

TEACHING ETHICS WITHOUT CONFUSING QUESTIONS ILLUSTRATED BY THE EXAMPLE OF SCHOPENHAUER'S ETHICS

Matthias Holweger
Robert-Bosch-Gymnasium Wendlingen
matthias@uli-holweger.de

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Abstract

Like many other philosophical disciplines, ethics is sometimes highly abstract. And many key notions of the discipline are vague, ambiguous or both. Abstractness, vagueness, and ambiguity invite confusion. My objective in this paper is to draw attention to a serious problem that, despite being widespread, has so far remained largely unrecognized: the confusion of different questions in teaching ethics. This confusion occurs, for example, when a philosopher's viewpoint is presented as an answer to one question, but in fact, the philosopher is addressing a *different* question with that viewpoint. In the first part of this paper, I will present and clarify several ethical questions that are often confused, and point out damaging consequences that the confusion of such questions entails. In the second part, I will demonstrate the confusion of ethical questions by drawing attention to cases of confused teaching of Schopenhauer's ethics. Finally, for those interested, I outline how Schopenhauer's ethics could be taught without confusion.

Keywords: Teaching Ethics, Confusion, Moral Worth, Moral Motivation, Rightness, Schopenhauer's Ethics.

1. Introduction

Serious engagement with ethics is challenging for both experts and students for several reasons, including the following two. First, many of its questions are highly abstract. Consider questions such as "What is the foundation of morality?", "What determines the moral status of actions?", "Are moral judgements truth-apt?", "What is the relationship between justice and morality?". Secondly, many of its key terms are vague, ambiguous, or both. Think of terms such as "ethics", "morality", "morals", "moral status", "moral worth", "good", "bad", "right", "wrong", "ought", "duty", "obligation", "value", "virtue", "deontology" and "consequentialism". Abstractness, vagueness, and ambiguity invite confusion. Therefore, special caution is required when dealing with ethics. Alas, this caution is lacking all too often, and so the confusions take their course.

My objective in this paper is to draw attention to the problem of confusing different questions in teaching ethics. This confusion occurs, for example, when a philosopher's viewpoint is presented as an answer to one question, but in fact, the philosopher is addressing a *different* question with that viewpoint. Despite being widespread, this problem has so far remained largely unrecognized.

The rest of this paper is divided into three parts. Part one presents and clarifies several ethical questions that are often confused (section 2) and explains why confusing such questions is a serious problem (section 3). Part two demonstrates this problem in the example of Schopenhauer's ethics: I first give a brief account of it (section 4) and then present several

teaching proposals on it that are subject to the confusion of different questions (section 5). Part three suggests, for those interested, how Schopenhauer's ethics could be taught without confusion (section 6).

2. Questions Often Confused

The list of questions I present in this section is not exhaustive. I focus on questions that arise in the treatment of Schopenhauer's ethics. However, I would like to emphasize that these questions are also confused in other contexts.

I call the first question the "Question of Moral Worth". Here it is applied to *actions*, for it is confused with other questions particularly when actions are concerned.

The Question of Moral Worth:

What are the conditions under which an action has moral worth?

In moral-philosophical debates, the term "moral worth" is conventionally used to refer to the property of actions by virtue of which an agent deserves *moral praise* for that action.¹ "Moral praise" is praise based on *moral* grounds.

Mary may deserve *some* praise for her athletic skills, but they certainly do not give rise to *moral* praise. On the other hand, when Mary risks her own life for a good purpose without selfish intent, it seems intuitive to say that she deserves *moral* praise for that.

Actions of moral worth are sometimes called "moral" actions (as opposed to "immoral" actions), or "morally good" actions (as opposed to "morally bad" actions). Actions of moral worth are characteristic of good, or morally minded, people.

The next question can be called the "Question of Moral Motivation".

The Question of Moral Motivation:

What motivates a person to perform actions of moral worth?

Once we have identified the conditions under which an action has moral worth, we have not yet clarified what (if anything) *motivates* a person to perform such actions. Suppose for the sake of illustration, that altruistic actions, and *only* altruistic actions, have moral worth. Then, the Question of Moral Motivation boils down to the question of what (if anything) motivates a person to perform altruistic actions.

Another, distinct question is the "Question of Rightness".

The Question of Rightness:

What are the conditions for an action to be the right action?

¹ Cf., e.g., Kant 1911: 398; Dahl 1986: 369; Arpaly 2002: 224 and Markovits 2010: 203.

As the term is commonly used in the relevant debates, *the right action* is the action that *ought to be performed, all other things considered*.² And usually, no distinction is made (or seen) between *performing the right action* and *doing the right thing*.³

Just as there are different kinds of *ought*⁴, there are different kinds of *rightness*. Thus, “the” Question of Rightness actually covers several distinct questions. For example, we can distinguish between “self-regarding”, “other-regarding” and “universal” rightness. *Self-regarding* rightness is rightness regarding oneself. Pete may ask himself: “Should I spend a quiet evening at home, or should I rather go to the birthday party? What would be the right thing for me to do?” Correspondingly, *other-regarding* rightness is rightness regarding others⁵, and *universal* rightness is rightness in regard to any bearer of value. Performing animal experiments for human medical purposes is clearly wrong in the *other-regarding* sense, when focussing on the laboratory animals as the “others”, because they would be better off without such experiments. However, it may be argued that performing such experiments is right in the *universal* sense, because such experiments (supposedly) produce more overall good than harm.

