the “ethical discourse” or the possible “elements of ethics” situated beyond the metaphysical horizon of *authentic* morality. This, I would term *great ethics* – Schopenhauerian ethics proper –, mainly because it is seen by the philosopher to be a great mystery (*großes Mysterium*) and *because it can* unfold in the *rarity* and *radicality* of something even more grandiose or extraordinary: in asceticism. *Small ethics*, on the other hand, may be identified mainly to the extent that, considering the idea of “improvement” of the intellect and the role of this same intellect as a “suggester” of motives to actions, we might recognize the active and “suggestible” side of compassionate action itself.

This hypothesis of a small ethics might also suggest that it might be described as a kind of “ethics for life *in the world*” and in society, rather than that of *surpassing the world* suggested fundamentally by the doctrine of the negation of the will to live. In this sense, small ethics would designate a subset of Schopenhauerian ethics in tune with – although it cannot be identified with – some characteristics of the wisdom of life (*Lebensweisheit*), a sphere related to the notion

2 This distinction, alongside the differentiation between metaphysical and pragmatic pessimism, is one of the central theses of my work *A outra face do pessimismo: caráter, ação e sabedoria de vida em Schopenhauer* [*The other face of pessimism: character, action and wisdom of life in Schopenhauer*], as reviewed by F. Ciraci in *Jb.* 101 (2020), 243–148.

3 The differentiations I propose resemble but do not coincide with those other studies on Schopenhauer’s ethics. Rudolf Maltèr, *Arthur Schopenhauer.*, 393ff., differentiated “Ethics I” from “Ethics II”; Roberto Aramayo, “L’eudemonologia di Schopenhauer”, 53–54, defended the hypothesis that there would be a “provisory morality” in Schopenhauer; and Matthias Koßler, *Empirische Ethik und christliche Moral*, in particular 447–460; and also in “Empirische und metaphysische Mitleidsethik bei Schopenhauer,” 217–226, differentiated empirical ethics from metaphysical ethics of compassion. I will not compare my reading with the distinctions mentioned in all the aforementioned commentators. However, throughout the text, I will indicate some elements of similarities between great and small ethics and Koßler’s proposal. There is no total coincidence – although there are many parallels – between what Koßler and I indicate as the metaphysical aspects of ethics on the one hand and empirical aspects on the other. Not all the characteristics of what Koßler classifies as empirical ethics and metaphysical ethics of compassion, a distinction in fact clearer and more unambiguous than that of Schopenhauer himself between an analytical and a synthetic approach, correspond to small and great ethics. But, in particular, the indications on empirical ethics help greatly to understand and justify the concept of small ethics. Koßler elaborates a more systematic and structural analysis in relation to my more hermeneutic reading.

of acquired character and which is synonymous with deepened self-knowledge and “commerce [of the individual] with the world”, thereby being a fundamental expression. In contrast to great ethics, the small one would not comprise the sphere of morality properly speaking; it would be better identified with the sphere of sociability (life in society) and would dialog more directly with the sphere of legality.

The main premises that underlie this hypothesis can be elaborated thus:

- i. Egoism can be seen as a *Haupt- und Grundtriebfeder* (BM, 190), an impulsive human tendency that is the principle, fundamental incentive to actions instrumentalized by rationality;
- ii. Human nature is innate, immutable and individual, and, thus, is not susceptible to moral improvement. Therefore, disinterested, spontaneous and immediate compassion can be seen as the only authentically moral incentive or motivation, while, consequently, the lack of any egoistic incentive is a criterion for the morality of action (the criterion of disinterestedness);
- iii. Compassionate action is mysterious in its purity: “Every wholly *pure good deed, every fully and truly disinterested help that has, as such, the distress of others exclusively as its motive, is really a mysterious action, a practical mysticism*” (BM, 255, my emp.⁴);
- iv. The disinterestedness of compassionate morality is well recognized, as is the doctrine of the negation of the will to live, which, in turn can be identified in the grandiosity of ascetic figures and in the mystical quietism of their self-denial; it is similarly recognized the primacy of the notion of abolition of character (*Aufhebung des Charakters*) relative to the moral improvement of character (premise ii);
- v. Compassion takes place, notably in the realm of the virtues (justice and charity), arising from “impure” or mediate elements. It is, thus, more empirical than metaphysical, referring, for example, to an “ethics of improvement” (*bessernde Ethik*, of the intellect or mind), of a moral culture (*moralische Bildung*), and of a moral container or depository (*Behältnis, Réservoir*) of the source of morality (BM, 205).

Given these premises, the fundamental questions are: to what extent would establishing compassion – as an impulsive tendency, or *Triebfeder* – as the sole source of moral actions, entail having to admit the *compassionate action* as merely immediate, mysterious, and independent of its social dimension? What would it mean to claim that the Schopenhauerian basis of morality and moral action were

4 I will indicate the abbreviation “my emp.” for quotes where “my emphasis” is added.

not just mysteries to be described, but could instead be produced and, to some degree, suggested⁵?

