

## Schopenhauer's Five-Dimensional Normative Ethics

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A normative ethical system involves a set of standards by which to morally evaluate actions. Does Schopenhauer offer a normative ethics in any significant sense?

Some commentators have suggested he does not. D.W. Hamlyn writes:

Schopenhauer's ethics... depends on... a rather simple-minded dichotomy between self-regarding and other-regarding attitudes... It says very little about malice, or about particular virtues and vices... It might rightly be said that there is more to ethics than that... for example, there tends to be argument between those who favour utilitarianism and those who favour a more Kantian approach. Schopenhauer has next to nothing to contribute to such a debate.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, though more charitably, Julian Young states:

Schopenhauer regards 'normative ethics', the attempt to establish the fundamental principle or principles of morality over which Kant laboured so long and hard, as a non-discipline since it is simple common sense. The supreme principle of morality, as everyone knows, is just 'harm no one; on the contrary help everyone as much as you can'<sup>2</sup>

Though some recent commentators have found more complexity in Schopenhauer's theory of the virtues than Hamlyn acknowledges,<sup>3</sup> most seem to tacitly agree that Schopenhauer's normative ethics is too simple to deserve much discussion.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the majority of scholarship on Schopenhauer's ethics focuses on other issues, such as his metaethics, his moral psychology, and the relation between ethics and the denial of the will.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hamlyn 1980, 147.

<sup>2</sup> Young 2005, 175.

<sup>3</sup> See esp. Hassan 2022.

<sup>4</sup> For example, David Cartwright states that "Schopenhauer's moral philosophy consists in an ethics of virtue *rather than* an ethics of principle, duty, or doing" (Cartwright 198, 18, our emphasis. One significant exception to this trend is Puryear 2017.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Atwell 1990, Mannion 2003, Shapshay 2019, and Marshall 2021a. Schopenhauer claims that "philosophy is always theoretical... describing without prescribing", because it cannot "guide action [or] shape character" (WWR 1, 297). While this might be read as a rejection of academic ethics as a means for guiding shaping character, it is compatible with normative ethics in the contemporary sense: one can well describe evaluative standards for actions and characteristics without taking those descriptions to

In this chapter, we argue that Schopenhauer's normative ethics involves more complexity than is often recognized. To be sure, Schopenhauer did not write anything comparable to Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, which provides a detailed moral taxonomy that is explicitly applied to a range of issues. Nonetheless, a closer reading of Schopenhauer's published work shows that he engages in fairly detailed normative ethical theorizing, offering much more than a "simple-minded dichotomy" or "simple common sense." In fact, we believe, if we approach his writings with a moderately strong principle of interpretive charity, we can find a more complex evaluative approach to actions than in many contemporary ethical systems.

We proceed as follows. In Section 1, we identify five distinct evaluative rankings of actions in Schopenhauer's writings. The distinctness of these rankings generates an interpretive choice. Either Schopenhauer's normative ethics is massively inconsistent, or else the five rankings are meant to assess distinct aspects or dimensions of actions. In Section 2, we explore the latter interpretive option. Taking a cue from Timothy Scanlon's two-dimensional ethics, we argue that Schopenhauer can be read as having a consistent five-dimensional ethics. We also argue that properly understanding the role of moral principles for Schopenhauer helps preempt interpretive conclusions like Young's. In Section 3, we aim to shed further light on Schopenhauer's normative ethics by exploring one crucial case: actions arising from misplaced compassion within oppressive societies. When considered through the five dimensions, this case reveals some disturbing implications of Schopenhauer's normative ethics.

To keep our discussion manageable, we will largely set aside Schopenhauer's views on three topics closely related to ethics: political justice, freedom of the will, and asceticism.<sup>6</sup> We also focus our attention on Schopenhauer's main discussions of ethics in the final editions of *On the Basis of Morals* and the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, though we occasionally draw from other works.

## 1. Five Moral Rankings of Actions

In this section, we describe five ethical rankings of actions Schopenhauer offers. While these rankings partly overlap, we will argue that they are distinct. This will raise the question of the coherence of Schopenhauer's normative ethics, which we will address in Section 2.

### 1.1. The *Neminem* Principle

Schopenhauer holds that the "principle or highest basic proposition" of ethics is "the shortest and most concise expression of the way of acting that it prescribes" (BM, 139).<sup>7</sup> There is such a principle, in Schopenhauer's view, and it is one "over whose content all ethical theorists are really united": "Harm no one; rather help everyone to the extent that you can [*Neminem laede, imo omnes, quantum potes, juva*]" (BM, 140). Since Schopenhauer typically formulates this principle in Latin, we call it the "*Neminem* Principle." Any other moral principle,

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themselves impact actions or shape character. See Stephen Puryear's contribution to this volume for a related discussion.

<sup>6</sup> For some relevant discussions, see Woods 2017, Magee 1997, 236–37, and Shapshay 2019, 22–25.

<sup>7</sup> Schopenhauer denies that philosophy can be prescriptive in a strong sense, though he states that his views are analogous to prescriptive ethics. See WWR 1, 401, and Marshall 2017, 309 for discussion.

Schopenhauer claims, is just an “indirect or oblique expression of that simple proposition” (BM, 140).