Another distinction, which cuts across the one just discussed, is that between “subjective” and “objective” rightness, where subjective rightness is *rightness in light of the agent’s epistemic situation*, and “objective” rightness is *rightness in light of the facts*.⁶

Suppose all the evidence points to Pete being Mary’s murderer. Based on this, Pete receives a fifteen-year prison sentence. However, after five years, new evidence reveals that Pete was wrongly convicted. Someone else was the actual murderer. With the distinction introduced, we could (arguably) say that the conviction was both right and wrong, meaning it was *subjectively* right but *objectively* wrong.

Apparently, debates in applied ethics are often about *universal objective* rightness. Thus, many so-called “ethical” questions apparently refer to this kind of rightness; for example, the question of whether it is right to test on animals for medical purposes, the question of whether active euthanasia should be legalized, or the question of whether homosexual couples should be allowed to have children.

A conceptual problem arises from the fact that many people refer to universal rightness with the term “*moral* rightness”. Given the ordinary sense of the term, this is inadequate. This can be seen by considering the following example:

Suppose Pete has a tasty cookie, which he can either eat or give to Mary. Pete knows that even though Mary likes these kinds of cookies, he would derive far more pleasure from it than

² Sometimes, people also speak of “a” right action. Cf., e.g., Bentham 1789: Ch. I, paragraph X. By this, they seem to refer to an action that ought to be performed, all other things *equal*. In the present context, I focus on “the” right action.

³ Besides, “doing the right thing” and “acting rightly” are sometimes used interchangeably. Given the ordinary meanings of these terms, this is potentially misleading. See Singer 1977: 75 and Audi 2021.

⁴ See, e.g., Wedgwood 2016: 147-8.

⁵ The term “others” is to be understood in a broad sense in which it covers any potential bearer of value that is not part of the subject.

⁶ This, or a relevantly similar distinction, is endorsed or discussed by Prichard 1933; Ross 1939: ch. 7; Russell 1966: sect. 3; Broad 1985: ch. 3; Feldman 1988; Hudson 1989; Jackson 1991; Howard-Snyder 2005; Zimmerman 2008; Sepielli 2009; Graham 2010; Smith 2010; Kiesewetter 2011; Parfit 2011: ch. 7; Dorsey 2012; Feldman 2012; Olsen 2017; Fassio 2022 and Feldman 2022.

Mary. Nevertheless, he altruistically gives her the cookie.⁷ Considering the case as such, Pete’s action was wrong in the universal sense. But was it *morally* wrong? Apparently not. Such cases suggest that morality is, by its very nature, (exclusively) *other-regarding*, being (exclusively) concerned with the well-being of others.⁸ Thus, it may be suggested that moral rightness may be identified, not with *universal*, but with *other-regarding* rightness. At first glance, this seems like a plausible idea. This is not the place to settle this matter conclusively. For the present purpose, it is sufficient to see that we must be very careful when there is talk of “moral” rightness.

Given the distinctions introduced in this section, we can derive at least *six* questions associated with the term “the right action”, as illustrated in Table 1. All these questions aim at something different and therefore must carefully be kept apart.

The question of ...					
... subjective objective ...		
...self-regarding rightness	...other-regarding rightness	... universal rightness	...self-regarding rightness	...other-regarding rightness	... universal rightness

Tab 1. *Questions associated with the term “the right action”*

Objective (other-regarding or universal) rightness is sometimes confused with moral worth. However, there is a difference between doing something of moral worth and doing the right thing (in the objective other-regarding or universal sense).⁹ A company may do the right thing by making a big donation to an effective charity, but if they are doing it *solely* for the sake of their own image, then they do not seem to deserve *moral* praise for their action. Therefore, in such a case, their donation does not seem to have any moral worth. After all, they would not have made the donation, had they not hoped to improve their image in so doing. Thus, even if in some sense they have done something good and desirable, *moral* praise seems inappropriate.

Arguably, the reverse is the case when someone gives good-intentioned advice that results in overall negative consequences. For example, imagine Pete advising his depressed friend to drink alcohol every now and then as a means of getting into a better mood. One could argue that Pete deserves at least *some* moral praise for his action. After all, he shows genuine care for his friend’s well-being by giving him some good-intentioned advice.¹⁰ But in a certain sense, he quite probably did not do the right thing. He should have reflected more carefully to come up with advice that, instead of potentially harming his friend, is more likely to help him.

⁷ This is a variation of an example used by Michael Huemer 2022 to argue against utilitarianism. See also Stocker 1976: 207 for another illustrative example, where only the agent herself is involved.

⁸ This view is most explicitly endorsed by Finlay 2007; Gronholz 2018 and O’Hara 2018: Ch. 3.

⁹ Cf. Moore 1912: 188-9, 192-4; Prichard 1912: 26-7; Ross 1928-9: 251-2; Ross 2002: 7, 156; Broad 1928: 297; Ross 1930: 7; Frankena 1980: 48-9; Dahl 1986: 370; Sverdlik 1996: 330; Arpaly 2002: 224; Spielthener 2003: 284 and Driver 2022.