2. The great ethics: the mystery of compassion and the rarity of asceticism

2.1 Great because immediate and mysterious

In describing compassion as an authentic moral action, Schopenhauer takes it to be immediate participation in the unaware suffering (or of the non-self), while defining it as *mysterious action*: “*This process is, I repeat, mysterious: for it is something of which reason can give no immediate account and whose grounds are not to be ascertained on the path of experience. And yet it happens every day*” (BM, 218). The immediacy of ethical action arises from a lack of freedom. Thus, given a certain motive (in this case, the suffering of others), the only possible action is necessarily compassionate in character. Schopenhauer agrees with the Scholastics that *operari sequitur esse* (actions follow from being), and that what cannot be taught (*velle non discitur*), i. e. freedom, belongs to *esse*. This is the origin of one of the most important aspects of the so-called Schopenhauerian metaphysical pessimism regarding ethics. This pessimism is legitimized by its opposition to the optimism about the production of moral action. If the *immediacy* of altruistic actions can be taught and disseminated in ever-increasing amounts and intensity, then, the philosopher argues:

[I]f all the many religious institutions and moralizing efforts were not to have failed in their purpose, the older half of humanity would have to be, at least on average, significantly better than the younger half. But there is so little trace of that that we hope, conversely, for something good from young people rather than from the old, who have become worse through experience (BM, 237–238).

This is the sense that enables us to look at how Schopenhauer distinguishes his own ethics from the “optimism of all philosophical systems” (N, 318). The unteachable immediacy of morality is added to its unheard nature when the philosopher assumes that compassion is pure motivation and mystery. In this manner the pessimism mentioned here might be directly associated with the mysteriousness of the realization of moral action, rather than being unrelated to it:

In fact, we can regard the actions that occur in accordance with it, for example those of benevolence, as the *beginning of mysticism*. Every good or kind action that is done with a *pure* and genuine intention proclaims that, whoever practises it,

5 The use of “suggestive” or “suggested” in this paper does not indicate any negative connotations that the term may have in the English language. In other words, it does not refer to any pejorative notions of implying something or seducing others to carry out an act. Rather, by “suggestive” I just mean that the intellect, in Schopenhauerian terms, can present or convey motives of compassion to a character (to the subject of an action).

The “margin of maneuver” that remains between the invariability of the want and the indeterminacy of action, between the character and the motives that can be suggested to him, may be guided in the social, legal, or juridical spheres to the extent that, for example, the State (even in the face of the minimal attributes that the Schopenhauerian doctrine confers upon it) manages and employs means to prevent suffering or injustice (above all, of the social type). This is the basis for the derivation of a vein of Schopenhauerian praxis. Moreover, the ethical agent would attain a knowledge of the whole of life in the form of *tat-tvam-asi* once and for all and would guard it in the form of an abstract precept, being able to apply it whenever motives and circumstances demand. If these empirical or “artificial” aspects of ethical theory – which, for that very reason, can be seen in the sense of a small ethics – do not consist of the source of morality, this does not mean that they are irrelevant to “a moral life” (BM, 205), in the philosopher’s own words.

This is not a relapse into identifying rational with virtuous action, nor into the excessive rationalization of ethics that Schopenhauer had criticized so vociferously in Kant. The intuitive and unheard-of mastery of Schopenhauerian morality is not in question. What is subject to debate is the characteristics of the active and non-quietist ethics of the great pessimistic metaphysician, a praxis molded between the horizons of life wisdom, sociability, and ethics.

As the philosopher illustrates, if “one person helps another and runs to his assistance [...], after long deliberation and difficult debate, the great-hearted British nation gives up 20 million pounds sterling to buy the negro slaves in its colonies their freedom” (BM, 218). Compassion would be the basis of the great metaphysical ethics (first case), but it would also encompass the sphere of small ethics (second case). In the latter, it is translated into a less mysterious, pure or secret language, such as those examples offered about the injustice and cruelty of slavery and the extenuating workdays. Therefore, the “spontaneous identification with all that suffers” does not get caught up in a quietist and contemplative salvation, which is still debatable. Although mysterious, Schopenhauerian compassion is not only an immediate renunciation of self (which can achieve total renunciation), but it can also take place gradually and repeatedly as a result of planning and discussions based, for example, on a wide gamut of social problems. This certainly makes both the basis and the effectiveness of Schopenhauerian morality less titanic.

A not complete table of the differences between Schopenhauer’s great and small ethics can be thus composed:

	Great ethics	Small ethics
Moral action	immediate	mediate
	mysterious; spontaneous acts	(partially) planned
	greatness/great achievements	small acts
	unteachable	suggestionable
Ethical horizon	purely compassionate authentic, pure of motive	impurely compassionate, located within the sphere of virtues
	eternal justice	temporal justice, charity
	ascetic, (self)denying	lived within society, institutions, and projects
	redemptive, “negation/denial of the world”	engaged, “commerce with the world”
Characterology	intelligible, empirical and invariable character	acquired character
	fundamental incentives (egoism, evilness, and compassion)	deliberation of motives, education/improvement of intellect
	heart (feelings)	intellect (thought out) arising from life experience
Representatives	compassionate heroes and heroines	typical of common people acting in anonymity
	ascetics, saints, anchorites, “great souls”	philanthropists
	disinterestedly genial, “great humans”	polite egoists, “small humans”
Social sphere	eventual compassionate acts	actively and continually compassionate
	quietism and immobilism	justice, charity, solidarity
	acceptance of the <i>status quo</i> , description of suffering	action, transformation, denunciation of suffering
	right	left