There is therefore some textual basis for Young’s claim that Schopenhauer just rejects complex ethical theorizing. For, taken at face value, the *Neminem* Principle sets two simple, absolute demands: no harming whatsoever, alongside helping exactly as much as one can. This implies (at most) a 4-tier ranking of actions:

1. Non-harming, maximally-helpful actions
2. Non-harming, non-maximally-helpful actions
3. Harming, maximally-helpful actions<sup>8</sup>
4. Harming, non-maximally-helpful actions

Nothing in the *Neminem* Principle implies that any finer-grain differentiations of actions. Consider two actions in which an agent neither harms nor helps as much as they can, say, one in which a billionaire gives \$10 to charity and another in which that billionaire gives \$10,000. If the *Neminem* Principle is *the* fundamental moral principle, it would seem that these actions would come out as morally equivalent - while contemporary readers might (in a consequentialist vein) be tempted to think that more helpful actions are better than less helpful ones, the principle itself does not imply that.

Relatedly, nothing in the *Neminem* Principle implies that there must be a uniquely right action in a given situation. Elsewhere in BM, Schopenhauer identifies injustice or wrongness with harm or injury, and defines rightness as its negation:

Injustice [*Ungerechtigkeit*], or wrong [*Unrecht*], always consists... in injury to another. So the concept of wrong is a positive one and precedent to that of right, which... designates merely the actions that one can perform without injuring others (BM, 207; cf. WWR 1, 365).<sup>9</sup>

All tier 1 and tier 2 actions are right, while all tier 3 and tier 4 actions are wrong. Of course, there may be some situations in which there is only one available action in tiers 1 or 2. But the *Neminem* Principle gives us no reason to expect that there is always an answer to the question, “what is *the* right thing to do?”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The ranking of tier 2 over tier 3 actions is (weakly) suggested by the grammatical order of the principle’s clauses.

<sup>9</sup> For an illuminating discussion, see Puryear 2017. Puryear points out that Schopenhauer does not count all actions that harm non-human animals as wrong, on broadly consequentialist grounds (e.g., “the will to life as a whole suffers less” (WWR1, 399n.)) - which seems inconsistent with Schopenhauer’s definition of “wrong” (Puryear 2017, 255).

<sup>10</sup> This point has sometimes been missed. For example, Sandra Shapshay reads Schopenhauer as holding that “an action of moral worth must also be *the* right thing to do” (Shapshay 2019, 162, our emphasis). Note that Schopenhauer has an additional relevant category: duties, as actions that it would be wrong not to perform (see BM, 210). However, this does not meaningfully add to the four tiers, since he does not imply that dutiful actions are better than other actions that are merely not wrong. Nor does it imply there are uniquely right actions. Schopenhauer seems open to there being conflicting duties, generating cases in which every course of action is wrong.

From a certain interpretive perspective, it would not be surprising if the *Neminem* Principle did constitute all of Schopenhauer's normative ethics, since he often aims to reduce philosophy to simple propositions or insights. After all, Schopenhauer claims that his main work, *The World as Will and Representation*, "aims to convey a single thought" (WWR 1, 5). Nonetheless, it turns out, Schopenhauer offers much more than the *Neminem* Principle - not just because he believes there are complications in applying the Principle (which he does<sup>11</sup>), but because he endorses what seem to be distinct evaluative approaches to moral action.

## 1.2. Moral Worth of Actions

One of Schopenhauer's primary aims in BM is to identify "the criterion of actions of moral worth" (BM, 196). He concludes that the criterion is compassion, in which:

the ultimate motivating ground for an action, or an omission, resides directly and exclusively in the *well-being and woe* of someone *other* who is passively involved in it, so that the active party has in view in his acting, or omitting, simply and solely the well-being and woe of *another* and has nothing at all as his end but that the other should remain unharmed, or indeed receive help, support and relief. *This end alone* impresses on an action or omission the stamp of *moral worth* (BM, 199)

Hence, an action's moral worth (or lack thereof) is a function of the agent's motivating ground or end in acting. Actions with moral worth are done from the ground of compassion, which Schopenhauer later argues is constituted by literally feeling others' suffering (something he thinks is possible only if all individuality is merely apparent<sup>12</sup>).

The *Neminem* Principle does not appeal to agents' motivations. Hence, where an action sits in the 4-tier ranking of actions is independent of whether it has moral worth.<sup>13</sup> Consider an action that is done with pure compassion, but results solely in harm: attempting to pull someone away from a dangerous river but instead accidentally knocking them in. Such an action has moral worth, despite being in the fourth, lowest tier.<sup>14</sup> Or consider an egoistic action that harms no one and maximally benefits others – for example, someone who puts out a dangerous fire

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<sup>11</sup> E.g., "in many cases the infinitely... nuanced nature of the situation means that the right choice must flow directly from character: the application of purely abstract maxims either gives the wrong result... or cannot be acted on" (WWR1, 85).

<sup>12</sup> See Marshall 2021a, 787–89.

<sup>13</sup> There is, of course, a thematic link between the *Neminem* Principle and the criterion of moral worth, but we disagree here with commentators such as Cartwright, who claims that the *Neminem* Principle "serves simply to summarize the lines of conduct to which moral worth is attributed" (Cartwright 2012, 255). One complication, pointed out by Puryear, is that Schopenhauer links rightness to motives at WWR 1, 365 (Puryear 2017, 253). Since the *Neminem* Principle aligns with the rightness/wrongness distinction, this would seem to link that principle and the criterion of moral worth. However, in the discussion that immediately follows (WWR 1, 365–66), talk of motive drops out entirely.