¹⁰ There are divergent intuitions about such cases. Some believe that *rightness* is necessary for actions of moral worth. See, e.g., Arpaly 2002: 226; Markovits 2010: 205; Sliwa 2015; Fearnley 2022: 2888 and Driver 2022. But even they agree that rightness and moral worthiness are two different things. Making this clear is the only thing I am pursuing in the present context.

The final question I want to present is what I call the “Question of Determining Rightness”.

The Question of Determining Rightness:

How can we determine what would be the right thing to do in a particular situation?

This question can be interpreted in different ways, depending on what kind of rightness we have in mind. But no matter what kind of rightness is at stake, it is a distinct question.

Consider this analogy: I may know the conditions for a person to be an “evil” person. But this does not mean that I know how I can determine in a concrete situation whether a certain person is evil or not. In the same way, one may know the conditions for an action to be the “right” action, without thereby knowing how to determine in a concrete situation *which* of the available actions satisfies these conditions.

On standard interpretations, prominent examples of procedures that are supposed to help determining whether an action is the “right” action in a given situation are Bentham’s “hedonic calculus” and Kant’s method of applying the “categorical imperative”.¹¹

3. Why Confusing Distinct Questions is a Serious Problem

Before demonstrating the confusion of ethical questions by the example of Schopenhauer’s ethics, I shall briefly explain *why* such a confusion is a serious problem by pointing out several damaging consequences of it.

Non-Understanding. An obvious problem is that students cannot understand a subject properly if it is being taught in a confused way. Without question, teaching something the students will not properly understand is unfortunate.

Opportunity Costs. Among other things, this entails opportunity costs. With the given resources, another subject could have been taught from which the students would have benefited more. In practice, these costs are all the higher the more often confused teaching takes place. Since confused teaching is widespread, it is safe to assume that these costs are indeed very high.

Failure to Master Ethical Judgment. A problem related to non-understanding is that failing to distinguish basic ethical questions in our teaching, students will then, with great probability, also fail to distinguish these questions. And if they fail to distinguish these questions, then we cannot expect them to have a proper understanding of any of these individual questions. For instance, if you do not realize that Bentham is talking about something different when he presents the hedonic calculus than Schopenhauer is when he states that non-egoism is necessary for acts of moral worth, then you are not only confused, you also do not seem to properly understand the Question of Rightness and the Question of Moral Worth *as such*. Otherwise, you would be expected to *notice* that neither philosopher is addressing the other’s question at all. Now, if students do not have a proper understanding of basic ethical questions, then we certainly cannot expect them to achieve what many ethics curricula state as a major objective: the mastery of “ethical judgement”. For such a mastery clearly presupposes that one understands the questions addressed by ethical judgement.

¹¹ In the case of Kant, this standard interpretation is doubtful. But that should not concern us further in the present context.

Confused Understanding. Above, I stated that teaching a subject in a confused way inevitably results in students not properly understanding that subject. It is important to see that confused teaching not only entails a mere (partial) *non*-understanding of a subject, but it also entails a *confused* understanding of that subject. A “confused understanding” of a subject is characterized by the fact that one has not (properly) understood the subject while *believing* that one has. In general, a confused understanding may have more damaging effects than a mere conscious lack of understanding. Those who are aware of not understanding a subject tend – rightly – to feel incompetent to make relevant decisions. Those who falsely believe they understand a topic tend to feel competent to make relevant decisions. Those decisions will tend to be wrong, because a confused understanding of a topic involves false beliefs and false beliefs tend to cause wrong decisions. The more responsibility that comes with a decision, the more damage can result from a wrong decision.

It should also be noted that if you think you understand a subject without actually understanding it, you are unlikely to feel compelled to reflect on your own understanding and revise it if necessary. A confused understanding thus inhibits your progress in knowledge. Furthermore, if you delve deeper into the subject in question without having uncovered your confusions, you will inevitably succumb to further confusions.

Despite the cursory presentation, it should have become clear that the problem of confusing questions is serious, and that it is therefore worthwhile to sharpen one’s awareness of this phenomenon. To show what such a confusion of questions can look like in practice, I shall present cases of confused teaching of Schopenhauer’s ethics below. First, however, I will offer a brief account of his ethics.

4. An Account of Schopenhauer’s Ethics¹²

As the title of Schopenhauer’s relevant monograph suggests, the central issue in Schopenhauer’s ethics is the “basis of morals” [*Grundlage der Moral*].¹³ Intuitively, several, different questions can be associated with the notion of the “basis of morals”. So, what exactly is Schopenhauer aiming at?

When presenting his view of what the task of ethics should be, Schopenhauer is quite explicit about what he is aiming at:

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* [...]. These, then, are to be regarded as a given phenomenon that we have to explain correctly, i.e. trace back to their true grounds, and so demonstrate the particular incentive that moves a human being on

¹² In presenting Schopenhauer’s ethics, I refer exclusively to his essay “The Basis of Morals” [*Über die Grundlage der Moral*]. The English translation used is from Schopenhauer 2009 and will be abbreviated as “Sch-E”. The German text version used is from Schopenhauer 1988 and will be abbreviated as “Sch-G”. Terms and passages that are central to understanding Schopenhauer’s ethics and have the potential to raise exegetical questions will be presented in both English translation and the original German.

¹³ In addition to “basis of morals”, Schopenhauer is also speaking of the “foundations of morals” [*Fundament der Moral*] and the “foundation of ethics” [*Fundament der Ethik*] (cf. Sch-E: 139, 187, 189, 221 [Sch-G: 492, 549, 551, 559]). There is no indication that Schopenhauer is referring to different things with these terms. Therefore, I assume that he uses these terms interchangeably.

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*. (Sch-E: 189, my emphasis)¹⁴

So, the “basis of morals”, as Schopenhauer conceives of this notion, is the “cognition” of the “ultimate ground of morality”. And the ultimate ground of morality is the “incentive, together with receptivity for it,” that “moves a human being on each occasion” to actions of “*genuine moral worth*”.

Thus, in simpler terms, Schopenhauer’s central task is to gain knowledge of what moves people to perform actions of genuine moral worth. Therefore, Schopenhauer is primarily concerned with what I termed above as the “*Question of Moral Motivation*”.¹⁵

The following is a brief reconstruction of Schopenhauer’s train of thought, culminating in the conclusion that compassion [*Mitleid*] is what (directly or indirectly) moves people to perform actions of genuine moral worth, where “compassion” is defined by Schopenhauer as “the wholly immediate sympathy [*Teilnahme*] independent of any other consideration, in the first place towards another’s *suffering*” (Sch-E: 200 [Sch-G: 565]). This part of this section is only relevant for those interested in section 6, which outlines how Schopenhauer’s ethics could be taught without confusion. Others can jump directly to the next section.

4.1 Preliminary Thoughts

Answering the Question of Moral Motivation logically requires first an answer to the Question of Moral Worth. According to Schopenhauer, two conditions are necessary and jointly sufficient for an action to have moral worth: (1) it has no egoistic motive, and (2) it does not aim at causing suffering to others (cf. Sch-E: 197 [Sch-G: 560]).¹⁶

He divides actions of moral worth into two categories: (a) unselfish actions which consist in *refraining from* doing wrong to others, and (b) unselfish actions which consist in *actively helping* those who are suffering (cf. Sch-E: 186, 189, 196, 203-4 [Sch-G: 547, 551, 559, 569]). Somewhat idiosyncratically, he usually refers to actions of the former kind as actions of “freely willed justice [*freiwilliger Gerechtigkeit*]” and to those of the latter kind as actions of “disinterested loving kindness [*uneigennütziger Menschenliebe*]” (cf., e.g., Sch-E: 196 [Sch-G: 559]).

He goes on by asking whether such actions ever occur at all. He concedes that “this question [...] cannot be answered purely empirically, because in experience only the *deed* [*Tat*] is given every time, while the *impulses* [*Antriebe*] are not open to view: so the possibility always remains

¹⁴ „Ich setze [...] der Ethik den Zweck, die in moralischer Hinsicht höchst verschiedene Handlungsweise der Menschen zu deuten, zu erklären und auf ihren letzten Grund zurückzuführen. Daher bleibt zur Auffindung des Fundaments der Ethik kein anderer Weg, als der empirische, nämlich zu untersuchen, ob es überhaupt Handlungen giebt, denen wir *ächten moralischen Werth* zuerkennen müssen [...]. Diese sind sodann als ein gegebenes Phänomen zu betrachten, welches wir richtig zu erklären, d. h. auf seine wahren Gründe zurückzuführen, mithin die jedenfalls eigenthümliche Triebfeder nachzuweisen haben, welche den Menschen zu Handlungen dieser, von jeder andern specifisch verschiedenen Art bewegt. Diese Triebfeder, nebst der Empfänglichkeit für sie, wird der letzte Grund der Moralität und die Kenntnis derselben das Fundament der Moral seyn“ (Sch-G: 551).

¹⁵ Cf., e.g., Hallich 1998: 51, 79; Birnbacher 2018: 115; Shapshay 2019: 151 and Marshall 2022: 32, 34.

¹⁶ The second condition may seem superfluous, and possibly, it is. Schopenhauer’s reason for including it is his idea that “actions of pure malice [*Handlungen reiner Bosheit*] and cruelty [*Grausamkeit*]” may occur without any egoistic motive (Sch-E: 197 [Sch-G: 560]).

that an egoistic motive might have had an influence on a just or good action” (Sch-E: 196 [Sch-G: 559]). But this epistemic problem, Schopenhauer argues, should not lead us to believe that such actions *never* occur at all:

I believe there will be very few who doubt, and who do not from their own experience have the conviction, that we often act justly, simply and solely so that no injustice [*Unrecht*] happens to another [...]. [...] Similarly, I think, it will be conceded to me that many a person helps and gives, contributes and sacrifices, without having any further intention in his heart than that the other, whose distress he sees, should be helped. (Sch-E: 196 [Sch-G: 559-60]; cf. also *ibid.*: 186 [547])

Believing that “[t]he chief and fundamental incentive [*Triebfeder*] in a human being, as in an animal, is *egoism*, i.e. the urge to existence and well-being” (Sch-E: 190 [Sch-G: 552]), Schopenhauer raises the question of how it comes about that people are ever motivated to perform actions of genuine moral worth.