<sup>14</sup> Schopenhauer does claim that whoever is "filled with [compassion] will reliably [zuverlässig] injure no one... [and] help everyone, as much as he is able" (BM, 223). Given that Schopenhauer elsewhere recognizes the possibility of mistakes arising from compassion (e.g., FW, 110), however, this can be read as claiming that compassion gives rise to tier 1 actions other things being equal, or in ideal circumstances (see Marshall 2021b, 36).

solely to save themselves, but thereby also saves dozens of others at the same time. That action would have no moral worth, despite being in the first, highest tier. Hence, the *Neminem* Principle and the criterion of moral worth generate distinct rankings of actions.

Setting the *Neminem* Principle aside, it is noteworthy that Schopenhauer's theory of the virtues implies that there are multiple levels of moral worth (contrary to Hamlyn's "simple-minded dichotomy" claim). Within compassion, Schopenhauer distinguishes justice and loving-kindness as the cardinal virtues, from which all other virtues flow (BM, 204). Justice is the first level of compassion and the most fundamental cardinal virtue. Just acts occur when an agent feels enough compassion to prevent myself from harming others (BM, 205). Actions of loving kindness require more. An action done out of loving kindness "does not merely hold me back from injuring the other but actually drives me on to help him" (BM, 216). Compassion, depending on how lively and deeply felt it is, may drive one to help others at a cost to oneself. Some actions of loving kindness "consist in the exertion of my bodily or mental powers . . . in my property, in my health, freedom, and even my life" (BM, 216). Schopenhauer carves out a special category for actions of loving kindness that involve self-sacrifice: these are actions in which compassion "goes as far as magnanimity and noble-mindedness" (BM, 201).<sup>15</sup> His favorite example of noble-mindedness is the folk hero Arnold von Winkelried, whose sacrifice for his native land brought about the Swiss army's victory (WWR 1, 402, 545; BM, 196).

This complexity within Schopenhauer's theory of virtues would seem to imply further differences in the moral worth of actions, and these differences would not always align with rankings based on the *Neminem* Principle. For example, an action done from magnanimity would seem to have the highest level of moral worth. However, such an action could be less than maximally helpful - not all actions of self-sacrifice yield any benefit to others. That would prevent it from occupying the *Neminem* Principle's top tier of actions.

### 1.3. Magnitude of Injustice

In addition to the rankings of actions suggested by the *Neminem* Principle and the criterion of moral worth, Schopenhauer also suggests a way of quantifying the wrongness or injustice of actions:

In every unjust action the wrong is the same in terms of *quality*, namely injury of another... But in terms of *quantity* it can be very different. The difference in the magnitude of wrong does not appear to be property investigated as yet by moral theorists, but is recognized everywhere in real life... Matters are similar with the *justice* of actions. To elucidate this: e.g. someone who steals a loaf of bread when near to death from hunger commits a wrong - but how small his injustice is compared with that of a rich man who in some way deprives a poor man of his last possession... [T]he measure of this highly significant difference in the *quantity* of justice and injustice... is not direct and absolute... but mediate and relative, like that of sines and tangents. I put forward the following formula for this: the magnitude of my action's injustice equals the magnitude of

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<sup>15</sup> The fact that Schopenhauer has this special sub-category within loving kindness is often missed in literature on his theory of virtues. See, e.g., Cartwright 2012 and Hassan 2022.

the ill I inflict on another by it, divided by the magnitude of the advantage I gain by means of it (BM, 209-10)<sup>16</sup>

Schopenhauer does not offer a method of quantifying loving-kindness. A parallel construction, however, would divide the magnitude of the benefit to another by the magnitude of the harm or disadvantage I undergo. To simplify our discussion, though, we focus solely on Schopenhauer's proposed measure of injustice.

Schopenhauer's suggested measure of injustice generates yet another distinct ranking of actions. As with the *Neminem* Principle, the measure makes no reference to an agent's motivations or ends, and concerns solely the resulting harms and benefits. So compare (A) our earlier case of someone accidentally killing while compassionately trying to help with (B) Schopenhauer's case of the poor man stealing bread in order to survive. Only (A), being done from compassion, has moral worth, but since it yields less benefit to the agent and more harm than does (B), it has a greater quantity of injustice than (B). Hence, the magnitude of injustice gives the opposite ranking of these actions than the criterion of moral worth.

The measure of injustice also comes apart from the *Neminem* Principle's 4-tier ranking of actions. This is because the *Neminem* Principle says nothing about whether an action benefits the agent. Recall that the lowest tier is for actions that harm and do not maximally help, while the second lowest tier is for actions that both harm and maximally help. Now, imagine that the poor man in danger of starvation has to push a baker aside to get the loaf of bread, causing a bruise. Despite being in the bottom tier, this quantity of injustice of this action would be low (a bruise divided by averting death). Compare that with a case in which someone helps as much as they can but also causes massive harm: for example, a trolley scenario where a malicious agent's only means of helping anyone (and achieving some mild malicious pleasure) is to save one person by having a trolley run over five other people. Such an action, being maximally helpful, would land in the third tier, but the quantity of injustice would be very high (five deaths divided by some mild malicious pleasure). Hence, Schopenhauer's measure of injustice gives the opposite ranking of these actions than the *Neminem* Principle.

#### 1.4. Expression of Wrongness

Next, consider a passage that appears shortly after Schopenhauer's analysis of wrongness in *The World as Will and Representation*:

the concept of *wrong*... expresses [*drucken... aus*] itself most perfectly, authentically, and palpably in concrete fashion in cannibalism.... After this comes murder...

Intentionally mutilating or even injuring someone else's body - or indeed, any blow - can be seen as essentially the same as murder, differing only in degree. - Wrongdoing

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<sup>16</sup> Taken at face value, this passage commits Schopenhauer to some implausible results, such as there being less injustice or wrongness in murdering 40 people to get 40 cookies (a ratio of 1 death per cookie) than in murdering 2 people to get 1 cookie (a ratio of 2 deaths per cookie). In addition, Schopenhauer's measure of injustice gives no result when there is no benefit to the agent, since this would be a case of dividing by 0. Note that Schopenhauer also offers a similar measure of the justice of omissions, which raises additional questions we cannot explore here.

manifests [*stellt... dar*] itself further in the subjugation of other individuals... and finally in the assault on someone else's property, which, to the extent that we regard it as the fruit of their labour, is essentially the same as slavery, and is related to slavery as a simple injury is to murder (WWR 1, 361-62)

Here, Schopenhauer offers another evaluative ranking, now by appealing to how actions *manifest* wrongdoing or *express* the concept of wrongness. Schopenhauer offers no parallel ranking of rightness or loving-kindness, though we might guess what that ranking might look like.

Though this passage does not offer a general evaluative formula, its ranking of cannibalism below murder is sufficient to make it diverge from the other evaluative scales we have considered. With apologies for this unpleasant exercise of imagination, consider a pacifist cannibal, who merely takes bodies to eat from morgues, and only then when those bodies will not be missed. However disgusting we might find their actions, the cannibal's harmless actions would be only in tier 2 from the *Neminem* Principle. Moreover, if those actions were done out of a compassionate desire to avoid injuring others, they would have more moral worth than actions malicious murder. Finally, since the cannibal's actions bring about no harm, the quantity of injustice in such cannibalism would be nothing, whereas all cases of murder would involve a positive quantity of injustice.<sup>17</sup> Hence, this evaluation in terms of the expression of the concept of wrongness yields different rankings from the other evaluations.

### 1.5. Eternal Justice

Finally, in §63 of WWR 1, Schopenhauer offers an account of eternal justice. Because, in his view, everything is an appearance of the same fundamental will,

[e]verything that happens to the individual - indeed everything that can happen - is always right [*Recht*].... Eternal justice is at work: if human beings were not on the whole worthless, then their fate would not be on the whole so sad. (WWR 1, 378)

Later, he describes eternal justice as a "balancing scale inseparably connecting the evil of the offence with the evil of the punishment" (WWR 1, 381). Like compassion, Schopenhauer holds, recognizing eternal justice requires one to see beyond the realm of appearance into how things are in themselves (see WWR 1, 380-81), though when consciousness of eternal justice is "misunderstood and falsified by the unclarified intellect," it becomes the source of satisfaction in punishing individuals for their misdeeds (WWR 1, 384).<sup>18</sup> While he is explicit that eternal justice is a merely one species of justice, Schopenhauer does not claim that the notion of right he

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<sup>17</sup> It is possible that, in the relevant passage, Schopenhauer is focused on murderous cannibalism. Even so, it is hard to see how cannibalism would rank below murder by other evaluative measures. As Bill Waterson's character Calvin proposes: "cannibalism ought to be considered grounds for leniency in murders, since it's less wasteful" (*Calvin and Hobbes*; June 3, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Part of the difference between compassion and insights into eternal justice is that, in compassion, we supposedly feel others' suffering (see BM, 203), whereas this does not appear to be part of the recognition of eternal justice (for more on this aspect of compassion, see Marshall 2021a).

invokes here is merely one species - instead, this seems to be an application of his general definition of right in terms of injuring or harming others. For if the difference between individuals is merely apparent, then no harm is ultimately harm to an *other*. Hence, “[t]he tormenter and the tormented are one” (WWR 1, 381), which Schopenhauer takes as vindicating the Christian doctrine of original sin (WWR 2, 618).

For our purposes, Schopenhauer's key claim is that, when it comes to eternal injustice, everything that happens to any individual is right. The distinctness of this ranking of actions from the four others is straightforward. For all actions impact some other individual, and if everything that happens to any individual is right, then all actions are right. From the perspective of eternal justice, and only from this perspective, are all actions ranked as equivalent.

## 2. Towards A Coherent Reading of Schopenhauer's Evaluative Rankings

We have seen that Schopenhauer's normative ethics includes more than the *Neminem* Principle, despite his claim that the latter is *the* basic principle of ethics. To be sure, Schopenhauer might just be massively inconsistent, and the divergences we described between different rankings might just show that his normative ethics is a jumble of loosely-related ideas. We take that interpretive possibility seriously, and acknowledge there are textual reasons in favor of it.<sup>19</sup> In this section, however, we explore a more charitable approach that makes Schopenhauer's normative ethics internally coherent.<sup>20</sup>

Our explanation has two steps. First, we draw on Timothy Scanlon's distinction between two dimensions in the moral assessment of actions, suggesting that Schopenhauer can similarly be understood as offering multiple dimensions of assessment. Second, we consider the role of principles in Schopenhauer's moral psychology, with the aim of showing why Schopenhauer's “basic principle of ethics” is so simple, containing no hint of the multiple dimensions of his normative ethics.