4.2 The argument for compassion as the basis of morals

Schopenhauer’s argument¹⁷ is complex in detail and has some points that need clarification. For the present purpose, a rough reconstruction of the argument is sufficient, so that Schopenhauer’s basic idea becomes apparent. Roughly, the argument might be reconstructed as following (cf. Sch-E: 198-200 [Sch-G: 562-565]):

P1: Well-being and woe [*Wohl und Wehe*] are the only things that motivate us.

P2: In actions of moral worth, we have, by definition, a non-egoistic motive.

C1: Consequently, in actions of moral worth, the well-being and woe of others is our motive.

P3: That well-being and woe motivates us means that we desire this well-being as an ultimate end [*Endzweck*] and do not desire that woe¹⁸ as an ultimate end.

C2: Consequently, we are motivated to perform actions of moral worth only if we desire the well-being of another as an ultimate end and do not desire the woe of her as an ultimate end.

P4: This presupposes that we suffer along with the other, that is, that we feel her woe [*sein Wehe fühlen*].

P5: This in turn presupposes that we identify with the other in some way [*dass wir auf irgendeine Weise mit ihm identifiziert seien*].

P6: We can only achieve such an identification by feeling compassion [*Mitleid*] for the other.

C3: Consequently, it is compassion that motivates us to perform actions of moral worth.

C4: Consequently, the recognition of this (putative) fact is the basis of morals.

This argument suggests that in each situation we are only motivated to perform an action of moral worth if we feel compassion for another *in that situation*. Surprisingly, this is what Schopenhauer explicitly denies a few pages later:

¹⁷ It should be noted that later in his work, Schopenhauer presents yet another, apparently independent argument for his view, sometimes called the “Titus argument”. See, for example, Shapshay 2019: 154 and Marshall 2022. In academic discourse as well as in ethics classes, this argument seems to be received less often. In this paper, I confine myself to the argument that is considered by most to be Schopenhauer’s *main* argument.

¹⁸ By *not desiring* Schopenhauer here seems to mean *being averse*.

[I]t is by no means required that compassion is actually aroused in every single case, where anyway it would often come too late: rather, out of the recognition of the suffering that every unjust action necessarily brings upon others [...] the maxim ‘Harm no one’ [*neminem laede*] emerges in noble minds, and rational deliberation elevates it to the firm resolve, formed once and for all [...] to keep oneself free of the self-reproach of being the cause of someone else’s sufferings [...]. For although *principles* and abstract cognition [*Grundsätze und abstrakte Erkenntnis*] in general are in no way the original source or prime basis of all morals [*Urquelle oder erste Grundlage der Moralität*], yet they are indispensable for a moral life, as the container, the reservoir in which the disposition [*Gesinnung*] 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. (Sch-E: 205 [Sch-G: 571])

According to this passage, it seems sufficient for moral motivation that our capacity for compassion has “produced” in us the maxim “Harm no one”, and that in any given situation we are motivated by (the reflection on) this maxim. In short, Schopenhauer here suggests that compassion need not motivate us “directly” for us to perform an action of moral worth, but that some sort of “indirect” motivation, by way of a maxim, is sufficient.

Whether this suggestion contradicts Schopenhauer’s argument as reconstructed above or can be reconciled with it is not to be discussed here. We are content to note that when Schopenhauer declares compassion to be the “ground” of morality, he does not clearly mean that we act morally in a situation if and only if we feel compassion for someone in that situation.

5. Confusions in Teaching Schopenhauer’s Ethics

Having summarized Schopenhauer’s ethics, I now present several teaching proposals on Schopenhauer’s ethics that are subject to the confusion of different questions. I confine myself to examples of German-language materials, because I am most familiar with them. As we shall see, the most common confusion is the Question of Determining Rightness with other questions.

Goergen (2020) presents a teaching proposal entitled “What should I do?” [*Was soll ich tun?*]. The basic idea of his proposal is that students apply four “moral” theories to example cases and compare them with each other. One of the main goals of the teaching sequence is for students to learn that “moral theories [...] can offer real help in escaping a moral dilemma [*die Moraltheorien [...] [können] echte Hilfe bieten [...], um einer moralischen Zwickmühle zu entkommen*]” (Goergen 2020: 7). Given the proposal’s title and the information provided, it is obvious that this proposal is about the Question of Determining Rightness (presumably in the universal sense of “rightness”). Thus, one would expect that the theories offered in this proposal *all* provide and answer to *this* question. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The theories in question are Aristotle’s virtue ethics, Bentham’s idea of the hedonic calculus, Kant’s doctrine of the categorical imperative and Schopenhauer’s ethics of compassion. Since the focus in this paper is on Schopenhauer, I go into more detail on Goergen’s conception regarding Schopenhauer.¹⁹

¹⁹ In passing, however, it may be worth stating that of these four theories, only Bentham’s idea of the hedonic calculus is *clearly* pertinent. While Aristotle’s virtue ethics can be interpreted as answering “a” question of (determining) rightness, it is not the same question that Bentham answers. Aristotle provides a theory of what human *eudaimonia* consists in and how to achieve it. Thus, since the realization of *eudaimonia* is supposed to be the most desirable thing from a self-regarding perspective, it seems more obvious to reconstruct Aristotle as being concerned with the question of (determining) *self-regarding* rightness. The problem with Kant is that the

The worksheet on Schopenhauer (cf. *ibid.*: 13) is structured as follows: First comes a very short extract from Schopenhauer's work, which is apparently intended to offer a brief summary of Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion. In it, Schopenhauer points out that egoistic actions cannot have moral worth and suggests that compassion is a fact of consciousness and, unlike other things, really motivates us to perform actions of moral worth. We then find three cases on the worksheet which all end with the question of what the relevant agent should do in each given case. Finally, we find four relevant tasks for the students. Of these, two are particularly revealing: "1. [...] How would you decide according to Schopenhauer's conviction in the three cases if you really wanted to act morally? [...] 4. Discuss whether Schopenhauer's view is suitable for leading to ethically appropriate results in all cases of moral conflict. [*1. Wie würden Sie nach Schopenhauers Überzeugung in den drei Fällen entscheiden, wenn Sie wirklich moralisch handeln wollten? [...] 4. Erörtern Sie, ob Schopenhauers Sichtweise in allen moralischen Konfliktfällen geeignet ist, zu ethisch angemessenen Ergebnissen zu führen*]".

The confusions in this worksheet are apparent. The extract from Schopenhauer's work addresses the Question of Moral Worth and the Question of Moral Motivation. However, the cases are not about these two questions at all. In each of these cases, the issue is what the agent *should do*, that is, these cases concern the Question of Determining Rightness. Thus, the extract does not help in any way to arrive at a decision in these cases. This, however, is suggested by the first task, which, by the term "act morally", seems to allude to Schopenhauer's talk of "moral worth" in the extract. Thus, in the first task there is a confusion of the Question of Determining Rightness with the Question of Moral Worth and the Question of Moral Motivation. The same confusion can be found in the fourth task. This task suggests that Schopenhauer offers an account to resolve cases of "moral conflict". As we have seen, this is not the case.

This confusion is also reflected in a subsequent worksheet (cf. *ibid.*: 14). There, students are confronted with another case in which the teenagers Steffi and Oliver, as the only witnesses to a crime, should identify the perpetrators in court. Their problem is that they are blackmailed by the perpetrators' buddies to make a false statement. – The students are asked to take on the roles of Aristotle, Kant, Bentham and Schopenhauer respectively and provide, from their point of view, a reasoned response as to what the right thing for Steffi and Oliver would be to do. Again, this task falsely presupposes that they are all concerned with the Question of Determining Rightness (here, obviously, in the universal sense of "rightness"). For Schopenhauer, at least, this does not apply.

Another example of a confusion in teaching Schopenhauer's ethics can be found in Althoff & Franzen (2019), a philosophy textbook. There is a chapter entitled "Basic Positions of Philosophical Ethics" [*Grundpositionen philosophischer Ethik*]. The guiding question of the chapter is: "What should a good action realise above all else [*Was soll eine gute Handlung vor allem realisieren*]" (Althoff & Franzen 2019: 152) What exactly this question is aimed at does not seem entirely clear. What seems clear, however, is that the question cannot be equated with the Question of Moral Motivation. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer is listed on the introductory pages (*ibid.*: 152-3), which suggests that he provides an answer to *this* question. There,

application of the categorical imperative does not seem to lead to determining the right thing to do. Rather, it seems to lead (at best) to determining which actions (or maxims) are (non-)forbidden.

Schopenhauer's (alleged) position is summarized by the following slogan: "Act on your compassion, and you will act well [*Folge deinem Mitgefühl, dann wirst du gut handeln*]" (cf. *ibid.*: 153). It is hereby suggested that Schopenhauer's ethics is not (primarily) about moral motivation, but rather about the determination of rightness. However, this is not the case. As quoted above, Schopenhauer explicitly states in a prominent place that his aim is to determine what motivates people to perform actions of moral worth (Question of Moral Motivation). Nowhere – at least not in the prominent passages printed in this textbook – does he say that his aim is to offer an account of how to determine the right action in a particular situation. Thus, this slogan is a misrepresentation of Schopenhauer's ethics.

The same misrepresentation occurs in Dreier-Horning et al. (2017). This textbook on ethics has a short section about Schopenhauer's ethics, starting with the question: "Does my feeling tell me what is right? [*Sagt mir mein Gefühl, was richtig ist?*]" (Dreier-Horning et al. 2017: 180). This, again, suggests that Schopenhauer's main objective is to answer the Question of Determining Rightness, which is not true.

This kind of confusion is also manifested in criticism levelled at Schopenhauer's ethics in textbooks. Pfeiffer, for example, suggests:

[1] It is doubtful whether Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion can adequately address the ethical problems of our highly complex, technologized times.

[2] Compassion may sensitise us to the suffering of others, but it does not reliably tell us what to do. Pity can also motivate us to do unreasonable things. (Pfeiffer 2022: 82, my translation).²⁰

Such criticism presupposes that Schopenhauer's central issue is the Question of Determining Rightness. But again, this is not the case.