### 2.1. Moral Dimensions

Consider a case from post-Schopenhauerian ethics: during a war, a military officer decides to bomb a building containing both enemy combatants and civilians. According to the Doctrine of Double Effect, whether the action of bombing is permissible can depend on the officer's intentions, in particular, whether the officer *intended* to kill the civilians or else merely

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<sup>19</sup> One concerning fact is that Schopenhauer's terminology does not consistently align with the distinctions described in Section 1. For example, he states that the *Neminem* Principle identifies which actions have moral worth (*moralischen Werth*) (BM, 139), which would blur the first distinction from the previous section. Similarly, Schopenhauer elsewhere says that wrongness hinges on an agent's aim in acting (WWR 1, 364), which contradicts his definition of wrongness in terms of harm or the boundaries of another's will (though see Puryear 2017). Even on a charitable reading, therefore, we must grant that Schopenhauer's presentation of his normative ethics is messy.

<sup>20</sup> A different approach to making Schopenhauer's views coherent was suggested to us by David Bather Woods: perhaps some evaluative rankings are downstream of others. For example, perhaps the tiers of the *Neminem* Principle apply only to actions that already meet the criterion of moral worth. We believe this approach is worth exploring, but will not attempt to do so here.



foresaw that they would be killed. Against the Doctrine of Double Effect, Scanlon argues that we should distinguish the *permissibility* of an action from its *meaning*, where the latter is “the significance, for the agent and others, of the agent’s willingness to perform that action for the reasons he or she does.”<sup>21</sup> According to Scanlon, an action’s permissibility does not essentially depend on an agent’s intentions or reasons. On the other hand, Scanlon claims, an action’s meaning does so depend, and meaning is what matters most to praise, blame, guilt, and related moral reactions. Hence, on Scanlon’s view, while the bombing might be permissible or impermissible regardless of the officer’s reasons for doing it, the action has a very different meaning if it was done with the intention of killing civilians than if that killing was merely foreseen, and so could call for different moral reactions.

Scanlon ties the permissibility/meaning distinction to two roles that moral principles can have, where some principles are used by agents in deliberation about what it is permissible to do, while other principles are used in assessing the meaning of others’ actions. The former sort of principle can ignore agents’ intentions, whereas the latter sort of principle should take them into account. Because of this, the different sorts of principles might rank actions differently, e.g., a principle of permissibility might rank two actions as equivalent, while a principle of meaning might rank one above the other.

We suggest that Schopenhauer’s complex normative ethics can be understood along broadly similar lines, though with more dimensions than Scanlon describes.

First, the *Neminem* Principle offers direct guidance on how to act, and is arguably a Scanlonian principle of permissibility (though it is not obvious whether the tiers implied by the *Neminem* Principle line up with the contemporary permissible/impermissible distinction<sup>22</sup>). This principle is meant to guide agents in their actions, and this is plausibly why Schopenhauer gives it an imperatival form (more on this below). It is a principle whose home is the point of view of the acting agent.

Second, the criterion of moral worth is meant to describe which actions call for our moral praise and blame, and so is not directly tied to the acting agent’s point of view. Schopenhauer’s views on praise and blame support this reading. According to Schopenhauer, a person’s “actions are... imputable to him morally” only when they are the “pure result” of “the individual character of the human being” (FW, 110) or, as he says elsewhere, “in what [an agent] *is* resides blame and merit” (BM, 174, see also PP 2, 214, WWR 2, 606). Character, for Schopenhauer, is sharply distinguished from intellect, which is why the harm that results when one accidentally “pours out poison instead of medicine” is not “morally imputable” (FW, 110). Actions therefore have a certain meaning because of what they proclaim about the agent’s character: “Every good deed done with pure intention proclaims that he who commits it stands diametrically opposed to the world of appearance” (PP 2, 199). Yet virtuous agents are not primarily concerned with what is imputable to them, but instead with what will harm or help others. So we can expect these first two dimensions to come apart.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Scanlon 2010, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Schopenhauer would say that all wrong actions are impermissible. However, taken at face-value, the *Neminem* Principle itself demands helping as much as one can as unconditionally as it demands not harming. So even if not harming is sufficient for not acting wrongly, the *Neminem* Principle demands more than not acting wrongly.

<sup>23</sup> See also WWR 1, 371 on the “inner meaning” of right and wrong.

So far, Schopenhauer's dimensions line up relatively neatly with Scanlon's. We propose, next, though, that Schopenhauer's measure of the magnitude of injustice is an interesting mixed case. Like the *Neminem* Principle, it does not directly concern agents' motivations, and instead considers only amounts of harming and helping. Like the criterion of actions' moral worth, however, it is not supposed to play a role in agents' deliberations. Schopenhauer claims that magnitudes of injustice shape other moral reactions, namely, indignation, and whether something is seen as an "abomination," such as when Dante assigns traitors to the lowest circle of Hell (BM, 210).

Not coincidentally, we think, Schopenhauer offers his measure for the magnitude of injustice immediately after describing how, in his view, law-giving in a state should adopt the doctrine of right (*Rechtslehre*) from morality in order to ensure that "no one should *suffer* wrong" (BM, 209), but without regard for what intentions lead to that wrong. Attitudes like indignation have a more social character than praise or blame. Hence, adapting Scanlon's terminology, we might distinguish between actions' *individual meaning* and their *social meaning*. Both impact our moral reactions, but while actions' individual meaning shapes reactions concerning individual agents' characters, actions' social meaning shapes social reactions such as outrage we feel on behalf of some group.<sup>24</sup> We suggest, therefore, that Schopenhauer's rankings of actions in terms of the magnitude of their injustice concerns their social meaning, while the criterion of moral worth concerns their individual meaning.

Next, when Schopenhauer ranks actions in terms of how well they express the concept of wrongness, we suggest his concern is simultaneously aesthetic and moral: how clearly an action presents the ultimate nature of injustice or wrongness. In Schopenhauer's aesthetics, the value of a piece of (non-musical) art is partly a function of how clearly it manifests an unchanging Platonic idea.<sup>25</sup> For example, architecture, as a fine art, presents universal qualities such as gravity, cohesion, and rigidity (WWR 1, 239), while a successful work of tragic drama portrays "the terrible aspect of life" (WWR 1, 280). Even apart from the fine arts, "every existing thing can be considered purely objectively and apart from all relation... making the thing an expression of an Idea" (WWR 1, 234).

How does this connect to wrongness or injustice? For Schopenhauer, injustice arises because "the will needs to live off itself because there is nothing outside of it and it is a hungry will" (WWR 1, 179). Cannibalism (murderous or not) might not be the main thing that compassionate agents aim to avoid, the main action that elicits blame, or the worst social abomination, but it can nevertheless manifest or display the ugly root of injustice more clearly than any other action.<sup>26</sup> Rankings of actions along this aesthetic-moral dimension are therefore understandably distinct from other rankings.

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<sup>24</sup> For something like this distinction, see Strawson 1962 on personal vs. vicarious reactive attitudes. See BM, 224 on cheating a rich man vs. a poor man out of a hundred thalers (which are both unjust, but the latter shows more of a lack of compassion), with the differences in "the reproaches of conscience and the blame from impartial witnesses." None of this is to say that Schopenhauer's measures of injustice get the matter right as presented – the problems noted above with the measure remain to be addressed.

<sup>25</sup> See (Shapshay 2012).

<sup>26</sup> See also PP 2, 183 on "internal truths". It would seem to follow that, when considered in an aesthetic mode, cannibalism is beautiful, since Schopenhauer takes "beauty" to express our cognition of an Idea in a thing. Yet Schopenhauer is committed to this anyway, since he claims that, considered in the appropriate way, "everything is beautiful" (WWR 1, 234). Even so, he allows that some things are

Finally, evaluations of actions in terms of eternal justice resemble those expressed in the *Neminem* Principle, but are made at a level of metaphysical insight that is incompatible with ordinary deliberation about how to act. Eternal justice concerns whether one being ever harms a distinct being, and since no beings are fundamentally distinct, the resulting evaluation is always the same. Ordinary deliberation about how to act, however, always occurs from a non-fundamental perspective, since ordinary deliberation takes beings to be distinct. The same is true with compassion, though matters are more complicated here. Schopenhauer is explicit that, in compassion, we recognize the otherness of the person suffering (BM, 203). So the dimension of eternal justice is distinct from that of even compassionate agents who engage with others.<sup>27</sup>

In sum, Schopenhauer's five distinct types of action evaluation can be understood as evaluations of five independent dimensions of actions, as opposed to indications of indecisiveness on Schopenhauer's part.<sup>28</sup> To be sure, one could raise further questions about the consistency of Schopenhauer's normative ethics, and we have not argued that all of Schopenhauer's ethical writings fit with our interpretive proposal. But similar challenges face interpreters of any complex ethical system.

## 2.2. The *Neminem* Principle Revisited

The previous subsection offered a partial explanation of why Schopenhauer claims that the *Neminem* Principle is basic: it is basic *within* one dimension of moral assessment, which is consistent with other dimensions being governed by distinct rules. Nonetheless, we might still ask why does the principle not provide agents some guidance on how to differentiate actions within each tier and why it does not even hint at the other four dimensions of moral assessment?<sup>29</sup>

To answer these questions, it will help to consider how Schopenhauer understands moral principles. In particular, consider what Schopenhauer says about moral principles as "reservoirs":

out of the recognition of the suffering that every unjust action necessarily brings upon others, a recognition attained once and for all and sharpened by the feeling of enduring

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humanly impossible to consider in an aesthetic light, including disgusting things (WWR 1, 232-33), and this is plausibly the case with cannibalism.

<sup>27</sup> For more, see Marshall 2021a. Though Schopenhauer suggests the same cognition is involved in understanding the essence of virtue and in understanding eternal justice (WWR 1 2:418), understanding the essence of virtue is different from having compassion, that is, from being virtuous.

<sup>28</sup> Schopenhauer arguably has two other evaluative, though less purely ethical, approaches to actions: one concerning whether actions bring us closer to ascetic resignation and one connected to ideal agency or acquired character. For relevant discussions, see Woods 2021, Hassan 2021, and Sean Murphy's contribution to this volume.

<sup>29</sup> Hassan claims that the principle is meant merely as a heuristic, and suggests it might be understood on the model of moral principles in a contemporary particularist moral framework (Hassan, 2022). We think this is a useful comparison. However, contemporary particularists typically hold that, for an agent in a specific circumstance, there are fine-grained facts about which actions it would be better or worse to perform, so that heuristics are useful as approximations of those fine-grained facts. For Schopenhauer, however, there are few fine-grained moral facts (perhaps only within the dimension of the magnitude of injustice), so the role of principles is fundamentally different.

a wrong... the maxim 'Harm no one' emerges in noble minds, and rational deliberation elevates it to the firm resolve, formed once and for all, to respect the rights of everyone... For although principles and abstract cognition in general are in no way the original source or prime basis of all morals, yet they are indispensable for a moral life, as the contained, the reservoir in which the disposition that has risen out of the source of all morality... 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 (BM, 205-206)

Here, Schopenhauer describes the three-step origin and the psychological role of moral principles. Both shed light on why moral principles, of which the *Neminem* Principle is the most basic, must be simple.