In summary, we have seen how questions presented in section 2 are confused in teaching Schopenhauer's ethics, in particular the Question of Determining Rightness (in one or the other sense of "rightness"), the Question of Moral Worth, and the Question of Moral Motivation. Now some may wonder how Schopenhauer's ethics could best be taught without succumbing to such confusion. The following and final section offers a brief suggestion as to how this might be accomplished. This section is not relevant to the main purpose of this paper. Those who are not interested in this question can skip directly to the final conclusion.

6. Teaching Schopenhauer's Ethics Without Confusion

My suggestion follows Schopenhauer's line of reasoning as presented in section 4. However, a detailed discussion of original passages from Schopenhauer's work is only intended where the Question of Moral Motivation is addressed. I suggest proceeding as follows.

Step 1: Basic Motives of Action. Make your students understand that actions proceed from motives, and that there are different motives from which actions may proceed. Following Schopenhauer, you may distinguish three basic motives: selfishness, malice and unselfish benevolence. You can ask students to explain the difference between these motives based on a

²⁰ German original: „[1] Ob mit Schopenhauers Ethik des Mitleids den ethischen Problemen unserer hochkomplexen, technologisierten Gegenwart angemessen begegnet werden kann, ist zu bezweifeln. [2] Mitleid sensibilisiert zwar für fremdes Leid, aber sagt uns nicht zuverlässig, was zu tun ist. Mitleid kann auch zu unvernünftigem Tun motivieren.“ – See Engels & Goergen 2013: 162 for similar criticism.

case discussion. You could present them a case where someone sees a stranger who needs help. Then you could have your students imagine different outcomes for this case. In one outcome, the agent may reveal itself as a misanthrope who decides to make the situation of the needy person even worse. In another, the agent may walk away because she has an appointment she does not want to miss. In the next, the agent may decide to help the person in need, but *only* to impress others. In the last one, the agent may help the person in need, but this time purely out of concern for the welfare of the other. By discussing these outcomes, students should realize that malice is involved in the first outcome, (non-malicious) selfishness in the second and third and unselfish benevolence in the fourth. The third outcome is important because it shows that there is a difference between performing actions with good consequences and performing actions that are unselfishly benevolent.

The following two steps are *logically* unnecessary when approaching the Question of Moral Motivation. But they might help engage students in thinking about motivation of actions in general, which is why I strongly recommend taking them.

Step 2: Common Selfishness. Help your students realize that selfishness is common. You can do this in different ways. One way is to show students some everyday facts that indicate a general tendency toward selfishness. Ideally, these are facts that relate to the students themselves, for example the fact that a vast majority of people, in most cases, have no genuine ethical considerations whatsoever when they go shopping.

Step 3: Existence of Unselfish Benevolence. Next, you could ask whether selfishness might be not only common, but perhaps even the *only* motive of all our actions, and whether, therefore, unselfish benevolence really exists.²¹ Here, you could confront the students with Schopenhauer's observation that answering this question is hampered by the fact that "in experience only the deed [Tat] is given every time, while the impulses [Antriebe] are not open to view" (Sch-E: 196 [Sch-G: 559]). You could let students discuss whether it is still *reasonable* to think that people now and then act out of unselfish benevolence. For example, you could give them this task: "Imagine that you are detectives: Your job is to create a guide on how to investigate whether a person's "good deed" is unselfishly benevolent or secretly selfish. What evidence could be used to do this? Discuss how you could proceed, and which clues would be important." It is to be expected that students come up with quite some plausible indicators of unselfish benevolence. In a final discussion, you can point out that the indicators collected may well be encountered in real life from time to time, and therefore the assumption that there is unselfish benevolence is at least plausible.

Step 4: Moral Motivation. You could lead to the Question of Moral Motivation as follows. First, recapitulate the result of the previous step. Point out that we cannot *prove* the existence of unselfish benevolence, but it seems at least quite plausible. Then, go on as follows: "If we suppose that people are unselfishly benevolent at least sometimes, we have to wonder: What exactly could *motivate* them to be unselfishly benevolent?" Remind the students that unselfish benevolence, by definition, rules out any consideration of self-interest. To make the question more interesting for the students, you could, for example, bring up an example of a heroic deed where unselfish benevolence seems very likely. You could then apply the Question of Moral

²¹ Here one could point out that this thesis exists under the name of "psychological egoism".

Motivation to this instance and ask, “What could make someone like this person commit such a heroic deed without any consideration of self-interest?”

Before presenting Schopenhauer’s view, let the students think about the question themselves. You could point out that some people seem more inclined to be unselfishly benevolent, while other people seem more inclined to be selfish. You could then ask them to speculate about what makes the difference: “What do the former people possess that the latter do not?”