First, the psychological and epistemological origin of moral principles is course-grained: a general recognition ("attained once and for all") of the suffering that results from unjust action.<sup>30</sup> That recognition is then "sharpened" by the feeling of enduring a wrong, but this sharpening sounds more like a matter of increased force than of increased precision. Finally, "rational deliberation" elevates this representation to a firm resolve concerning respecting others' rights. This resolve is "formed once and for all," though. The primary role of rationality here is again not to add precision, but to add firmness.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, on Kant's view, moral principles arise from reason itself, and so can arguably be expected to involve rational precision from the start.

Second, the role of moral principles is to ward off anti-moral incentives: egoism and malice. Schopenhauer holds that "[e]veryone bears something downright bad inside, morally speaking" (PP 2, 191), and that egoism "towers over the world" (BM, 190). Rationally determining which action is ethically optimal is not a luxury that Schopenhauer grants us - instead, principles offer a blunt psychological tool for restraining egoism and malice. So, to be useful, the *Neminem* Principle needs to be simple and absolute. A more complex principle that nodded to the other dimensions of moral assessment would stand less of a chance of helping avert unjust actions, since it would require more thought to apply. Likewise, a less absolutist principle that allowed for occasional harm and less-than-maximum help could too easily be co-opted by egoism (see WWR 2, 229). The *Neminem* Principle therefore sets absolute demands of no harm and maximum help even though Schopenhauer thinks that many actions that score high on some moral dimensions fall short of tier 1 of the *Neminem* Principle.

In sum: the *Neminem* Principle is simple because of Schopenhauer's anti-rationalist moral psychology, which gives moral principles a specific and limited role, not because he himself does not have more to say about normative ethics.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> By contrast, concrete instances of compassion can involve the apprehension of particular individuals' suffering (see Marshall 2021a, 790–92).

<sup>31</sup> To be sure, adding firmness to moral principles is not the only role Schopenhauer gives reason in agency. See, e.g., WWR 1, 112, 331-32.

<sup>32</sup> Schopenhauer took one moral paragon to be irrational in his finest moment: "when Arnold von Winkelried, with excessive magnanimity, caught all the enemy spears with his own body in order to secure victory and salvation for his countrymen, who would praise this as an extremely *rational* deed?" (WWR 1, 545).

### 3. An Objection: Misplaced Compassion in Oppressive Systems

Though we do not have space to argue this here, we believe the above explanation can address some objections that have been raised to Schopenhauer's ethics.<sup>33</sup> In this final section, though, we describe what we see as a serious objection to his system: none of his dimensions of moral evaluation appropriately condemn actions motivated by compassion that occur in the context of oppressive systems.<sup>34</sup>

To be fair, Schopenhauer was an impressive critic of some oppressive systems, at least in comparison to other 19th century German philosophers. He repeatedly condemned practices of slavery and of cruelty to non-humans,<sup>35</sup> and accused other philosophers of promoting harmful complacency.<sup>36</sup> His normative ethics, as we've interpreted it, is also well-equipped to identify various problems connected to social and political justice.

However, consider a passage in which Schopenhauer describes some moral paragons:

if there is a threat to the collective well-being or the lives of the majority of individuals, this can outweigh any concern over your own individual welfare. In such a case, the character who has achieved the highest goodness and the most perfect magnanimity will sacrifice his life completely for the good of many others: this is how Codrus died, as well as Leonidas, Regulus, Decius Mus, Arnold von Winkelried, and everyone else who freely and consciously goes to a certain death for the sake of family or fatherland. (WWR 1, 402)

At first pass, this might sound unobjectionable. But notice that Schopenhauer does not consider whether the "family or fatherland" for these characters sacrificed themselves were oppressive ones. They were: Codrus, Leonidas, Regulus, and Decius Mus all presided (or supposedly presided) over states (Athens, Sparta, and Rome) in which slavery was common practice, and the Old Swiss Confederacy for which von Winkelried sacrificed himself was not without problems.

The type of case we think Schopenhauer's ethics gets wrong has this structure: a member of an oppressive class, out of compassion for other members of that same class, acts to preserve the status quo. The problem will be clearest if we assume (breaking with Schopenhauer's examples) that the oppressive class forms the majority of the population in the relevant family or fatherland, and that a change to the status quo would make things dramatically better for the oppressed class. It is clear, in our view, that defenses of the status quo out of compassion would be morally problematic, but none of the five dimensions of Schopenhauer's normative ethics implies this. That is because all these dimensions focus either

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<sup>33</sup> See Marshall 2021b for a review of some objections.

<sup>34</sup> David Bather Woods argues (convincingly) that Schopenhauer's *political philosophy* supports systems of exploitation and oppression, but holds that his moral system "naturally lends itself to the moral criticism of exploitative behaviors" (Woods 2017, 316). For criticisms of Schopenhauer with some similarity to ours, see Atwell 1990, 109-13 and Cartwright 2012, 258.

<sup>35</sup> See Woods 2017, 314–15, Puryear 2017, 259-61, and Shapshay 2019, 181–82 for helpful discussions.

<sup>36</sup> For example, he accuses "the renewed Spinozism of our day" of turning ethics "into a mere introduction to a proper life in the state or the family, and it is this life, a complete, methodical, smug, and comfortable philistinism, that is supposed to be the final goal of human existence" (WWR 2, 605).

on features of the agent or on how the agent immediately impacts others - no factor allows for moral assessment specifically in terms of broader social context or impact.

First, actions of misplaced compassion could land in the highest tier of actions defined by the *Neminem* Principle. When Arnold von Winkelried, “embrac[es] as many enemy spears as he could” (BM, 196), this might harm no one and help as much as he can - though the help would be exclusive to other members of the oppressive class.<sup>37</sup> Second, such acts would have the highest kind of moral worth, demonstrating noble-mindedness or magnanimity - for Schopenhauer defines these virtues primarily by compassionate self-sacrifice, without constraints on who one should sacrifice for.<sup>38</sup> Third, since this kind of act need not *itself* harm others, it might have no quantity of injustice, despite indirectly helping maintain an oppressive system.<sup>39</sup> If, as we suggested above, the magnitude of injustice concerns the social meaning of actions, then the failure of this measure to take account for broader social contexts is especially concerning. Fourth, Schopenhauer plausibly takes such acts to most clearly express the nature of compassion. Recall that his aesthetics involves considering an object in isolation from all relations to other objects, and solely as the manifestation of an unchanging Platonic Idea. Because aesthetic-moral evaluation leaves out consideration of relations to other objects, it cannot take into account whether an action helps preserve an unjust system. Finally, since eternal justice yields the same ranking of all actions, nothing in that dimension of assessment would single out oppression-preserving actions as particularly problematic.

One could, of course, *modify* Schopenhauer’s ethics to avoid these consequences. But these modifications would have to be far-reaching. Even if Schopenhauer did better on some sociopolitical issues than did, say, Hegel, his ethical views nevertheless show a certain level of political complacency. This is suggested by his characterizations of morally ideal agents:

the good character lives in an external world homogeneous with his essence: others for him are not not-I, but are ‘I once more.’ Thus his primordial relationship to everyone is one of friendship: he feels himself akin to all beings inside, immediately participates with sympathy in their well-being and woe, and presupposes with confidence the same participation on their part. Out of this grows the profound peace inside him and the reassuring, calm, satisfied mood that makes everyone feel good in his presence... The magnanimous man who forgives his enemy and repays evil with good is elevated and gains the highest praise (BM 254-55, see also WWR 1, 400-401)

In a truly egalitarian society, it could be morally appropriate to regard all others as friends, feel calm and satisfied, and repay all evil with good. However, this kind of attitude seems far from ideal in a society where systematic change is needed. Someone who felt a general calm

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<sup>37</sup> Crucially, the harm that Schopenhauer attributes to an action is always one of more or less immediate effects (or omissions).

<sup>38</sup> Hence, Schopenhauer’s system seems poorly equipped to condemn what Kate Manne labels ‘himpathy’ (Manne 2017).

<sup>39</sup> One could, of course, have a more expansive notion of harming, on which any action that helps uphold a harmful system thereby counts as harmful. Schopenhauer’s notion of harm does not appear to be that expansive, however.

satisfaction while benefiting (however indirectly) from practices of slavery in their society should hardly count as a “good character.” Along these lines, Schopenhauer suggests that the “really proper mode of address between human beings” might be, “my fellow-sufferer” (PP 2, 273) - which itself may show a lack of sensitivity to the differences between the moral situations of the oppressed and the oppressors (imagine a slaveholder addressing a slave in such terms!).<sup>40</sup>

For similar reasons, Schopenhauer does not seem equipped to appropriately assess the moral appropriateness of anger and indignation on the part of the oppressed.<sup>41</sup> It is hard to see how oppressed people could see their oppressors as friendly, or how they could presuppose sympathetic participation from their oppressors. Tellingly, Schopenhauer gives the example of a poor man who returns a rich man’s lost purse (BM, 209), and counts this as an exemplary instance of justice - not considering whether the rich man’s wealth might be the result of an unjust system. Seeing ethics as rooted in something deeper than the world of individuals and their contingent relations therefore seems to lead Schopenhauer to overlook moral problems arising from contingent (but morally significant) differences in social positions and levels of participation in oppressive systems.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have argued that Schopenhauer’s normative ethics is not, as Hamlyn and Young suggest, simplistic. Instead, Schopenhauer can be read as offering five dimensions of moral assessment for actions. This five-dimensional view, we believe, is attractive in various respects, and deserves attention from contemporary ethicists. Even so, we do not claim that Schopenhauer’s ethics is unproblematic. In particular, it seems to fail to condemn a range of actions involving misplaced compassion. However, no major ethical system in Western philosophy is without apparent problems, and perhaps further examination of Schopenhauer’s system will be fruitful, as have, e.g., careful examinations of Kant’s ethics.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Though see Shapshay 2019 for a convincing argument that Schopenhauer recognized some differences in suffering.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Cherry 2021.

<sup>42</sup> For helpful comments and discussion, we would like to thank David Bather Woods, Patrick Hassan, Sean Murphy, Stephen Puryear, Sandy Shapshay, and Aaron Barker.

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