After that, confront them with Schopenhauer’s argument for compassion as the basis of morals. As a preliminary step, clarify the notion of “moral worth” as used by Schopenhauer. Tell the students that the term “moral worth” is used to refer to actions for which an agent deserves “moral praise”. Explain the difference between “moral” praise and other kinds of praise. Then, point out that, according to Schopenhauer, acts of unselfish benevolence, and *only* such acts, possess moral worth. With this background information, students can see more clearly that Schopenhauer’s argument, which targets “actions of moral worth” and makes use of this notion, is *de facto* aimed at the very phenomenon that has been discussed.²²

When compiling the passages of Schopenhauer’s work the students are to be confronted with, you have to consider this question: Do you want to confront the students only with excerpts from Schopenhauer’s *central* passage (cf. Sch-E: 198-200 [Sch-G: 562-565]), or do you also want to consider that marginal passage in which Schopenhauer clarifies that *occurrent* compassion is not necessary for motivating moral action?²³ Your decision should depend on the students’ cognitive level and on the specific goal you have when teaching Schopenhauer’s ethics. However, I think there is also a *general* argument against including that marginal passage: The idea that Schopenhauer presents there is unclear in important details. Even in research, as far as I know, there is no agreement on how to interpret this passage exactly. Accordingly, it would be unreasonable to expect students to be able to do so. Therefore, I think it is better to stick to Schopenhauer’s central passage, even if this means giving an incomplete and inaccurate picture of Schopenhauer’s position. Of course, nothing prevents you from making it transparent to your students that you are offering them a simplified version of Schopenhauer’s ethics.

In general, I believe that it is better for students to learn as much as possible about the subject itself, when studying a philosopher’s views, than to be confronted with interpretive problems that are too difficult for them and whose treatment does not provide significant insight into the subject itself.

It goes without saying that after working out Schopenhauer’s argument, a critical discussion of it should follow.

Step 5: Compassion and Rightness Determination. I recommend that you end this teaching sequence by asking the students whether (occurrent) compassion enables us to realize the right thing to do in a given situation (where care must be taken to clarify what kind of rightness is involved).

²² A discussion of whether actions of unselfish benevolence are *necessarily* morally praiseworthy, and whether there are other kinds of actions that are morally praiseworthy, would be theoretically significant. But for most students, such a discussion would certainly be too abstract.

²³ Cf. the last paragraph of section 4.

This suggestion may be surprising, given that I have previously criticized that the Question of Moral Motivation is often confused with the Question of Determining Rightness when dealing with Schopenhauer's ethics. My idea is this: By raising this question, making it clear that it is a *different* question, separate from the Question of Moral Motivation, you might even help *avoid* the risk of students themselves confusing these two questions in other contexts. The key is to emphasise that the Question of Determining Rightness is a separate question, distinct from the Question of Moral Motivation.

7. Conclusion

My objective in this paper was to draw attention to the widespread phenomenon of confusing different questions in teaching ethics. First, I have presented and clarified several questions that are often confused: the Question of Moral Worth, the Question of Moral Motivation, the Question of Rightness, including many of its sub-questions, and, finally, the Question of Determining Rightness. Then I have explained why confusing different questions in teaching ethics poses a serious problem. I have pointed out that it leads to non-understanding, which entails opportunity costs; that it prevents students from mastering ethical judgement, which is a major objective in many ethics curricula; and that it causes a confused understanding of the subjects covered in class, which entails further problems.

I have then demonstrated the problem of confusing different questions with cases of confused teaching of Schopenhauer's ethics. As we have seen, a common confusion in teaching his ethics is that between the Questions of Determining Rightness, Moral Worth, and Moral Motivation. Finally, I have offered a brief suggestion as to how Schopenhauer's ethics may be taught without confusion.

This paper leaves an important question unanswered. Even philosophical experts and great thinkers in the history of philosophy confuse ethical issues from time to time. What should we do when we want (or have) to teach a philosopher's view which itself involves a confusion of different questions?²⁴ It is obvious that we should not pass these confusions on to students. But how *exactly* one should deal with this problem is a topic for another paper.

The choice of Schopenhauer's ethics as an example to illustrate the problem at hand is quite arbitrary. I invite readers to examine teaching proposals on other prominent ethical theories to see whether and to what extent the problem of confusing questions arises there. As far as my experience goes, the problem is widespread.²⁵

If I am right in thinking that the problem is widespread and serious, then it is imperative that it be studied more thoroughly. We should pursue the goal that future teachers have a sharpened

²⁴ Indeed, there is evidence that Schopenhauer himself is subject to the confusion of different questions at some points in his work.

²⁵ Together with Friedrich Christoph Dörge, I illustrate the problem of confusing questions with yet another example. We identify this kind of confusion in a teaching unit of the 2016 ethics curriculum for the "Gymnasium" in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. In this unit, students are required, among other things, to compare different approaches to the "foundation of morality" [*Begründung von Moral*]. The unit is supposed to be about *one* concrete question: the question of the "foundation of morality"; and the different approaches mentioned in this unit are supposed to point to different answers to this very question. On closer inspection, it turns out that this is not the case. The unit confuses several *distinct* questions. For example, by suggesting that students compare Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion with Bentham's utilitarianism, here the Question of Moral Motivation is confused with the Question of Determining Rightness, too. See Dörge & Holweger 2023: sect. 3.

awareness of this problem, and that future curricula and teaching materials do not succumb to such confusions in the first place. To achieve this, we must first ensure that academic professionals themselves become more aware of this problem. I hope that with this paper I have succeeded in making a first contribution to this end.²⁶

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